

FORGET WHAT NEEDS TO BE FORGOTTEN

Dr. George O. Wood

I come to this pulpit with so many memories. I was actually 6 years younger than Scott when I became pastor of this church. So we have in common that we started as young persons as pastors.

As I was preparing for today I thought I could pull out a golden oldie and half of you wouldn't know the difference. But the Spirit really quickened my heart about a text I don't believe I've preached from before. It's a wonderful hinge text for the close of a year and the opening of a New Year. I want to direct your attention to it. Philippians 3:12-14. It has a very key word in it – forgetting.

If you take a Greek concordance of the New Testament and look up remember, remembrance and memory you'll find that the memory words occur 72 times in the New Testament. But the forget words – forget, forgetting, forgotten – occur only 10 times. Six of the ten times we're told not to forget. So the real focus of the New Testament is upon remembering.

If any of you have ever been close to someone who's had Alzheimers you know how crucial memory is in understanding your present and your future because without the memory you don't have a present or a future really. I like what Ronald Reagan said when he was first diagnosed with having Alzheimers. He was always great with a quip and his ability to self deprecate endeared him to all of us. He said, "There are some downsides to Alzheimers but I've also found one upside. I meet new people everyday."

This wonderful text focuses on forgetting. "Not that I've already attained all this or have already been made perfect but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, 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 to the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if your mind were like a chalkboard and you could just take a sponge to it and any time you wanted to erase something that had happened that was unpleasant in your life you could just take the sponge and blot it out. When you read a text like this "Forgetting the things which are behind," it's easy to falsely assume that the scripture implies that there's some magic potion you can use to erase the hurts. Some of you in looking back on the year 2002 have lost a romance. Maybe a wife or husband has walked out on you. Perhaps there's been a serious illness in your life that you're still battling or you've lost a friend or gone through financial hardship or someone really close to you has died. How do you blot out something like that? How do you just forget the things which are behind?

I submit to you that only God can forgive and forget. He can forget, you know. Scripture says "As far as the east is from the west, that far he has removed your sins from you not to remember them any more." But what God can do we seemingly can't do because if you look at any significant occurrence in your life, positive or negative, it is still a memory with you if you have normal mental capacity. And you simply can't forget it.

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So given the fact that you can't forget it, what does the apostle Paul mean to say when he says to us, especially as we stand at the juncture of an old and new year, "Forgetting the things which are behind." How do you forget what needs to be forgotten when there is no ability to take a sponge and wipe the slate clean on your mind?

I want to suggest to you from the letter of Philippians itself that there are five strategies that Paul used to help him and all believers forget the things that need to be forgotten.

The first is we forget by being grateful.

Gratitude alone can erase a lot of hurt and negative things that happened in our lives. It's clear by reading Paul's letter to the Philippians that his mind is not a blank tablet. He remembers these believers just as I remember you. There's not a day that goes by that I do not pray for this church and have kept that as a practice for years. Gratitude to God for wonderful relationships that I've enjoyed not only in the 17 years that I was pastor but in the 15 years since then.

Paul looks back on his experience with the Philippian church. I'm sure he thought of those early days described in Acts 16 where Lydia was the first to come to the Lord. She was a wealthy Asiatic. We know she was wealthy because she made designer clothes – purple clothes. And she had a home big enough to house the four members of the apostolic team that had come to Philippi. Then there was the slave girl who had been demon possessed who worked for less than minimum wage because she was a slave and she was probably Greek. Then there was the Roman jailer, the third convert. The three charter members of the Philippi church. He was unlike Lydia and the slave girl. He was a different gender and a different socio-economic class. He was middle class. We know he was middle class. He had a regular paycheck, he worked for the government!

These three people didn't belong together. There was no society in Philippi that could have brought them together except the church of Jesus Christ. They had no similarity at all. But in Christ Jesus they had become one, the prototype of the new humanity that God was building in his church. A church that's composed of male and female, parent and child, senior citizens and young people, Republicans, Democrats and Independents and maybe even a member of the Green party. A church that's composed of those who have means financially and those who don't. A church composed of persons with different esthetic and social tastes. But in Christ Jesus we've been brought not only near to him but near to one another.

Paul in looking back on those Philippi believers with whom he has maintained such a close bond overflows with gratitude. He could have been at a moment of bitterness in his life. After all, when he writes this letter he has had a really bad five years. He had been assaulted by a mob while preaching in Jerusalem. He was taken into custody, spent two years in a jail at Caesarea By the Sea on an unjust charge while the Roman governor was waiting to be bribed by Paul. Failing that, Paul embarks on a wild trip across the Mediterranean in which his shipwrecks, he washes up to shore and while building a fire gets bit by a venomous snake. Then finally in transit to Rome and by the time he writes the Philippi letter he has been under house arrest, chained.

He talks about his chains in this letter. He's been chained to soldiers guarding him while in house arrest while he awaits trial before Nero Caesar. It has been a tough five years. You'd expect and you could certainly excuse him if in the Philippi letter you find complaint after

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complaint. You find no mention of complaint. Instead, as you know from reading the New Testament, this has been called the letter of joy. The words “joy” and “rejoicing” are used so continually throughout the letter. He’s filled with gratitude.

He is forgetting all the unpleasant things by replacing it with something else, gratitude – an attitude of gratitude.

He says to the Philippian believers “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers to you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” He says in 1:7 “I have you in my heart.” As much as you carry the photograph of people dear to you in your wallet Paul says I carry your photograph in my heart.

He expresses gratitude for colleagues like Timothy and Epaproditus who risked his life for him. In fact although Paul has opponents and that’s clear there are opponents in the Philippi church (Philippians 3 talks about them) but you’ll find in this letter that of all the people that the names there is not a name of a single person who has hurt him. The only persons named in the Philippi letter are the people who helped him.

That’s a wonderful thing. To focus not on the hurts but the helps and to be grateful. We can choose to remember the people who hurt us or the people who help us.

I think also this letter reflects gratitude that the Lord is working out his sovereign purpose in his life even though present moments are difficult for him. Paul understood this basic principle of life: that God was mixing everything together in his life for good. Therefore he could have an attitude of gratitude.

Forget by being grateful.

The second focus of forgetting it seems to me is that you forget by repenting.

That doesn’t mean that what you repent of is blotted out. It simply means that one of the ways of caring the past where there has been wrongs we have done is to repent. Repent is not a word that is popular word today because typically it connotes the idea of a finger waving preacher pointing to people – You’re going to hell, you nasty person! Repent! We don’t like the word. Repent simply means to change your mind. There are ways that we need to do that. All of us who have come to Christ have had a moment of repentance. Paul had it. Philippians 3 talks about it where he goes through his pedigree. He was a person who was well advanced in his religion but he didn’t have a relationship with God. He came to a point where he realized that religion without relationship is meaningless. He says I laid all that aside. I consider it all as dung. Paul says I look at that life of regulation, of trying to be a religious person without having a relationship with God and I laid that aside. I reconsidered. I changed my mind.

The most basic form of repentance is changing our mind about who Jesus is. As our minds change our hearts change as well.

I had what I would call a calm rational conversion. I actually had a two stage conversion. As a ten year old youngster I had a dream that the Lord returned and I was not ready to meet him and I was scared spitless all through that long night. Wondering whether my parents were still in the house or not and if I had missed the Lord’s return. I said to the Lord, Lord, if you haven’t

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returned I'll serve you for the rest of my life. Then I thought, but if he has returned what am I going to do? The only consolation I had was I was the only kid on the block who would have a 1950 Hudson to drive around. When you are born into the kingdom of God by fright you tend to be somewhat stillborn. Somehow faith has to invade the fright somewhere along the line and it has to become a relationship not of fright but of love and sound belief.

Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is not simply a good feeling although believing in him brings a wonderful feeling in the heart. The apostles preached in the beginning to those who had been most directly responsible for the death of Jesus. Peter's words on the day of Pentecost were simply this: "When they were cut to the heart because they had killed the one who rose again from the dead on the third day they said 'What must we do to be saved?' and Peter said, 'Repent. Reconsider what you did. The one whom you crucified God exalted by raising him from the dead.'"

It was that which brought me to a settled conversion. As a junior in college, a Christian college, quietly walking away from the faith because like so many people I compared the lives of some believers with their words and found that the life did not match the words. And being an idealistic person even to this day as old as I am it bothered me that there was a discrepancy between person's testimony and how they actually lived out their life. What happened was for a while I was looking at those people rather than at the good examples. I had taken my eyes off Christ.

In my junior year a person with a doctorate from Stanford came along and gave a series of lectures on the historical reliability of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And why it was the most rational, credible explanation to help us understand what happened to Jesus. And that faith was not a leap in the dark but a resting in sufficiency of the evidence. I concluded as I sat in that chapel that week that I had moved from unbelief to faith. I had repented. I had reconsidered Jesus. I was no longer judging Jesus by the flawed lives of those whom I had gotten my attention on. But I was looking at Jesus by who he is – the Lord of life who came to give his life for us. The perfect life lived as a substitute for us. Rising again from the dead. To believe in him is to have eternal life. The gift of salvation, the gift of hope. I came to faith and it was a very quiet, meaningful, powerful, the most life changing thing in my whole experience. That's repentance. Changing your mind.

God wants to create a relationship with us. We'll get to know his book but the relationship comes first. We come to repentance in different ways. But the critical point is that we understand that God wants us to leave our past sins. First of all the repentance is toward him. Then there may be need for repentance toward one another.

Certainly that was the case in the Philippi church. There were two women in the congregation who were prominent who weren't getting along with each other. Some in fact think that that is why Paul wrote the Philippian letter to try to help them get some closure on the rupture in their relationship. Their names were Euodias and Syntyche. 4:2. What they were arguing about and what they had polarized members of the congregation about we don't have a clue. But Paul is saying, "I beseech you. Agree with one another in the Lord." Some think that the reason why Paul wrote the eloquent passage of chapter 2 "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who thought not equality with God a thing to be grasped but humbled himself, took upon himself the form of a servant." Some think that the reason why the Holy Spirit had Paul put that there was he is getting ready to inch into the problem with Euodias and Syntyche that they

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weren't acting like Jesus. They didn't have the mind of Christ, they were standing on their rights rather than taking the attitude of a servant. They needed to repent and stop this meaningless quarrel.

As we look back over the year 2002 I not only have to ask myself "Lord, is there any rupture in my relationship with you?" But "Is there a any rupture with my relationship with another that I need to seek to cure?"

Which brings me to the third way to forget in Paul's letter. Forget through forgiveness.

Repentance is what we do for the wrongs we've done and forgiveness is how we respond to the wrongs others have done us. Forgiveness.

I think there is much glibness about forgiveness in the Christian marketplace. Forgiveness does not mean you roll out the welcome mat to an abuser and say, Please walk on me. That is not what forgiveness means. There are moments in life when we are deeply hurt by the actions of another. Sometimes it's continuing action, not simply a one time action. Probably all of us in this room cannot talk publicly about those times. I doubt that any one of us would want to get up publicly and say, "The greatest hurt of my life was..." It's painful. Because most deep hurt occurs privately it cannot be publicly discussed. There are memories in my own life I would like to expunge. I wish I had a sponge and could simply erase them from the slate. But I cannot.

On the other hand I'm not responsible for what people do to me. I'm only responsible for my own actions. My own actions include the option of forgiving what has been done me that was wrong. That's all I can do. I cannot change the past. But by my attitude of forgiveness I can change the present and the future.

Sometimes I even think that the primary beneficiary of forgiveness is not the other person. Many times the other person won't even receive the forgiveness. The primary beneficiary of forgiveness is ourselves.

Paul certainly experienced this. The example of it is in the Philippian letter. We tend to look at the apostolic church as a problem free church, ideal church. There is no ideal time.

I look back on my 17 years as pastor of Newport-Mesa Christian Center and I want to halo the time and say it was a honeymoon. But there were issues. There was stuff we dealt with. There were even a few people over the course of 17 years that may not have initially liked me. But we got over that! The church is a real place. People sometimes get into conflicts. We're not all yet there where we need to be. Incredibly in Paul's being laid on the shelf, his not being able to have hands on experience with this church at Philippi, in his absence there were others who were using his vacant position as a chance to jostle for top leadership position. Paul talks about them in the Philippian letter. He says in chapter 2 "Some preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I'm in chains." He's saying some preach Christ out of bad motivation. Some preach Christ out of good motivation. But I'm going to take the attitude – and here's the attitude of forgiveness – Christ is preached and for that I'm glad.

It had to hurt Paul in the natural that there were some using his absence as a pretext for posturing for their own advancement. Paul doesn't ignore what they're doing. He doesn't cozy up to

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them. But he doesn't let it get in his spirit. Forgiveness means holding out a general spirit of amnesty toward others.

Paul resolves the whole issue of conflict by saying I'm not going to let this get in me. In fact, one of the great principles of life I've learned is what happens in you is more important than what happens to you.

A book about Robert E. Lee that talks about the time after the Civil War when he visited a lady in Kentucky who took him to the remains of a great, grand old oak tree in front of her house. There she bitterly complained that its limbs and its trunk had been destroyed by federal artillery fire. The way she complained Lee knew that she was doing this to anybody that came. A day by day thing. She was showing them the remains of what the Union had done. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North for its action and justifying her attitude. Lee sympathizing with her loss looked at her in a very clear and uncondemning way said, "Madam, cut the tree down!"

There are some remembrances in life where it does no good to keep pointing to the bruised limb and the torn branches of our life. We just simply need to forgive and to cut it off, cut it down. Be able to find in Christ Jesus a way to neutralize that negative effect, that event that hurt has had upon our life.

To forgive doesn't relieve the other person for the wrong they've done. They'll have to face God. They'll have to face civil authorities if they're caught.

There's a mystical phrase in the short letter of Jude. It says that when Moses died the archangel Gabriel "contended with Satan for the body of Moses." I don't know what that's all about. But what is intriguing is Jude says that when contending with Satan for the body of Moses, Gabriel did not bring a railing accusation but said, "The Lord rebuke you." What's intriguing is the person who brings railing accusations is the devil. Gabriel in fighting the devil did not use the devil's methodology. He left it to the Lord to bring justice and said, The Lord rebuke you.

Some people in fighting the devil let the devil get in them. And begin fighting like the devil. Forgiveness gets the devil out of us. It's better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to remain. If we allow them to remain then bitterness takes root.

Fourth, we forget by learning from the past. I hope I've learned a lot about 2002. The young man asked the wealthy businessman for his secret to success, "How did you make so much money?" *Don't make mistakes.* "How do you learn to do that?" *By making mistakes.*

Michael Jackson the basketball player not the singer said "I have failed over and over again in my life. And that's precisely why I succeed."

Paul says it this way 4:11 "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." The fact that he says "I have learned" in the past tense indicates that there was a time when he had not yet learned that. He was a believer and he wasn't content. I wish I was on Paul's level at this point. I wish I could stand before you today and honestly say at 61 years of age I have now learned to be content. I am not yet there. Which tells us of course that life is a spiritual journey and there are some goals we have not yet arrived at. I am working on it. I'm more content than I used to be. I am less type A. I am less driven I think than I used to be.

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But I think of the context of this letter and Paul's statement "I've learned to be content." I want to listen to somebody that's at this level. He had already been incarcerated for 5 years. There was the sheer unfairness of his chains. The unfriendliness of his colleagues. The seemingly unfaithfulness of his Lord who had let him spend these five years as a prisoner. He could have been focusing on what was unfair but he had a different focus. His focus is reflected in 4:8 "Whatever is true, whatever's lovely, whatever's admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy think about such things." He had learned to keep his focus where it needed to be rather than upon that which would only destroy him and suck him down.

Dwelling on the positive, Paul had been able to come to the conclusion that what had happened to him had really served to advance the gospel. The result of course is seen in the Philippian letter. The whole palace guards, Nero's secret service elite knew why he was in chains. Every four hours the squadron of four soldiers would change. One by one these guards become converted. They tell their families. By the time we get to the end of the Philippian letter Paul is saying those of Caesar's administration salute you. He had made Christians right in the upper echelons of the government. He did this by learning to be content.

There is paradoxical balance between striving and contentedness. To be content doesn't mean we lack ambition. It doesn't mean we don't want to see things happen. But there's a delicate balance there.

Twenty years ago we had our first service in this building. I look back on all the striving of those years when I was trying to work out the coming of this church to this campus when the Lord was saying no. I was so frustrated with God. "God, this would be a perfect place for a church. We could grow. We could reach people in this community." Now I realize looking back three times the Lord said no. Because each time we couldn't handle it. We weren't ready for it. We would have built too small. We built too small anyway! We didn't have the money, we didn't have the funds. We didn't have all that was needed. The Lord was saying Wait. I was getting frustrated because I don't like to wait. There are some who teach that God's answers to prayer are always yes and if he didn't answer Yes it was because you didn't have enough faith or there was sin in your life. But the scriptures say that sometimes he says No or Wait. But it's the No and the Waiting process that gives us the anxiety. Paul says look back on the year, look back upon life and be content by learning that God is in the warp and woof of your life.

Fifth, forget by leaning forward.

Look again at 3:12-14. Paul says "I press on, straining towards what is ahead, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." He's using the language of a runner. He's saying as he runs he's now nearing that point where he's stretching out, where his body is leaning forward. He is pressing to hit the tape.

Life at the end has no brick wall. There is someone waiting with open arms. I'm leaning toward Jesus, Paul says. I am using these years even though I am cut off, shut in, there is still that which I can do. As he leans forward we get Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon. All those come out of his life when he could have been saying, there's nothing I can do here. If he had had that attitude we wouldn't have that rich treasure of understanding we get in what are called the prison letters. He's saying I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. Our citizenship is in heaven. We eagerly await a savior. Paul demonstrates this attitude of a runner.

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An Olympic runner has said, “The only way to win a race is to forget all previous victories that would give you false pride and forget all former failures that would give you false fears. Each race is a new beginning. Pressing on to the finish tape is all that’s important.”

So as we close this year and enter a new year of life the Lord says don’t end this year with a last gasp. Pick yourself up and forget by now leaning into the future. Leaning forward into what God has for you, his wonderful purposes in your life.

One of my heroes in life and one of my great models is a 95 year old pastor in northwest China. He preached with my dad in the old days. He was 9 years in prison during the cultural revolution. In prison because of being a Christian leader. Sixteen years of probation followed. Finally in 1983 when he was 75 years of age he was allowed to repossess the church property and reopen. He was 75 and he had 30 old people when he reopened the church.

I first saw him again five years after he first reopened the church in 1988. It was my last year of pastoring here. The church in five years under his watch had grown from 30 old believers to 1500 adult baptized believers. How did this happen? He said, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever and we pray a lot.” That’s a wonderful way to describe the growth of the church. I was just back in August. We’ve been helping because although the congregation is large it is extraordinarily poor. So we’ve helped them develop their central church. Then two years ago we planted a new church on the west side of town. Here he is 95 years of age, planting a new church that runs into the thousands. Now we’re helping him with another church on the east side of town. Because at 95 he’s not done. He’s still leaning into the future. He’s got in the whole province 50 churches spread throughout the area. The church that has home meetings all during the week now numbers 14,000 believers. It’s phenomenal to be with him. What if he, at 75 had said, “I’ve run the race. I’ve done my time. I’ve served Christ. Not too many people spend 9 years in prison. I’ve done my duty.” But he didn’t take that attitude. Instead of getting off the track he stayed on and he kept leaning. “God’s given me another year of life. I’m going to keep going.” He’s kept doing that for the last 20 years. Most people would have an excuse for hanging it up. He’s in there and at 95 he’s still leaning and planning another church.

He’s a living example of this whole thing that Paul’s talking about – forgetting what is behind I press on toward the goal. When the whistle blows and the game of life is over I don’t want to be caught off the track, sitting down on the bench, leaving the game and disappearing from the stadium. I want to be on the track, running the race to the last step.

That’s where Paul brings us. How do we forget what needs to be forgotten? Leave the past behind both with its woes and with its wonders and lean into God’s future for you for he has a plan for 2003. A plan for your life. A plan to use you for his honor and his glory.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for this time we share together today. We want to hear the admonition of scripture to forget what lies behind and to lean toward what lies ahead. We regret that we cannot simply erase hurtful moments from our minds. We are joyful that we can be grateful. We can be grateful for all that you’ve done. We can be grateful for the people we’re sitting next to in this sanctuary. For family. We can be grateful for the family of God, for who you are and at this Christmas time visited us with your salvation.

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There may be those here, Lord, who do not have a personal walk with you. For whom you remain either a distant figure or an unknown figure or a religious teacher but there is no relationship. I pray that a person in that place that there would be this very morning a reconsideration. There is no one like you. You are the only one who gave your life for our sins. You are the only one who rose again from the dead on the third day. You are the only one who will come again for those who trust you. You are the way, and the truth and the life and no one comes to God except through you. We come to you and we are grateful for you. Where there have been wrongs we have done against others forgive us Lord. Help us to forgive, help us to forget by forgiving. Help us to learn that you are working your purposes in all things and give us a measure of strength to lean into whatever future you have for us. Help us to run until the race is done and the crown of life is ours. May this congregation as a whole run the race that is set before it. While we treasure the past and are grateful for it this church's destiny now does not lie in its past. But it lies in its future. Give to Scott and to those who serve in leadership and throughout this entire body an ability by the Holy Spirit to lean into the glorious future you have, for the mission of this church and this community to be an agent of...

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