

Press On

In the name of him who has made us his own, dear friends in Christ: We are over the hump (so to speak) in our journey together through the penitential season of Lent, with more of it behind us than lies ahead of us. And since we are on what might seem to be the reverse slope, it may be tempting slack off a bit and simply coast on down to the finish line. I mean, the Christian life is to be one of continuous repentance, yes; but during Lent we double down, we dig deeper into the darkness of our hearts to discover and root out sinful thoughts, lusts, and actions. It may be that by this time, we think we've done enough. Let's back off. Let's stop digging.

Of course, this may be true not only of this year's waning Lenten season, but of our Christian life in general. It's all too easy to get settled into a religious routine, to stagnate rather than to grow and move forward, to coast rather than to strive, to settle for status quo rather than to push forward toward greater faith, greater holiness, and greater Christian virtue. That would be a mistake. To do so would be like the two and a half tribes of Israelites who made it all the way through those forty years in the wilderness right up to edge of the Promised Land, but when they got there, they looked around and said, "Well, this is good enough. We think we'll be just fine staying here on the east side of the Jordan. We don't need to push on into the Promised Land." They settled there. And not surprisingly, were they first tribes to be compromised, to be seduced by idolatry, and ultimately to be lost. There is no settling in the Christian life. If you are not pressing forward, you are losing ground.

This is why in today's Epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul calls us to redouble our efforts, to strain forward like a long distance runner who has maintained a steady pace for the duration but then puts everything he's got into the last lap. Using himself as an example, Paul urges us to press on forward toward three goals: toward proper confidence, toward proper righteousness, and toward the proper pursuit.

In the section immediately leading today's reading, Paul writes about his life as a Pharisee before he had his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. At the time he was supremely confident. He had been born with all the spiritual advantages a person could possibly have. He was a member of God's chosen people Israel. He could trace his ancestry through the patriarch Jacob's beloved son, Benjamin, all the way back to Father Abraham himself. And Paul was a true son of the covenant that God made with Abraham. He bore the mark in his flesh having been circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Lord's command. For Paul it was a badge of honor. But above and beyond those advantages was what Paul had done with them. So many other of his countrymen had the same advantages, but they squandered them. Little about their lives would have distinguished them from the Gentiles who lived among them. Not Paul. He was super zealous for pursuing absolute holiness of life according to the strict disciplines of the Pharisees. He had studied under the greatest and most famous rabbi of the time and had taken what he had learned to staggering new heights of devotion. Jews looked to the Pharisees to see what it meant to live as a godly person. The Pharisees in turn looked to Paul. He was *that* good at it. And Paul was keenly aware of it. He was fully confident in himself that he was at all times giving his best for the Lord.

But all that changed the day he met the risen Lord Jesus. Then Paul discovered the amazing truth that confidence based on giving your best for the Lord is like building your house

on the sand. It's entirely misplaced. True confidence comes from knowing that in Christ, God has given his best for you. And for that reason, Paul emphatically denounces everything he had formerly trusted in. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish". Well, not exactly "rubbish"; that's the way translators try to be less offensive to our ears. In truth Paul uses the then popular crude term for excrement which is not used in polite company. That's what he thinks of what he had formerly been confident in: stinking, filthy, repulsive. Infinitely better – like day and night – is the confidence he has in Christ.

As is the righteousness he has found in Christ. Before he strived to keep the Law of God whole and undefiled, scrupulously pouring over each command and dutifully following all the meticulous rules and traditions the Pharisees had established to act as hedges around the Law to keep a person from getting even close to breaking a command. By observing those rules a person could indeed outwardly adhere to the letter of the Law, but he could never get close to keeping the spirit of the Law, which is love. Paul came to understand that as a human born in sin, he could never achieve even the tiniest hint of true righteousness before God, and that indeed all his best efforts to attain righteousness on his own were in fact taking him farther from the Lord and digging himself deeper into sin. True righteousness before God, Paul discovered, is imputed as a gift through faith in Christ—Christ who himself was truly righteous, who embodied love, and who gave himself as a sacrifice of atonement for sin.

And that changed what for Paul was his life's pursuit. In his former life he had pursued Christians. He saw them as members of a dangerous and heretical cult, a threat to Jewish life and social order. They were leading people – God's people, good Jews and their children – to perdition. They had to be wiped out. He became a ringleader in the persecution that started in Jerusalem which was sparked by the mock trial and stoning of St. Stephan. And while they managed to intimidate, beat, and imprison some Christians, the persecution had the unintended effect of making the cult of Christianity grow. Many believers in Jesus living in Jerusalem fled in all directions, and wherever they settled, they shared the good news of Jesus with their new neighbors. The Syrian city of Damascus became a haven for a large number of these refugees. And so it was that Paul went to the high priest to attain a commission and a warrant to bring these Christian refugees back to Jerusalem in chains.

Well, you know what happened. As Paul was closing in on his destination, muttering under his breath about how much he hated these wretched believers in the cursed Nazarene, and how he was going to enjoy making them suffer, he met the very risen Lord Jesus in whom they believed. Do you know what real fear is? It's knowing that the one true, holy, and all powerful God has been watching you hurt and torture his children. I can't imagine anything more terrifying. But then, just when Paul is thinking he's about to be thrust into the deepest pit of hell to burn in flames forever, the same God tells him no, for the sake of Christ Jesus who suffered, died, and rose again, I have taken away your sin. More than that, from now on you'll be working for my side. I'm appointing you my ambassador to the nations to share the good news of my love, my mercy, and my forgiveness through faith in my Son, Jesus Christ.

What kind of God does that? A God Paul had never known or imagined. A God Paul couldn't begin to understand. But he wanted to. That became his new pursuit: to know this Jesus Christ, to marvel at what he had done, to wonder at his love, with the goal of becoming like him – to imitate his behavior, to walk in his ways, to learn his love, to share in suffering for his sake to save as many as possible.

Paul says, "I'm not there yet; but I am pressing on." And we can learn by Paul's example to likewise press on toward attaining perfect confidence in Christ, toward the righteousness that is not our own but that depends on faith in him, and toward the goal of knowing better each day the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us – that we may know him and the power of his resurrection to raise us now in time to be like him, and to raise us on the last day to live with him forever. Dear Friends, these are the goals. Let us press on. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!