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A Year of Testimony & Praise
Knowing Christ
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Today we continue in our series of the book of Philippians and one of the images Paul uses in chapter 3 is that of running a race. The message version coins it this way, **“I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward – to Jesus. I’m off and running and I’m not turning back. So let’s keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us.”**

Who likes to run? If you are here and you like to run, jog, even power walk long distances raise your hand. I asked 2 people who liked to run in marathons and half marathons here at WVPC – and bc this was the weekend of the mens retreat - I asked two women - what it was like. The two people I asked about this were Karen Clark, and Margaret Ann Joiner. Now Karen (and her husband Mike also) have been doing long distance running for a long time. They are veterans Ask them about it...they have great stories to tell. But Margaret Ann just did her first half marathon real recently.

But the thing that was clear to me as they both sent me emails about their experience was that you cannot just go out your door one day and run 10 miles, or 6 miles, or 26 miles. Your body won’t do it. You will break down. For some of us, even thinking about doing such a thing exhausts us.

Margaret Ann said “When I first started training I could not run one minute without huffing and puffing because I hadn’t run in 35 years.”

Over time though – for about a year -,with her son David as her coach she trained. At the start all she could do was run for one minute and walk for three minutes, three times a week. Gradually, over time she got stronger and stronger and just recently she came in 6th in a six mile half marathon.

Now Karen and Mike train constantly for marathons, eating right, working out, reading the right articles, getting enough sleep. But Karen said that no matter how hard you train, sometimes you “hit the wall” sooner than you think.

“The “wall” she said, is that point **where finally you have to walk for a bit, or limp, ... starting to run again is hard, but you know you better run because you came so far... I only break through the wall when the finish line is in sight...The finish line is everything you have trained for and prepared for, the destination you need to achieve. At the finish line is your family and friends, and if you pick your races right it could even be a fireman handing out Tiffany's boxes to finishers!** “

Does any of this sound the least bit relaxing? To me it all sounds downright painful...

Did either of these women enter into these marathons lightly?

Did either of these women wake up one day and decide, oh yeah...I think I'll run a marathon today because I kind of sort of feel like it....its sort of a marathony day...

No way!

They had their focus on the goal of completing this race, long before the day of the marathon...

Training, dedication over time...focusing on their goal allowed these women to finish the race.

Now why do you think Paul uses a race to describe the spiritual life?

I think its because the spiritual life is just like running a marathon...its all about focusing on the goal, and training to reach it.

And what is that goal?

The goal, the finish line for Paul was to **KNOW CHRIST.**

This was what he wanted more than anything...

He says in scripture, **“I count everything as garbage...compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”** That was Paul's goal.

Now in saying this, you have got to know that Paul was raised in an “ivy league” town of his day.

Tarsus, where Paul was born was a very wealthy highly educated environment

Paul learned classical Greek, as well as the tongue Koine greek

He probably started at age 5 studying the Pentateuch (first 5 books of the OT)

And he knew Hebrew.

Scholars believe he went to the rabbinic school of Hillel, which was the highest and best school that a good Jewish boy could go to.

Paul was privileged...his family was wealthy and he had everything that a successful person could ever want.

I want you to understand then, when says, **I count everything as garbage compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**

He is saying a lot...

He is saying that pursuing a relationship with Jesus Christ is better than anything the world can offer, because Paul had everything it could offer and counts it as nothing in contrast to knowing Christ

Who knows the mission statement of WVPC?

It comes right from Philippians folks.

“To Know Christ, And To Make Him Known.”

That is what we are all about here as a church.

To get to know Christ more deeply day by day.

I have a book by my bed that my daughter Julie bought for me just recently. I had read it long ago, and it is a classic...I recommend it to you. It is called **“The Pursuit of God”** by Tozer and its all about how we are meant to pursue our relationship with Jesus Christ... with all our hearts..

Even the word pursuit reminds of the pursuit of marathon runners to reach their goal...that finish line...even though its hard. And what Tozer talks about is the fact that just because we have been raised in the church and learned a lot about God...all our lives...and just because at confirmation or camp or somewhere along the way way , we accepted Christ as our Lord, and we call ourselves Christians...just because we’ve done that it doesn’t mean that we have somehow arrived.

Tozer says that accepting Christ *is just the first step*, as much as buying running shoes is the first step to getting ready to run a marathon.

Tozer says this:

“How tragic that....everything is made to center upon the initial act of 'accepting' Christ . . . and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found Him, we need no more seek Him.” (Pursuit..pg 16)

I remember working in a church where a woman, named Janet would come every Sunday with her children so that they could learn the Bible stories and good morals, she told me. She believed in Jesus, was a Christian, but church really wasn’t for her – it was for the kids and she pretty much, it seemed to me, tolerated the worship services – then went and picked the kids up after SS and went home.

But one day one of the messages got ahold of her, and she came to me and said, “The Holy Spirit has been working in my life. And I don’t know what’s up but I have such a hunger for God all of a sudden- I can’t stop reading the scripture. Do you realize what is in this Bible? I am actually beginning to believe that this is true.” Yeah, I said. It really is.

I am telling you, a change happened in her that I could not believe. She could not get enough of Scripture, of worship, of anything that had to do with Jesus Christ. She wanted to grow, to go deeper, to as Paul says “grab hold of Christ, as Christ had grabbed hold of her.” And she did; she always

was willing to do anything that would help her grow in her faith. She actually became a great friend of mine and had a very powerful prayer ministry, and many were healed because of her prayers.

...Paul says...keep seeking Christ...keep pursuing a closer relationship with God. Don't stop and stagnate. Keep at it! Pursue Christ with all you've got!

Not once does Paul say in Philippians "I've arrived." Not once does he say that.

He never is satisfied with his knowledge of Christ...He wants more...just as a runner, or any competitive athlete is always trying to beat his/her own time, do it a little better, go a little further, make the pace a little quicker, a little stronger.

Karen told me that every time she competes in a race she always thinks about how she could run it better the next time. There isn't a place where you just arrive and sit comfortably on your laurels in the Christian life.

Seeking more of God ought to be the heart throb, the goal, the longing of every Christian, as we fall more and more in love with Jesus Christ...

Again Tozer says **"Once quickened by the Spirit, our whole being senses its kinship with God (because we were created in the image of God) and leaps up in joyous recognition!...now begins the glorious pursuit, the hearts happy exploration of the infinite riches of the Godhead."**

Matthew Henry said: **"Wherever there is true grace there is a desire for more grace."** There is a certain addictive component to this relationship with God, where once we experience him, we can never seem to get enough. When Paul said, **"Don't be drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit"** ([Ephesians 5:18](#)), his aim was to make God-aholics out of all believers. The Spirit is addicting. The evidence that you have him living in you, is that you want more of him.

When Tim and I were dating, we were so in love, we could never get enough of each other.

This was before cell phones, yes I'm that old, I'd use the dorm phone in the hall. It was really uncomfortable to talk to him because the cord on the phone in the hall was so short I had to crink my neck, and then there was no place to sit so I stood there forever... ..and the cord wasn't long enough for me to sit on the floor... and it was staticky so I also had to hold the cord into the phone so it wouldn't make that noise.

I endured physical discomfort and a great sense of awkwardness to talk with that man...I don't know if he really appreciates that...and then I endured

social torment because I lived in a suite...and my roommates got mad because he and I would talk for so long. *Don't you know we have lives too! Why are you always hogging the phone?*

I hardly thought about all of this though because all I wanted was to be with him, whether on the phone or in person...Because we just couldn't get enough of each other. Now we never see each other! Why does that happen after you get married...not sure.

But we still have that longing...to be together. We're always trying to find time to do that. And that same longing for God is what the psalmist writes about when he says...

“As a hart longs for flowing streams...so longs my soul after you O God.”

“A day in your courts is better, than a thousand elsewhere.”

Now its important to remember that any longing that we have for God has been put there by the Holy Spirit to begin with. So if you are sitting there thinking, *“Yeah God, I really do want to know you better. I want to grow in my experience of your living presence. I want to do what I need to do to train myself to grow spiritually, and get to know you in a deeper fuller way.”*

If you are in that mode right now, that's the Holy Spirit at work in you, creating that longing and desire...so go for it...

Don't quench the Holy Spirit. Follow that urge, that nudge...God does not force himself on us, but calls us to seek him with our whole heart...

And don't think that a personal knowledge, an intimate close connection to Jesus Christ is left for the religious professionals, or people who know more about the Bible than you. Let me ask you...**True or False...**Jesus said, **“Come unto me all you who are learned and Biblically educated and I will give you rest...”** He said **“Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.”**

Brennan Manning puts it this way,

My personal experience of the relentless tenderness of God came not from exegetes, theologians, and spiritual writers, but from sitting still in the presence of the living Word (Jesus) and beseeching Him to help me understand with my head and heart His written Word (the Bible). Sheer scholarship alone cannot reveal to us the gospel of grace. We must never allow the authority of books, institutions, or leaders to replace the authority of *knowing* Jesus Christ personally and directly. When the religious views of others come between us and the primary experience of Jesus as the Christ, we become.... unpersuasive travel agents handing out brochures to places we have never visited.”

– [Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*](#)

Travel agents promoting a land we've never been to. That happens when you know a lot *about* Jesus, never personally experience his living reality and his love Or maybe you did long ago, but you are dried up, worn out and tired. You may have grown up in church all of your life, and you may know all the Bible stories, but its been a long time since you've experienced his grace.

Theres so much in this life that distracts us from him, that creates fear and anxiety in our hearts, that gets us off track. So how do we train?

Well the first way to train for the spiritual marathon of life in Christ is

I. Get to know scripture. If you don't know it well start in Philippians. Mike Clark was doing the adult ed up here last Sunday and told everyone that Philippians is full of great memory verses. I couldn't agree more. Start there...start memorizing those things in Philippians that are meaningful to you as we study it together. Get it down inside you.

If you become familiar with Scripture, it will make such a difference in your life because as you fill your mind and heart with God's word, your mind and heart start to be transformed to be like Christ. And the more you read scripture, the more you develop a hunger for it...and by all means...Join a small group Bible Study so you can be with people who know God's word... and learn it!

The second way to train for the spiritual marathon of this life in Christ is to **II. Learn how to pray.**

In order to learn to pray deeply... you've got to work at it... We have a prayer workshop coming up. Invest the time to come on out to it.

You know, to be perfectly honest, I don't always feel like praying. Just like I don't want to go to the gym, or I know MA said she didn't always want to train to get ready for the marathon either, day after day.

I pray on many days because I know I need to, whether I feel like it or not, or whether the experience of prayer is especially rewarding that day or not. I just simply keep at it because I know, from past experience that I need to do it to stay in spiritual shape.

As Margaret Ann started her training with 1 minute of running and 3 minutes of walking, start with 1-3 minutes of prayer a day. Then go to five, then seven...make it eight the next day and gradually increase your prayer life. Build into your life a routine of prayer...Spending time in prayer is one of the most powerful things you can do for yourself and your family, and the Enemy hates it when we pray. That's why its so hard to do it. .

Prayer does not come naturally to us...our minds wander...we feel like we are not doing all of the things that we should be doing as we sit in God's presence...Sometimes we will experience a sense of God's absence when we pray...sometimes we will sense his presence. And yet over time, as you train yourself to pray regardless of how you are feeling on any given day, you will find that you will grow in your love for Jesus Christ and it will become easier and more natural for you to engage in prayer for long periods.

Finally the third is **III. Fellowship** with others who know Jesus

We cannot run this marathon alone. Karen sometimes runs with her daughter Sarah. Margaret Ann ran this last one with her mother in law and they encouraged each other as they went. And I know that just being in a pack of people headed for the same goal is exhilarating, and keeps you in step. It keeps you going.

That's why we've got the church. We are that pack of people on that spiritual marathon run and if we truly are putting knowing Christ first in our lives ahead of all else, we will keep one another in step. We will encourage each other, and we will reach the finish line together...we will finish well

Today our pack of supporters in the spiritual marathon is even bigger than West Valley, because today we celebrate world communion Sunday...That means that every Christian church around the world is also participating in the Lord's Supper today. Think about the vast number of Christians gathered around this table who are all today remembering Jesus' extravagant love, his enduring friendship, his relentless compassion, and his uncompromising forgiveness.

Recognize this as you partake of these elements...pray that you might experience this holy God, who has made such an impact on our world through Jesus Christ. Who has pursued you, who has died for you, and who longs for you to be in relationship with him. Once you realize the nature of his presence, you will only seek more of him. You will realize that nothing else satisfies. He fills the longing of every human heart, and he will fill yours as well.

May we truly KNOW Christ today at this table...and out of the fullness of knowing him...make him known. AMEN