

How to Win in the Game of Life
2 Peter 1:3; Phil. 3:10-14

Good afternoon! So glad to see you all once again. Some of you I just saw yesterday. Yes, folks, we had our first-ever VBS or Vacation Bible School yesterday here in church. It was a resounding success. All glory to God, Amen? And praises also to our indefatigable organizers led by Tita Mary Rose and Tita Bel. And, of course, our several volunteers who came to teach, assist, decorate, and all that stuff. Please rise if you were part of that group. Don't be shy. Hats off to you.

I know we greeted one another earlier. But I want us to do that again especially there are some more folks who came in. Why don't we all stand and greet one another. And say to at least five people, "I'm so blessed to see you".

So, we're on the 6th part of our series on "Becoming a Champion". This afternoon, what I'm going to share with you is something that has something to do with our VBS theme of Game On. In fact, this is a message that some of you may have heard before. It is because I shared this with you in the past. And I thought of sharing it again with a few changes because I thought this was relevant to our theme. OK?

Now, let me ask you, When you say, Game On, what do you mean? Or what does it mean to say "Game On"?

It means you're accepting a challenge. It means you are ready to get something done. So, if you want something to get done, you need power, right? You need energy. Where do you get this power? From Jesus!

Look at what 2 Peter 1:3 says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." This verse refers to Jesus. And he has what?

Divine power...to give you everything you need to live a life that is pleasing to God. And because he gives you power, you can become a champion. As the Bible says in Philippians 4:13 and let us say together, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

I'm sure all of us here want to be winners. No one wants to be a loser, right? Unless you were one of the participants in the reality show called "The Biggest Loser". Now, when we talk about life, we want to win in life, right? How do you do that? Even Christians, who are supposed to be forward-looking and positive and assured of a place in heaven, can't even figure out how to win in life on earth. Many of us are deep in debt, some are caught in some kind of addiction, some have habits or attitudes that rival those of non-Christians. How do we overcome all these?

A peanuts cartoon shows Lucy preaching to Charlie:

"Charlie, sometimes life is just like a deck chair. Some people place it in such a way that they can see where they have been. Some people place it in such a way that they can see where they are headed. And still some place it in such a way they know where they are at present."

"Lucy," Charlie said, "I couldn't even get mine unfolded."

Some people are like Charlie Brown. They can't figure out life. As a result, they miss out on life. They miss out on the little joys and pleasures that life can offer.

The reason why some people fail is because they never really tried. Some give up easily. When they encounter a problem, they whine and groan and act as if it's the end of the world.

Someone was fretting and getting worried about a computer problem she was having in the office. She was responsible for fixing it.

Hours passed and she hadn't worked out a solution yet. An officemate dropped by and seeing that she was mighty troubled, tried to comfort her.

He said, "Hey, don't worry too much. It's not the end of the world. It's just the end of your career."

That's being optimistic. Friends, whatever problems you're facing, it's not the end of the world. And don't you ever believe anyone who says that it's the end of your career, or your marriage, or your finances. You can win in life. God meant for us to win in life. That's the reason Christ came to earth. He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." And the apostle Paul also tells us in Romans 8:37 that we are more than conquerors through him, through Jesus Christ, who loved us.

This doesn't deny the fact, however, that aside from successes, life is also full of surprises and sufferings. Anyone who tells you otherwise don't know what Jesus and his disciples went through in life. That's why the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:17 that we share in the sufferings of Christ. But we can rejoice. Because he also says that sufferings produce perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.

Now, would you please open your Bibles to Phil. 3:10-14. Let us read.

You don't have to be a loser. You can be a winner. To win in the game of life, there are three things you must do based on the passage we read. So, take your pens and outline, and follow along as I share with you what these three things are.

Are you game? In Tagalog, game ka na ba?

First, Pursue a Goal.

Having a goal in life is what makes life meaningful and worthy of living. Without a goal, life is without direction and we are just like a spinning top that is out of control.

What is your goal in life? Is it to become the best in your profession? Is it to get a high-paying job? Is it to raise a family in a nice, quiet neighborhood? Is to become the next American Idol?

Goals are like targets we aim at. They help us to be focused. Our goals help us to become organized and more efficient. Then life begins to have meaning.

Now, our values determine our goals. If we have the right values, then we will have the right goals. How do you have right values? Have a right relationship with God.

The apostle Paul had a right relationship with God. It is this relationship that caused him to establish one thing as his main goal in life. In verses 10-11, he says,

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

In this passage, what the apostle Paul is really trying to say is that he wants to become more like Christ. He wants the character of Christ to be reproduced in him. That is his goal in life, to become like Christ. In achieving this goal, he starts by saying that he wants to know Christ. You see, to become like someone we admire, we make an effort to know that someone.

How many of us already know Christ? I mean, really know Christ? We may say that we know Christ because we are already saved. We have accepted him as our personal Lord and Savior. Or we may say that we know Christ because we grew up in a church that talked about Christ. But the apostle Paul was already a Christian when he said those words.

“I want to know Christ.” That was Paul's longing and desire. He wanted to continue learning about Jesus. He wanted to become more and more familiar with Jesus. In that way, he can become more like Christ.

You see, when we received Jesus in our hearts as personal Lord and Savior, we have barely scratched the surface with regards to knowing him. It's like getting married. You see, some people say that the marriage process consists of three rings. Engagement ring, wedding ring, and suffering. When you get all three rings, you become Lord of the Rings. Anyway, it is when you receive the third ring that you really begin to know your partner.

I'm using this analogy to let you see that becoming like Christ is a continuing process. It doesn't stop when we receive him. There must be a conscious effort on our part to become more like him. How do we become like him?

To answer this question, let me just share with you the Rabbi and Disciple relationship during the time of Jesus. Like other rabbis of his day, Jesus had disciples called talmidim. The disciples' deepest desire was to follow their rabbi so closely that they would start to think and act like him.

What normally happened was that students approached a rabbi and asked, "May I follow you?" So, it was like enrolling you know. You chose your rabbi. Then the rabbi either accepted the student as a talmid or sent him away to pursue a different trade. Jesus broke this pattern when he chose his own talmidim. As he asked his disciples to follow him, they knew without a doubt that their rabbi believed in them.

A talmid followed the rabbi everywhere, often without knowing or asking where he was going. He rarely left his rabbi's side for fear that he would miss a teachable moment. And he watched the rabbi's every move, noting how he acted and thought about a variety of situations.

Talmidim trusted their rabbi completely. They worked passionately to incorporate the rabbi's actions and words into their lives.

The disciples' deepest desire was to follow their rabbi so closely that they would start to think and act like him.

If we want to be real disciples of Jesus then, we would always dwell on his word, the Bible. We would read it and study it. Because the Bible tells us all the thoughts and words and actions of Jesus.

The apostle Paul, no doubt, was a diligent student of the Bible. That's why through his writings we can see a man who had developed a close walk with God. I'm sure if we lived during his time and we saw him, we would see someone who reflected the character of Jesus. And yet, he never stopped in his goal of knowing Christ to become like Christ. He was thirsty for God in the same way that a parched soil is thirsty for rainwater.

The apostle Paul had other goals, no doubt. But these goals were secondary to his main goal. Sometimes, they came out of his main goal. For example, we can say that his desire to reach out to the gentiles was a direct result of knowing Christ. The more he knew Christ, the more he discovered the love of Christ, and the more he wanted to share this love with others.

Whatever your goal in life is, in your relationships, in your career, in your family, in your leisure, make it secondary to the goal of becoming like Christ. In fact, Paul asks us to follow his example. In verse 17, he says,

“Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”

So, let me encourage you, make knowing Christ the primary goal in your life. Not just knowing him in your head, but knowing him real well in your heart. Then, let other goals you set in life be secondary. For example, you want to be a good singer and be recognized for that. Go on, join American Idol, try to achieve your goal. Or you want to become an excellent basketball player. Go on, join the Wizards or better yet the Warriors so you can achieve your goal.

But don't lose sight of your main goal which is to be like Christ. Meaning, you don't act in a way like others do in this world. Once they become famous, they become materialistic or selfish or lose their faith. Some artists or celebrities gone that way. They have been sucked into the world of materialism because of their success. They have abandoned their faith and Jesus.

Set a goal in life. It makes life meaningful.

After establishing something as your goal in life, you must

Prepare for Your Goal.

Preparation is very important in any undertaking. An ill-prepared student has already failed the exam even before taking it. An ill-prepared lawyer has already lost his case even before arguing in court. An ill-prepared army has already lost the battle even before the battle began.

Preparation is the key to success. Whatever your goal is. It is the key to winning. If your goal is to become the best employee at work, you must be ready to spend time reading up and perhaps putting in extra hours. You may have an excellent goal but if you don't prepare yourself enough for it, that goal is nothing but a pipe dream.

Preparation is hard work. There are no short cuts. In verse 13, Paul gives us an example of how he prepared for his goal. He said, "*Forgetting what is behind.*"

He knew that any excess baggage would slow him down. And so, he'd rather forget them, leave them behind so he could travel unhampered.

It's just like a runner who runs a race. The runner should leave unnecessary clothes behind. Then, as he runs he should not look behind him. Otherwise, it will slow him down. Even just glancing sideways to see who is gaining on him can cost him a fraction of a second and can cost him the race itself. It's just like the famous race between John Landy and Roger Bannister in 1954.

They were at the time the greatest rivals because both had broken the 4-minute barrier in the mile, meaning both had run the mile under four minutes which was thought impossible before. So, when they raced, John Landy started strong. He set a fast pace, leading by as much as 15 yards before Bannister caught up as the bell rang for the final lap. Landy was still ahead but a few meters before the finish line, he looked over his left shoulder and as he did that, Bannister passed him on his right and won the race. What's the lesson? Don't get distracted. You'll lose your momentum. Forget what is behind.

Now, we must remember that there are two things we can forget.

First, we can forget our past hurts and failures. When I say failure, I'm talking not only about failing to achieve something but also about sinning. If I ask who among you has failed in the past, I'm sure everyone will raise their hands. If you don't, you must be perfect. And, of course, no one is perfect. I saw a bumper sticker that says, "If you think you're perfect, try walking on water."

The Bible is clear about our sad situation. **Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**

We are imperfect because we are sinners. And because we are sinners, we fail.

Failure can be a heavy baggage to carry. In Japan, the suicide rate among teenagers is high. You know why, it is because when they don't pass their college entrance exam, many of them commit suicide. Their society expects too much from them. Failing in the exam is humiliation, big-time.

Moral failure or committing sin can be as tragic. When Judas betrayed Jesus and afterwards realized his mistake, he took his own life. Sin, we all know, is a heavy burden to carry. But, you know what, you can forget that you sinned because God can forgive you.

He can forgive you because of his son Jesus who died for your sins. All you need to do is to ask for forgiveness and you'll be white as snow, as the Bible says.

Many of us are hostages of our past. We let our past condemn us even though Christ had already set us free. Hebrews 12:1 tells us, *“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”*

Now, let's talk about our hurts. I'm sure many of us have been hurt in the past. Some have been more hurt than others. Even right now, some of us are still hurting. We're carrying bitter memories of the past. And when we're alone, they torment us, even paralyze us. How do we forget our hurts and get on with life? By forgiving others. When we fail, God can forgive us. When others fail us, we can forgive them.

When we forgive, we take a great load off our chest and we're able to breathe easier. How many times can we forgive? Jesus says, 70 x 7. That's a whole lot. Of course, it doesn't mean you count the number of times you've forgiven someone and then once you've reached 490, you stop. It means to forgive as long as you live.

Colossians 3:13 says, *“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

Forgiving, however, doesn't mean an immediate restoration of the relationship. Like the case of a battered housewife who leaves the house in order to avoid being abused over and over again. She can forgive and not be bitter about the situation. But it doesn't mean going back and be reconciled. A wound takes time to heal. Sometimes, keeping distance or being civil is the best approach until circumstances are right again. Forgiving then means to stop thinking ill of someone, or even to think of getting even.

So, forgetting our past hurts and failures can help us to go on living. But there's another thing that can hold us back from pursuing our goal. And this is our past successes and achievements. We must forget them, too.

Of course, it doesn't mean that we throw them away like they never mattered. It just means that we don't become too satisfied with them that we forget that there are other mountains to climb.

You see, life is composed of a series of challenges. If we don't face the next challenge, then we won't know our full potential. We won't know that we can be what God really wants us to be. We can't be conformed to the image of Christ.

The second part of preparation is training. Paul called it straining. Which aptly describes it. For training in life requires vigorous straining of the muscles of our body, both physical and spiritual.

A runner puts in a lot of hours in training. He trains so hard because of what is ahead. He knew that without adequate training, he cannot reach what is ahead. The same is true for a Christian. A Christian who wants to reach what is ahead must train himself in the spiritual disciplines. Studying the Bible is one of these disciplines. Others are praying, attending church and Bible study groups, and fasting. If the Christian wants to become more like Christ, he should commit himself to these disciplines.

1 Corinthians 9:25 tells us, *"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."*

So, to win in life, I must pursue a goal, second, I must prepare myself for my goal, and third, I must **Press on toward my goal.**

To press on is to persevere. It is to keep on keeping on. Despite opposition. Despite difficulties. Despite setbacks. It is not giving up.

The ability to press on, however, doesn't come from us. It comes from God. God is the source of our strength and courage.

There are people who have taken God out of their lives. They think they can live without God. They think that they can go it alone. Perhaps, for a time, but not for a long time. Sooner or later, they will feel the emptiness and their helplessness.

So, for us to press on, to persevere, we must learn to draw our power from God always. Be connected to him. Jesus said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing."*

How can we be sure that we are always connected? By surrendering our lives to him. Many of us here are already Christians. We became Christians because we gave our lives to him. We told him, "Lord, I can't make it on my own. I yield my life to you. Take over my life. I believe you died and rose again for me."

But, you know what, we never followed up on that commitment. Now, we say, "Lord, thank you for saving me. But can you please wait before I commit myself to you totally? There are things I need to do first." Friends, Jesus is not a butler who is waiting for our beck and call. He is our master whose orders we follow. Someone said, "If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all."

Once we are surrendered to Jesus, it is then we experience his grace and power working within us. When the apostle Paul was going through hard times, Jesus said to him, *"My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Friends, becoming like Jesus does not happen overnight. It takes years and years. We may even become frustrated as we pursue this goal. Then we say to God, "Lord, I don't think you can work through me. I'm stubborn. I keep committing the same sin over and over again. Did you really save me?"

But God says to you, "My child, it doesn't depend on you. It depends on me. Because I chose you, I will complete my work in you."

Friends, Philippians 1:6 says, *"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

It also says in Hebrews 12:2 that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. He knows what he is doing. All we need to do is to submit ourselves to him like the clay submitting itself in the hands of the potter. So, press on because God is behind us all the way as we pursue our goal.

William Wilberforce was a member of the British Parliament. He lived in a time when slave trade and slavery were firmly entrenched in the British society. Rich men and politicians had slaves. By opposing the slave trade he was opposing these powerful and influential men. He struggled for many years in the parliament receiving defeat after defeat. He was discouraged so many times because he did not make any progress in years of speaking, bill writing, and evidence gathering. But he persevered with some prodding from his headstrong wife, and good friends John Newton, John Wesley and William Pitt. In the end, three days before he died, the Parliament passed a law banning slavery in the United Kingdom.

Wilberforce was a Christian and made his goal in life to free the slaves in Britain. Against all odds, he prepared for his goal and pressed on toward his goal.

To win in life, my friends, pursue a goal. And nothing is more worth our time and effort than the goal of becoming like Christ. Then, prepare for the goal. And, press on toward the goal.