

Philippians 3:14

Dear Friends in Christ and especially you, Taylor, our confirmand,

Some of the words that jump out at us when we read the passage you have chosen as your confirmation verse are GOAL and PRIZE and PRESS ON, or pursue. And those are important words in this passage. But there is a word in this passage that we might easily skip over if we aren't careful. It's a word that we don't want to miss. We don't want to miss this word because it reminds us where we have to start. It has to come before the goal and the prize. It's the reason we pursue the goal. It's the word CALL.

Paul says **God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus**. You know the history of Paul. You know that he was leading the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, but he wasn't satisfied with his work there. He knew that there were Christians who had fled to Damascus. So he obtained permission from the Jewish leaders to go to Damascus to try to find them. He was determined to eradicate Christianity like weeds in a garden. You know what happened. As he traveled to Damascus the crucified and resurrected Jesus appeared to him. The power of his presence knocked him off his horse and the brightness of his glory blinded him. After Paul arrived in Damascus, Jesus sent a man named Ananias to baptize Paul and remove his blindness. Jesus called Paul to faith. And then he called Paul to be his Apostle to the Gentiles.

That's a wonderful story of conversion, but what does it have to do with us? Well, the Bible makes it clear that, although we weren't running around the Middle East persecuting Christians, we were just like Paul. By birth we were blind, we were enemies of God. By nature we want the opposite of what God wants. We were dead in trespasses and sins. But God sent someone to us to baptize us and heal us. He sent parents and grandparents who trusted God's promise and brought us to be baptized, who told us about Jesus, who prayed with us, who brought us to church with them. And through the gospel connected to the water of baptism and through the gospel which we heard at home and in church the Holy Spirit did for us what he did for Paul. He converted us. He gave us a second birth. He opened our eyes so that we could see Jesus. He called us to be his own dear children and heirs of heaven.

You have a high calling. It's a call from heaven, from God himself. It's a powerful call; a call that has brought you from spiritual death to life. As Jesus said, **I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live**. God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus.

As was evident in Paul's life, and as he taught over and over again, our call to faith in Jesus, our salvation, is 100% God's work. It is pure grace. As you learned from Luther, we can't, by our own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus our Lord or come to him. But, notice that God did not just call Paul to faith. He called Paul to service. He called Paul to preach the gospel, to travel all over the Mediterranean proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the savior of the world.

We'd have to say that Paul took his call to serve seriously. Within days of being called to faith in Jesus he began proclaiming the good news about Jesus in Damascus. Within days he discovered that his call to serve God in this way wasn't going to be easy. The Jews in Damascus plotted to kill him and he had to escape by being let down from the city wall in a basket. Because of his faithful service to God he was beaten, imprisoned, stoned and finally executed.

Just think of how many times he was tempted to think, “why am I doing this? If I could just find a quiet place to settle down and keep my faith quiet, just worship God in the privacy of my own home, things would be so much easier.” But he knew that’s not what God had called him to do.

A number of times in his letters, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul reminds us that we have not only been called to faith, but we have been called to serve. He tells us that each of us has been given gifts from God that he expects us to use in serving him and others. He uses the picture of the body to illustrate that we have important work to do, maybe as a mouth to proclaim the gospel, or an ear to listen to a fellow Christian’s confession; a hand to help someone in need; legs to run errands for someone who can’t walk. We each have different gifts given to us by God so that we can serve him and each other.

What an honor! What a privilege! What a high calling! God lets us here on earth, after he has called us to faith and saved us, so that he can work in and through us doing **the good works he has prepared in advance for us to do**. He has called us to serve. But we know that even on our best days, even when we are filled with thankfulness for all that God has done for us in Jesus and we are trying hard to serve him, we don’t serve him perfectly as he deserves or demands. With Paul we confess, **I have the desire to do what is good, but I do not carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing**.

That’s why our baptism is a daily reminder to drown our old Adam with contrition, confessing our sins, and repentance, trusting in Jesus for forgiveness. Then our eyes will be focused on the goal, the perfection of heaven, and the prize, the crown of righteousness that Jesus has waiting for us and for all who long for his second coming in glory.

Yes, you have a high calling. God has called you to be his own dear child. He has made you an heir of heaven. But Satan doesn’t want to have it. He doesn’t want you to reach your goal and get the prize Jesus has won for you. That’s why Paul says he **presses on toward the goal**, literally, he pursues it. At confirmation we promise, as Taylor will in a few minutes, that that is what we are going to do. We are going to press on toward the goal. With God’s help we are going to remain faithful unto death. We are going to hold on to what we have so that no one will take our crown. But that’s easier said than done.

We have the warning in Scripture, **if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall**. During this Lenten season we have the graphic examples of Judas and Peter to warn us. As we promise that we are going to remain faithful it almost seems that Satan is snickering in the corner saying, “we’ll see about that,” as he plots all kinds of temptations to try to make sure we don’t remain faithful and get the crown of eternal life. His goal is to trick us into doing something we know is wrong, something we maybe thought we would never do, and then try to convince us to despair as Judas did. That’s why we need the daily reminder of our baptism. It reminds us that even when we are unfaithful, God remains faithful. It reminds us to confess our sins and turn to Jesus for forgiveness as Peter did.

The most difficult struggle we have in remaining faithful to our Lord comes from within. By the powerful call of God we were brought to faith and a new man was created within us; but, as long as we live on earth, we still have an old man, a sinful nature. Because of this sinful nature we often get distracted. The things of this world seem so interesting, and there are so many things we need, at least we think we need them. Our sinful nature says, “Hey, if all your sins are paid for already and Jesus is preparing a place for you in heaven and there isn’t anything you can do to earn or deserve anything from God, why not have a little fun? Why not live it up

a little?” Or we think, “my family has always been Christian. I’ve always been a Christian. I think I’ll be just fine. I don’t have anything to worry about. I know Jesus and what he’s done for me. I can focus my energy on other things.”

That’s not the way Paul looked at it. That’s not the way he wants us to look at it. He says in another place **Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

In the earlier verses of this chapter he says, **Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** Each day, Paul says, he forgets what is behind. Anything he has done has been done by God. He claims no credit for it. His sins and shortcomings of the past have been washed away in Jesus blood. So, each day he continues to strive to be faithful, to pursue the goal, the crown of righteousness Jesus has waiting for him, and us.

You have a high calling. It’s a call from above, from God himself. That call of God has created faith in your heart and saved you. It’s also a call to serve the one who saved you each day. It’s a call to live with God forever. Today, Taylor, you promise that you will be faithful to that call we are here to pray with you and for your and to encourage you to **press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus!**