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PHILIPPIANS 3:12-21

Series: Choosing Joy in a Post-Traumatic World

Paul the apostle must have been a sports fan. I say that because he uses a lot of terminology in the scriptures related to sports. He says – *We don't wrestle with just flesh and blood.* That's a wrestling illustration. He says – *We fight the good fight.* That's a boxing illustration. But I think his most favorite illustration from sports comes from running. He talks about running, running the race. Today in our passage in Philippians 3:12-21 we're going to see what that is and a little bit more closely. We're going to see what the race looks like. We're going to talk about it in these very personal ways. In fact, today he's going to talk about going toward a prize. He's going to talk about winning the race. So I've entitled this particular sermon, Five Secrets for Winners. I think that it's going to give us some direction for our life so that we too can be winners in life.

But before we do that, let's look at the passage in Philippians 3 because he starts with some words of humility. I think we always need to be humble in our minds, in our lives. We think we have the right answers. We think we have it all figured out sometimes. In fact, I think the people looked at Paul and they must have thought... Remember, he just finished talking about I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings. He's just talked about that. And so I imagine people saying, "Paul has got it together. He must be perfect in his life." And so Paul is going to start with this exhortation. I'm going to receive it as an exhortation in my own life about the humility that we must have in our lives. That sometimes we're going along in a way that we think is right, but it may not be the right thing. Humility is so important for us to embrace because it keeps us teachable and willing to learn.

So he starts out in verse 12 by saying these things. *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* He says – *I press on to make it my own.* You see, I think what Paul is saying is this isn't just theology that's out there. I want it to be mine. I want it to be personal in my own life. I think that's why whenever we come to God's word we ask the same question. How can I make this my own? What can I learn for this for my own heart? This is not just something written 2,000 years ago. It's something that's written for my heart today. How can I make this my own? A very important question that we ask every time we come to God's word. It keeps us humble. So that we don't go on and start doing things that may be counterproductive in our lives, we need to remain humble. And that's what Paul seems to be saying here. Paul is saying I'm growing.

Now we're going to look at these five secrets for winners and as we do, you're going to see some ideas, I hope, that are going to drive you forward in your own life and your own Christian walk. The first one that we're going to look at is this one to concentrate. I use the word concentrate, but

the word that's used in the passage of the word *press on*. Press on. We already talked about it in verse 12. *I press on to make it my own*.

But let's look at verse 14 where he uses the same Greek word *dioko*. Let me tell you what this word means. It's very important that you get the picture here. Because *dioko* means to press forward aggressively. It's most often translated persecution. It's the word used for persecution throughout the New Testament. *Dioko*. Persecuting the Christians. Now Paul is using it in a completely different way here. In the last chapter he said – *I persecuted the Christians*. He used the same word *dioko* in the last chapter when he talked about persecuting the Christians. But now he uses it in a completely different way to describe an aggressive pursuing. He says – *I press on*. I press on for what? Yes, there's this idea of being intentional. This idea of being courageous. This idea of concentrating by pressing on. But what is he pressing on toward? Notice he says – *I press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ*.

What is the upward call of God in Christ? See, I think these words *the upward call* are the key to the passage. So I want to park here for a moment. In fact, if I were you, I would circle the word *upward call* and maybe draw lines to the five things. Because it's really the upward call that we're pursuing. And these five different words or these five different secrets for winners are driving us toward the upward call.

When I think about the upward call, I think of everything that it means to serve Christ. When I think everything that it means to value Him, to want to be with Him in His presence, to spend time with Him, to not let any other distractions get in our way. This upward call that it causes us to have our eyes on things above, not on earthly things. That's mentioned in different ways in the Bible in all kinds of passages that are driving us to think about God is the most important thing in our lives. It is the upward call of God.

I can imagine Jesus walking on the road or near the Sea of Galilee there and seeing Peter and Andrew, and James and John. At different times He said to each of them – *“Leave your nets and follow me.”* See, whenever we follow the upward call of God, we're leaving something behind and we're choosing to follow Him. Sometimes we leave good things behind because the most important thing is the upward call of God.

So when Paul is saying I press on, I concentrate. It's not just saying I concentrate and I think hard; he's saying I'm focusing or I'm concentrating on something. I'm being intentional towards something. And it's this upward call.

As I was looking at what does the upper call mean, I came across a quote. I actually was going to say this, but I want to give credit to the man who wrote it, John Coblentz, because he wrote this in a way that is so succinct and I love what he says. Here's what he says. What is the upward call of God? *“The world drags us downward. The devil tempts us downward. Our fallen natures exert a downward pull. But God calls us upward through His Son Jesus Christ. When Jesus lived among us, He offered an alternative to the world—Himself. He said, ‘Follow Me.’ He asks us to forsake the world, surrender everything to Him, and to become His disciples.”* Now get this last statement. *“This upward call is a lifelong climb, an ongoing process that requires commitment, courage, and discipline.”*

This is the thing that Paul is pressing on toward. He's pressing on toward the upward call. So the first thing we're looking at in this passage, the first secret, is to concentrate or be intentional about what we're doing. To press on.

The second one is this idea of focusing. In order to draw our attention to the focus idea, Paul uses the words *one thing*. Let's see it in verse 13. He says – *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do...* What is the one thing? I'm going to tell you. The one thing is the upward call? That's the one thing I'm focused on. The focusing on Jesus, following His path, doing what He's called me to do. That's the one thing.

Do you know that the words *one thing* are used several times in the Bible? Let me show you one. You remember the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and said, “Well I've kept all the laws in my life. How can I get into the kingdom?” And Jesus responded in Luke 18:22. It says – *When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing.”* What is the one thing? It is the upward call. You lack one thing, the upward call. Further too He says – *“Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.”* Follow me on the upward call. Now here's a man who was distracted by money. It's not wrong to have money or riches. But when they distract you from the one thing, then they're a problem. We don't want anything to distract us from the one thing. If we're going to be a winner, we're going to concentrate, we're going to focus on the one thing, and that one thing is to follow Jesus. The upward call, as it's described in these verses. Then He says – *Follow me.*

The words *one thing* are used in the psalm, Psalm 27:4, when David says these words: *One thing.* What is the one thing? It's the upward call to be in God's presence. He says this: *One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.* I want to be in the presence of God. That is the upward call. That is the one thing that I seek.

I suppose my favorite one thing is the one that takes place when Jesus visits Mary and Martha. They're cooking a dinner for Him. He's coming over as their guest of honor. And this is what it says in Luke 10:39 and following: *And she (Martha) had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.* You see what Mary's doing? She's paying attention to Jesus in His teaching. That becomes important for her and that's her one thing. That's the upward call for her is just to sit there and listen to Jesus teaching.

But Martha was distracted with much serving. It's not the serving that was a problem. It was that she was distracted, distracted from the one thing, from the upward call. She's distracted by good things, serving, and in this case, it's her to-do list, it's her agenda. Her agenda is taking her away from the most important thing. In fact, Jesus is going to tell us more about it. *And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”* You see what Jesus says to Martha? Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, about these serving things. I wonder what distracts us from the upward call.

With the rich young ruler it was money, but with Martha it was her to-do list and the things around. She was anxious and troubled about many things.

I think that could describe me sometimes. I'm anxious and troubled about many things. And maybe those are distracting me, as Jesus described here distracting Martha, from the one thing. What is the one thing? The one thing is the upward call of God in our lives. We need to be able to focus on that one thing, because that is the most important thing.

Last weekend, I was flying back from Raleigh, North Carolina after teaching a parenting seminar. So I'm in the airport on Saturday to fly home. We're standing around waiting for the plane to take off and there was a pilot there. So I struck up a conversation. Happened to be my pilot. I find out that he's flying me back home. So I want to know this guy and who he is. So I started talking to him and I asked him this question. "How many planes are you certified in to fly on?"

He says, "Oh it doesn't work that way. You can only be certified on one plane."

I said, "Only one plane?"

He says, "Yes, I'm certified on the Embraer 175 airplane." That's the plane I was flying on home. "That's the one plane that I fly. I don't fly any other planes. I fly that one plane."

And I'm thinking to myself, and maybe I said something to this effect. I said, "You know, it seems like if you were if you were certified on more planes then you'd be able to have more opportunities to work."

He says, "No, it doesn't work like that. You want to know one plane. Because if something goes wrong on that one plane, you don't want to be wondering where everything is. You know when you get into somebody else's car and the emergency brake sometimes is on the floor, sometimes it's over here, you pull it, sometimes a button you push. You don't want to be trying to figure that out the last minute. One plane, that's all I fly." And I think, wow, what an interesting illustration. When many of us are trying to fly a lot of planes at the same time, maybe we need to focus on the one thing.

The one thing that Jesus is talking about here, the one thing that Paul says is a winner in these five secrets to a winner. Focus on this idea of being in this upward call. How are we focusing on the upward call? I think that our second word here that we're using is to focus. Because of the words *one thing*.

Well let's look at the third secret. The third secret to winners is this next one – to lean forward. Now I get that from this idea in verse 13, where he says – *forgetting what's behind him and straining toward what is ahead*. So I'm suggesting that as believers going for the upward call, we need to lean toward it. We lean to lean forward. Let's read the verse actually and see what it says.

It says in verse 13 – *Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead*. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. It's a picture of a runner who is looking backwards. If you have a runner looking backwards, he can't really run forward very fast. He loses ground. So that's what Paul is saying. We're not going to look back; we're going to go forward in our lives. We're going to look on where we're going, not where we've been.

This is a really interesting idea. I find it specifically interesting when we come to the counseling area. Because there's some people who think that when they get into counseling, they got to go back into their past and figure out why all the things happened in their past and why they are where they are today. Do we really have to do all of that?

I mean, let's say I'm an angry person (I'm not an angry person nor is my family this way), but let's say I'm an angry person and I say, "Oh, my parents were angry people. That's why I'm angry, because I just saw anger happen in my family all the time. And then I've been hurt so many times in my life, and this relationship fell apart, and this business idea collapsed. Oh I've just experienced so much pain in my life. And so I'm angry inside because of all of these things that have happened in my past." Now what's that going to do for me? What's it going to do for me to go back in and analyze that? So now I figure all those things out. Does that help me with my anger? Probably not. In fact, I would suggest that it's more productive in most cases not to go backwards, but to go forwards. And here's why. Inside of our hearts, let's say we've had all those bad things happen to us in our lives. So we're an angry person and we've got these tendencies. So now a small thing happens and we react to it. Or someone offends us and we get upset. Or someone says something that's foolish and we get offended by it. Okay. So we see those things happen. What are we going to do? Oh, well, I got to go back and look at my parents and all these things? No. I think what we do is we go forward, and we learn new patterns of relating. I need to learn how to become more patient in situations that call for patience, especially with people who may not say or do the right kinds of things. I need to be patient, I need to be tolerant of things not going my way. I need to work on that. I need to work on self-control and manage my impulses when I start to feel angry. What I need to do is I need to not worry about where I came from; I need to worry about where I'm going and allow God to train me to move me in a positive direction.

I think that's going to be a key to any of our lives. And I think that's what Paul is saying here. I'm going to forget about what is behind. And I'm going to move toward what is going forward.

Now just think about in the passage, what could Paul be thinking about when he's saying forgetting what is behind? Well in the previous chapter we have some things that he said that he might be proud of. Things like he was a Pharisee of Pharisees. That he studied the word and he studied under Gamaliel. All these things that then made him so great. He could experience pride by looking back, a danger that we might all experience. Or he might experience guilt. He described himself as a persecutor of the church. He was the one who stood there and condoned the death of Stephen. He could be plagued by guilt because of his past. But Paul says this. I'm going to forget what's behind. And I'm going to strain toward what is going forward. I think this is going to be one of the keys to the upward call. That we're focusing on where we're going, not where we've been. If we're focusing on where we're going, then we're looking to heal relationships, we're trying to build them, we're trying to strengthen them, we're trying to develop a different way of thinking and processing life. As we start thinking and processing life differently, we start moving in a good direction.

Now just imagine the upward call as part of that. So now I'm moving toward this upward call and God is teaching me how to be a disciple of His. Now I am following Jesus, I'm learning what it

means to be a disciple of His because I'm following Him. I'm forgetting the things behind and I am straining toward what is ahead.

But you might say, I cannot forget the pain. I cannot forget the mistreatment. I cannot forget the irritation or the offenses from the past. Well, I don't think that's what it's talking about. I don't think it's talking about here removing it from our memory. Because we always will remember the pains from the past, difficulties we've experienced. I think when we understand this word forgetting, what we're seeing is that it's saying I will not take those things from the past and allow them to influence my future. I'm not going to allow the things from the past to influence my future. It's not forgetting them from my memory, it's forgetting them from the influence of what's going to happen. That's why you can forgive someone when they've done something wrong. You're forgiving them. We say forgive and forget. Well we can't completely forget anything. But what we're saying is, when part of what forgiveness means is I'm not going to hold that offense against this person. I'm going to move forward in my life. When we understand this idea of what forgetting means in the scripture that I'm not going to allow it to influence my future decisions, then we can understand God's word when He says I will remember their sins no more. We know that God doesn't remove them from memory because God knows everything about everything in the past, everything in the present, everything in the future, and every possibility of things that might have happened if something else would have happened. God's omniscience is just so strikingly amazing. So we can't imagine that God actually forgets something, that is remove it from memory. But what He promises us is that He will not allow those things to influence how He's going to treat us going forward. *I remember their sins no more*, He says.

So when we come to this verse where Paul is saying forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, he's talking about I'm not going to allow the things of my past to influence where I'm going. I'm going to trust the Lord of this upward call and I'm going to move with Him 100%. This is one of the secrets of being a winner.

Let's go on. The fourth one is to partner with others. And I use that because the actual words in verse 17 are to *join in*. Okay, I want you to see how the word is used in verse 17. Oh I didn't finish reading from verse 14. It says – *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*. That's where that verse is. Then verse 15 – *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you*. I kind of like that statement that Paul was making there. *Only let us hold true to what we have attained*.

Now, let's go forward to verse 17. He says – *Brothers, join in imitating me*. So notice he's saying, join in. That is, partner with me in imitating me what I'm doing. But not only that, he says – *and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us*. In other words he's saying I want you to imitate me and also those other people that are on the upward call. What Paul is saying is that runners do better with other runners. That's the idea here. Runners do better with other runners. They run faster when they're in a race. They're able to perform better when they're with other runners.

This is a good motivation for all of us to check our friendships. Young people, you want to look at the friendships you have, because Proverbs says – *The one who wants to be wise walks with wise people*. But there are a lot of people who are dragging us down and create problems. So who we walk with is important. You want to surround yourself by other people who are on the upward call of God, who are going in that direction. When you have those runners going in that same direction, good things can happen in you as well. There's this spring on, an encouraging. That's why it says *join in*.

Join in imitating me and following those people, *keeping your eyes on those who are walking in the example*. Do you see the word *example*? That word *example*, you could circle it and you can write the word *tupos* where we get our word 'type' from. That is, this is a type of this. It's an example. It really means pattern. That's the best example for a word that we could use. It's the pattern, the example you have set for us. Because now when you're looking at other people and this person's reacting in patience instead of reacting in anger. You're going, wow, look how that person was able to manage that insult they just received without getting all bent out of shape by it. Or look at that person who experienced that painful thing there, but handled it okay. And so we watch these patterns in other people, and we're able to experience them.

Now there's a contrast in the passage here as I go into the next verse, I want you to see it. There's a contrast between the ones who are following when they're on the upward call, and this other group of people. Let's just look at what he says.

Verse 18 – *For many of whom I have often told you, and now tell you even with tears* (so this is the other side, these are the bad guys), *they walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction*.

It reminds me of what Jesus said. There's a broad road. It's broad because so many people are on it. And its end is destruction. They think it's a good road. They say to their parents, "Well everybody's doing it." Okay when everybody's doing it, you're probably on the wrong path because it's heading toward destruction. But Jesus says there's a narrow road and leads to life. Why is it narrow? Because few are on it. He says – *Their end is destruction*.

Secondly, *their god is their belly*. That means their appetites. They're just trying to satisfy themselves for the moment. This is making pleasure your idol. And when pleasure becomes your idol, then you're in danger. That's the example used there.

They glory in their shame. In other words, they do shameful things and they laugh at them. They glory in them because they're just making fun of something that shouldn't be made fun of. In the book of Proverbs, this person is called a mocker. A mocker is a person who laughs at sin. And when someone thinks it's funny to do things that are shameful, then we have a problem. This is the example of people that are not on the upward call. These are the people we need to be careful of. These are the people we need to guard how much time we spend with them.

If you say to me, "Well my best friend is not a Christian." I'm not saying that's necessarily bad. But what I am saying is, you want to surround yourself with people that are on the upward call

because that's what's going to help you to be able to move forward. That's why this fourth principle is to partner with other people who are on the upper call. That's the goal here.

He says (lastly) – *with their mind set in earthly things*. Because see, as someone who's on the upward call, our minds are set on heavenly things, not on earthly things. And so if our minds are set in heavenly things, we are doing something different. So Paul is making this statement about the people we're with and he's saying partner with the right kind of people. Join in. That's number four.

Let's go on. One more. And that is to confirm your identity. We get that from this idea of citizenship. Let me read in verse 20. He says – *But our citizenship is in heaven*. In other words, your identity is not here. If you pull out your identification, it's going to say my home is in heaven. That's your identity. Okay, confirm your identity. *And from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself*.

Now I'm sure that you have to confirm your identity on a number of occasions. Okay, every time I open my computer, I have to confirm my identity. Every time I try to charge something on a card, I have to confirm my identity. I would suggest every time we make a decision, every time our emotions start getting carried away, we need to remind ourselves of our identity. We need to confirm the fact that we are Christians, that we have been chosen by God, and we are serving Him. That is our identity, that we are citizens of heaven. That's the point that he's making here.

I've told you the story. I'm going to tell you it again, because it's so meaningful and was so touching for me in my own life. My doctor, Dr. Josh, that I met about 30 years ago he saw that I was experiencing stress in my life. And he says I have a four-week stress training program I can take you through individually. And I said, "Well, that sounds good. Sounds like I could use that." So I met with him for four weeks. And he taught me in four weeks, my physician...he's not even a Christian. He wasn't a Christian then. He's a Christian now because he came to our church and got saved. But he wasn't a Christian at the time. And he was telling me all these things about stress management from a biological physician's point of view. They were such good ideas. They really impacted my teaching of parents, teaching of children, and they come out in my sermons, the things that he taught me in those four weeks.

But the last week, what he said was, "Now that you've learned all this, you need to tie it into who you are. Like make it part of yourself." I mean, this is what he says to me. "Like you're a Christian, right? I mean, isn't this being like a peaceful person part of your identity?" Smacked me, you know. Jesus talks to me through this unsaved doctor who says, "Shouldn't this be what you're doing already? Isn't this part of your identity?" And I say, "Yeah, of course it is." It was so helpful for me because I took all of this teaching that I'd learned and I brought it into who I am as a person, as a Christian before God. It was so valuable for me. Because it's not just some techniques I put on it. It's part of who I am, that I want to trust the Lord for peace in my life.

You know, I think this is what the upward call is about. It's not just something we put on on Sunday morning. It's not just something we do when we're around other Christians. The upward call is part of our identity. It's where we're going. It's where we're headed in our lives. We're

serving God 100%. We're running the race, as Paul is describing here, so that we can serve God in everything that we do.

Wow. I look at these five things. In fact, let's just look at them all one more time. These five things that I go, wow, those are so powerful. Five secrets for winners and they're all focused in or they're all tied into this upward call idea. I need this in my life to help me to stay on track and do what I need to do in my life.

Well, I want to tell you a fun story. I'd never heard this story before this week. There was a race called the ultramarathon. Five hundred forty-five miles these guys would run from Melbourne, Australia to Sydney, Australia. There was a Westfield Shopping Center here in one city and the Westfield Shopping Center in the other city and they sponsored this race to go 545 miles. The ultramarathon. Many people entered this ultramarathon. And they had plans. You know, these young guys are out there, "Oh yeah. I'm going to do this." They all had plans of how they're going to do this. The basic plan was this. We're going to run for eighteen hours and sleep for six until we get done with this whole ride. It's considered a six-day race. We're going to run for eighteen hours and we're going to sleep for six. And we're going to continue on till we complete the race. So now they all get to the finish line. But there's one guy who shows up there. A 61-year-old man in overalls and boots. And he's getting ready to run this race. Now you can imagine people laughing at him and saying, "Who is this guy?"

Let me tell you about Cliff Young. Cliff Young grew up on a farm. They had over 2,000 acres and they had thousands of sheep. Occasionally, he would have to go out because a storm was coming in and he'd have to round up all these sheep. He would run all over this place to get these sheep where they needed to be. This guy knew how to run. He shows up in these odd running clothes and he gets on the line and they start going. Now this guy has this really interesting kind of way of running, you know. All the other guys are running on. This guy has got this shuffle. It just goes like this, you know, and he's going along. This is in 1983 by the way. I don't know if I told you that. 1983 this race took place. And he's going on. Now at the end of day one, he is way back behind the pack. When all the other guys went to sleep, he kept running. He did not sleep for five days. He ran straight for five days, fifteen hours and four minutes, and crossed the finish line before anyone else. That person who came in second was ten hours behind him. Nobody told this guy maybe you should sleep. He just kept going and going and going. And now people have looked at his kind of running, they call it the "Young Shuffle." That's the shuffle that he has. It's been proven now aerodynamically this is a great way to do these long races. It keeps your energy level at a certain level so you're not burning yourself out.

I'm thinking the same thing that made that race work is the same thing that's going to make our race work as we're going after the upward call. We're not in a sprint. We're not just going to try to show off in a quick form. What we're going to do is we're going to run a marathon, but I even like this idea better. It is an ultramarathon that we're running in and there's five secrets that we all need in order to run this marathon and stay on track so that we can have the prize that he's talking about in the passage. The prize of just being in the pleasure of God. The prize of being able to experience the blessing of God and to enjoy Him. The one thing. The upward call of God.