

Session 3

# Act Boldly toward the Goal



by Sue Ann and Ron Glusenkamp

The theme passage of Scripture for this study is Philippians 3:9–14. What is Paul’s situation as he writes this letter? He is in prison, but he is so filled with joy that he can encourage and exhort the believers in Philippi. He uses the word *rejoice* several ways in this letter. See verses 1:18; 2:17, 18, 28; 3:1; 4:4, 10.

Then there is the wonderful hymn of praise about Jesus in 2:5–11. Paul reminds us to be of the “same mind” as Christ, that is, to live as copycats. We are to follow Jesus, to act like him, to imitate him (also see Ephesians 5:1).

Can you remember a time when you played dress-up and imitated someone in your family? Have you ever seen a young child imitate something you did?

Then we are told in Philippians 2:7 that Christ “emptied” himself. Let’s talk about that for a minute.

## Extreme makeover

In Philippians 3:4–6 Paul tells us about his past. If anyone could brag about his credentials, Paul could. But all these things (see verse 5) don't add up to

anything anymore. In fact, because of Jesus, the past is past and Paul now understands all those old gains to be less than nothing, to be loss.

Read Mark 8:31–38.

Some people live their lives with the attitude: “finders keepers, losers weepers.” Jesus turns that schoolyard saying upside-down: Finders are weepers and the losers are the keepers. Paul tells us that the Gospel changes how we account for our life.

In Philippians 3:8, Paul tells us, “More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” The word for *rubbish* Paul uses here has the sense of “refuse, leavings, dirt, dung.” Paul is writing about righteousness (verse 9). He makes it clear that what matters most is to be found in Christ, not having the righteousness that comes from the law but the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

- What does it mean to empty ourselves?
- Conversely, what does it mean to fill ourselves?
- How might we empty ourselves in order that others might be filled?
- How can we rejoice in all of this?

- Are there times when we appeal to righteousness of our own, as opposed to that of Jesus Christ?
- Do we sometimes think we can gain our way with God?
- How does it feel to turn the old saying around and celebrate being a loser, not a finder?

## Keep on keeping on

In verse 12 Paul writes, “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.” These words express the challenge and the opportunity that followers of Jesus have to act boldly toward the goal. The word translated as *press on* also means “strive, pursue, seek after.” It is used in other passages such as Romans 9:30, 31; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; and 1 Peter 3:11.

We read about several people in the Gospels who had a simple goal: to have an encounter with Jesus. Do you remember these goal setters and achievers?

- Zaccheus who climbed a tree to get a look at Jesus (Luke 19:1–10)
- The woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ garment (Matthew 9:21)
- The men who lowered their friend through the roof to be forgiven and healed by Jesus (Mark 2:3–6)

There are many types of goals and many ways to achieve them. Paul’s goal is to strive for the reward of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (verse 14).

Now as Lutheran Christians we get a little nervous when people start talking about “rewards.” What do you think Paul is saying in these passages? Does it add clarity or does it confuse the situation for you?

Take another look at Philippians 3:8b–14.

Paul writes, “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” (3:13–14). Sometimes groups that have a wonderful history have a hard time moving toward the future. The past can be so satisfying (or maybe memories of it

are a little rosy and romanticized) and feel so secure that people are tempted to stay there. Paul talks about the need to forget what lies behind and strain forward, toward the future.

## Toward the goal

Every January people start off the new year with optimism and a bunch of resolutions. The gym I visit sees a dramatic increase in new members at the beginning of each year. We regulars see new people with new gym bags, new shoes, and new outfits crowding our space. We know that in two or three weeks, the new gym bags will be in a car trunk, the new shoes out in the garage, the new outfits in the back of the closet—and most of the new members gone. Their resolutions will evaporate, just like the fancy designer water in their fancy designer water bottles.

Why do most people usually fail when they make resolutions or decide to act boldly toward a goal? There are many reasons (some of which I know all too well), ranging from ill health to sloth, from lack of time to lack of energy. Sometimes we are just not prepared to make a change in our habits or our lives, even though we want to. But I know when I set SMART goals, I have a better chance of meeting them.

How can goals be smart? By being:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Trackable

## Sue Ann’s marathon story

On my office door is a small wooden sign: “It’s never too late!”

In 1978 I ran a half-marathon in New Haven, Connecticut, with the intention of running the Boston

The Web site [www.elcaforwellness.org](http://www.elcaforwellness.org) is a helpful resource that describes SMART goals. This is a collaborative effort between the ELCA Board of Pensions and the Vocation and Education unit of the ELCA, in cooperation with the Mayo Clinic.

Marathon later that year. On June 5, 2005—some 27 years later—I finally met that goal by finishing my first marathon in San Diego, California. What a thrill! I recall running down the home stretch, tearfully shouting, “I’m 50 years old and I’m finally finishing my first marathon! It really is never too late!”

I ran to fulfill my dream and to ease the sting of becoming a half-centenarian, but I also ran to support the American Stroke Association. Running in honor of stroke survivors was very meaningful to me. My mother, Doris, suffered and survived a severe stroke in 2003.

My goal was *Specific*: I would run the San Diego marathon that year. My goal was *Measurable*: I would run a 26.2-mile course. My goal was *Achievable*: I worked with Train To End Stroke (TTES), an organization that helps people train for the event. My goal was *Realistic*: I had a well-thought-out training regimen and changed my routines to accommodate it. And my goal was *Trackable*: My training schedule had weekly goals that took into account what I needed to do every day.

Whether your goal is to set aside time every day for reading the Bible, to get your financial house in order, or to begin exercising, thinking SMART can help you. “It’s never too late!”

### The real deal

It seems sometimes that there is some ambivalence in the church about setting goals. Maybe people think that by setting a goal we might be infringing on the

work of the Holy Spirit. Or maybe we don’t want to set a goal for fear of being disappointed. And yet, by not having goals, we set ourselves up for a lack of participation, support, and energy in our parishes.

I have come to believe that if we don’t set goals in certain areas of our individual and corporate lives, we are not practicing good stewardship. When we are clear about what we are trying to achieve, we can harness resources and create energy around a project, event, or issue.

### Press on

Read Philippians 3:12.

Both Sue Ann and I try to do some kind of physical activity each day. We get lots of positive benefits from running and cycling, and we enjoy them. But we didn’t start by running or cycling miles each day: we started with baby steps.

Often when people want to do something new—whether it is starting a new exercise program or increasing the number of people coming to circle meetings at church—they focus on the whole project, on going the entire distance. It’s helpful to remember that two SMART goals are: *Achievable* and *Realistic*. Starting small is smart. As we grow in ability and confidence, we can stretch a bit and increase the goal.

Sue Ann and I can also tell you about the many times we have stumbled. It seems that all is going well, we’re enjoying what’re doing—and *oops!*—we’re on the ground, rubbing a knee or elbow. Acting boldly toward the goal isn’t always smooth: expect some slips along the way. The important thing is to get up, bandage the scrapes, evaluate what went wrong, and either keep going or adjust your plan.

A key part in pressing for a goal is our *motivation*. As Lutheran Christians we believe that we are saved by grace through faith. Apostle Paul in the Philippians text (3:8b–14) delicately balances the re-

In the first session of this Bible study, we looked at balance. If you were to set some goals to help you achieve more balance in your life, what would they be?

In the second session of the study, we looked at acting boldly for health in crisis. If you are experiencing a crisis or difficulty in some area of your life right now, what goals can you set to help you weather the storm? If you are not in difficulty right now, what goals could you set that would help you prepare for the inevitable storms of life? What goals could you set for yourself to help someone close to you weather the storms in her life?

activity of humanity with the pro-activity of God. So if we are asked why we do what we do, our answer is simple: “because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” That’s the real deal!

### Health, our shared endeavor

So now you’re wondering what might be a good goal to press toward. Consider these resolutions, which arise from the church’s social statement, *Caring for Health—Our Shared Endeavor*, and were adopted by the church at the 2003 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The title accurately describes the reality: Health is a shared endeavor. What would it look like if we would act boldly toward these goals?

To challenge all members of this church to become good stewards of their own physical and mental health by attending to preventive care, personal health habits, diet, exercise, and recreation, and by making prudent use of health-care resources;

To urge all members of this church to develop

reasonable expectations for their own health and for the health care they receive at each stage of life and to engage in thoughtful preparation with health-care professionals and loved ones for difficult choices in their health care.

*Caring for Health—Our Shared Endeavor*

You can read the entire social statement at: [www.elca.org/socialstatements/health/resolutions.html](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/health/resolutions.html)

Women of the ELCA has launched a health initiative, “Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls,” committed to promoting women’s complete health: physical, spiritual, and emotional. To learn more and find resources, go to [www.womenoftheelca.org/getinvolved/health.html](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/getinvolved/health.html).

**Sue Ann Glusenkamp is a nurse and Ron is pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Cherry Hills Village, Colo. He formerly served as vice president church/sponsor relations for the ELCA Board of Pensions where he was involved with their special programming on health and wellness.**

## SUPPORT HEALTHY HEARTS

Women of the ELCA is supporting new federal legislation aimed at fighting heart disease in women, and your participation will help. The Heart Disease Education, Analysis, Research, and Treatment (HEART) for Women Act would amend the Public Health Service Act to improve the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of heart disease, stroke, and other cardiovascular diseases in women. To find out more and to see a letter we hope you’ll print, fill out, and send to your state’s lawmakers, visit [www.womenoftheelca.org/getinvolved/health.html](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/getinvolved/health.html).

Session 3: Act Boldly for Health

# Act Boldly toward the Goal

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## Getting ready to lead

As you prepare for this session, turn to page 33 of this issue of *LWT* for some tips on how to prepare. The main text we are examining in this session is Philippians 3:8b–14, with glances at other parts of Philippians.

## Opening

Greet the women as they arrive, and when all is ready, call the group together in prayer. You may pray in these words or your own.

Holy God, you who inspired St. Paul  
to rejoice in his prison cell,  
and called him to press on toward the goal,  
we look to you and your holy word for wisdom.  
May we treasure the surpassing value  
of knowing Christ above all things.  
Guide us as we strive to glorify you  
with our bodies, minds, and spirits.  
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

You might gather the group to sing “Rejoice, the Lord is King!” (*LBW*, 171).

## Exploring *rejoice*

Paul uses the word *rejoice* in several ways in his letter to the Philippians. Ask participants to take turns reading the verses listed in the first paragraph on page 42.

What is it that makes Paul so joyful, even though he is in prison awaiting execution?

We are told in 2:7 that Christ emptied himself. Talk about the questions in the box on page 42.

Take a few minutes to ask participants to write out their answers to the questions in the box on page 42 of the Bible study. Invite the group to share their responses, if they feel comfortable doing so. If some answers call forth group discussion, welcome the opportunity.

To close the session, call the group together in prayer. You may use these words or pray in your own.

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings  
with your most gracious favor  
and further us with your continual help,  
that in all our works,  
begun, continued, and ended in you,  
we may glorify your holy name,  
and finally, by your mercy,  
obtain everlasting life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.  
(*LBW*, p. 49)