



Let's Talk

So how is your school year going? I'm talking about your learning in the classroom of faith as we move through memorizing this passage. I hope you are doing great in this class, in this season of learning and growing in your faith!

When I was actually teaching in the classroom, along about this time of the school year there would come a day when I would need to have a heart to heart with my classes, to allow them to see me as a real person, not just their teacher, and to talk to them about their progress in the school year. The lessons would get set aside; I would ask them to give me their full attention and we would just talk. I never planned for it, but it always happened. There would just be a moment of knowing it was time to get some things straight. In these talks, inevitably I would end up telling a personal story of my own learning about determination and perseverance, sharing with them my own hopes and struggles, and then letting them also know how much I cared about them as a class, how much potential I saw in them, and how much I desired for them to do well. After all that, I would then issue a challenge about exerting their own determination if they wanted to succeed. When the students left my class that day, I hoped they knew me as a real person and I hoped they were propelled to do even greater things in the coming learning times.

This is the kind of tone I hear in Paul's words in verse 13, the verse that we are focusing on this week. Up until this point he has been sharing about:

- Counting things as loss
- Knowing Christ
- Knowing Christ's power
- Living a resurrected life

These are pretty intense lessons in the classroom of faith. But then, hear the first word of verse 13. It is like Paul is setting things aside and saying lets have a talk here, lets make sure we have this straight before we move on any further. He says,

"Brothers..."

He is making sure his listeners know he is just like them, like a brother... and then he goes on to share,

"...I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it..."

In these first words of this verse, I see Paul setting aside the harder lessons of faith and just sharing from his heart, saying, *"I haven't arrived yet, I haven't totally figured out all this faith yet either, I am learning just like you."*

This is so important for a teacher to do, to connect with his students, to identify with those who are learning from him, to take away any pretenses and just share from the heart. I appreciate these passages in the New Testament where Paul allowed us to see his humanness, his struggles and his questions. They help me to keep on keeping on.

Now back to my "talk day" with my students. On this day, it always seemed that I would end up sharing along these personal lines too; letting them know that as a teacher I haven't figured it all out yet either. But then I would end up issuing a success challenge, beginning by sharing my own conviction about learning and moving forward. That is exactly what Paul does here too. Look at what he says next,

“...but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead...”

As a teacher I believed those sharing days were powerful. I can also see the benefit here for Paul's "students" and I don't want to miss this opportunity for our "class" as well. So... this week I think our moment to "talk" has arrived. For today let's set memorization learning tools aside, whatever yours may be, and just talk. Being your teacher in this project, I want to share from the heart with you and I want to encourage you in your faith learning journey.

First of all I can say to you,

“brothers (and sisters) I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it...”

How I love my faith, and how I have seen God do great things in my life through it, but I want you to know, I don't consider myself yet to have arrived. I know there are still things I am allowing in my life that are keeping me at a distance from what God has for me. Although it is painful for me to have to identify them, if I am honest, I know they are there. Daily they present challenges and temptations for me. For example, about two months ago the Lord revealed to me that I have some distinct areas of bitterness in my heart. At first I didn't want to admit it but the more I have allowed God to speak to me, the more He has shown me the truth about these feelings. As I asked God for a deeper faith, He showed me how I was allowing bitterness to hold me back. Do you see that I haven't taken hold of all the fullness of faith God has for me? There is this bitterness thing and other issues as well where I need to more fully apply God's Truth in my faith. As I share this with you, I hope you can see that even though I get to be the teacher for this memorization project, I am still learning.

As our "talk" continues though, we have to also consider the second part of what Paul shares in verse 13. He recognizes that he hasn't arrived yet, but he makes it clear that he is straining on. He says,

“but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead...”

As I write, I am on a plane, returning from a women's conference with over 20,000 women. At this conference we were challenged to be relentless in our faith. Wow, what a time! Goodness did God ever challenge me this weekend to put this bitterness behind me and strain toward what God has for me. But let's not miss the word Paul uses here, the word "straining." This conference about relentless faith helped me to see it too. This word "straining" is a very active word. Living fully in our faith isn't something that God is going to force us to do. He wants us to live that way. In fact the Bible tells us again and again that the righteous man lives by faith. So He authors our faith and completes our faith and helps us along the way, but we must realize the journey of reaching the fullness our faith requires intense personal effort, pressure, sacrifice and determination! I have to tell you that understanding all that and then knowing that I have allowed bitterness to take root in my heart, I have had to make a choice to leave it behind and strain toward to what is ahead.

So how do we forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead? I can only share what I have experienced and learned. About 2 months ago God revealed this bitterness to me. At first this revelation only made me angry. I spent a couple of weeks in my anger, trying to justify my feelings. God was relentless with me, gently prodding me forward. Then as we began memorizing these verses, I made a faith decision that I needed to forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead. So... I have prayed, I have cried, I have shared with a few trusted friends and allowed them to be honest with me even though it hurt, I have sought out more Truth from His Word about bitterness, I have taken my thoughts captive to what God wants me to feel even when it made no sense and I have been challenged to purposely bless the ones who hurt me. Ouch! I have also had my ears and eyes open for the supernatural wisdom of God, given to me only by His grace to fill in the gaps where I can't make sense of it all. God is so good. I wish I had time to tell you all the detailed ways that God showed up in my life to help me strain forward when I didn't think I had any straining left in me. Now I can share with you that I am inches away from being free! Praise the Lord, but please know it has been a straining, a pressing forward to the good life of faith I know God has in store for me.

So what does this all have to do with you? I share all this with you for two reasons. First, to make sure you know we are all in this faith class together. I haven't arrived yet and more than likely, you haven't either. But I also share to challenge you to strain forward. Has God revealed some things to you that you need to count as loss? Has he shown you some areas that definitely need attention? Has He put a desire in you for your faith to impact more of the day to day moments of your life? You know you can't go back and change what has been. The only reason to look back is to learn from your mistakes!

And...if you are to strain toward to what is ahead you are going to have to be purposeful. You are going to have to get intensely involved. The Christian faith is all about intensity. If you embrace it, it will invade every moment of your life. Ask yourself today, what am I purposefully doing to strain forward? I hope one thing you are doing is memorizing scripture! But what else can you do? God has authored a great faith within us. And just when we need it, He will step in with His supernatural hand as He sees us straining forward. So I challenge you as you step through this coming week, pursue your faith with a straining effort...

Strain forward, I am too!

Sharon Thomas

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