

Are you familiar with the power of intense focus? A simple magnifying glass can focus the rays of the sun in such a way that it will ignite a fire. But the intensely focused beam of a laser has even more power- amazing power. It can burn a hole through a diamond. It can carry billions of television signals at once. The more intensely focused light is, the more power it contains and that's what a laser is- focused light. But laser light differs from regular light in two ways. I'm an expert at this of course, because I have the ability use the World Wide Web.

The Internet tells me that lasers differ from regular light in two ways. Regular light goes off in every direction at once. When you turn on a light, it fills up a room. Laser light is, in a sense, gathered up and put out in one direction. The second difference is that regular light operates on a number of different frequencies, but laser light is pushed and pressed forcefully to operate on basically one frequency. When you gather up that widely dispersed light operating on multiple frequencies and you focus it in one direction at one frequency there is POWER!

We're coming to the end of a series of messages from the book of Philippians called *To Live Is Christ*. (Next week I'm excited to hear Kelly share our final message of the series out of chapter four.) Throughout our time in this short letter written by the first church missionary (Paul), we've been learning how to sustain a vibrant life in Christ, because, as it turns out, Living Fully, Loving Deeply and Giving Freely are not the default positions of our hearts. Reflecting the heart of Jesus requires knowing Him! And as we come to know Him and trust Him more, Jesus begins to shape our hearts. We develop perseverance, endurance, and humility. Today we learn that knowing Jesus will also shape our focus. Just as there is immense power in the focused light of a laser, there is amazing power at work in us and through us when the Light of Christ is focused on us.

12 I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. 13 No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

In our text for today Paul is talking about what it means to live for Christ. In verses 12 through 14 we see him use the word "press." "I press on," he says. One thing that's interesting, the very same word that he uses in verses 12 and 14 translated as "press" is also used in chapter 3 in verse 6 but there that Greek word is translated into two words "harshly persecuted."

Paul said that he "harshly persecuted" the church. But then the same Greek word down in verses 12 and 14 is translated as "press," and the question is what kind of word could be used in such different ways? How can a single word be translated as "persecuted" over here and "press" over here? Here's the answer. The word means "to pound."

Before Paul began to follow Christ he was gathering the church and pounding it toward death but after he put his faith in Christ he's gathering up his whole self and pounding it, pushing it forcefully toward a single direction. "One thing," he says in verse 14. "I'm after one thing, now."

Here's what that means: The power of the grace of Jesus focused into our lives has the ability to transform our hearts and redirect us so that we share God's purpose and direction in this world. When we encounter the grace of Jesus- when we are captivated by Him- the same power of forgiveness and hope and joy that comes to us also changes the trajectory of our lives.

We were pounding in different directions before we encountered Jesus. Is this true of your life and your experience? It's true of mine. I was born and raised in the church. My dad is in ministry, so

I've known about Jesus for as long as I can remember. But when I left home for college and struck out on my own there was a season of my life that I spent looking for direction. And I thought I'd found it. I was going to become a professional basketball player. Ha! It sounds so ridiculous to me now, but back then I pursued that path relentlessly. I was pounding away at it. I was pressing in that direction, and I became a really good basketball player. In college I was twice selected first team all-conference and first team all-region. But no matter how successful I was on the court- that pursuit could never sustain my life. It wasn't built to last.

My guess is that you've spent seasons of your life pounding away too- pressing toward something. Probably in a different direction than hoop dreams (hopefully), but similar in the sense that the direction you were aiming at (no matter how accomplished you became) just didn't satisfy. Maybe for you that direction was the pursuit of knowledge- gaining the right degrees. Or maybe it was your career- your profession. Maybe the pursuit of your life was finding a spouse- a mate- someone who you loved and who loved you in return. Maybe it was having a family.

These are all noble pursuits- far superior to my NBA plans- and they each have their rewards. But experience teaches us that we should not build our entire lives upon these pursuits, because not a single one of them can bear the weight of our lives. These pursuits cannot be the foundation we build our lives upon, because not a one will last- not forever. If you haven't discovered this to be true yet, one day you will.

That's what happened to Paul. When he writes those words in verse 12, *"I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me,"* he's probably remembering the moment when the direction of his life changed forever- the day he first encountered Jesus. You remember what happened, right? At the time, Paul was known as Saul and he was on a mission to harshly persecute the church when a focused ray of light stopped him in his tracks. (Acts 9:1-8)

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. 2 He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

3 As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"

5 "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.

And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! 6 Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one!

8 Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus.

Jesus hit Paul full in the face with a laser beam. It stopped him in his tracks and blinded Paul physically but that beam of light was not a force meant for destruction. Paul would regain his physical sight, and not only that, but spiritually his heart would be opened- because the light revealed to Paul the power of the grace of Christ.

Paul was never the same. Before that encounter with Jesus he was intensely pounding- pressing forward- but the force behind all of his ambition was a cold and brutal heart. When Paul saw the light (Hank Williams), his relentlessness remained, but it was attached to a heart of mercy, love, and joy.

This is the transforming effect of the power of Christ in a person's life. Paul changed from a cold-hearted force for evil into a grace-filled ambassador of the Good News. He's like the Grinch who stole Christmas- except not a cartoon- and, instead of having his heart grow three sizes, Paul received a heart transplant.

He writes in verse 12 of our text in chapter three: "*But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*" The Spirit of God invaded Paul's life, it filled him from the inside out- and that's what happens to each of us, when we choose to invite the "Light of World" (Jesus Christ) into our hearts. Paul says it this way in Galatians 2:20, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" Paul's story is my story too. I wasn't blinded by the light, but I was no less stopped in my tracks. My hoop dreams ended with a major knee injury. At the time I actually felt like God had abandoned me. I was angry with Him at first, because I thought He had taken away the one thing I wanted to pursue in this life. And truthfully, He had- but He replaced it with something infinitely better: His calling.

When the Light of Christ invades your life, it may have a similar effect. Quite often the change that occurs in our hearts is followed by a change of direction for our lives.

Now, by this I don't mean that you should drop out of class, quit your job, leave your spouse or put your kids up for adoption (though if either of those last two options sound surprisingly appealing you should definitely consider hiring a baby sitter and having a date night). When we choose to lean fully on Christ with our lives, (instead of our jobs, or our education, or our spouses, or kids), we should not be surprised to find Him opening our eyes to how selfish our old ambitions often were, and to see Him redirecting our focus- away from ourselves- and onto His purposes and His people.

How does this happen? What does it look like? Let me describe it this way.

I'm really grateful that God has given my wife and I the chance to parent our two daughters who are nine and eleven, and their baby brother who is almost five-months-old. If you're a parent, you know that raising your children is the most challenging endeavor you'll ever face, right? The older my daughters get the more I see them seeking my approval- they want me to show them how much they mean to me.

Sometimes this is expressed in subtle ways- and unfortunately I often miss these cues. My wife generally has to make me aware of it later, which is disappointing because it means I've managed to waste an opportunity to give my girls the validation they crave. Sometimes, thankfully, the cues are more obvious. They'll want to show me something they've done- maybe schoolwork or a recital or some little project they've put together at home- and as they show me what they've done, I know they're watching me. They're paying attention to how I respond, and the older they get, the more they're able to tell if my smiles are genuine or counterfeit. They know me well enough to tell the difference between praise that is legitimate and flattery that is insincere.

If there's one thing I hope to impress upon my kids- if there's one thing I want them to understand and never doubt- it's that my love for them is not based upon anything they do. But I don't want them to simply hear me say the words, I want them to understand *why* I love them. The reason I love them is not because of anything they *do*. I love them because they're mine. God gave them to me.

But the problem I have is this- as much as I love my kids (and I love them enough to lay down my life for them)- I still love them imperfectly. I'm human, and though I long to be a perfectly loving

Father I am not- not all the time. If I set myself up as their savior and lord- if they're looking to me and leaning on me- if I'm the foundation upon which they build their lives- then I've set them up to fail, because I'm not capable of living up to a role like that.

What my daughters need- what you and I need- runs deeper than the love and support of a parent. No person or ambition or pursuit of this world can measure up to the deepest need of our hearts.

This is a role only God can fulfill in our lives. Listen, when Jesus walked up that hill with a crown of thorns on His head, and a cross on his back it was because there was no other option. Nothing else would suffice. No one else could fulfill that role. So thank God, because He has done for us what we could not do ourselves. Jesus took our sin, our brokenness, our waywardness and He paid the price in our place.

(Phil 2:6-11)

6

*Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.*

7

*Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.*

When he appeared in human form,

8

*he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

9

*Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,*

10

*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

11

*and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Jesus is the only one who can save us and He does. He saves us. He replaces hopelessness with joy. He replaces our inadequacies with His sufficiency. He replaces our sin and shame with forgiveness and Hope. Jesus saves!

If Jesus is our Savior, and without Him we are lost, then the mission of our lives must be to direct people to Him. Our job is to shine. That's how Paul describes it: "*Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a (crooked) world.*" (Philippians 2:15b)

In our text (in verses 13 & 14), he says it this way:

*"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, **14** I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us."*

The phrase "looking forward" is actually one Greek word and it's a very graphic term. It pictures a runner straining every nerve and muscle as he keeps on running with all his might toward the goal,

his hand stretched out as if to grab it. Paul is describing for us how he's extending himself on behalf of Christ. It sounds like the voice of an impetuous young man, but Paul was in his twilight years when he wrote these words. At a time when most people would be headed to Florida (retirement & rest), Paul was going for broke.

I feel like these verses are exactly what we as a church need to be hearing right now. Paul's words perfectly express where Harbor is headed. We are pressing on.

...Dear brothers and sisters, (we) have not achieved (perfection), but (we) focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, (we) press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

Our calling has never been more clear as a church and we're going for it. In just a few moments we're going to describe what that looks like in more detail, but let me just say this. The hope of the world is Jesus. He's the Light of World. He is the source of grace and mercy. Salvation is found in no one else. And if we have chosen to follow Him, He has placed His light inside of us. We become light in the darkness. So may we let our light so shine among men that they may praise our good and loving Father. That's the calling on our lives. And by God's grace we will run after it with all we have.

A Blessing:

Give us one pure and holy passion

Give us one magnificent obsession

Give us one glorious ambition for our lives- to know and follow hard after You

To grow as your disciple in your truth

This world is empty, pale and poor compared to knowing You our Lord

Lead us on and we will run after You