

Philippians 3:12-21. Press on!

There's a place called "Yaddo." Have you ever heard of it? I hadn't until this past week. It's the gift of Spencer and Katrina Trask who left their estate for a residency program for artists, many literary. And so Yaddo was born in 1926. One commenter has made the observation: *"the forty or so acres on which the principal buildings of Yaddo stand have seen more distinguished activity in the arts than any other piece of ground in the English-speaking community and perhaps the world."* There are some accomplishments to go with that kind of grand talk. Yaddo artists have won 78 Pulitzer Prizes, 31 MacArthur Fellowships, 69 National Book Awards, and a Nobel Prize for Literature.

And yet the most long-lasting, highest-in-importance words to ever be present at Yaddo or presented there, I'd suggest, are possibly these 4 words colored in glass upon one window at the estate: **διώκω ἐπὶ τὸ βραβεῖον.**

There's a story behind those words getting there, which I'd sure like to know. Who was responsible, and what was their impetus for putting this message there? I wonder if the answer to those questions has been told to residents who have passed by the window over Yaddo's almost 100 year existence. From that or from personal digging, I wonder how many have come to learn the saying's meaning.

Have you figured out the connection, that long before being placed in the stained glass window of Yaddo - some almost 2 millennia earlier - these 4 words were recorded in Philippians ch.3? Paul tells us, in the midst of our encouragement today: **διώκω ἐπὶ τὸ βραβεῖον.** That's **"I press on toward the prize/for the prize."**

Press on, or aggressively chase. Pursue with the haste like a hunter after a catch. There's a specific prize that Paul goes on to name, of course. But before we go on to talk about that more, go back to Yaddo for a brief moment.

Along with the words on the window, there is a depiction of an arrow, and an arrow-filled quiver, and a set of hunting bows. So the meaning of pursuing, pressing on, like a hunter seeking to catch a prize is certainly conveyed in the window. But the window just takes the message up to "prize": "I press on for the prize/toward the prize." For all those who have walked past it at Yaddo, I wonder: What did they have their hearts and minds set upon to chase / to pursue? If there was a poll question given, "What is the highest prize you have your eyes set on?", I wonder the answers that we would hear.

Success, measured in accomplishing something and experiencing material gain, and ease in life? Or success of a different kind, measured in acclaim – to be known, maybe even considered among the greats, in your field of art or interest or academic area of expertise? Or maybe not any of that, but just to realize a sense of accomplishment on a personal level, the satisfaction of having used one's gifts to their full potential?

Maybe you hear it. Has it struck home for you? That this is more than a question to imagine Yaddo's illustrious occupants answering. What about you?

I've heard statements like "You are always chasing something." You and I – individuals – are always pursuing something. I What are you pursuing?

More specifically: "What is the highest prize you have your eyes and heart set on?" This is the focus this morning. We hear Paul's answer today. And it is the answer God has for us, the answer He wants for us to have living in our hearts today and all the rest of your life and my life through: **"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me - one thing I do - I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."**

So we could talk about many more things this morning from these verses, but this central thought and encouragement is where we want to explore for our time: **press on, pursue, this prize**. As we dig in to that, a story I've heard helps drive this concept home for me. My dad and Don (a friend of his from our family's time in Nebraska when I was very little) were pheasant hunting one day. My mom and Don's wife, Barb, were along - walking and watching. Don and my dad scared up a pheasant. It took flight. My dad shot. It fell from the air. They didn't have a dog. So *they* had to retrieve the pheasant. But it wasn't dead. And pheasants can run very fast. So the two started to run after the wounded pheasant. I can picture the scene as he goes on to describe, "We were in a harvested field of milo so there were plenty of places where the pheasant could go and hide and probably die. We might never find it. We had to hurry. My glasses always have fitted somewhat loosely. So as I was hurrying, my glasses fell off and onto the ground. At that time it was more important to capture this pheasant, so I let the glasses fall in the middle of this field and went chasing this bird. I did catch up to the pheasant and captured this prize. But now, where did my glasses fall to the ground? With four of us looking, we did amazingly find the glasses. So the story ends with a successful hunt and your father had his glasses."

Now it might be debated, and from my understanding it was following the event, whether the prize was worth the leaving of the glasses behind (and the potential loss of the glasses). But here's the point... This is the kind of focus on the prize, which when it comes to the gift and prize of heaven & eternal life with the Lord, no one among us should debate the value (the worth compared to anything else). Leave behind whatever else might hinder or distract from your continued focus on "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Never loose having your heart and mind set upon this as your highest prize.

You understand that this is not saying that you and I can't enjoy anything else life has to offer. The Lord has given us life here and now. There are many good things from Him to be appreciated, enjoyed, even sought out. But ...

- If the thing you are setting your eyes and heart on *as your ultimate or primary prize* becomes anything other than Jesus and "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus," it will leave you in disappointment. You will inevitably end up with no lasting satisfaction from those other things.
- For only knowing Jesus – faith in Jesus – brings with it peace that lasts, and joy that lasts, and blessings that will not come to an end.
- Two things that Paul describes point out for us the unique peace that only Jesus provides. And what I mean by those two things are: 1) the fact that we don't need to look back in fear over our past, and 2) the sight ahead to the eternal life that is waiting for us. And we learn everywhere in the Bible that both of these are God's gift, freely given, to all who trust in Jesus. That's the only way that they are ours.
- The first of those Paul describes when he says, "**forgetting the things that are behind.**" Since Jesus took the punishment for all our sin, God gives this assurance: everyone who believes in Jesus' Saving work is forgiven. All your sin washed away and all its guilt taken away. So you, dear Christian, like Paul are freed from looking back weighed down and burdened by guilt or fear. Your past, your failures and sin, are not what define you in God's sight. Your standing in God's sight is holy. You are His holy child, through faith in Jesus.

Then Paul turns our attention forward: "**Straining toward the things ahead, I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**" You too, like Paul, are given the sight ahead to the prize – the gift – which is yours through faith in Jesus. Since you are at peace with God through Jesus, heaven and eternal life with God is what you have to look forward to.

Now, here's the thing to guard against: letting any earthly, temporal thing here and now begin to detract or hinder or distract from that remaining your ultimate prize, which your heart and mind see as their greatest treasure.

How might it happen that you or I might get distracted? What should we watch out for? What are we up against? Listen to vs.18-19 again. ¹⁸ ***To be sure, many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. I told you about them often, and now I am saying it while weeping.*** ¹⁹ ***Their end is destruction, their god is their appetite, and their glory is in their shame. They are thinking only about earthly things.***

The apostle Paul wrote these words almost 2,000 years ago. And yet, look how closely the description matches what's happening today. For "Many" ... "...their god is their appetite.... They are thinking only about earthly things." "Appetite" here represents all the desires of the human sinful flesh.

There is a strong pull on us to be swept up by the flow of society's thinking or behavior. Our sinful flesh tugs at us to join in with those who are thinking only about earthly things. How do we guard against being pulled in by...

- ✘ websites or movies or TV programs that promote doing whatever you want, as if your highest prize is chasing whatever seems to satisfy for the moment
- ✘ or, social media posts – or in person exchanges – where saying whatever you want, attacking whomever you want, is the way fulfillment is found
- ✘ or, all the advertisements that say you deserve it all (and you should have it all, regardless of what God says about it all)?

In the face of this temptation, from society and from our sinful flesh, to make our "appetites" our god, Paul encourages us: ***"Press on toward the prize / for the prize."***

It takes spiritual wisdom, strength and motivation to go against the pressure from our culture and our sinful flesh. We don't deny the failures we've had against temptation, when we've fallen into sin.

What's the answer? The cross of Jesus declares: Your sin has been taken away, your spiritual baggage is taken, guilt gone. And so the cross of Jesus and Jesus' perfect life lived in our place, also leave no doubt about our destination. Paul says,

"Our citizenship" – as ones who trust in Jesus – "is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there – the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

"What is the highest prize you have your eyes set upon?"

May the answer living in your heart, today and all your life through be: ***"I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*** Amen.