

**“ONE THING I DO.”****PHILIPPIANS 3:1–14**

We live in an age of ultimate distraction. And it's only getting worse! The first touchscreen-operated iPhones went on sale in June 2007, followed by the first Android-powered phones the following year. Smartphones went from 10 to 40 % market penetration faster than any other consumer technology in history. If you don't carry a smartphone today, you're considered old or just odd. At the same time, smartphone owners describe feeling "frustrated" and "distracted." Nearly half of 18-25 year-olds said they used their phones to "avoid others around you." The phrase "information overload" was popularized by Alvin Toffler in 1970. It's one of the biggest irritations in modern life. There are e-mails to answer, virtual friends to pester, texts to exchange, and YouTube videos to watch. Commentators have coined a profusion of phrases to describe the anxiety caused by too much information: "data asphyxiation" (William van Winkle), "data smog" (David Shenk), "information fatigue syndrome" (David Lewis), and "cognitive overload" (Eric Schmidt).

After a while you start to yearn for whatever is just clear and simple. Even following Jesus can seem to get overcomplicated at times. We have all these endless Christian books, online websites, blogs, and other digital offerings to inform us. Or do they just distract us? There's a phrase in the Bible that pops up several times in different locations. "One thing." Simple. Clear. No confusion. No distractions. No information overload. If less is sometimes more in other aspects of life and living, less is more can also be true spiritually. So, I want to explore with you five of these "one thing" passages in the Bible. Here's the first one. "Brothers and sisters, 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." (Ph. 3:13-14 NIV) That was written by the great Christian leader, Paul, to followers of Jesus living in the Greek city of Philippi. Paul had founded the very first church in Philippi on one of his mission trips and now he wanted to communicate with them about some important matters. We call it the letter to the Philippians. Let's read a few additional verses that help us understand Paul's statement better. One thing I do." Here's what I hear Paul saying.

**FOCUS ON ONE SIMPLE, CLEAR GOAL: KNOWING JESUS.**

Our Bible passage today reveals God's wonderful goal for your life and mine. It's not 55 different goals. It's just one. Simple. Clear. No distractions. No confusion. "Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ." (Ph. 3:8 NLT) God wants you to know His Son, Jesus. He wants you to have the kind of personal relationship with Jesus that results in a complete and ongoing transformation of your life – from top to bottom, inside and out. It takes a lifetime, but you increasingly resemble Jesus in your attitudes and behavior. If Paul were here today, he might enlarge on that statement by saying something like this: "Knowing Jesus as my Lord and Savior has been the greatest thrill of my life. My life has been absolutely revolutionized by Jesus. What absorbs most of my time and

energy now is developing this marvelous relationship with Jesus. Everything else in comparison is just like so much foul smelling garbage. I have a new goal and it brings me the greatest joy I've ever experienced."

What does it mean to know Jesus? Even though we can't relate to Jesus as we might to the physical person sitting near us today, it is possible, nonetheless. We serve - and know - a risen Savior! Knowing Jesus on a personal level is certainly more than simply knowing some facts about who He is and what He did here on Earth. Actually, there are some strong similarities to a very close, loving marriage. When you love another person, you discover a place of intimacy and connection with him or her. You want to be identified with that person in every possible way. You share life in every way imaginable. You even want to share that person's struggles and sufferings to some degree. Is it even possible to have that kind of relationship with Jesus? Yes! As you read and study the Bible, as you learn how to make prayer a conversation with Jesus throughout the day, as you worship Him, as you serve Him with others who know and love Him, as you even suffer persecution and rejection because of your loyalty to Jesus, as you gradually get more and more committed to the things Jesus cares about, you come to know Jesus. Gradually a wonderful transformation takes place. The more you know Him, the more you become like Him. The more you become like Him, the more empowered you are to serve Him. His attitudes become your attitudes. His way of treating people becomes your way of treating people. His goals become your goals. His mission becomes your mission. His life becomes your life.

"Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ." (Ph. 3:8 NLT) That was the clear, simple, undistracted goal of Paul's life - period. It was the "one thing" or the main thing in his life. I'm challenged by his example. You and I often live lives of frustration because we get distracted or we make things more complicated than necessary. When you try to follow Jesus, but your goals in life are the same as those who don't follow Jesus, you're headed for frustration. What are the goals most people pursue? To have a nice family. To achieve a certain standard of living. To be successful as the world defines it: having a certain kind of job, or house, or car, having a large income, or having other people admire or look up to us. How easy it is to allow what people live for who are without Jesus to become what we live for, too! Sometimes Christians have been accused of being so heavenly minded we're of no earthly use. But perhaps the real problem is just the opposite. We can be so earthly minded, we're of no heavenly use.

Paul is careful to remind us here that this world's goals should never be the ultimate focus for Jesus' followers. A little further on in this same chapter, he says, "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives." (Ph. 3:21 NLT) That statement would have been very impactful for those Philippian Christians. Why? The city of Philippi was a Roman colony in northern Greece. It was like an American military base in a foreign country. Citizens of Philippi wore Roman fashions, spoke Latin, conformed their lives to Roman customs and culture, and were judged by Roman law. Even

though the Philippians didn't actually live in Rome, they were to conduct themselves as if they did at all times. They were Roman citizens living in a foreign land.

Christian, you're like that. Yes, you are of this Earth, because you had a natural, physical birth. But you are also of Heaven, because you had a supernatural, spiritual rebirth. First and foremost, you're a citizen of Heaven. You've been given a Heavenly origin and a Heavenly destiny. You've been given the privilege and responsibility of living a Jesus-centered life in a world that could care less about Jesus. Sure, you hold a job, raise a family, and live a life that looks very similar in many ways to everyone else. But your values, your priorities, and what matters to you is very different. You're not limited to this world and what it values. God's ultimate goal is for you to know Him fully by coming to know His Son, Jesus, fully. That purpose governs all you do and how you live life every day. That's the one thing you do. That's the ultimate prize and goal.

I've not had the opportunity to visit The Alamo in San Antonio. I understand that near the main entrance is a portrait of a man with the following inscription under it. "James Butler Bonham – no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom." We don't possess a literal portrait of Jesus either, do we? But the likeness of Jesus can be seen in your life, in my life, and in the lives of all of His true followers. To reflect His likeness every day, to every person we meet, in every situation we face is your simple, clear goal and mine. Now, I hear at least two pieces of inspired advice in these verses that enable you and me to keep this simple, clear goal of knowing Jesus first and foremost in our lives. Like Paul, you and I need to learn how to...

### **LEAVE YOUR PERSONAL CREDENTIALS AND ACHIEVEMENTS BEHIND.**

Paul was very concerned about a group of false teachers operating in his day and age. The first Christians were all Jewish people. But within 30 to 40 years, most Christians were non-Jews – Greeks, Romans, and other ethnicities living around the Mediterranean Sea area. A powerful group of Jewish Christians firmly believed and insisted that to become a Christian, every non-Jew had to become essentially Jewish. That meant adopting several Jewish identity markers or credentials. Like what? Like circumcision for all male believers, the observance of Jewish holy days, and following the dietary regulations of Judaism. Paul, himself an ethnic Jew, had come to the conclusion through the Holy Spirit that it was completely unnecessary to become a Jew in order to follow Jesus. All those Jewish credentials were culturally interesting and OK, but spiritually irrelevant. Not one of them had the power to make a person – Jew or non-Jew - acceptable to God. Only faith in Jesus had the power to do that. By insisting that non-Jews had to become Jews to be followers of Jesus, the false teachers were implying Jesus' death on the cross was essentially inadequate. If getting circumcised or observing holy days made you right with God, why did Jesus have to die?

Paul launched into a devastating argument in v. 4-6. Here's the implication of what he wrote there. In effect, he says, "Let's suppose these false teachers are right for a

minute. Let's suppose becoming Jewish is necessary to know God. Well, if anyone could earn a relationship with God on that basis, I'm that man! I was no convert to Judaism. I was circumcised on the eighth day as commanded in the Law. I am Jewish by race – a member of the nation of Israel. Besides, I know my genealogy. I'm from the honored tribe of Benjamin. I know how to speak our ancestral, mother tongue of Hebrew fluently. My family is of Palestinian origin. Those are the credentials I was given at birth. But let me also tell you about my achievements from a Jewish perspective, too. I was a Pharisee – the most rigorous and fanatical keepers of the Jewish Law among Jewish people. I was so zealous for God and His reputation - from a Jewish perspective - that I persecuted Christians by helping to get them arrested, tried, and executed. When it came to observable, outward behavior consistent with the Law, no one was able to point a finger of fault or blame at me about anything. But do you know what I discovered? All of those credentials and achievements were worthless in getting or keeping a relationship with God. In fact, they were actually an obstacle to a relationship with God because I put my confidence in them – not in what God had done for me. I put my confidence in myself – my credentials and my achievements. I had to face an uncomfortable fact. Those things were like some really foul smelling garbage preventing a relationship with God – not enabling it.”

If you ask the average person today – your neighbor, a friend at school, someone who works in the next office – about how a person starts and keeps a relationship with God, you often still get answers based on either credentials or achievements. “Oh, I was baptized when I was a baby” or “I got baptized at a church camp when I was 12 years old.” Water doesn't create a relationship with God. “Oh, well, my grandfather was a Baptist minister.” God has no grandchildren. Many will say, “Oh, I believe in God. I believe Jesus is God's Son.” So does the Devil. “Well, I am a moral person. I'm honest. I'm kind. I'm a good provider. I take good care of my family. I help others in need.” Good for you. You really think your personal morality is acceptable to an absolutely holy God? “Well, I grew up in church and went to Sunday School every Sunday. Oh, I've been a member of Karl Road Baptist Church for decades. I give money to the church. I serve in three different ministries.” All of those credentials and achievements are good in and of themselves. But not one of them has the power to make you right with God. None of them get you into Heaven. None of them result in eternal life. None of them enable you to know Jesus by themselves.

Only Jesus can make you acceptable to God. It all goes back to the cross where Jesus paid the full penalty for your sin and mine. In exchange for your sinfulness, Jesus gives you His perfect goodness or rightness with God. God considers us right with Him. We are truly righteous in God's eyes now. That kind of goodness can't be achieved or acquired through having the right credentials or by personal effort. It can only be given as a gift. Jesus gives you a new status with God – absolute acceptance – as a gift the moment you put your faith in Jesus and what He did for you on the cross. That's what Paul is getting at when he says, “I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.” (Ph. 3:9 NLT)

Here's the irony. On the one hand, it's humbling to realize you're unable to reach God by way of your own credentials and achievements. On the other hand, it's liberating to realize you can't reach God by yourself. You have to throw yourself on Jesus – who He is and what He did for you on the cross. A London warehouse property was up for sale. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed windows, and left garbage inside and out. When the owner of the property was showing a prospective buyer around, he promised to replace any broken windows, correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. But the buyer said, "Forget about the repairs. When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site." When God "purchases" your life He wants complete renovation and transformation. He's not particularly concerned about your own trivial efforts at self-improvement. All He wants is the site – your life - and permission to build what He wants to build. Now, here's another piece of advice to keep this clear, simple goal of knowing Jesus first and foremost in your life and mine.

### **LEAVE YOUR PAST IN THE PAST.**

Sure, there's a time to look back and reflect on what's happened in your life both good and bad. That can be helpful sometimes. Nevertheless, it's healthier to let the past stay in the past. Don't look back in such a way that it keeps you from moving forward. Don't become a prisoner of your past. Too much focus on your past can affect your present and your future for the worse. Satchel Paige, the great baseball player, put it memorably, "Don't look back, something might be gaining on you!" All of us have things in our past that are sinful or painful. Hurt. Failure. Disappointment. Shame. Paul had a past that needed to be left in the past. Before his conversion, he was the Christian community's greatest enemy. He'd be called a terrorist today. He participated in the killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He hauled other Christians off to prison. Paul's past was littered with atrocious acts of evil against God's people.

All of us have known people who have suffered some great tragedy or misfortune in their past that has left them resentful, bitter, or just "stuck." They can't seem to get past the past. They allow the past to ruin their present and their future. In Charles Dickens' novel, *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham is a person who was never able to overcome painful memories. She was jilted on her wedding day. Her fiancé left her waiting at the altar. On that day, Miss Havisham's life stopped. The clocks in her house stopped. Her wedding cake was never removed and was finally covered with cobwebs. She continued to wear her wedding dress every day. She never recovered because she couldn't keep from looking back. An extreme example, perhaps, but we all know people who are trapped in their past. That's deadly for your spiritual life.

If you need to forget the bad things in the past, it's equally true that you need to forget some of the good things, too. Yes, leave your failures in the past, but leave your credentials and achievements back there as well. Paul wasn't ashamed of his Jewish heritage. He thought it had been a great blessing, but he had to leave it behind. Additionally, no Christian leader was more successful than Paul. I wonder if there were

times when Paul just felt like retiring from his ministry. He'd brought so many people to Jesus. He'd started so many churches. How easy it would have been for Paul to say, "Well, maybe it's time to let someone else serve the Lord." Friend, don't ever stop serving the Lord. It's fine to retire from your job. But you should never retire from your efforts to know and serve Jesus. There's ministry that needs to happen in your family, in your neighborhood, in your office, and at your school. There's ministry that needs to happen in this congregation. We have our share of older people in our congregation. Now you have both the time and the maturity to be even more impactful for Jesus' Kingdom. Don't miss new and wonderful opportunities to be used by God today.

"No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us." (Ph. 3:13-14 NLT) The race was never over for Paul in this life. The ultimate goal was never reached in this life. Each new day provided a fresh opportunity to discover the challenge and adventure of life in Jesus. Surrender all the failures and all the pain in your past to the Lord. Thank God for any and all past achievements. But don't ever stop - keep moving forward with Him at all times. Achieving that goal of knowing Jesus demands, first of all, God's grace working in your life from start to finish. It also demands, secondly, your daily and personal surrender to the Holy Spirit who will enable and empower you. God's grace and your personal submission to the Holy Spirit work together to propel you towards Christlikeness.

If you set and keep as your goal in life to know Jesus, your life will have great joy and meaning. "One thing I do." Yes, like everyone else who has ever lived, you will have sorrow as well as happiness, pain as well as pleasure, hardship as well as abundance. But in life, through life, and – above all – at the end of life, you will possess a joy unspeakable and full of glory. Why? Because you will have fulfilled God's goal for your life – to know Jesus fully and become like Him.

Leighton Ford is a godly Christian leader who for many years was an Associate Evangelist with the Billy Graham ministry. He had a son by the name of Sandy who developed a very serious heart problem at the age of 14. The problem seemed to be corrected by surgery, so Sandy returned to the athletics he loved so much particularly track and cross-country running. Once he was pulling ahead to a record-setting victory in the mile run with a 40 yard lead on the next runner. Then, either his old heart problem came back or he developed a problem with his legs. Sandy stumbled and fell. He picked himself up and stumbled forward a few more yards and fell again. Looking around, he saw the second place runner closing in on him. Sandy rose to his hands and knees and crawled under the tape, across the finish line and fell there having won the race. They took a picture of that dramatic finish. When his father saw the picture in the paper, Leighton thought of Paul's words, "I have finished the race."

Sandy Ford was intensely dedicated in everything he did and he was especially dedicated to Jesus. He wanted to be a minister and was already a strong witness for Jesus at the secular university that he attended when his heart problem returned.

Further surgery was required and after 12 long hours the doctors came to tell Leighton and his wife that they couldn't get Sandy's heart started again. There are many things Leighton and his wife still don't understand about why God would allow the death of a 21 year old man with so much to give to Jesus. And yet they know this. God has used Sandy's life and death as a powerful witness to stir other young people to come to Jesus and then to go for Jesus. Were 21 years enough? There's no answer to that question, is there? How many years would be enough: 31, 51, or 81? The only answer is that every moment we have must be focused on one goal: to know Jesus as fully as He can be known in this life. "One thing I do."