

## **FIVE KEYS TO SEIZING THE PRIZE! (Philippians 3:12-16)**

A young soldier and his commanding officer boarded a train together. The only available seats were directly across from an attractive, young lady who was traveling with her grandmother. The two men sat down, and during the ride, the young soldier and the young woman kept eyeing one another. It was obvious there was a mutual attraction.

Suddenly, as the train entered an unlit tunnel, the car became pitch black. Almost immediately, the smack of a kiss was heard followed by the whack of a slap across the face.

No words were spoken, but the grandmother thought, "I can't believe that young man kissed my granddaughter, but I'm glad she gave him the slap he deserved."

The commanding officer thought, "I don't blame the boy for kissing the girl, but it's a shame that she missed his face and hit me instead."

The girl thought to herself, "I'm glad he kissed me, but I wish my grandmother hadn't slapped him for doing it."

As the train exited the tunnel and broke into the sunlight, the soldier was grinning for ear-to-ear. He had just seized the opportunity to get away with kissing a pretty girl and slapping his commanding officer!

Years ago, the movie *Dead Poet's Society* popularized the Latin phrase, *Carpe Diem*, which means, "Seize the Day." Based on today's text, I want to substitute the word *prize* for *day*. By the way, the English word *prize* in Latin is spelled p-r-i-z-e, just like in English. Today, we are going to consider, *Carpe Prize, Seize the Prize*. Let's look at Philippians 3:12-16.

In this third chapter, Paul moves from an accounting metaphor to an athletic one. He had been talking about assets and liabilities, but now he is concerned with both running and winning a race.

Before we proceed further, we need to stop and answer the question, "What is the prize to which Paul refers?" Nowhere does Paul clearly state what the prize is, but he does offer hints.

- From v. 12, we know there is something Paul has yet not obtained. In that verse, he uses the word *perfect*. Is it perfection he wants to seize? Maybe.
- From v. 13, we know that Paul is pursuing something that lies ahead in the future.
- From v. 14, we know that what he seeks has something to do with the call of God in Christ.

So, what's this prize? In his expositional commentary on Philippians, James Boice comments on the word *call*. He writes, "In the New Testament when this word is used of a Christian it almost always refers to God's calling to be conformed day by day to the image of Jesus Christ."

I believe the prize Paul sought to seize, and the one for which we are to run after is Christlikeness. That is certainly what God wants for us. Everyday, we should be getting closer and closer to being like Jesus.

Today, we are looking at five verses and from those five verses, I want to offer to you

five keys, five things we are to do in order to seize the prize of Christlikeness.

### **Key #1: We Can Seize the Prize by Admitting Where We Are.**

Look again at the first part of v. 12 and the beginning of v. 13. Basically, Paul is saying, “I’m not there yet.” In earlier verses, Paul said that it was his goal to gain Christ, and to know Christ, and to live the resurrected life, but Paul admits that he has not yet reached his goal, that he is still in pursuit.

You are not going to reach the goal God has for you if you think you are already there. There are those church members who have concluded that they have done enough, that it is time for others to step up, and maybe it is, but the Christian life is not all about doing. There are those who conclude that they have put in enough time, that it is time to retire, but the Christian life is not about time served. And by the way, God has no retirement plan for Christian service. We are to serve Him until He takes us home. The Christian life is about becoming. We are to become like Jesus, and we aren’t there yet; none of us are.

My son was a runner. In high school he lettered in both cross country and track. In track, he routinely ran the 880 and 880-relay. The 880 is two-times around the track. That is a half-mile. If you run the mile, that would be four times around the track.

Can you imagine a runner who is running the mile, and he miscounts? On his third trip around the oval, he thinks he is on his fourth and final lap. With 100 yards to go of what he thinks is his last leg, he starts his kick. He’s going to finish strong. He races past the line, and then slows down, and then comes to a complete stop. His teammates and coach are yelling at him, “Keep going. You’re not done. You got one more lap to go.” But now he’s spent. He didn’t know where he was.

When my son ran cross country, the races were usually 5K’s. In practice runs, he routinely timed himself. He knew what he would have to run in each K in order to reach his personal record.

We need to know where we are in this Christian race we are running, and most importantly where we aren’t because where we aren’t is there. We have not yet attained Christlikeness, but we should be gaining on it every day.

### **Key #2: We Can Seize the Prize by Realizing Whose We Are.**

In the latter part of v. 12, Paul states the reason he keeps running after Christlikeness, “because Christ Jesus has made me His own.” The KJV uses the word *apprehended*. Jesus had apprehended Paul. That word means *to seize*. We are the prize, so to speak, that Jesus has seized. Now that we belong to Him, we are to seize the prize of being like Him.

In the Disney animated classic movie, *101 Dalmatians*, there is a wonderful scene in which various people are walking their dogs, and the dogs bear a striking resemblance, each to their own master. It is very, cleverly drawn.

Jesus is our Master. He’s not going to put us on a leash, but He is going to walk with us in this world. The longer we walk together, the more we will come to resemble Him in how we think, how we act, how we speak, and how we respond to challenges, to heartache, to temptation, to opposition, and to the opportunities that will be ours to serve

the Father.

When you belong to the world, you will end up looking and being like the world, but when you belong to Christ, you will become like Christ. Realize and remember whose you are.

### **Key #3: We Are to Seize the Prize by Forgetting Yesterday.**

In v. 13, Paul uses the words “forgetting what lies behind.” The NLT renders that as “forgetting the past.” The Voice Bible puts it, “I’m leaving my old life behind.” In his paraphrase, J.B. Phillips wrote: “I leave the past behind.”

Brothers and sisters, we need to forget yesterday. **Forget yesterday’s failures.**

Urban Hilger, Jr., was a division president of the Singer Corporation. He went on a ski trip. The first day on the mountain, he took a skiing class early in the day. At the end of the day, he found his instructor and boasted, “I skied all day long, and I didn’t fall down once. I had a great day.”

The ski instructor replied, “Personally, Urban, I think you had a lousy day.”

Urban was shocked. He asked, “What do you mean, lousy day? I thought the objective was to stand up on these boards and not fall down.”

The instructor answered, “Urban, if you’re not falling, you’re not learning.”

Folks, we need to go out into the world and make some honest mistakes. It is by our mistakes and failures that we learn. We need to offend some people, unintentionally, so that we can learn to share the gospel either with greater sensitivity or with greater boldness. We need to try an evangelistic outreach that flops so that we can go back to the drawing board and design one that God chooses to bless.

Baseball fans remember that Babe Ruth had 715 career home runs, but who remembers that he struck out 1330 times?

Let’s forget yesterday’s failures. Learn from them; then, forget them.

**Forget yesterday’s hurts.** There is not a single person here who has not been hurt by someone, and the closer that person is to you, the more that hurt stings. We need to learn to let the hurt go. Don’t nurse it. Don’t fixate on it. Don’t rehearse in your mind daily or weekly or monthly or yearly. Let it go so that you can move forward.

**Forget yesterday’s victories and achievements.** Our past achievements and victories will impede our progress if we choose to rest on our laurels. Don’t get stuck in the past re-living how great things were back when: back when you were young, back when you were healthy, back when you were making money. You can’t seize today when you are living in yesterday.

A couple of years ago, Dr. David Dykes preached a sermon series entitled, “The Gospel According to the Beatles.” I haven’t read all of those sermons, but I did read one that came from today’s text in Philippians. In that sermon, he mentioned that there was one song where Paul McCartney wrote the music, the lyrics, and he sung it as a solo while he played his guitar and was accompanied by the other members of the Fab 4. This particular song happens to be one of the most covered songs in music history. He claims that it has been recorded by 2500 singers from Ray Charles to Elvis Presley to Daffy Duck, and I heard Daffy Duck sing it on YouTube. The song was entitled, “Yesterday.” The song begins:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away.  
Now it looks as though they're here to say.  
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

He claims that now he is only half the man he used to be. Then, in the third verse, McCartney sings:

Yesterday, love was such an easy game to play.  
Now, I need a place to hide away.  
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Do you believe in yesterday? I hope not. We can all believe there was a yesterday, but yesterday has passed. There is no reason to believe in it. Yesterday is gone, and it's not coming back. It's forever gone.

Dyke said, "So, here's the sermon in a sentence: Don't let yesterday mess up today because that will ruin tomorrow."

We can't run our race well if we keep looking back. Let's keep facing forward with our eyes on the prize.

#### **Key #4: We Are to Seize the Prize by Running Determinedly.**

Paul was determined. Paul wrote in v. 12, "I press on." In v. 13, he assured that he was "straining forward to what lies ahead." Then, in v. 14, he says again, "I press on."

We need to understand, we are not going to stumble into Christlikeness. It is not going to happen easily or accidentally. It will require determined effort.

The Academy Awarding film, *Chariots of Fire*, was released in 1981. It tells the true story of Eric Liddell, a man who ran for Scotland in the 1924 Olympics. Being a devout Christian, he refused to run on Sunday and thereby forfeited some of the medals he likely would have won.

There is one scene early in the movie that may appear like Hollywood fiction, but it is absolutely true. One year before the 1924 Olympics, Eric Liddell ran in a meet between England, Ireland, and Scotland. He ran the 100, 220, and 440 events.

In the 440, he got off to a bad start. When the gun sounded, there was a lot of shoving to get in front to the inside lane, the preferred position. Liddell tangled his feet with J. J. Gillies of England, and Liddell tumbled to the track. He sat there dazed for a moment, when the official screamed, "Get up and run!"

Liddell jumped to his feet and took off after the pack, which was now a full twenty yards ahead of him. In a quarter mile race, that's an impossible distance to try to make up, you would think. As Liddell ran with all of his might, he pulled into fourth place, ten yards behind the leader, J. J. Gillies.

With forty yards to go, he pulled into third place, then second. Right at the tape he passed Gillies, stuck out his chest, won the race, and collapsed to the track in total exhaustion. Medical personnel had to assist him off the track.

The next day, *The Scotsman* newspaper ran an article which claimed, "The circumstances in which Liddell won the race made it a performance bordering on the

miraculous. Veterans whose memories take them back years in the history of athletics were unanimous in the opinion that Liddell's win in the quarter mile was the greatest track performance they had ever seen."

Liddell ran with determination, and that is what God expects of us. Look with me at Hebrews 12:1-3. Picture yourself as the runner. All around you is the crowd. These are the saints who have gone before you, and they are cheering you on: "You can do it. Run, run!" While the crowd is around you, Jesus is before you. While the crowd is cheering, Jesus is whispering: "Get up, child. Run! Keep running."

Very likely, during the course of your race, you have gotten tangled up, and you hit the track hard. Maybe, Satan is the one who tripped you up. He snarled at you, "Stay down. You can't win. It's not worth the effort."

You have a choice to make. You can limp off the track and admit defeat or you can get up and run. In the race of the Christian life, the prize does not go to the first one to finish. The prize goes to all who finish; so, don't give up; keep on running.

You may have to finish your race with a limp. You may have to play hurt. Most athletes do. Life isn't a dress rehearsal. The director isn't going to yell, "Cut! Let's do that scene again." In a performance, if you flub a line, you just keep going. Likewise, let's keep moving. Let's keep going. Let's finish the race God has marked out for us, and let's finish strong.

### **Key #5: We Can Seize the Prize by Practicing What We've Learned.**

Look at how Paul closes this section in vv. 15-16. Verse 15 may be a bit difficult to understand, but I think J.B. Phillips gives a good sense of what Paul is communicating. Listen to the paraphrase of v. 15 that Phillips gives us: "All of us who are spiritually adult should set ourselves this sort of ambition, and if at present you cannot see this, yet you will find that this is the attitude which God is leading you to adopt."

It is almost like getting into a dispute about how a verse is to be interpreted and you end the conversation by saying, "I tell you what, you believe what you want to believe, and I will believe what Jesus believes. I think in the end, as you think it through, you will get on board with us."

The verse I really want you to catch is v. 16. The NLT makes it crystal clear: "But we must be sure to obey the truth we have learned already."

The sad fact, however, is that most of us have to re-learn truths and principles we have learned before, and somewhere along the way, we forgot them. Worse yet, there were times when we had established some spiritual disciplines. We were practicing good habits such as a daily time of prayer and Bible reading, Scripture memory, worship attendance, and Sunday morning Bible study with other believers. Then, over time, we let those good habits slip, and eventually they were gone from our daily and weekly routine.

Paul is saying, "Don't let that happen. Don't take two steps forward followed by two steps backward. Get off the spiritual roller coaster."

Instead, let there be a steady, spiritual progression. We sang about that this morning. We sang "Higher Ground." Listen again to the words of the first two verses:

I'm pressing on the upward way,

New heights I'm gaining every day—  
Still praying as I'm onward bound,  
“Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”

My heart has no desire to stay  
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;  
Tho' some may dwell where these abound,  
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.

I spent considerable time this week trying to figure out how to end this message. I looked for stories and anecdotes to press home the central message of this sermon. Nothing seemed to fit. I couldn't find anything that sounded right.

Last night, I grilled some steak and fish for the family. It was excellent, by the way. As I was waiting for the food to get done, it hit me. What I need to say has been staring me in the face.

This is Mother's Day, and mothers more than anybody else illustrate what I have been trying to say. You see, the thing about mothers is that mothers never quit. They never quit loving you. They never quit caring. They never quit worrying. They never quit praying, hoping, and believing in you.

Mothers, good mothers, are also the most Christlike people I know. You see, like Christ, good mothers love sacrificially. They love you unconditionally. You don't have to earn your mother's love because if you do, she isn't a good mother. Good mothers forgive quickly. They do whatever they need to do to help you to grow and become the person God created you to be. That's why they tell you to eat your vegetables, to brush your teeth, to mind your manners. They are trying to build you into being a person of character. There is a difference between being a character and having character.

God wants you to have character and so do moms, and like God, moms are here to help that happen.

Like moms, I encourage you to keep running, keep pursuing, keep seeking the prize of Christlikeness. Don't quit. Don't give up. For us to become like Christ, we need to obey the Bible, and we need to do what mom says. It's debatable whether fathers know best; I'm pretty sure moms do.