

If Only...
Philippians 3:12-14
September 29, 2019

Stephen Covey (1932-2012) was an American educator and an expert in business organization. He wrote a bestselling book called “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” It is still widely read. One of the seven habits he mentions in that book is that the highly effective people begin all things with the end in mind. When they start a project or program, they start with the end picture in mind. In other words, they ask themselves, “By doing this project or program what are we going to achieve?” “Once we do this project or program, what will happen?” “What difference will it make?” “What does the end picture look like?”

They start with that end picture. Will the end picture help them to build the world or the company they are dreaming about? Not only do they start a project or program that way, they also live their lives that way. They think of their lives’ end picture – the legacy, the values, the impact they would make. What would the world look like as a result of their existence? One of the things Stephen Covey suggests the readers to do is to plan for their own funerals.

I realize that it may be uncomfortable to think about your own funeral. Bear with me and let us imagine for a moment that you are attending your own funeral. Many people have gathered to celebrate your life and your contributions.

Let us say four people have been asked to share about you: one from your family; one from your friends; one from the people you worked with; and one from your church. They will all share their own reflections on you, your influence in their lives and your contributions in the community in which you were a part. If what they say is nothing but the truth with no exaggeration or beautification, what will they say about you?

What kind of things will they say? What do you want them to say? What kind of person do you want them to say that you were? What kind of husband, wife, father, or mother? What kind of friend? What kind of worker? What kind of church member? What would you want them to say about your character? What achievements would you want them to highlight?

Now look at the people who are attending your funeral. As you look around at the people, what difference would you like to have made in their lives? What would you want them to remember about you? What words or phrases would you like to hear from them?

He was a man of integrity.
She was generous and sincerely caring.
He was a man of wisdom. You could always depend on his advice.
She was very creative and was full of new and wonderful ideas.
He was a great teacher.
She was always there for me.

What do you want them to say?

As you look at the people, do you feel you wish you had done things differently? Perhaps you wish you had done more for them? Does this phrase “If only...” come to your mind? If only I had spent more time with my family. If only I had paid more attention. If only I was more patient. If only I was more careful with my words. If only I was healthier. If only I had recognized my gifts earlier. “If only...”

Now, let us come back to the present. What about now? Do you feel the phrase “If only...”? If only people really knew my abilities. If only I had a different career. If only I had not had that accident. If only I had a different spouse. If only I had different parents. If only I were smarter. If only... If only...

There is a world of difference between “if only” and “next time.” “If only” always looks backward. “If only” has a sense of defeat, a sense of resentment, a sense of hopelessness. You cannot do anything about it, because “If only” looks at the past.

“Next time” however, looks forward. “Next time” has a sense of hope, a sense of new beginning.

The Scripture we have this morning is a part of the letter that Saint Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi. In this letter he says, “This one thing I do: (that is) forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.”¹ Saint Paul was one of the greatest followers of Christ who ever lived, if not the greatest.

He had a great background as a Jew. He had all the things a devout Jew should have and more. “If I were to boast about my Jewish background, I have a few things to say,” he mentions. “I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness

¹ Philippians 3:13.

under the law, blameless.”² There were not many people who could say that in those days, especially the last part – “as to the righteousness under the law, blameless.”

As good as his credential was as a Jew, Paul’s past was filled with shame and regrets. He said, “I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”³ In the name of Judaism, he dishonored the Lord by persecuting the church. In the name of zeal, he oppressed and tyrannized the Christians. In the effort of protecting Judaism, he not only participated but actually led the murderous movement against the followers of Christ. He participated in the execution of Stephen. Considering all the things he had done, he considered himself not only a sinner but the greatest sinner.⁴

I am sure Paul had plenty of “if only” moments. But he did not allow himself to be consumed or dominated by regrets.

Regret is a paralyzing emotion. “If only I had not done this,” or “If only I had done that.” These words are the expressions of defeat. They bind us to past mistakes. They keep us preoccupied with the past and drain us of the energy we need today. “If only” is always an expression of self-pity. Nothing creative, nothing positive comes out of self-pity. Paul, although he had many regrets, he did not allow himself to be a victim of his past mistakes or regrets.

Paul says, “This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead.” I do not allow myself to be consumed by past mistakes, but I move forward. I move toward the goal, the goal that the Lord wants me to accomplish.

Can we be like that? How can we be freed from self-pity and all the regrets?

First, be delivered from your past. You cannot move forward if you are always looking backward. Winston Churchill once said, “If the present quarrels with the past, there can be no future.” Let the past be past, both good and bad.

Paul had to let go of his past guilt. He also had to let go of his grief and grudges. Because of his faith, Paul had suffered greatly. He had been beaten, shipwrecked, scorned, left to die, alienated, betrayed, and ostracized by his family.

² Philippians 3:4-6.

³ 1 Timothy 1:13.

⁴ 1 Timothy 1:15.

Paul said, “I forget the things of the past.” Please don’t misunderstand the word “forget.” It does not mean “to fail to remember.” You cannot totally erase your past from your memory. In the Bible, the word “forget” means “no longer to be influenced by or affected by.”

In the Bible when God says, “I will remember your sins no more,” it does not mean that God suddenly forgets all your sins. What it means is, God will no longer allow our sins to affect our relationship with him.

Likewise, we need to disallow ourselves from being a victim of our past. We need to free ourselves from our regrets and not allow them to affect the energy and attitude of today. We can never erase the things we did or did not do, that we regret. We need to let the past be the past. We don’t have to re-live it.

Second, focus on how you will finish. Focus on your values. Focus on what you live for. Paul says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”⁵ The Greek word for goal is *skopos*, which means “to look at.” We get the words like microscope or telescope from this word. It means to fix our eyes upon something.

What Paul is saying that he has been focusing on one thing in his life. That is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection.⁶ He wanted to experience Christ’s presence in his life each and every day. That was his goal in life.

Now, what would be our goal in life? If we are to know Christ and to experience the power of Christ resurrection, what would that mean? What would it mean for us to experience Christ’s presence in our lives each and every day? Since we have faith in Christ, we will experience the resurrection in the end as Christ promised us, but in the meantime what would it mean for us to know Christ?

It is to have a clear picture as to how we want to finish our lives. How do you want to be remembered? What is it that you need to do to end your life with a legacy of faith? This is what we need to focus on and live our lives in such a way that we actually establish the legacy of faith, and the legacy of worthy values to leave behind.

⁵ Philippians 3:14.

⁶ Philippians 3:10.

Every day we have is a new day. Whatever happened yesterday – good, bad or indifferent – happened yesterday. You have a new day to live each and every day. How will you live it? May we live this day to solidify our legacy!