

City of New Starts
Phil 3:4-14
Let go of the past

Hear this story:

I had not really planned on taking a trip this time of year, and yet I found myself packing rather hurriedly. This trip was going to be unpleasant and I knew in advance that no real good would come of it. I'm talking about my annual "Guilt Trip."

I got tickets to fly there on Wish I Had airlines. It was an extremely short flight. I got my baggage, which I could not check. I chose to carry it myself all the way. It was weighted down with a thousand memories of what might have been. No one greeted me as I entered the terminal to the Regret City International Airport. I say international because people from all over the world come to this dismal town.

As I checked into the Last Resort Hotel, I noticed that they would be hosting the year's most important event, the Annual Pity Party. I wasn't going to miss that great social occasion. Many of the town's leading citizens would be there.

First, there would be the Done family, you know, Should Have, Would Have and Could Have. Then came the I Had family. You probably know of Wish and his clan. Of course, the Opportunities would be present, Missed and Lost. The biggest family

would be the Yesterdays. There are far too many of them to count, but each one would have a very sad story to share.

Then Shattered Dreams would surely make an appearance. And It's Their Fault would regale us with stories (excuses) about how things had failed in his life, and each story would be loudly applauded by Don't Blame Me and I Couldn't Help It.

Well, to make a long story short, I went to this depressing party knowing that there would be no real benefit in doing so. And, as usual, I became very depressed. But as I thought about all of the stories of failures brought back from the past, it occurred to me that all of this trip and subsequent "pity party" could be canceled *by me!* I started to truly realize that I did not have to be there. I didn't have to be depressed. One thing kept going through my mind, I can't change yesterday, but I do have the power to make today a wonderful day. I can be happy, joyous, fulfilled, encouraged, as well as encouraging. Knowing this, I left the City of Regret immediately and left no forwarding address. Am I sorry for mistakes I've made in the past? YES! But there is no physical way to undo them.

So, if you're planning a trip back to the City of Regret, please cancel all your reservations now. Instead, take a trip to a place called Starting Again. I liked it so much that I have now taken up permanent residence there. My neighbors, the I Forgive Myselfs

and the New Starts are so very helpful. By the way, you don't have to carry around heavy baggage, because the load is lifted from your shoulders upon arrival. God bless you in finding this great town. If you can find it — it's in your own heart — please look me up. I live on I Can Do It street.

—Larry Harp, "Leaving the city of regret,"
inspirationalstories.com/3/314.html. Retrieved October 10, 2006.

Let us pray
Lord, give us ears to hear and willing hearts for your Word today. Amen.

Ok, do you want to take a vacation, uh, guilt trip to Last Resort Hotel? Probably when asked the question you confidently say, "No!" Yet, we do it, don't we? Why? We didn't have any fun last time – or the time before that. Yet, we go again. Like some kind of self flagellation.

I encourage you to follow along in your Bibles, Philippians 3 beginning at verse 4 as we discuss what Paul has to say about this.

There was a conflict over the correct way to live as Christians. Sure glad we don't have conflicts like that today? Right? We're all in agreement on how a Christian should live – not.

There were some in Philippi who wanted new Christian gentiles to be circumcised because that was traditionally the Jewish way. Paul challenges their

reasoning. He sees the requirement as an argument to hold to the old traditions of Jewish law. Paul explains that this no longer applies and he gives the example of his own life.

In verses 4 through 6, Paul expresses how completely righteous he was in observing the law. He begins with his own circumcision on the eighth day of his birth and his descent from the tribe of Benjamin. He calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews because he so diligently followed the law. He spoke of his zeal in persecuting the new church because Jews believed the Christians were blasphemers.

And Paul clearly states that he is righteous based on the law. That describes his old life.

In verse 7 he explains that all he thought was gain, thought was righteous, is loss for the sake of Christ. In verses 8-11 Paul speaks about his new life in Christ – what he now considers of greater value and importance. All the prior was as garbage compared to what he now has in Christ.

His righteousness is not his *own* or based on *his* past. His righteousness comes not from the law but through the faith of Christ. Righteousness, Paul explains, comes from God. In his new conviction Paul wants to know Christ, not just head knowledge but heart knowledge. He wants to experience Christ to the full.

Paul's righteousness comes from Christ. And so does yours.

How does it make you feel to hear that your past, whether a stunning example of exemplary living or a mass of problems is not what determines your righteousness before God? Are you relieved or disappointed? Your answer probably depends on your past.

I've met some people who, like Paul, have a list of accomplishments that they like to hold up before others. We find our self worth in many sources. We display bumper stickers showing that our children made the honor roll. We post our diplomas or certificates where others can see that we are in fact qualified to do what we do. We do this with our Christianity too. We point to our regular small group attendance, or our faithful attendance in church, or our long time service in ministry, or in giving.

Now none of what I've named is bad. None of it is a problem, *unless* we place our worth on that. If our jobs, our income, our education, our social standing, our dating or marital status, our children, our church involvement, or anything else becomes the measure of our esteem, we've missed the point. We've placed our value on things instead of Jesus.

Paul had once placed his value on being a Hebrew of Hebrews. Paul had to learn that his self righteous living would not bring him all that Christ offered.

Now the law is not invalid. We are asked to keep the commandments. However, the law in itself

does not remove the negative things of our past. We miss the point if we overlook the invitation of Jesus.

Trying to live by the law alone, as Paul did, leads to a cycle of frustration and failure. Ever had someone in your life who was so demanding, expecting such perfection of you, that you just never measured up? It may have been a demanding parent and no matter how you tried you could not meet the requirements. Or maybe it was a boss and no matter how much time you put in or how carefully you worked, your efforts were still criticized and put down. Or maybe you are the one who places the high, unrealistic demands on yourself and you live in a constant cycle of letting yourself down.

It's the same way when we put too much weight on perfectionism before God. We need to find the balance between letting God transform us through his Word, through worship, through service and being too hard on ourselves.

It is God's grace offered to us in Jesus that leads to the transformed life that Paul describes.

Some of you are thinking, "My problem isn't that I have a great reference letter to give. My problem is quite the opposite. My past is not worthy of Christ."

There are probably more of us who fall into this category. What we're holding onto, and going back and visiting, like the traveler to the City of Regret, is our messy past. When we fail to deal with the

emotions, actions, memories, sins and failures of our past, they grow blacker and stickier until they affect not only ourselves but our loved ones and all our contacts. The yuk of the past bleeds over into our daily lives if not disposed of once and for all.

Guess what? It's not about us, it's about Jesus. Paul figured out that is isn't what we do or fail to do. It's about Who we know, Christ Jesus.

Paul chose to wrap up the past and dispose of his old way of living. He chose to strain forward to what lies ahead in Jesus' grace. He speaks of a prize – the prize of the benefits that come with Jesus; the benefits of assurance, peace, grace and transformation.

I don't know what you are holding to that keeps you from focusing solely on Christ, but chances are you do. Maybe you've known you need to let the past go. Maybe you've tried under your own terms.

Look at Paul's words. Learn to consider the past, whether based on your own righteousness or a past of failure based on the perfection others demanded, as just plain garbage, rubbish. It isn't what is important. It is what it is and you can't change it. So don't wallow in it. Don't revisit it and nurture its memory. Let it go for Jesus. Take up his call and his invitation. It's time to move forward with a new beginning, a new call.

No, we aren't perfect. Neither was Paul. There had been a time in his life when he thought pretty

highly of himself. Now he realizes, in verse 12, he has not obtained his goal. He is still leaning toward what is ahead.

Paul's not looking backward. He's looking ahead to a deeper relationship with Jesus. He is trying to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of him. Jesus considered him, and each of us, worth suffering and dying for. Paul wants to find that value, genuine value, that Christ placed on his life. That special something that God finds in each of us for which he offers his grace.

Is it self absorption we find ourselves partaking of, or Christ absorption? Our purpose is to reveal Christ to others. We can't do that if our focus is caught up in ourselves - in our pasts. It's time to give up living with your past accomplishments or failures and find true value in your relationship with Jesus.

Yes, some of our accomplishments and failures are a bit sticky and we don't let them go easily. Confession is a great manner of releasing them. Through Christ the stickiness of our past is released and forgiven. Don't go back there anymore. Be remorseful and confess those times when you held to your own self righteousness or failures. Confess and let go.

It's time to relocate to the city of Starting Again – a new start in Christ. Meet your neighbors, the I Forgive Myselfs and the New Starts. They are sitting around you. Together we'll help encourage one

another. Leave behind the heavy baggage and move to I Can Do It With Christ Who Strengthens Me Street.

In your bulletin are some blank pieces of paper. I invite you to write down the thing you need to let go of and pray a silent prayer of confession to God for allowing that thing to keep you from a full relationship with Jesus. No one will see it but you and God.

Now, I invite you to bring it up and put it through the shredder – for that’s where it belongs – it is garbage in comparison to the gain you have in Christ.

Let us pray

Thank you, Jesus, for these bits of shredded paper that symbolize the stuff we want to give up so that we can be fully present to you. Help us, Lord, in truly letting the past go as we strain forward to you. Amen.