

December 30/31, 2006

**Auld Lang Fine?**  
**Philippians 3:1-21**  
**Pastor Jeff Peterson**

Well, we finally got our white Christmas, huh? A little bit late unfortunately, but I'm glad to see that you were able to make it here today. You know, I was thinking to myself all this week, "You know what? I think maybe I ought to get new tires on my little Escort." Guess what...I need new tires on my little Escort. I was sliding all over the place.

Today obviously, as we know, is New Year's Eve. That means in just a matter of hours the ball is going to drop on another year, and 2006 will be no more. That also means that all over America, and even around the world, millions of people today are rushing to come up with their New Year's resolutions. Have you made any New Year's resolutions? I think mine is to get new tires next week. Maybe you made a New Year's resolution last year. If you did make a New Year's resolution last year, how many of you fulfilled that through the whole year. (No, don't raise your hands.)

It's an interesting thing, this whole concept of New Year's resolutions and the idea of making these decisions at the beginning of a year. I actually found a Top Ten list<sup>1</sup> where they polled people and elicited input on what are the things that people are committed to in the New Year. The ten things that made the list are:

- 10) Get Organized (Kind of get it together; you know, tired of all the mess.)
- 9) Help Others (That's a good thing.)
- 8) Learn Something New (How to fix your computer or read a book or take up some new hobby.)
- 7) Get Out of Debt (Probably a good idea.)
- 6) Quit Drinking
- 5) Enjoy Life More
- 4) Quit Smoking
- 3) Tame the Bulge (This one's always on the list.)
- 2) Fit in Fitness (A close cousin to number three.)
- 1) Spend More Time with Family & Friends

Now if you've been thinking about a New Year's resolution, maybe something you've been thinking about is somewhere on this list. Of course the thing that I always find to be somewhat strange is that list is kind of familiar, isn't it? Anything on there really shock you? I just wonder if we were so resolved about those things last year, how come they're on the list again for next year?

You know, I never know quite what to make of the New Year's Eve thing. In one sense, tomorrow's just another day, isn't it? We just go on, and it's one day and the next day and the next day. But in another sense, it does provide us with an opportunity to stop and reflect because the reality is life is fleeting. And the reality is the days that we've just lived in the year 2006 are about to come to a close, never to be lived again. Never again will we have the moments and the opportunities that God gave us in this past year. So maybe before we run headlong into a new year, it would be worthwhile to stop and just assess a little bit of where we're at.

That's kind of what I want us to do this morning, and really to do that I just want to ask a simple question: How are you doing? You know, so often we ask that as we're walking along, "Hey, how

are you? How's it going?" And we have the automatic programmed response, don't we? "Fine, I'm fine, thanks. Everything's fine. How are you?" "Fine, thanks, fine."

But are you really fine? As you think about where you're at in your life, as you think about the year that's coming to an end, and as you think about your walk with God, as you think about your cultivation of a relationship with your Creator, how are you doing?

I want us to take just a little bit of time this morning to stop and just to think about our lives and to assess those ideas. A great passage that really sets the table with some good thoughts on this whole thing is Philippians, Chapter three. If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn there with me?

Philippians is a great book. It's a letter written by Paul when he was in prison to the beloved church of Philippi. It's a book filled with hope, with joy, as Paul writes to this church which he loves and he tells them over and over to rejoice and reminds them of the hope that we have in Christ. Obviously we don't have time this morning to talk about the whole book. We'll just jump right in with Chapter 3 beginning in verse 1:

**Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.** (Philippians 3:1, \*NASB)

In verse one Paul is making a transitional statement. He's tying back to what he talks about in Chapter 2, and he is preparing us for a warning he is about to give in Chapter 3, verse 2.

**Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.** (vs. 2-3)

Really something interesting about verse 2 of Philippians 3 is Paul's tone because it is so strikingly different than his tone in much of the letter. That is because Paul is again giving a fatherly admonition to a church that he deeply loves, and it's again because of an issue that keeps coming up in the early Church. We've talked about it a lot in our series in Acts. Bryan covered it very well when we talked about Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council. It's the issue of these guys called Judaizers who were coming into the early Church and they were saying, "Yeah, you need Jesus, but if you were a Gentile first, you need to become a Jew (in essence), you need to be circumcised, you need to keep the Law. You need to do all those things *and* you need Jesus."

You know, that was settled back in Acts 15, but the issue continues to come up in the churches. And if you want to see Paul get his feathers ruffled, this is the thing that really gets him upset. So he uses very strong language, saying, "Beware of the Dogs." He even calls them "evil workers." He refers to the "false circumcision." It reminds us in that verse that true circumcision – God's true desire in regards to covenant and relationship with us – is not about external things; it's a matter of the heart. And so he says, "Don't pay attention to what they're saying because our salvation, our relationship with God, our covenant relationship with God, is an issue of the heart. We're the true circumcision, we who worship in the Spirit."

You remember in our series in Acts we saw that it was the evidence of the Spirit coming upon the Gentiles. Just as at Pentecost, that was an affirmation that salvation by grace alone was available for the Gentiles as well—we who worship in the Spirit and who glory in Christ and put no confidence in the flesh. In other words, we are not trusting in ourselves. We're not trusting in our work. We're not trusting in our ability to gain right standing before God. In essence, we're not glorying in us. We're not boasting about us. We aren't here to say, "Wow, look what I have done,"

and “Look who I am,” and that has made me somehow worthy in the eyes of the holy God. Instead, we glory in Christ and Christ alone. That’s the true circumcision.

Paul is so concerned about this that he uses his own life to make a very strong case. He goes on and says:

**For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.** (vs. 3-6)

In verse 4-5 Paul does kind of a stunning thing here. He lays out to the Philippians his résumé before he came to Christ. And it’s really a staggering résumé. He says there are things that are true of him by his birthright and by his lineage which really give him a basis to stand on if there was such a basis. And then he says not only by birth but by application, by the things that he’s done in his life, talking about being a Hebrew of Hebrews, and he references the tribe of Benjamin. All of those things are his lineage which would have given him great standing among the Jewish people of the first century. And then his studying under Gamaliel and becoming a Pharisee. And today we sometimes think, *Oh, they were the hypocrites*, but that would have been an esteemed position in the time in which Paul lived. And so zealous for what he thought were the things of God that he literally persecuted the church. And so faithful was he in keeping the works of the Law that he could say he would have been found, according to legalistic righteousness, blameless. Paul just lays it out. And he really lays out a compelling résumé of who he was in the culture in which he lived.

The challenge for us is that doesn’t really translate well to our day and age. It doesn’t mean a whole lot to use “to be circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin.” That’s kind of a “so what” thing for us. And because of that, unfortunately, we miss some of the power of what he is about to say.

So I thought to myself this week how could I illustrate for you kind of what this would mean in our culture of what Paul is about to say. And I thought, *You know, one of the places where we really seem to give a lot of attention and affirmation and adulation is in the realm of athletics in our culture.*

One of the greatest athletes of all time is Michael Jordan. He was born in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up primarily in Wilmington, North Carolina. And as he grew up, he developed powerful hips, quadriceps, hamstrings and calf muscles that could push his lean skinny body into the air with ease. He also had fast twitch muscle fibers that provided explosive power. In addition, at 6’6” his center of gravity is higher than that of the average person which allows him to jump high into the air and to be a great basketball player. This is part of his résumé; that’s his lineage, things that were true of him by birth.

But also some things that are true of Michael Jordan by application are that by his efforts, Jordan was known for his fanatical work ethic. Jordan’s coach for most of his career was Phil Jackson who said, “The thing about Michael is he takes nothing for granted. When he first came into the league his outside shooting wasn’t up to professional standards, so he put in his gym time in the off season shooting hundreds and hundreds of shots each day.” Jordan is now considered by many to be the greatest basketball player of all time, having the highest scoring average in NBA history, having won six NBA championships, ten scoring titles and fourteen different MVP awards.

By the way, based on Jordan's 32,000 career total points, we can estimate that he has been airborne for approximately 4 ½ hours. That's like a flight from New York to L.A. or three low-altitude orbits around the earth in the space shuttle. And if Michael Jordan were to go to the moon, he would be able to leap 24 feet in the air and hang there for six seconds. That's like jumping over a small two-story building in a single leap. Now *that* is an amazing athletic résumé.

Now I'm not talking about anything else related to Michael Jordan's life, but from an athletic perspective, he has an incredible résumé. And that is sort of a comparison with Paul. If you were to try to figure out what was Paul's résumé like among his people in the day and age in which he lived, Paul was the *man*. Paul was *the* guy. If anyone had a basis to say, "Look at me," it was Paul—just like we would think of Michael Jordan in our day. And that's what makes Paul's next statements so staggering.

**But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.** (vs. 7-8)

Friends, I think that sometimes we lose perspective on just what a wonder it is that we have Christ. I think sometimes it's just easy for us to lose the awe and to no longer be amazed by what it is that we have in Jesus. And particularly, if you've been a Christian for an extended period of time, that could be your real danger. Listen again to Paul's language: "**Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.**" He goes on and he says, "**I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**"

Imagine for me, if you will, Michael Jordan going before the cameras on national television, talking about all of his résumé, talking about all of his accomplishments, all of the adulation, all of the kids who are wearing his label shoes and everybody who thinks he is the greatest thing in the world, imagine him going before the cameras and saying, "I count it all as rubbish compared to this other thing that I've found."

That's what Paul is saying in Philippians Chapter 3. It doesn't matter what you've accomplished or what you've achieved, it doesn't matter all of the things that the people of the world say and all the things that we want or tend to value in the world. The reality is that what we have in Jesus Christ is so surpassing and so great it's as though those things were loss.

Now Paul isn't saying that everything he ever did was completely worthless. What he's saying is take all those things, take all of that résumé, and by comparison and contrast what we have in Christ is so awesome that it makes the résumé appear to be nothing but rubbish.

Do you count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus? Do you count everything else in your life, everything else in your world as rubbish in comparison to what you have in Jesus?

You know, it was challenging for me this week to study this and to think about it, think about my own life, think about my own heart. And one of the things I recalled is a situation that happened decades ago when I was a young believer. I was in a situation, and I won't go into a lot of details, but through a number of circumstances I had an opportunity my last year in college where I was going to get to go to the Orange Bowl to watch the Huskers play. And not only was I going to get to go to the Orange Bowl, but I was going to receive an all-expense-paid free trip.

Now, some of you have heard me speak before and you heard me talk about going to the Orange Bowl. This is actually a different time—it's not *that* story. This is a different time that I was going to receive a free trip to the Orange Bowl, and I was going to be able to stay for a week at a five-star hotel right on the beach in Miami with the team, with the official party. And if you watched the news this week, all the things the Huskers have done, I was going to get to go to all those events and be a part of all the things that happened with the Bowl game. And then during the game itself, 50-yard line seats right there in the Orange Bowl to watch the whole thing, and all of it absolutely free.

But in the months and the weeks leading up to that Christmas break, some things began to happen. You see, that was the point in my life where I had met Christ, and I was growing in my relationship with Christ, and I was hungering and longing for Jesus. Some friends of mine began to talk about what they were going to do for Christmas break, and they were going to be going to Denver, Colorado. They were going to be going to a conference where they were expecting a thousand college students to gather for a week, and what they were going to be doing there is they were going to be worshipping and they were going to be receiving instruction about God from the Word. And they were going to be fellowshiping together, having a great party with God and with each other—a thousand college students for an entire week.

And something amazing began to happen in my heart. I began to long to go not to Miami, but to Denver. I will never forget walking up to the person who had offered me this free trip, this deal of a lifetime, and looking him in the eye and saying, "Thank you, but I'm not going to Miami. Instead of accepting the free trip, I'm going to pay money to go to Denver, Colorado to a conference with a bunch of college students."

Why in the world would I make that decision? Because I had come to discover the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. And it wasn't a hard decision. It was what I *wanted* to do. I look back on that and I think about that time in my life and how it was so clear that God had brought me to a point of understanding that nothing this world had to offer could compare to what I have in Christ.

You know, a lot of you have been believers for a long time, haven't you? Sometimes years go by, you get kind of used to this whole thing. We can do church, and we're pretty good people, and all that kind of stuff. But somewhere along the way sometimes we lose that sense of passion, that sense of awe, that sense of wonder of who God is and what we have in a relationship with Him. And I wrestled with that this week even in my own life, and I asked myself the question: If those two choices were before me today, would I make the same choice? I think I would. I hope I would. But I am challenged by the fact that it is so easy the longer we walk with God to lose the freshness of a perspective of the surpassing greatness of the wonder that we have in Christ.

On this New Year's Eve I want to ask you where are you at in your hunger for God. Do you thirst for Him as a deer thirsts for streams of water? Do you long for Him as the greatest desire of your heart? If so, have you pursued Him this year in 2006 as your first love, your first priority? Did you make Him this year your greatest ambition? That's what Paul is talking about. He says in verse 8:

**[I] count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.** (vs. 8b-9)

And again, in essence, nothing we've done to earn this; only imputed righteousness because of what Jesus has done. And so he says, "I want to gain Christ; I want to be found in Him," and then:

**...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.** (vs. 10-11)

Friends, the goal of life, the goal of even the *Christian* life is not happiness. It's not success. It's actually not even self-improvement. It's knowing Christ and being conformed to His image.

Our goal as we look ahead toward this next year should not be worldly success. It shouldn't be trying to put together the greatest résumé. It shouldn't be trying to get all that the world has to offer. It shouldn't even be spiritual success, whatever that is. Rather, more than anything else, it should be knowing Christ—His person, His resurrection, His suffering.

But experiencing this reality requires living with the right priorities. You know, if we spent 95 percent of our time, our energy, our passion and our focus in the year 2007 on the things of earth, if we spent 95 percent of our time on the things the world says matter and on building our résumé or accomplishing success or experiencing great things the world has to offer, if we spent 95 percent of our time on that, we can't very well expect to come to the end of the year and find our hearts bursting forth with wonder and awe and love over what Jesus has done for us. Having the kind of perspective that Paul articulates in Philippians 3 requires the kind of intentionality with which Paul lived in the ordering of his priorities. And, you know, God leads us in that process, and sometimes He even uses suffering along the way. Sometimes He uses hardship to bring us to that point of seeing the reality of all that we have in Him.

I know a person who spent 2006 suffering in ways that I have never come close to suffering, suffering in ways unimaginable to me and that I pray I'll never experience. And I know that person would rather by far have done something completely different in 2006 than suffer in that way. But I will tell you this: Every time I heard from that person this year I was struck by one thing, *That person knows Jesus in a way I simply do not.*

Sometimes our focus is so much on trying to have life be happy, comfortable and easy that we forget that the point is knowing Jesus, being conformed to His image, and ultimately the point is eternity. The ultimate end is found not in this life, but in the life to come. Paul says, "In order that somehow by the miracle of God's grace I might experience the resurrection from the dead."

You know, the existentialist mindset of this world that is constantly being pushed upon us is that when you die you're food for worms. Therefore that affects how you live because what the world tells you is, "Live for now, go for it, go for the gusto, experience it all, do what it takes, make yourself happy." That's the mantra of the world because life is fleeting and it's over and it's done.

But friends, that is completely contradictory to what God says in the New Testament. God says life is not about today, and when you die it's not about being food for worms. It's about living for eternity. It's about the reality of a resurrection. And it's about the expectation of coming face to face with the risen Christ, and getting to be with Him for all eternity. And thus we realign the priorities of our life to live not for now but for those things that matter.

That's what Paul shares, and then he gives a critical perspective for us to keep in mind:

**Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.** (v. 12)

That's a pretty amazing statement. You know, Paul gave his résumé before he came to Christ. Then we know about his life afterward. We know him as the great apostle – all those things. But

what did he say in verse 12? He says, “Hey, I’m not there yet.” He says, “I’m telling you that the greatest thing in life is the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus, being conformed to His image, and being united with Him in every possible way. But I’m still on the journey, and therefore, I’m going to continue to press forward in the days to come to know my Lord more.”

Now if even the great apostle Paul would say to us that he hasn’t arrived, yet you and I are somehow okay with where we’re at, that may indicate that we’ve become seriously complacent. Really there ought to be within each of us what there was in Paul, and that is a godly restlessness, a sense of divine dissatisfaction where you say, “You know, I’m so excited about who God is and what He’s done in my life that I want more.” That’s what Paul is saying here.

I’d ask you, as you’re looking forward to 2007, does your heart burn within you that this coming year you want to know Jesus more? There ought to be that kind of divine dissatisfaction that propels us forward, but we run into this problem of complacency. And often the problem of complacency comes out of the problem of comparison because so often we judge how we’re doing, where we’re at, and we decide we’re fine on the basis of comparison with the world around us. We look out there and we say, “Oh, look at that – I’m doing pretty good, things are fine.” Or sometimes we even take it another step and we compare ourselves to the people around us. And we look out around the church and we say, “Well, you know, hey, look at that person – I’m doing better than that,” or “Well, maybe not quite as good as him, but, you know, I’m close maybe.” We look at the people around us and that becomes our measure on how we’re doing on our walk with God. But the only place for accurate measurement in our walk with God is to look at the person of Jesus, to look at His character, to look at His nature, to look at all that He is and who that He is and compare ourselves to Him, and then to compare ourselves to ourselves, where we’re at in progressing in becoming more like Him.

Are you more like Jesus today than you were one year ago? Five years ago? Ten years ago? That’s how we ought to measure. But even when we measure against ourselves, sometimes our focus is wrong because we focus on external activity instead of internal transformation. We think, *Well, I don’t do that and I don’t that, and I don’t that either*, or, *Well, I do that, or I do that, or It’s snowing out and I’m here today, aren’t I?* We look at these external activities and that becomes a measure. But the real issue is how is your heart—the unseen reality that only God and you know? The Christian life is about becoming more like Christ.

You know, it’s not even about getting it all together. It’s been a real challenge for me over the years to come to grips with this fact. I grew up in an atmosphere where failure was not acceptable. It just was not tolerated. And I grew up believing that I could not fail and be acceptable. And therefore, really the focus and the goal of so much of my life in the early days was getting it all together. And then I met Jesus. And one of the things that excited me about being a Christian is now I had the power of God to get it all together. And I tell you what, if you would have said to me twenty years ago, “Jeff, paint a picture for me of what your life will be like after walking with God for twenty years; tell me what you’ll be like,” I guarantee you I would have painted for you a picture back then that doesn’t really line up with who I am today. And part of the lesson along the journey for me has been some of the struggle and frustration and the disappointment. To look back and say, “Why Lord? Why after twenty years of walking with You, why do I still struggle with this or with that? Why haven’t You changed this or that? I’ve asked You time and time again,” what God has quietly been teaching me is He has a greater priority, even greater than me getting it all together, and that is what He wants to do in my heart.

And when I ask God to search my heart, I can with confidence given by His Spirit confirming with my spirit say that while I have so far to go, I am a completely different person than I was twenty years ago. I love my Jesus in ways today that I couldn't even understand or fathom twenty years ago. I'm a totally different person than I was five years ago. I don't have it all together, and I still long to see God do so much more. But the reality is I want Him to work more than anything in my heart.

As you evaluate your life this morning, I want to encourage you to ask God to search your heart and show you if you are in fact falling more deeply in love with Him and becoming more like Him. As you think about the year that's just gone by, did you order your life in such a way that allowed you to fall more in love with your Lord and to be transformed by His power and His grace? That's what Paul is saying. Verse 13:

**Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** (vs. 13-14)

Paul says as he looks at it, "I'm not there yet, but what I'm going to do is I'm going to forget what lies behind and I'm going to keep pressing for what lies ahead." Now, you may be thinking, *Wait a minute – he just said forget what lies behind. You're saying to think about the year that's gone by.* You see, there's a critical difference between *assessing* and *obsessing*. And while it is valuable for us to periodically stop and assess our progress, after we've done that, believers should walk with their eyes primarily fixed on the future, allowing it to affect our choices in the present instead of being shackled by our failures from the past.

I was reminded again of kind of a visual image for me of that this week. You see, my kids got a video game for Christmas, and it's been sort of the obsession at our house this week. Well, I don't play video games, and yet they begged me to try this, and I was reminded of why I don't play video games. But I went down and they got this thing and they're all over it. There's a "hard mode" and all that, and so I dialed it down to "easy." And then there's this thing like a track that kind of comes at you and you're basically supposed to hit a button at the right time as these things come flying at you. The kids are kind of laughing because I'm in "easy mode," and to me they're like a hundred miles an hour and to them it's like they're standing still.

So I'm watching this thing and I hit the button and I missed the thing and it goes by. And I'm thinking about why did I miss it, and what happened; and meanwhile while I'm thinking about that, ten more have gone by and I've missed a whole bunch more. And I thought to myself this week that's kind of the picture of how we ought to live our Christian life. "You know what—I missed that one. Okay, I missed it, but if I sit there and keep thinking about the one I missed, I'm going to miss another one because God has opportunities today." God wants to meet with you today. God wants to draw near to you today and tomorrow and the next day, and our focus needs to be on the future as we allow our hope for the future to affect our decisions in the present instead of being shackled by our failures from the past.

For another athletic illustration, I heard Bill Callahan be asked after a game when Nebraska didn't play very well, "What do you do after a bad game?" He said, "We break down the film; we learn from it; we move on." And it's a good perspective because past failure only has profit inasmuch as it can be used for constructive self-examination leading to future change. Otherwise, it just completely halts progress, and it becomes a chain that keeps you from moving forward and growing in Christ.

You know what—the same can be true of past success. Maybe 2006 was a great year for you. Maybe you experienced intimacy in a relationship with God like you never have before. If you walk into 2007 with your eyes fixed behind you instead of fixing your eyes on what is ahead, then you may very well become spiritually complacent and miss out on the opportunities that God has for this coming year. So Paul's answer is, once we've done this assessment, forget what lies behind and press on. Reach forward toward what lies ahead.

Some of us need to get over the past, whether it's our failures or the failures of others, because sometimes we miss out on experiencing the joy that Christ does bring our way when we can't get over the fact of how we failed yesterday. We also, as we assess, need to make sure we're assessing the right thing. Here in verses 12-14 Paul is not admonishing us into moral progress. He's not saying do better, be better people, fulfill your New Year's resolution—although those are good things. What Paul is talking about is something much higher here. He is calling us toward an all-out pursuit of being faithful in regard to God's calling on our lives because one day we will stand before the risen Christ to give an account for our lives. And His primary concern at that point will not be whether or not we got more organized in 2007. But rather it will be whether or not we pursued Him and whether or not we were faithful to His personal calling on our lives as a part of building His eternal kingdom. And sometimes we forget that there actually are real and lasting consequences related to the choices that we make regarding what we live for and how we run the race.

Earlier Paul reminded us clearly that our standing before God is solely based on His grace. Later in verse 21 he's going to remind us our citizenship is in heaven. Those things are fixed, they're unchanging; they're by God's grace, and they will not change. But there is a very clear biblical concept of eternal reward and also the potential loss of reward based on how we run the race. Several passages exhort us to run in such a way as to win the prize by His grace and in His power, and it's because of all these things that Paul says in verse 13:

**Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** (vs. 13-14)

**“One thing I do.”** Is there a single-mindedness to our lives, or are we distracted and bothered by so many things? Do we have a clear and calm center to who we are by focusing on cultivating an inner life with Christ, or are we tossed all over the map by circumstances and events in our lives and in our world? Paul is laying out a mature perspective. Verse 15:

**Let us therefore, as many as are perfect [mature], have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.** (vs. 15-16)

We understand there's nothing we ever have done or could do to earn the salvation and favor of God. He has given us the greatest gift in all of human history, and because of that we come to understand the surpassing greatness of what we have in Him. And understanding that surpassing greatness, we pursue that with all we are. We realize we haven't arrived in knowing Him in the fullness of who He is, so we press on and we assess where we've been. But we forget what's behind and we keep pressing forward, reaching and reaching to draw closer and closer to Christ. That's the goal for which we live, and that's a mature perspective on life. Paul says if you don't get that, it's okay. God is going to reveal that to you in His time and His way. He's gracious even in His response to that. And then a key to running the race is following the right examples. Verse 17:

**Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.** (vs. 17-19)

Paul says follow my example and the example of others like me. And while we are not to measure ourselves against the crowd, it is a profitable thing for us to seek out men and women, one or two others, who have run the race ahead of us after whom we can pattern our life. And look at them as examples of people who understand the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Because if we don't have the kind of models and mentors that Paul is talking about, so often we're going to default to living like the people around us. And that's the picture of the world that he paints in the next verse.

Even this week, as soon as Christmas was over, I was struck by the fact that on the news every night they began to do the highlights of the last year. And they had the highlights in sports, and they had the highlights in weather, and in this and in that. But one that really struck me was the highlights in entertainment, or something to that affect, and the highlights were absolutely horrible. I saw another news story the other night talking about what some kids had been doing on the internet in this day and age, and how we used to try to keep the things that we did that were shameful, secret. But now, apparently, it's all the rage to put them on a blog and basically air your laundry to the world. And what's happening in our culture right now is the things that ought to be a shame are the things that people actually glory in. And in order to be a celebrity, you've got to do that which is more and more outrageous and more and more shameful. And those models are people whose god is their appetites, their base desire is living for self and the impulses of the moment and the pleasures of this world—and their end is destruction.

And Paul clearly says we are not to model our lives on all the things we see out there from people who are enemies of the cross of Christ, but rather look to him, look to others, look to those who have gone before us to give us an illustration of how to run the race well. And ultimately much of this comes down to continually focusing our attention in the right place, which is eternity—having an eternal perspective and focusing our attention on the right things which is knowing and pursuing and following and obeying and serving Christ who will one day bring everything into proper order. Verse 20:

**For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.** (vs. 20-21)

We eagerly await Jesus' return. We live not thinking one day we will be food for worms, but that one day we will stand face-to-face with the One who gave all to redeem us. We live in expectation of that, and we understand that when He comes back He is going to straighten everything out. The word "subdue" means to arrange in ranks. He is going to put everything back in order, so we live by faith looking forward to that day. And as we head into a new year, we live our lives in such a way as to arrange the order of our priorities to know Him and to follow His will.

One of the models and mentors in my life was Curt Lehman who was the founding and senior pastor of our church here for 32 years, and I learned very much over the years watching his life and watching his walk with God. He has now gone home to be with the Lord, but before he finished his earthly race, in one of his last days, he shared something I hope I will never forget.

Another Berean fellowship pastor was at the hospital visiting him, and he said to him, “Frank, the Lord’s been speaking to me, and He’s been telling me all the things I did for Him don’t matter that much. He just wants me to love Him.” My prayer is that when I come to the end of my race, whenever it is, that what will have marked my life more than anything else is a passionate pursuit of the One who gave everything for me. And my prayer for myself and for each one of you in this coming year is that in 2007, what would mark our year is that we pursued knowing the surpassing greatness of Jesus, living for Him, intimacy with Him and His purpose and plans for our life as a top priority of who we are.

As we close our service this morning, I’m going to ask Nathaniel to come out and play quietly. We’re going to take just a few minutes and reflect. And I want to encourage you to think about this past year and be honest with God and yourself—no one else—did you live your life in such a way to say that you understand and you are in awe of the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus? And maybe the answer is, “Lord, there are a lot of things I regret in terms of opportunities missed.” If so, ask God forgiveness for those things, deal with it, and let’s move on, fixing our eyes on the future and looking toward the future year.

And I would ask you to ask God one thing: “Lord, put one thing on my heart that I could do to pursue my relationship with You this coming year—just one thing.” Ask Him in this time to give you a specific idea, one step that you could take that you might know Him more one year from now. Let’s pray together.

<sup>1</sup> <http://pittsburgh.about.com/cs/holidays/tp/resolutions.htm>