

“Living for Jesus”

Philippians 3:12-14 and Hebrews 12:1-2

May 31, 2026 (Upward Soccer Celebration Sunday)

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Philippians 3:12-14

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this 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 heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Sermon

“Living for Jesus” is easy to talk about; it is more difficult to do. It’s the same with sports. They are easy to talk about, but they are more difficult to play.

In our scripture lessons for today, the Apostle Paul, compares the Christian life – living for Jesus – to an athletic event. He specifically compares it to running a race. We will also note some comparisons with soccer, since we are celebrating our Upward Soccer ministry and players today.

The first thing we learn in our scriptures is that Jesus lived for US. Jesus made us his own. Jesus loved us first. Jesus chose us for his team. All this came first. Our decision to live for Jesus is in response to Jesus living for us, loving us, and choosing us FIRST.

There are no try-outs or skill assessments to be on Jesus’ team. There are no “elite” and “regular” team divisions. We are all loved and accepted equally by Jesus without regard for how good or bad we are, what we look like, what kind of job we have, how smart we are, or where

we come from. All are included. All can choose to run the race. All can choose to live for Jesus.

You might say: “But I’ve made a lot of mistakes.” Well, the man who wrote today’s scripture from Philippians – the Apostle Paul – made a lot of mistakes, too. That’s why he says: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul didn’t let either his past successes or his past failures distract him from moving forward toward the goal. Paul knew that pride in his successes or despair over his failures would distract him from running the race.

You may know what that’s like on the soccer field. You make a great play, and you are so busy celebrating or thinking about that great play that you miss the next play. Or perhaps you’ve had this happen. You miss the goal, or if you’re a goalie and you miss the ball and the other team scores. Or, you have a handball or an “own goal.” You could let that discourage you and distract you the rest of the game. But we all know we have to “shake it off” and refocus for making the next play.

I’ll shift sports for moment. Let’s think about baseball. There’s a Peanuts cartoon in which Charlie Brown and his friends are playing baseball. Lucy had been criticizing Charlie Brown and she so often did, so he was already feeling low. Stationed in the outfield, an easy fly ball came right to him, but he missed it. When his teammates asked how he could miss such an easy ball, Charlie Brown said: “The past got in my eyes. I remembered all the other balls I’ve missed.” That’s how I missed it.

When we live for Jesus, we do not have to be distracted by our past mistakes. We don’t have to run the race or play the game with “the past in our eyes.” Jesus forgives us for our errors, our mistakes. Because of Jesus and his merciful forgiveness, we can “forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.”

But you may be wondering about the **fouls**. Unintentional “mistakes” are one thing, but what about the fouls – especially the intentional ones? I’ve learned that in soccer there are 17 laws of the game. Law 12 is the one that has to do with Fouls and Misconduct. We have the laws of the game so there will be **equal opportunity, safety, and enjoyment**. (*Official Soccer Rules Illustrated: A Quick Reference for All Coaches, Players, and Fans*, p. 53).

God has also given us laws for **living our best lives**. God provided the 10 commandments which teach us how to love God and how to love and respect one another. Jesus summarized the 10 commandments like

this: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” When we live and love like this there is equal opportunity to **flourish, there is safety for all, and there is enjoyment for all.**

But we all commit “fouls” in life, right? We **sin** by not loving. And God calls us out on our “fouls.” I don’t know about you, but sometimes I respond to God’s “whistle blow” for a foul I’ve committed, and I react like some soccer players do when a foul is called on the field, even if I know I did it. “What? Me?”

When we play on Jesus’ team, when we live for Jesus, we acknowledge the fouls we commit, ask for God’s forgiveness, and strive (with God’s help) to change. We strive to live by the Rules of the Game: to love God and to love people. Listen again to what the author of Hebrews says: “. . . let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” God does not want us to carry with us the weight of our sin – the weight of our fouls. He sent his son Jesus not only to live for us but also to die for us. Because of that we can “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run the race set before us.” Once again, God does not want the “past to get in our eyes” and God does not want us to be weighed down by our sin. He wants us to keep running the race and to keep living for Jesus. He wants us to keep our eyes on Jesus, not the past, for it is Jesus who shows us the way.

Soccer is a game that is played around the world. It can be played with the most sophisticated equipment in the finest arenas of the world. It can also be played with no equipment, except a ball, in a dirt field. When we have traveled to Northwest Haiti on church mission trips, we have seen soccer played on such fields. Goals are fashioned from three sticks – two for each side and one for the top cross bar. No nets. I saw no soccer cleats “boots” or shin guards. Sometimes players were bare-footed. The only uniforms I saw were some Upward Soccer or Basketball jerseys that had been shipped to Haiti for soccer and basketball camps sponsored by our missionaries. Still the “beautiful game” of soccer was played and enjoyed.

Living for Jesus does not require that you have money or fancy stuff. All are welcomed and included.

No jersey or outward uniform is required. But there is a uniform for all of us players and it does not cost money. Paul says in Colossians: “As

God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love." Let's wear this uniform.

Soccer players, I hope you've felt the great support of those who have been cheering you on during your games. Parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, friends, and neighbors have been celebrating your participation in soccer.

As we live our lives, as we live for Jesus, we may sometimes feel discouraged or alone. We wonder if we can press on. Our scripture for today paints a picture of a "great cloud of witnesses" who cheer for us while we are living our lives and facing challenges. Remember always that there are people in heaven and on earth who are cheering us on as we run the race of life and faith. We are not alone. We are not alone.

Let's try to remember today and always that we are loved by Jesus, who first loved us. Let us remember to live for Jesus, who first lived for us. Let us remember to die to our own selfishness, as Jesus died for all of us. Don't "let the past get in your eyes" and paralyze you from moving forward. Let it go, seek forgiveness, shake it off, press on. Put on your uniform of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. Remember the one great rule: Love. With that, everyone can flourish, everyone will be safe, and everyone will enjoy the beautiful opportunity to live for Jesus.