

## **Moving Forward with Purpose** *Philippians 3:12-14*

### **The Direction of Thought Matters**

There is a story in the Talmud. A father and his son were walking through the desert when they lost their way. They had run out of food and water and had reached a point where they could no longer endure. They were so hungry and thirsty that they could barely walk or even stand. In the distance, the son saw a grave. As soon as he saw it, he instinctively thought of death and said to his father in despair, "Father! We're going to end up in that grave soon."

But the father, instead, spoke words of hope: "Son, have faith. The presence of a grave means there's a village nearby. People live close to here. Let's use our last bit of strength to find it." While both saw the same grave, the son saw death while the father discovered hope. This story beautifully illustrates that the direction of our thoughts matters because it influences how we see reality and act in the world.

### **Direction Is More Important Than Speed**

This brings us to an important truth: Direction matters! I believe everyone will agree with this: "Direction is more important than speed." It doesn't matter how fast you're going if you're headed off a cliff. This is especially true when it comes to religious belief. Direction is more important than religious zeal and devotion because misguided religious zeal can harm others. Remember the Crusades or the Thirty Years' War that cost 30% of the population of Europe at that time. Remember the people who killed Jesus—the Pharisees, Sadducees, and high priests. They were not common folks; They were deeply religious and passionately devoted to their beliefs. Yet, in their zeal to defend the purity of their religion, they missed the direction God was leading and ended up crucifying Jesus Christ. Direction is more important than speed or zeal when it comes to religious belief.

Sometimes, misguided religious direction can lead to conflict, division, and even violence. This is why some people joke, "Beer is better than religion." Here are "The Top Reasons Beer Is Better Than Religion":

1. When you have beer, you don't knock on people's doors trying to give it away.
2. There are laws against forcing beer on minors who can't think for themselves.
3. Nobody's ever been burned at the stake because of their favorite brand of beer.
4. You don't have to wait more than two thousand years for a second beer.
5. If you've devoted your life to beer, there are groups to help you.

I can sense that some of you plan to drink beer after the worship service. As lighthearted as that comparison may be, it serves as a reminder to pause and reflect on whether we are heading in the right direction. Being Christians does not simply mean that we are headed in the right direction. Christians with zeal often head in the wrong direction. Think of the Christian nationalists who attacked the Capitol in the name of Jesus on January 6, 2021. They are a contemporary example of how Christians, with their religious zeal, can quickly turn to a different Gospel. They claimed to build a Christian nation for Christ, but what they actually did was mingle Christian vocabulary with their desire for political power to maintain their religious supremacy and, at the core, white supremacy. While they claim to do this for God, what they really do is worship power in the name of Christ. I can tell you that their attempts to attain

political and social power to sustain religious supremacy and white supremacy are antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many Christians head toward this wrong direction with full speed. Yes, Christians can quickly turn to a different Gospel.

This is precisely the kind of danger the Apostle Paul was concerned about. After Paul left the Philippian church, Jewish Christians from Jerusalem came and tried to persuade the Gentile believers that they needed to follow Jewish customs to be saved. These new teachers were leading the Philippians toward a wrong direction—seeking status and human credentials rather than relying on God’s grace.

To counter this, Paul shared his own story, revealing his impeccable credentials: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin, a strict adherent to God’s law, and even a fiery defender of his religion to the point of persecuting the church. But then Paul makes a powerful statement—he considered all these credentials as rubbish compared to the privilege of knowing Christ. When Paul met Christ, he turned in a new direction. Nothing else mattered anymore. He no longer sought to be righteous by his own effort; instead, he relied on God’s grace. He no longer obsessed with the purity of his religion; instead, he learned the joy of sharing meals and life together with Gentiles for Christ. He no longer sought power to correct and force others to his own beliefs; instead, he loved them as Christ loves them. His goal shifted to knowing Christ and embodying Christ’s teachings.

### **Moving Forward with Purpose**

However, Paul also understood that transformation is an ongoing process. He hadn’t yet reached his goal but was pressing on toward it. He uses the dynamic image of a runner stretching toward the finish line to illustrate his spiritual journey. [ppt] Have you watched an Olympic sprint race? In a sprint race, all the runners stretch their bodies forward as they approach the finish line. Watching them run is exciting and even beautiful because they are giving their best. While we tend to celebrate only the winner, no one can criticize the runner who finishes last, because they all have exerted all the strength they could bring, and everyone deserves applause, right?

Our spiritual journey might be similar. Knowing the right direction is important, but simply knowing it doesn’t change anything. We need to press on toward the goal with all our strength, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I always say that our faith is in the present progressive tense. Our relationship with Christ is always in the present progressive tense. If you are ill, you are ill, no matter how healthy you were. It’s the same with our faith. So we have to keep asking ourselves this question: Am I moving forward? Am I getting closer to Christ Jesus, our ultimate goal, and embodying His teachings in our lives? You may stumble on your way to the goal. That’s okay. What matters is your consistency and not giving up. I know some of you may not be able to run as fast as you used to. That’s okay, but you can still press forward with your cane and walker. As you get older, you may feel that you can’t actively work for the church as much as you used to. That’s okay. You can still pray for the church and its people. Speed doesn’t matter. How much your action produces doesn’t matter to God. If you keep moving in the right direction and becoming a better being little by little every day, you are on the right path. The good news is that God will not judge us based on what we have achieved or the quantity of our deeds. God will embrace us with God’s love when we complete our journey in this world. That’s the blessing and prize we will receive.

So my beloved Asbury family, remember, it’s not about how quickly we can achieve our spiritual goals, but rather about the direction in which we are moving. No matter where we are in

life, whether we are running swiftly or advancing with the help of a cane, what matters is that we are moving forward with purpose, aligning our lives more closely with Christ each day. Let us not be distracted by our past achievements or failures, nor be disheartened by the pace of our progress. Instead, let us remain steadfast, knowing that God's grace accompanies us every step of the way.

In the end, our faithfulness and perseverance in pursuing Christ will be what truly counts. As we continue our race, may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, trusting that God will guide us to the finish line. Amen.