Dog racing is a gambling sport that’s legal in 16 states. Now, I’ve never been to a dog race, and Christy will certainly want me to clarify that I in no way support or endorse it, not just because of the gambling, but because the dogs are often treated very poorly. And treating animals poorly, especially dogs, is not acceptable in our house. So now that that’s clear, I read a story about dog racing that I want to share with you this morning. Unlike horse racing, there are no jockeys in dog racing, so there has to be another means of guiding the dogs around the track in the right direction. Usually, the dogs are trained to chase a mechanical rabbit on a wire that goes just fast enough to stay ahead of the dogs. Well, a few years ago at a racetrack in Florida, the dogs were all crouched in their cages, waiting for the start of the race. The starting gun sounded. The cage doors popped open. And the dogs took off after the mechanical rabbit.

But as the rabbit rounded the first turn, an electrical short caused it to catch on fire and explode. In seconds, all that was left of the rabbit was some black stuff hanging on a strand of wire. With their rabbit gone, the dogs were so confused they didn’t know what to do. Most of them stopped running. A couple of them laid down on the track. Some of them started howling at the crowd. One started chasing its own tail. And a couple of them kept running at top speed, but without the rabbit guiding them, they veered off the track and ran into a wall. Not a single dog finished the race.

And the reason I share that story with you is because we’re all a lot like those dogs. We’re all chasing something. We’ve all got our sights set on certain things that we want in life. And we think that if we can ever just get a hold of those things, then we’ll experience the thrill of victory and we’ll really be happy. But let me ask you a question: What if the thing you’re chasing is an illusion? What if it looks attractive, but it’s not the real thing? What if it blows up in your face and leaves you confused and directionless? What will you do then?

Listen, the most important thing in life is not just that you chase hard after something. The most important thing in life is not even that you get what you’re after. The most important thing in life is that you chase hard after what really matters. Otherwise, all your effort is pointless. You can chase really hard… you can even get what you’re after… and if you’re after the wrong thing, you might as well have caught the smoldering remains of a mechanical rabbit that blew up in your face. You have to be headed in the right direction. You have to be focused on what really matters. You have to be chasing what’s most important.

And that’s exactly what our text is about today. Turn in your Bibles to Philippians chapter 3. We’re continuing our study of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and today we’re focusing on Philippians 3:9-14. These verses are closely connected to the first 8 verses of chapter 3. And it’s been a couple of weeks since we looked at those verses, so let’s take just a minute to remind ourselves of what’s going on in chapter 3. At the beginning of the chapter, Paul turned his attention to a group of false teachers called the Judaizers who were a threat to the Philippian church. The Judaizers were teaching a false legalistic gospel that you had to obey the Jewish law in addition to trusting Jesus in order to be saved. One of their main teachings was that men had to be circumcised like a Jew before they could be saved by Jesus. And Paul had absolutely no tolerance for such a perversion of the gospel. Look at what he says about the Judaizers in verse 2. He says, *“Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.”* Paul says they are filthy and evil and their circumcision is a pointless mutilation. Then in verse 3, he contrasts true Christianity with the false teaching of the Judaizers. He says, *“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.”* In other words, true Christianity is not about the outward act of circumcision or about any other religious ritual in the whole world. True Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, where you are filled with His Spirit and He changes your heart, and you worship and glory and trust in Jesus alone and not in yourself in any way.

And then Paul drives this point home by sharing his own personal life story. In verse 4 he says, *“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”* Paul tells us that he understands better than anybody what it means to follow the Jewish law. He was born and raised under the Jewish law, and he kept the Jewish law even better than the Judaizers. This was what Paul lived for. This was what he was chasing after. All of his energy and all of his focus and all of his life was dedicated to Judaism.

But then something happened that changed Paul’s life forever. Paul met the risen Jesus, and his eyes were opened spiritually, and he saw that Jesus is greater and more valuable and more worthy than everything else in the world. And when Paul came to know Jesus, he realized that all of his self-effort… all of his self-righteousness… all of his accomplishments in Judaism were garbage compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus. Look at verses 7-8. Paul says, *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”* Paul realized that everything he had valued… everything he had chased after… everything he had lived for… was worthless compared to Jesus. It was like garbage compared to Jesus.

And as you think about Paul’s story, I hope it’s clear to you that a person can be completely dedicated and completely wrong at the same time. It’s possible to be deeply sincere and still be sincerely wrong. It’s possible to chase as hard as you can after what you think you want and when you get it, it turns out it’s just a pile of garbage. And I pray that none of us will find that to be the case in our lives. I pray that you won’t wake up one day and find that you wasted your life chasing after things that don’t matter. There’s only One who’s worth chasing after, and His name is Jesus. There’s only One who’s worth living for. There’s only one right direction, and that is following Jesus. Someday when you stand before God, there will only be one thing that determines the verdict on your life: Do you know Jesus? Do you have an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus? Do you love Jesus? Do you trust Jesus? Did you live for Jesus?

And in our text today Paul describes for us what this looks like. He describes for us what it looks when the one goal and the one purpose of our life is to know Jesus and to follow Him. So read Philippians 3:9-14 with me. Paul writes, *“(I want to) be found in (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 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. Not that I have already obtained 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 toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”*

Do you hear how Paul’s passion and desire to know Jesus just erupts out of these verses? This is not just a hobby for Paul. This is not just something he does for a couple of hours on Sundays. This is not just something he does because his parents make him or his wife makes him or because it will be good for the kids. Paul is driven by an unquenchable, all-consuming desire to personally know and intimately connect with Jesus Christ. He knows that is what life is all about. Life is about pursuing Jesus. That’s the big idea for today: Life is about pursuing Jesus. And I pray that’s how we live. I pray that our deepest passion is to know Jesus and our greatest desire is to follow Jesus.

A. W. Tozer describes this passion and desire in his great book, *The Pursuit of God*. The first chapter of that book is called *Following Hard After God*. I love that phrase, “following hard after God.” And Tozer says that following hard after God is when you want to know God and experience God on the most intimate, personal level. He says it’s when you “want to taste, to touch with (your heart), to see with (your) inner eyes the wonder that is God.” Listen to me, that is what life is about. The only thing in life that’s worth living for… the only thing that’s worth chasing is a deep, intimate, personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. So I want us to look at our text and see three truths that will help us pursue Jesus and follow hard after God.

First, when you follow hard after God, you leave the past in the past. Look at verse 13. Paul says, *“Brothers I do not consider myself yet to have take hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead…”* Paul says he doesn’t have time to think about the past because all of his effort and all of his energy is focused on pushing forward toward Jesus and following hard after God.

And this idea of leaving the past in the past applies in two major ways. First, it means that all of your past failures… all of your mistakes… all of your sin… is over and done with. If you are trusting Jesus, your past has been nailed to the cross and crucified with Jesus and it is dead. God has dealt with it, and it doesn’t have to haunt you anymore. Whatever you have done, the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cleanse you and change you and make you a new creation. Think about Paul. He persecuted the church. He had Christians arrested and executed. But God, in His grace, forgave Paul and called him out of that. And if God can forgive Paul, God can forgive you. You are free from the past. So now you can follow hard after God, because He’s removed the baggage that was weighing you down.

The other way that we need to leave the past in the past is that we don’t rest on our own success or achievements or self-righteousness, because we know that none of that compares to Christ. Even our very best moments are garbage compared to the greatness of Jesus… and we’re leaving everything behind… we’re dying to all of it… because we want Jesus so much that there’s not room for anything else. Remember, Paul was the best of the best when it came to Judaism. He was the smartest, strictest, most successful Jew you can imagine, and in verse 7 he says, *“Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”* Everything he had going for him, he turned his back on it and counts it as a loss for the sake of Christ. He knows Jesus is more valuable, so He’s pursuing Jesus and He’s leaving everything else behind.

So when you follow hard after God, you leave the past in the past… both past failures and past successes, because you don’t want either to distract you from God. John Piper says, “Memories of successes can make you smug and self-satisfied. Memories of failure can make you hopeless and paralyzed in your pursuit of God. Never look back like that. Give humble thanks for successes; make humble confessions for failure; then turn to the future and go hard after God.” Leave the past in the past, because you’re completely focused on Jesus and you’re following hard after God.

Second, when you follow hard after God, you’re humbly discontent in the present. Look at verse 12. Paul says, *“Not that I’ve already obtained 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.”* This verse is a very important verse for us, because it gives us some great insight into some major issues that we often struggle to understand. This verse reminds us of the relationship between justification and sanctification, as well the relationship between God’s sovereign grace and our human responsibility in salvation. And just in case you feel like you just got buried under an avalanche of theological terms, let’s take a minute to dig through these issues one-by-one, because it’s crucial for us to understand these truths.

Let’s start with the word justification. Justification is one of the words the Bible uses to describe salvation. And justification is a legal term. It means that a judge declares you righteous in the eyes of the law. The judge tries your case and at the end of the case, he pronounces you not guilty… innocent… righteous. So when it comes to salvation, justification means that God declares you innocent. God’s verdict is that you’re righteous before Him. And the Bible teaches over and over and over that the only way to be justified before God is by faith in Jesus. There’s nothing you can do to earn your righteousness, because you’re guilty of sin. If you stand before God on your own merits, you’ll be condemned, not justified, because you don’t live up to God’s perfect law, and He will have to declare you guilty. But if you trust Jesus, then you don’t have to stand before God on your own merits. You stand before God on Jesus’ merits. That’s exactly what trusting Jesus is about. You’re confessing that your own righteousness isn’t good enough to save you, and you’re saying, “I’m trusting Jesus’ righteousness, because I know that He is good enough. And I know that because of His sacrifice, God will graciously forgive my sin and declare me righteous in Jesus.” It’s exactly what we see in verse 9 today. Paul says, *“(I want to) be found in (Christ), not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”* Paul says that his righteousness… his justification… comes from God and is by faith in Jesus.

Because Jesus is perfectly righteous, when you trust Jesus and you’re connected to Jesus by faith, God gives Jesus’ righteousness to you. And He now sees you as being righteous just like Jesus, so God justifies you and declares that you truly are righteous before Him. That’s what justification means. God declares you righteous by faith in Jesus, and you can now stand before God innocent and in right relationship with Him.

The second concept that’s really important for us to understand is sanctification. Sanctification is another word the Bible uses to describe salvation. You see, when God justifies you and declares you righteous, that’s not the end of your salvation. That’s the beginning of your salvation. God now sends His Spirit to live in you and to make you more like Jesus and to make you holy. And we call that sanctification, because the Latin word for holy is *sancto*. So sanctification literally means to become holy or to be made holy. A lot of times when we talk about living the Christian life and growing spiritually, what we’re talking about is sanctification. We’re talking about the process where we become more and more holy and more and more like Jesus.

And it is really important to have a clear understanding of both justification and sanctification when it comes to salvation. A lot of people could avoid a lot of confusion if they understood these two aspects of salvation. Here’s what I mean. Justification happens at a point in time, and it is instantaneous and forever. The moment you start trusting Jesus, God declares you righteous and it is done forever. That’s justification. Sanctification is a process that happens over time and keeps going on for the rest of your life. You keep trusting Jesus, and you keep following Jesus, and God’s Spirit keeps working in your heart for the rest of your life, making you more like Jesus and making you holy.

And here’s where people get confused. Some people focus completely on sanctification and forget about justification. They think salvation depends on how holy you are, which means that every time you sin and every time you struggle, they think you either aren’t saved or that you’re in danger of losing your salvation. Here’s why that’s not true: Because your salvation doesn’t depend on you. It depends on Jesus. And His work is already done. He is perfectly righteous now and forever. So when you’re justified by faith in Jesus, your justification never changes, because Jesus’ righteousness never changes.

Now, on the flip side, other people make the mistake of focusing completely on justification and forgetting about sanctification. These are the people who say, “As long as you prayed a prayer and said you trusted Jesus, you’re saved. You’re good to go for the rest of your life.” They think it doesn’t matter how you live for the rest of your life, because if you prayed that prayer, then God justified you, and they think that’s all there is to salvation. Here’s why that’s not true: Because the same God who justifies is the same God who sanctifies. And if there’s never any sanctification in your life… if you’re not becoming more holy… then there hasn’t been any justification, either. God doesn’t do one without the other. So salvation isn’t just that you trust Jesus at one moment in time. Salvation is that you keep trusting Jesus for the rest of your life.

So let me try to summarize: Justification is an instantaneous act of God where He declares you righteous forever by faith in Jesus. Sanctification is a process where the Spirit of God causes you to grow in holiness for the rest of your life. In practical terms: The fact that you aren’t perfect… the fact that you still sin… does not mean you haven’t been justified. Your justification depends on Jesus, not on you. At the same time, that doesn’t mean your life should never change. You should keep becoming more and more holy for the rest of your life as you grow in sanctification.

Now with all that in mind, come back to verse 12 with me. Paul says, *“Not that I’ve already obtained 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.”* Do you hear the relationship between justification and sanctification here? Paul says, “Christ Jesus already took hold of me.” It’s a done deal. Jesus has done His work. And we know from verse 9 that that work is the work of justification, because Paul says he has the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith in Christ. So Paul is joined to Jesus by faith, and Jesus has a hold of Paul, and Jesus’ righteousness belongs to Paul and justifies him.

But at the very same time, Paul also says, *“*I haven’t obtained all this. I’m not perfect yet. I’m still pressing forward to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” That’s sanctification. Paul’s saying, “There’s still room to grow. I’ve not arrived yet. I’ve got to keep pressing after Jesus and keep becoming like Jesus.”

And this is what I mean in our second truth when I say that we need to be humbly discontent with the present. We desire Jesus so much… we want Jesus so much… that we’re not satisfied with where we are. We humbly realize that we’re not yet as holy as we need to be. We know that we still have room to grow. And we’re discontent over the fact that we’re not yet like Jesus, so we keep following hard after Him, because we want to become more and more like Him. So we’re humbly discontent with the present, because we desire so much to be sanctified and to be holy like Jesus.

And before we move on to our third truth, there’s one last really important thing to see in verse 12. I told you a minute ago that this verse speaks to the relationship between God’s sovereign grace and our human responsibility in salvation. Paul says, *“Not that I’ve already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on…”* Paul says that he has a role. He has a responsibility. He’s pressing on. He is striving and reaching and longing for Christ. He’s not content to coast or drift or just accept the status quo, because Christ is too precious for that. Paul is pressing on and following hard after Christ with everything he’s got. But why? Why does Paul follow so hard after Jesus? Look at the rest of verse 12, *“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”* The reason Paul is reaching after Jesus is because Jesus has already grabbed hold of Paul. It doesn’t depend on Paul’s effort and what Paul’s doing. It depends on what Jesus has already done.

So here’s what you need to see. God is absolutely and completely sovereign in His grace and sovereign in His salvation. He does all the work, and He gets all the glory. But don’t think that that contradicts your responsibility to strive after Him. God’s sovereign grace is what should motivate you to strive after Him. It gives you hope, because of what He’s done for you, and it makes you desire Him, because you see how great He is. God’s sovereignty shouldn’t make you passive. It should make you passionate. God’s sovereignty doesn’t negate what you do. God’s sovereignty inspires what you do. It’s exactly what we saw in chapter 2, verses 12-13, *“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”* God is working in you, and it’s His work that drives you and enables you to work out your salvation. It always depends on His sovereign grace, and you are always responsible for responding to that grace.

And one of the ways you can think about this truth is to picture three different types of boats in the water. The first boat is a raft. A raft just sits in the water and doesn’t do anything. It passively waits for the water to carry it wherever it’s going to go. And some religious people do that. They pray a prayer, and then they just sit around, waiting for God to do something. But that’s a misunderstanding of Christianity, because we’re not passive in our spiritual life.

The second boat is a rowboat. A rowboat is the complete opposite of a raft. A rowboat depends completely on the strength of the person rowing it. And some religious people live like that’s how Christianity works. They think everything’s up to them and everything depends on their effort. But that’s also a misunderstanding of Christianity, because it doesn’t depend on you. It depends on Jesus. It depends on His righteousness and His goodness and His grace.

The third boat is a sailboat. A sailboat depends on the wind to carry it, and the way it depends on the wind is by setting its sail in proper alignment to the wind. And that’s the right picture of Christianity. God’s Spirit is the wind. And we’re completely dependent on Him to move us and cause us to grow spiritually. At the same time, we’re responsible for setting our sails and relying on Him as He moves us. He’s doing all the work by His sovereign grace, and we’re responsible for relying completely on Him. So the reason you follow hard after God is because God has already taken hold of you. He’s done all the work, and that gives you hope and motivates you to work even harder. It makes you humbly discontent in the present because you desire to become who God is making you.

And that brings us to our third truth. When you follow hard after God, you keep pressing toward the future goal. Look at verses 13-14, *“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 toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* The word translated “straining” literally means to stretch out. If you’ve been watching the Olympic trials, think of a sprinter who’s stretching his neck and his body forward to reach the finish line. Everything in him is pressing toward that goal. And Paul says that’s how he lives his life. His eyes are set on Jesus, and he’s straining toward Jesus for all he’s all worth. He knows that is what God has called Him to. He knows that is what his life is about, and He’s not going to settle for anything else in this world.

And the question today is, “What about you?” What are you chasing after? Are you chasing after all the mechanical rabbits of this world? Or do you see Jesus as the prize and the goal of your life? I pray that you won’t get distracted by anything in this world. I pray that the desire and the passion of your heart will be to know Jesus and follow Jesus. I pray that you’ll leave the past in the past, that you’ll be humbly discontent in the present, and that you’ll keep pressing toward the future goal. And I pray that you will follow hard after God.