

Pressing Towards the Mark

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...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...I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 3

When Paul wrote these words, he was entering the homestretch of his ministry and his life. He had endured imprisonments, shipwrecks, lynching, beatings, rejection, and seen many of the people he had nurtured in the faith turn away from his teachings. In today's lingo, Paul could say "been there, done that" for just about any situation we could imagine.

Having come this far in his life journey, Paul had the perspective that comes with maturity. He was able to look back at his life and discern the wheat from the chaff. He had discovered what was worthy and worthwhile and what was worthless and unworthy. With eyes of faith and through a lifetime of experience, Paul could see clearly.

And what Paul could see – and what Paul said – was the only thing that matters in life is Jesus Christ. Preaching before governors and high officials, means nothing. Earthly possessions mean nothing. The praise and respect of others mean nothing. Having faith even to move mountains means nothing. The only thing for Paul that means anything at all is Jesus Christ, and the life one finds in Jesus Christ.

That's great, you might be thinking, if you are an old man and have the luxury and leisure of looking back on a long life and saying all those achievements did not amount to anything anyway. But what about a man like Leonard Alley, who at best died at middle age?

Here we might be informed by another quotation, not from scripture, but one Leonard certainly knew well, that famous line from the eloquent sportswriter of an earlier era, Grantland Rice: *"When the great scorer comes to write against your name, he marks not whether you won or lost, but how you played the game."*

We are not all privileged to be "winners" in the game of life in the way winning is typically measured against losing. Some of us are dealt a more difficult hand to play than others. Some of us choose to not run the rat race or to scramble up some pre conceived ladder of success. And there are no guarantees for how long our lives will be.

Grantland Rice and the apostle Paul would agree on one point: winning or losing is not the measure of a man's life. What is a measure of a man's life is how that life is lived. How you play the game. As Jesus said, the measure is not what you say you do, the measure is what you actually DO in service to humankind and to advance God's rule in this world.

Paul concludes his words on the meaning of life by challenging his readers to ***join with others in following my example, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.*** We are well-served to model our lives on the lives of the saints who precede us.

At the end of his famous chapter on love in I Corinthians, Paul adds these words that are helpful for us as we mourn the loss of a son, a brother, an uncle, a respected colleague, a faithful friend: “Now we look in a mirror darkly, but then we shall see face to face.” Today we look at our future and it may appear as murky and shadowy as looking at one of those dull mirrors Paul wrote about in I Corinthians. But the murky darkness of this day will not last. There is light at the end of even this dark tunnel, the light of the new and everlasting life God extends through Jesus Christ. Now we can see and know only in part; then, by God’s grace, in time, we shall understand fully.

Confident of God’s grace in our lives from our first breath to our last, let us give thanks for God’s presence, God’s love, God’s word, God’s promises to us. May you find comfort in God’s word to you this day. And strengthened by God’s grace, let us ***press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus the Lord.***
AMEN.

R. Charles Grant
Bon Air Presbyterian Church
Richmond, Virginia
April 16, 2010