

"THE LOOK OF EAGLES"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Uncle Peter was a lover of horses. Once given the opportunity to select a colt from a herd of two-year olds, Uncle Peter chose a somewhat ordinary looking colt named Bluegrass. No one saw potential in this horse. A friend laughingly said to Uncle Peter, "Well... he'll never run in the Kentucky Derby". But, you know...they were wrong. Bluegrass got to run in the Derby and run he did! He won! In the interviews that followed, Uncle Peter liked to say he chose that colt because he had,

"The look of eagles in his eye".

"The look of eagles"....I've often wondered if St. Paul had such a look in his eyes...the look of eagles. For here was a man who was converted to the faith after being one of its toughest critics and most intense persecutors.... a man who spent much of his ministry in chains, as a prisoner. Here was a man who had an affliction which some scholars think was epilepsy, but which he simply referred to as "his thorn in the flesh". And yet, in spite of all the strikes against him, St. Paul just may be the second most important man who ever lived....second only to Jesus.

As you read his life's story, you can't help but wonder...what was his secret? What was it that put "the look of eagles in his eyes"? Verses 13 and 14 in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians sum up Paul approach to life....an approach to life we would do well to reflect upon. He writes,

"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

ONE THING I DO

Our first clue to the secret of his life is found in the first phrase of this text. "But one thing I do..." Not many things, but ONE THING.

Chances are that if you and I were to hire a consultant to look at our lives and give us a bit of advice on how to be more successful, that consultant might say "In the first place, you're trying to do too many things". It was Henry Ford who once wrote,

"A weakness of all human beings is trying to do too many things at once....that scatters effort and destroys direction. It makes for haste and haste makes waste, every now and then...." (Ford continued)... "I wake up in the morning....with a dozen things I want to do. I know I can't do them all at once...."

And when asked what he did about that, Ford replied,

"I go out and trot around the house...while I'm running off the excess energy that wants to do too much, my mind clears and I see what can be done and should be done - FIRST".

I doubt if St. Paul trotted around the house or not, but we do know that he was terribly focussed....focussed his time and energy on one thing which was serving God. What is it that the Quakers say about those who spread themselves too thin:

"You cannot be crucified on every cross"

Dorothy Haskins, in her book, A Practical Guide to Prayer, tells about a noted concert violinist who was asked the secret of her mastery of the violin. She answered with two words: "Planned neglect". She then went on to say,

"There were many things that use to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, then straightened the room, dusted...and did whatever seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. Unfortunately that system prevented me from accomplishing what I should on the violin. So I began to reverse things. I deliberately planned to neglect everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of 'planned neglect' is the secret of my success."

Few of us need much encouragement to neglect household tasks, but maybe there's a secret to life in all of this. You can't do everything. Most of us need to focus on a few things that really matter and excel in those. I like that line of St. Paul,

"But ONE THING I do...forgetting what lies behind..."

FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND

Which brings us to the second "key" in this formula which is, "Forgetting what lies behind....." Paul knew how to let go of the past. Do you? Paul could have spent his time doing what most of us do. He could have spent his time and energy beating on himself. After all, had he not persecuted the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. Was he not there the day when Stephen was stoned to death. He did nothing to intervene. Perhaps he was tempted to pick up a stone and toss it at young Stephen. There was much to regret. He was carrying that burden along with everything else. I've always been fond of that bit of advice from the 12-Step Program. "Look back....but don't stare".

Remember that helpful book by Rabbi Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People? Have you read it? Are you familiar with it? He tells of paying a condolence call on the families of two women who died of natural causes after living long, productive lives. At the first home, the son of the deceased woman sadly said to the Rabbi:

"If only I had sent my mother to Florida and gotten her out of this cold and snow, she would be alive today. It's my fault she died...."

And at the second home, the son sadly said to the Rabbi,

"If only I hadn't insisted on my mother's going to Florida, she would be alive today. That long airplane ride was more than she could take. It's my fault she died."

Very few of us make it through life without a few regrets here and there. Thomas Gilovich, a psychologist, refers to it as "The regret window". He describes working with patients who suddenly look distracted, as if they are looking out an invisible window. What opened the window seemed to be unpredictable....perhaps a casual remark or a glimpse of a face....but suddenly he says the patient's voice would sound tight, as if throat muscles were stiffening and their gaze would drift away from the therapist and then "fix" on this imaginary window.

"What were you looking at?" the good doctor then asked the person he saw doing this. "Lost life" came back the answer. And he determined that what the patients were seeing in that window were regrets....what he calls,

"The lost lives...lost selves a person could have lived or been if he had done things differently."

Most of us have "regret windows" in our lives...of one sort or another. How do we handle those regrets? It's a question we need to consider.

This one is from Crossroads and it's about a woman by the name of Betty Nesmith, a secretary in Dallas....at a bank. A good job. This was before computers took over. She came across a problem that interested her and one which I can identify with. Wasn't there a better way to correct errors she made on her typewriter? Betty had some art experience and she knew that artists who worked in oils just painted over their errors. Perhaps that could work for her, too, and so she concocted a fluid to paint over her typing errors. Before long, all the secretaries in her building were using what she then called, "MISTAKE OUT".

She attempted to sell the product idea to marketing agencies and various companies, including IBM, but they didn't pick up on it...turned her down. However, the secretaries continued to like her product and so Betty Nesmith's kitchen became her first manufacturing facility and she started selling her concoction on her own. Later she sold her little enterprise to the Gillette Company for - get this now - for \$ 47.5 million!

Now, wouldn't it be great if there was "whiteout" for the soul? For those of you brought up in this computer age, I guess one should say, hey - wouldn't it be great if there was a "delete" key for the soul? So many people are hampered by their regrets over past mistakes...past sins...past errors of judgement...past words spoken in anger. And regret drains them of the mental energy they need to be successful today - NOW. Writes St. Paul,

"But one thing I do...forgetting what lies behind.."

Paul knew that the past is past....that it no longer exists. St. Paul knew that Jesus had taken even the darkest of his sins and "whited" them out...pressed the "delete" key, if you will. My faith tells me that God coming to us in Christ has a way of taking all of the stupid things any of us have ever done or thought or said....and pressed the delete key for all eternity.

"But one thing I do....forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead....."

PAUL IMAGINED A VICTORIOUS FUTURE

Which leads on now to the third thing that Paul did. Paul always kept in mind a vision of a victorious future. "Straining forward" he said, "to what lies ahead." And the reason Paul could let go of the past was that his eye was so fixed on the final victory of Christ....over sin, over death. It reminds me of what Kiekegaard said that "life is lived forward but understood backward". Because of the cross and what it represents. We all need a future that we can set our eye and our hearts on. Without it, we're lost. We need that positive sense of the future....goals to pull us forward.

A college professor prepared a text for his "soon-to-be-graduating" seniors. He divided the test questions into three categories and the students were instructed to choose questions from only one of those three categories. The first category of questions was the hardest, most difficult and worth fifty points. The second was easier and was worth forty points. The third, the simplest, was worth thirty points. Upon completion of the test, students who had chosen the hardest fifty point questions were given A's. The students who had chosen the forty-point questions received B's. The students who settled for the easy "three pointers" were given C's. The students were very frustrated with the grading of their papers and asked the professor what he was looking for. Leaning over the podium, the professor smiled and offered this explanation,

"I wasn't testing your knowledge. I was testing your goals!"

Some business people are now using the word, "FEED-FORWARD". Think about that word for a moment. "FEED-FOWARD", as opposed to the familiar word, "FEED-BACK". If you're running a business, feedback means when something goes wrong, you pick up the signal that all's not well and you do something about it. Some might yell. Some shout. You verbally punish the "Guilty" one or whatever. The problem with "FEED-BACK" is that it's always after the fact. You're being "re-active" instead of "pro-active"....so why not try to anticipate rather than simply respond.

Watch a fast-moving tennis match. The best players can't afford to wait until their opponent hits the ball to decide where they should be on the court. They have to anticipate where the ball will be hit and commit themselves to that part of the court and be there. A form of "FEED-FORWARD". Anticipation. It's not always possible, but lots better than feedback when you can do it.

"But one thing I do" said Paul, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Yes....Paul was living in anticipation about what God was doing in his life and in the life of the world. He was living on "FEED-FORWARD". He wasn't being pulled by his past, but rather by a victorious future. We often say about life that we are products of our heredity and our environment. Why can't we be products of our dreams, products of our faith? That's "FEED-FORWARD". And thus, Paul pressed "upward" toward the goal that Christ had given him. Perhaps he had the chariot races of Rome in mind as he spoke those words. It's entirely possible. The "upward calling" could then refer to the summons to the winner to approach those elevated stands of the judge and receive his prize. It's an apt analogy. Nothing in Paul's life came easily for him. On the other hand, nothing could defeat him.

CLOSING Greatness has been a lifetime study of author, Irving Stone, writing novelized biographies of such men as Michelangelo, Vincent Van Gogh, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. Stone was once asked if he had found a thread that runs through the lives of all these exceptional people. In reply, he said this...

"I write about people who sometime in their life...have a vision or a dream of something that should be accomplished...and they go to work. They are beaten over the head, they're knocked down, vilified and for years they get nowhere. But every-time they're knocked down, they stand up. You cannot destroy these people. And, at the end of their lives they've accomplished some modest part of what they set out to do in their early years....."

He could have been talking about St. Paul. Paul was able to focus on the one thing in his life that really mattered - for him his "high calling in Jesus Christ". He was able to let go of excess baggage from the past that might have weighed him down on his travels. He was able to live in anticipation of Christ's future visitory. Pulled by "FEED-FORWARD" and not held or hindered by "FEED-BACK". Thus, he pressed onward...upward to his high calling. Some "take home" lessons for all of us...please remember to:

"FOCUS on those things that really matter. Let go of the PAST.....EXPECT good things from God in the future".

PRAYER Now help us, O God, to press on....serving You faithfully all of our days. Lead on, O King, and when it comes to those things in our past...help us to forgive, forget...forever. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives....down below the surface....bring us into the light and love of Christ in whom we have found life's highest hope, as well as its deepest meaning. In His spirit, we pray. Amen.