

“Remember to Forget”

Isaiah 43:15-25 • Philippians 3:7-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Anyone remember what last week’s message was about? If you were here hopefully you know that we discussed God’s call for us to remember. We are by nature forgetful people. Our lives get so busy that we forget that God is in control; that he has a plan for our lives. We forget that he loves us. We forget that Christ died for our sins and that we are forgiven. But God tells us over 200 times in Scripture to remember what he has done for us. Remembering is one of the major themes of the Bible.

The celebration of the Passover was primarily an act of remembering God’s deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. If there was one thing that defined the Jewish people in the Old Testament and in fact even to this day, it would be God miraculously delivering them from Egypt.

In the book of Deuteronomy God gives his people a number of commands. Fifteen times in Deuteronomy the command mentions remembering. But I think Deuteronomy 24:22 best sums up what they are to remember when it says, “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.”

The thing is, when Scripture tells us to remember it’s about more than just memory. Remembering is meant to shape our identity and determine our conduct. An important part of remembering is the formation of future generations of the faithful. Remembering what Christ has done for us in his life and death and resurrection helps to form our character and to influence our behavior. Remembering helps us to know who we are and helps to form us into the image of Christ, which means that remembering is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

But guess what. Just as God has called us to remember, he is also calling us to forget. I know what some of you are thinking: “Finally, a spiritual discipline I can do. I shouldn’t have

any trouble forgetting.” Some of you have been waiting for years to hear this. You just didn’t remember that you were waiting to hear it.

I think it will be helpful, however, to look at what we mean by forgetting. The dictionary basically gives two meanings of the word “forget.” The first meaning is probably the one we think of first when we hear the word “forget.” It means to fail to remember or to be unable to recall something. This is the kind of forgetting that I’m good at – forgetting where I put my keys or forgetting to pick up milk while at the grocery store.

But there’s another definition of the word “forget.” This one means “to cease thinking of something.” For example, your boss might say, “You can forget about taking next Friday off,” or you might tell your kids, “if your room’s not clean you can forget going to the movie this afternoon.” Unlike the kind of forgetting that you and I are used to, this kind of forgetting takes some active work on our part. It’s this intentional “forgetting” that the Apostle Paul has in mind in today’s passage when he says, “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.”

As he does in other places, Paul is here comparing the Christian life to a race. Often in the races, the runners who are in first or second place as they came down the final stretch will look back to see where their competitors are. But when they look back it slows them down so much that another runner is able to pass them by. Looking back at what was behind them costs them the race.

I think this is what the Apostle Paul is talking about when he tells us to forget. Forget what’s behind you and strain for what’s ahead. So what is it in our lives today that this passage is telling us to forget? What is it that God wants us to put out of our minds?

It seems to me that there are three areas of our lives that we are to forget. These are three things that slow us down by causing us to look back and take our eyes off the finish line.

The first thing we are to forget is our past mistakes and sins. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't learn from our mistakes – of course we should. That's part of changing our patterns of behavior. We need to remember our past so that we don't forget God's grace and forgiveness. The problem is that deep down many of us have this nagging thought that we've sinned more than God can forgive. Particularly as our faith grows and deepens we realize how sinful we really are. But we also need to realize that God's nature is to forgive. In fact not only does he forgive us, the Bible tells us that he will not remember our sins any longer. *God forgets*. Psalm 85 says, "You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins." In the passage from Isaiah 43 that we heard earlier, God says for us to forget the former things. The reason he gives for us to forget is in verse 25. He says, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

One of the most important passages about forgiveness and God forgetting our sins is found in Jeremiah 31. "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." We are to put out of our minds the mistakes of our past, our sins, because God himself has put them out of his mind.

The second thing we need to forget are the things that have hurt us in the past. Again, like our own sins, we need to learn from the times that other people hurt us. But we also need to

learn to forgive. Is there someone in your life – now or in the past – that you can't think about without getting angry? Maybe it's a parent who wasn't there for you or a brother or sister. Maybe a friend who betrayed your trust.

It's a fact of life that whenever we are in any kind of relationship with other people, we are going to experience some emotional hurts. But if we harbor those wounds by carrying a grudge we will become consumed by them. Resentment will always hurt you more than it hurts the person you resent. You must forgive. That forgiveness may be able to help restore the relationship, but even if it doesn't, we are called to forgive the other person.

When Jesus taught his disciples what we now call the Lord's Prayer, he was very clear about the fact that we are to forgive others in the same way that God forgives us and to some degree, the way God forgives us is tied to the way we forgive other people.

The third area of our lives that we are to forget may surprise some of you. We must forget all of the good things we have done in the past. This is the main thrust of this passage from Philippians. Paul says, "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ." The image here is one of a financial balance sheet. Paul is saying that those things that he considered to be "assets" are actually now liabilities. His education and his position actually got in the way of knowing Christ.

Maybe you've been involved in the church your whole life. Maybe you've been a part of accomplishing some great things for God's Kingdom. Those are not bad things. The problem is when you look back on them. None of the things we have done in the past will get us any closer to heaven and in fact, Isaiah 64 reminds us that our righteous acts are like filthy rags to God.

Instead, we understand that we attempt great things for God as a *response* for what he has done for us. We press forward, looking for new ways to participate in the kingdom. We study the Scriptures more and more, trying to

understand better. We pray more, serve more, minister to those in need more, worship more, and even fellowship more. Paul says in verse 12, "Not that I have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

So what is it that you need to forget? In Christ you are a new creation. We're no longer slaves to this world. But we have a lot to learn, too. None of us, as long as we live on Earth, can say we know everything there is to know about our Savior. None of us can say we live in the

perfect world. That's not the point. Don't look back. Forget your past sins. Put out of your mind the ways you've been hurt in the past. But also forget about the good things from the past. Forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. Make Jesus the singular focus of your life. Forget anything that distracts you from Christ. Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus. Remember to forget.

Amen.