



Summer 2016 Walking Through Philippians

Sermon Transcript
August 14, 2016

Run! Walk! Stand!
Philippians 3:12 - 4:1

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on August 14, 2016 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Philippians 3:12 - 4:1

3:12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Introduction

Last year, Ryan Murphy's mother was digging through some old piles of papers, when she discovered a long lost book that brought tears to her eyes. It was a book her 21 year old son had written for a school project when he was 8 years old. On the final page of the book, accompanied with a picture that only an 8 year old could draw, he concluded, "I hope my swimming life continues, and I become an Olympian when I grow up. I hope I will break the world records. I want to be the best swimmer in the world."¹

This past Monday, Ryan Murphy, won his first ever Olympic gold medal in the 100 meter backstroke. He finished just three hundredths of a second shy of the world record set back in 2009. The discovery of this childhood dream gives us some insight into the kind of drive and passion it takes to achieve Olympic gold. It starts with a dream but it is realized by hard work and determination. In fact, what I appreciate most about these athletes is not what we see when we watch them compete. What I appreciate the most is what we don't see when they train to get to where they are today.

I remember reading about Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time, And here he is at 31 years of age, still adding gold to his accomplishments. At the height of his career, he was working out 6 hours a day and 6 days a week. On top of the equivalent of swimming eight miles a day, he did weight training and worked out on a stationary bike. During the Beijing Games in 2008, it was revealed that as part of his training for the games, he consumed 12,000 calories a day. Listen to this "eating regiment" - For breakfast "he'd start off with egg sandwiches loaded up with all the fixings, ranging from cheese to fried onions to mayo. After that, he'd go for chocolate-chip pancakes, French Toast, grits, and a five-egg omelet—that is just breakfast! Lunch would include a couple ham and cheese sandwiches, energy drinks, and a pound of pasta to top it off. For dinner, he'd down a whole pizza. And yet another pound of pasta."² I have read, that as he gotten older, his eating regiment has changed a bit, but because of all the calories he would burn while working out, he had to consume a lot of food.

We get to see Michael Phelps realize his dream and accomplish greatness as he stands on top of that platform time and time again. But for all these athletes who compete, what we don't see is the discipline and the hard work it takes even to compete in these games. We don't see the quiet mornings in the pool when no one else is around. We don't see the daily sacrifice it takes to get their bodies to do what they need to do at such a high level. We don't see how many days they are literally pushing their tired and sore bodies to perform at such a high level. But we know that they keep pressing on to reach the

goal of achieving a medal at the Olympics. They didn't just show up at Rio to compete. They worked very hard to get there and to accomplish their childhood dream.

In our passage this morning, Paul is talking about living the Christian life. And I am struck with the Olympic feel there is in this passage. For example, Paul says in verses 13-14, "*But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*" In this verse, Paul is invoking the image of a runner who is running a race.

If a runner turns his head and looks back, it could cost him the race. That is exactly what happened in 1954, in what at the time was billed "The Mile of the Century." England's Roger Bannister and Australia's John Landy were the first to record a sub-four minute mile and now here they were running against each other. As they came down the homestretch, Landy had a slight lead, but because of the roar of the crowd, he couldn't hear the footsteps of Bannister who was right behind him. As he peeked over his left shoulder to get a sense as to where his opponent was, Bannister passed him on his right side and won the race by two-hundredths of a second. That gaze backward caused Landy to lose the race. Using this image, Paul instead says that he is *straining forward to what lies ahead*. Peter Obrien says this is a vivid word drawn from the games and it pictures the runner with his eyes fixed on the goal and his hands stretched out towards it and his body bent forward as he enters the last and decisive stage of the race. It is an intense desire with the utmost effort to reach his goal.³ He runs flat out for the finish line. It is this kind of intensity that Paul brings to the living out of the Christian life.

So I want to encourage you this morning to think about how you are living out the Christian life. Our passage this morning moves from running, to walking, and then to standing. It begins with the intensity of an athlete and so I want to encourage you to keep on running and to be active in living out your faith. In verse 17, Paul moves from running to walking, and so I want to call you to watch your walk and to consider the kind of example you are to others. And then finally, he ends in Philippians 4:1 with the call to "*stand firm.*" And so, I want to end by calling us to stand firm together, as one body in Christ for the sake of the gospel. Keep on running! Watch your walk! Stand firm together!

Keep On Running

You can't understand what Paul is saying beginning in verse 12, if you don't first go back to see the verses that come right before it. We looked at these verses last week. In

Philippians 3:10-11 you can hear the passion of Paul's heart that consumes his life. This marks his ambition in life. He writes, *"that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."* Earlier in the same passage he said that he counts all things as loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus. Nothing means more to him than knowing Jesus. Like that athlete who sacrifices it all to gain the gold medal, Paul's entire life has this one focus. He wants to know Jesus. In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, Jesus is the prize he is pursuing. I would like you to see three things Paul talks about that helps him run the race with his eyes focused on Jesus.

First of all, on this side of heaven, you never fully arrive. The race is not over until God takes you home. So whether you are just learning how to run or if you have been running for many years, the message is the same. Keep on running until you cross that finish line! How odd it would be to watch a track and field event this coming week to see a runner coming down the final stretch and for no reason stopping before he or she crossed the finished line. We would consider that runner to be out of their mind. In fact, we have been inspired in the past by the one who has gotten hurt in the race, and long after all the others have crossed the finished line, this injured runner is determined to finish the race and keeps on running until he crosses that finish line.

Don't you find comfort with how Paul begins in verse 12? In the verses prior to this, he sure sounds like a super-saint. He already declared that he counts everything as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. That is admirable and it conveys the passion Paul has for knowing Jesus. But then he confesses with humility in verse 12, *"Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect."* He reiterates this thought again in verse 13, *"I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet."* Paul readily admits that God is still working on him and that he has not fully arrived.

The fancy word for living the Christian life is the word "sanctification." It is the word that describes how God is in the process of making us more like Christ. And it is a process that has its ups and downs and yet over time, we can see the change that God is producing in us through Christ. But it is a slow process that progresses over time, but it is not finished until God takes us home. There is always room for growth in our lives. In fact it is through this process that we come to know Christ as we learn to carry our cross and die to our flesh and follow Christ. And so this becomes a motivating factor for Paul to continue to run the race set before him. There is no room for complacency or to even be satisfied. I am still under construction. And so Paul says, *"but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."*

This brings me to my second thought when it comes to running this race. When you come to a passage like this that calls us to action, to press on, you can very quickly find yourself losing sight of God's grace. And yet, the grace of God is all over this passage. It is interesting how Paul ends verse 12. He wants to "lay hold" of Christ. But why? It is because he was "*laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*" If you remember Paul's conversion story, he was on his way to persecute the church and quite literally, he was "*laid hold of by Christ Jesus.*" Kent Hughes suggests that it is as if Paul was taken by the scruff of the neck and even taken with a measure of violence.⁴ In fact this word "*laid hold of*" has kind of an aggressive and violent connotation. It means "to seize something with force." So just as Paul was "seized" by Christ, with the same intensity he now "seizes Christ" with a measure of aggression. Many of us can attest to the same thing when we talk about how God got ahold of our lives. We weren't looking for him, but with a measure of "violence" by his grace, God laid hold of us. Other statements of grace are found in this passage as well. For example, he says in verse 16, "*let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.*" In other words, "let us live up to what we already are in Christ." And so grace becomes the motivating factor for this passion and this single minded desire of Paul to keep on running.

I think some people get complacent in running the race of faith because of their misunderstanding of grace. Last week we made a big deal that our righteousness is not something we have earned, but we have the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus. Paul was calling us to remember the gospel. But the grace of God should not lead to a complacent faith. It should not lead to a passive approach to faith. If we have truly been laid hold of by Christ, then we should endeavor with all of our might to lay hold of Christ in our lives. Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*" Kent Hughes, speaking on this passage said it this way, "I want to say to everyone here this morning, those who are new and those who are old; if you have been seized by Christ and grabbed by Christ, then you are in the grip of his grace and therefore you are called for a grasping, hot-pursuit of him, a seizing of him." He went on to say that "this gospel allows no room for a middle class ethic that strives to be neither hot nor cold, rather, we are called to a single minded pursuit of Christ."⁴ I am afraid that we often have more of a meandering faith than a faith that is running the race. No runner meanders! There is nothing lazy about what Paul says here. And so motivated by the grace of God, Paul runs hard after Christ. How hard are you running?

And finally, when it comes to running this race, I love what Paul says in verses 13-14,

“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The past is in the past. Don’t look back. Paul is calling for a selective amnesia regarding the past. Paul is not just talking about failures here. He is also talking about successes. He is not resting on his laurels. Nor is he shipwrecked by his failures. Like a runner, his eyes are on the prize. The prize is Jesus. And so he keeps his eyes focused on what is in front of him and if he falls, he gets up and he keeps on going. It doesn’t matter how old you are or how much is in your past or what is in your past. If you have been *laid hold of by Christ Jesus* behold the old is gone and the new has come. So keep your eyes on Jesus and keep running forward.

This determination to run the race and to run hard after Jesus is not just something for Paul, the apostle. He says in verse 15, *“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”* This is the way for all of us who have tasted the grace of God. If nothing else, I would call you to keep on running. It is a call for you to be intentional. It is a call for you to be active in your pursuit of Jesus. You run this race by doing what you are doing right now, engaging in the corporate worship of God with his people. You run this race by getting in community and building up and encouraging each other in the faith. You run this race by using your gifts to serve the body. If anything, don’t be passive about your faith. Be active. Be intentional. *“Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* Keep on running!

Watch Your Walk

As we move on in the passage, Paul moves from the image of running to the image of walking. He writes in verse 17, *“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* Paul often uses the metaphor of “walking” to describe our way of life. In fact, as you make your way through the second half of his letter to the Ephesians you find these imperatives: *“walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called . . . No longer walk as the Gentiles do . . . Walk in love . . . Walk as children of light . . . Look carefully then how you walk.”* Our lives ought to reflect the character of Christ and they ought to align with what we profess to believe. It is the same thing we say today when we say, “Don’t just talk the talk, but walk the walk.”

Just because Paul changed the metaphor, it doesn’t mean that there is no connection to what he was speaking about in the previous section. Quite the opposite is happening

here. Instead, he is offering himself as an example to follow. Do you want to know what it looks like to press on and run the race set before us. Paul calls us to imitate him. He is not full of himself. He said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.* We need real life examples of what it looks like to run after Christ. Paul is an example for us to follow. He is not the only example. He goes on to say, *“and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* We already saw in Philippians 2 that Timothy and Epaphroditus were examples for them to follow as well.

In the church, we need living examples of those who keep on running the race and who finish the race well. We need leaders who model a life in Christ to others. When Paul instructs Timothy on how to pastor the church he tells him in 1 Timothy 4:12, *“set the believes an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity . . . Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”* We are not looking to put people up on pedestals, but we do need people to imitate. We are not talking about perfection. Rather, we are talking about humility and perseverance.

One of the reasons Paul makes an appeal for the church to follow his example is because there were some who had been in the church who were not a good example to imitate. He says, *“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”* You get the sense that these people were once part of the fellowship at Philippi and Paul knew them. He wept over them. But he says, *“Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”* I think this is a different group of people than what we looked at last week. Last week we encountered the Judaizer, the one who added law to faith in order to be right with God. Last week we saw the legalist, if you will. I think this group is the exact opposite. It is the group who swung the pendulum to the other side. They were “antinomian.” That means they didn’t believe there was any “law” that applied to them. They thought grace meant that they can live as they want. It was similar to the refrain of Romans 6 where Paul anticipated the question, *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue to sin that grace may abound?”* In other words, if we are saved by grace, are we free to live any way we want to? Paul says, *“By no means!”* I do think this is one of the pressing challenges of the evangelical church. But with grace comes the call to follow Jesus. We are called to a life of obedience to Christ. And so Paul is calling them to follow his example as he lays hold of Christ.

He reminds them in verse 20, *“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious*

body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” One of the fascinating things about the Olympics is seeing all these nations come together. The other day I was watching a volleyball match between Argentina and Poland. Just by looking at these two teams from different parts of the world, you could tell by their features that they were from different countries. Likewise, as Paul reminds that our citizenship is in heaven and so we ought to look like we are from heaven by our walk.

What a great promise and great hope we have in Christ, “*we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*” Someday, the race will be over. Someday, we will fully look like Jesus in our lives. But in the meantime, we are to walk in such a way. I can’t help but see the passage we read this morning in this verse. Paul says in Romans 12:1-2 that we are to *present our bodies as a living sacrifice . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*” Someday, that transformation will be complete. But in the meantime, God is changing us from one degree of glory to the next, so we should endeavor to walk in such a way.

This call for us to follow Paul’s example in how he walks is also a call for us to walk in such a way that we are an example to others. It also requires us to get into community with each other. How else can you learn from the example of someone’s faith? How will others be able to learn from your faith if you are not in community with others? It also moves us to find places in the church where we can serve. There is a next generation in our church that is in great need of examples to follow. At our last baptism service, I was struck by the power of example that has been lived out in this church family and its impact on the next generation. Do you want to do something that lasts for generations? Do you want to do something that has eternal impact? Give yourself to the next generation by serving our children and youth. We also need spiritual leaders in the church who walk humbly and set an example in *speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.*” This faith is both taught and caught. So let us walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and let us live in light of citizenship in heaven.

Stand Firm

Finally, in Philippians 4:1, Paul moves from running to walking and now he calls us to “*stand firm in the Lord.*” It is not the first time in this letter that Paul makes this appeal. At the end of Philippians 1 he says the same thing and it gives us insight as to what he is referring to here. He says in Philippians 1:27, “*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you*

that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” I love the communal aspect of this verse. This is not an image of you “standing firm by yourself.” It is side by side, together, we strive for the gospel. We stand firm together.

How does WEFC stand firm together for the sake of the gospel? We keep on running with our eyes set on Jesus. Because we have been laid hold of by Jesus, with passion we seek to lay hold of Christ for ourselves. It doesn't matter what has happened in the past, we keep on running. When we do that, we become examples for the next generation to imitate and follow. From generation to generation to generation, this church continues to be a lampstand, a light, to this community for the faith of the gospel.

Lets keep on running! Be active in your faith.
Watch your walk! Be someone to imitate.
Stand firm! Together, let us represent Christ to this community.

Conclusion

We have a dream we are pursuing that is greater than a gold medal. Our eyes are fixed on Jesus. The greater the dream, the greater the cause for commitment. I love the passion and the devotion for Jesus that is caught in the statement called “The Fellowship of the Unashamed.”

“I'm part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have the Holy Spirit's power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made—I'm a disciple of his. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, worldly talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need preeminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean in his presence, walk by patience, am uplifted by prayer, and I labor with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way rough, my companions few, my Guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch

in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of the enemy, pander in the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go till he comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till he stops me. And, when he comes for his own, he will have no problem recognizing me. My banner will be clear.”⁵

Keep on running!
Watch your walk!
Stand firm!

¹Jeff Eisenberg “Ryan Murphy wrote a book predicting his gold medal moment—at age 8”
sports.yahoo.com August 6, 2016

²Jesse Regan “Michael Phelps Daily Workout” articledashboard.com

³Peter T. Obrien *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991)

⁴Kent Hughes “But One Thing I Do” sermon preached on September 11, 2005 at College Church
in Wheaton, IL

⁵Fellowship of the Unashamed—source unknown

