

Mature Thinking, Upward Moving

Philippians 3:12-16

"I press on to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me his own"

Introduction: "Are we there yet?!" If you have ever taken a long-distance ride with your family, you have undoubtedly heard these words. "How many more miles?" Driving in our old station wagon to camping trips up the coast to Oregon and Washington, we would pile into the two bench seats, with trunk and roof rack filled to the brim with gear. These questions were not mitigated with Google maps where we no longer have to ask these questions, we simply try to beat the approximate time they tell us it will take. We used to have to play games like the "Alphabet game", the "out of State license plate" game, and the quiet game to pass the time. There was built into us a antsy-ness, a lack of patience, and a desire to know the destination since it seemed torturous to sit so close to siblings. Of course, for our dad, there was a focus of purpose where we would stop for nothing after the one designated lunch stop, blazing forward to get to the destination as quick as humanly possible. There was a distinct difference in knowledge and responsibility between parent and child, between driver and passenger, on these trips. It'd be better, for everyone, when we got there.

Maybe you never experienced this impatience of waiting, or not knowing how long something will take, or not knowing what to do with the time you have, but this is what Paul addressed in this tremendous passage in Philippians. Chapter 3 started with Paul countering the teaching of false Jewish teachers in the church who required keeping the Law for salvation, particularly the sign of circumcision. He then shared his own testimony that he had kept the Law in minute detail, and done so in a way that left every other moral person in the dust. Yet in all of his accomplishments, he realized they not only were rubbish, worthless in terms of gaining salvation, but as long as he trusted in his own works, they actually **kept him further away from the truth**. In one fell swoop, he obliterated the common misunderstanding that far too many people have, that being a good, moral person who attends church or is basically good will be saved based on their goodness. This is a demonic deception from the pit, where the moral person is actually further from the kingdom than the overtly sinful who is very aware of their condition.

In getting knocked down on the road to Damascus where he intended to persecute God's church, Jesus opened Paul's eyes to his sin, to the glory of God, and of the saving work of Jesus. What Paul gained in true salvation was a *real, relational, experiential knowledge of Christ* (3:8), which was of the highest value to him. He gained **fellowship with Him** by receiving a **righteousness from God through faith in Christ**, a righteousness that he could not earn but had to be imputed to him. He also received the **power of His resurrection**, enabling Paul to face sufferings and conforming to Christ. In fact, this is the goal of our salvation: "***For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.***"(Romans 8:29-30). In other words, we are saved by God in Jesus Christ in order that we would become more like Jesus as we anticipate the day that we will be raised from the dead to be with Him forever. This is the crux of knowing Jesus. It sets the course of our life, the main thing we set out to gain, the overwhelming passion of our soul. But partly to **counteract the false teachers who taught perfection was possible in this life** and partly to encourage every believer in Jesus Christ, he went on to talk about what we do in the meantime to gain Christ. He uses an **athletic metaphor of a runner** (he uses this so often you'd think we'd all take up running) that gives us a couple of clear principles of this passage:

- **Participants of the Roman games were citizens** - Paul is talking about a *post-salvation experience in the gospel*, not what saves us. This is a look into the life of a redeemed believer, not on seeking to be so.
- **Runners are serious people** - In 1 Corinthians 9:23-27, he reminded that runners run with a purpose to win, exercising self-control and bodily discipline. The point is this: *we were never saved to sit on our hands. We were saved for a purpose, to be conformed into the image of Christ, preparing for the day we will be with Him forever.* If that is not our goal for eternity, it is not our goal in the present, and if not the goal in the present then we must evaluate if we are truly saved or are simply trusting our own works.

So we will look at three ways we live out this reality everyday, maturely moving forward everyday toward Christ and our future with Him.

Attaining Christ means we are content but never satisfied (12)

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because **Christ Jesus has made me his own.**

We are owned

To clarify what he meant by "attaining the resurrection from the dead" and to "know Christ", he said he wanted to "make it his own". This phrase means to *seize, catch, or overtake*. He goal was to seize Christ, knowing Him now and literally seizing Him. But the **ONLY WAY HE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO THIS** was the fact that Christ **seized him first!** Paul experienced this on the road to Emmaus where Jesus caught Paul and made him His own. This is exactly what Jesus does with us today:

"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Titus 3:5

He saves us, makes dead bones live, and makes us His own. Think about that truth and reality for a second. Not only does this truth mean that I was loved and wanted, so much so, that because God wanted us to be with Him forever, into eternity, He saved us through the death and blood of Jesus on the cross. But this also gives us motivation like no other, where we seize Him because He has already seized us. This means our life is to be about a consistent, persistent, relentless pursuit of knowing Christ, since we are fully known by Him.

We have not arrived (yet)

Now notice the first phrase of this sentence. Countering the perfectionist teaching that somehow we can be made perfect in this life, Paul said he continually pressed forward to seize Christ because he was not perfect yet. Perfection is a great pursuit for a believer, but a terrible destination. If we think we will arrive in this life we will either be *frustrated constantly*, demotivated by failure, or *lazily satisfied*, thinking that we no longer have to work at our pursuit. What was Paul impressing on the church?

- **We must develop a holy discontent** - We know that in this life we walk in fleshly bodies with hearts that are idol factories, a broken world, and a heart that deceives. Our sin keeps us away from intimacy with Christ and numbs our heart toward worship. So we approach life knowing that sin will be revealed more and more as we move toward Christ, where we can continually confess, turn from, and replace sin with righteousness. Walking with Christ is **NOT** something that we can simply rest in a past decision but sets a course for our entire lives. I love the story of

Fred Barshaw, Stephens grandpa, who while facing the last stages of life in a hospital bed, said he couldn't wait for heaven so that he would no longer have to struggle with his sin. What a model of this, a man who battled his sin by faith until the end.

- **Holy discontent leads to faith driven effort** - Grace is not about earning but it is about effort. A runner can be a part of a team in training and perhaps even in the pacing of a race, but in the end, each individual runner must run on their own. There is no vicarious living or growth that comes simply because you are on the team. Every individual must thoughtfully consider what it means for them to pursue Christ, knowing, loving, and being in fellowship with Him.

Attaining Christ means our future is more important than our past (13)

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind** and straining forward to what lies ahead,

Comparison games kill. So often we compare ourselves with others around and deceive ourselves into thinking that someone else's life is mess free, someone's marriage is conflict free, or someone's life is sin free. Paul was one of the most effective missionaries and leaders ever, yet he had not arrived, nor did he reach perfection. He struggled with the flesh (Romans 7:16-24) and had the potential to elevate himself above others in pride, so God continued to send him a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10) to keep him from becoming conceited. Paul desired to know Christ but he also knew it was a **lifetime pursuit**, not something he did once and then moved on.

However, he also realized that this pursuit of Christ was the **one thing** that his life was to be about. Anyone desirous of success in life realizes that sacrifices have to be made to stay focused on one thing, disciplining themselves and forsaking other things. Olympic athletes, adventurers, entrepreneurs, and great musicians know it takes singular focus to achieve greatness. So building off this reality, Paul also revealed that the **one thing** for a believer is to make every effort to "*secure your undivided devotion to the Lord*" (1 Cor. 7:35). Every other "thing" comes out of here for a believer: you want a successful marriage, parenting focus, business, reputation, joy in all things? Make the **one thing** in your life the pursuit of Christ. What does that look like?

Forgetting our past – if that's even possible

Paul explained the pursuit of **one thing** in the negative and positive. Negatively, we are to forget what is behind, like a good runner who does not look behind them but focuses on running their race with eyes fixed forward. But if we are honest with the text in our life, this concept of **forgetting what is behind us, in our past**, is difficult and impossible. We can be captive to our past, and forgetting seems like a passive action, and those memories have a habit of creeping back into our mind at inopportune times. However, the Bible frames this idea of "forgetting" differently.

"To forget in the Bible means 'no longer to be influenced by or affected by'. When God promises, 'And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more' (Heb. 10:17), He is not suggesting that He will conveniently have a bad memory! This is impossible with God. What God is saying is, 'I will no longer hold their sins against them. Their sins can no longer affect their standing with Me or influence My attitude toward them.'"¹

What does it mean for us to continually be *forgetting what lies behind*:

¹ Warren Wiersbe, "Be joyful: It beats being happy" Philippians commentary', p. 97-98

Not getting stuck on past success

A runner is tested and proven in every race, and what they did the year before or even the race before does not matter in the present. The call to faith is one of **perseverance and endurance**, meaning we do not explain our testimony as something in the past that stays there, but simply one that started there. It also means that though we may retire from many things, we NEVER RETIRE from our pursuit of Christ and others. A cessation from working a job simply frees us to pursue Christ and others differently, not rest on past performance or activity.

Remembering not our past sin & shame

Christ came to forgive our sin by becoming sin (2 Cor. 5:21) and being the propitiation of our sin (1 John 2:2). He canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands, set them aside, and nailed them to the cross (Col. 2:14). This means that no matter what sin you've committed in your past, how egregious it seems to you now or you perceive it to be to others, Jesus paid for it all. I hear far too often "*I can forgive others, but I can't forgive myself*". This is a complete misunderstanding of the work of Christ on the cross, where he paid for the worst and vile, and God rung out His wrath on the Son so that we could have life. The inability to deal with our guilt and shame is an issue of **faith and humility**, believing the promise continually and walking humbly to accept grace and mercy.

"After over 45 years of pastoral counseling I am convinced that many who struggle with severe depression and anxiety do so because of unresolved guilt. Sustained feelings of guilt have a physiological impact on the central nervous system. Just read Psalm 32 and 38." John Street

Remembering not circumstances against us

Perhaps even more difficult is when we are faced with the reality of things **done too us**, whether we were taken advantage of or treated unjustly. When these are left unresolved, we are left with feelings of bitterness, anger, hopelessness, and joylessness. We are tied down from our past and either try to bury it which leads to a fake or artificial existence or try to numb the pain by entering into habitual sin. This is why actively **remembering not our past** and remembering who we are **In Christ** is so imperative.

Consider the story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. Who acted righteously toward his masters wife but was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Who's father believed him to be dead all those years, and who could have felt abandoned, bitter, and angry toward God, his father, his brothers, and just about everything or everyone else. However, when his family moved to Egypt during famine and Joseph had the perfect opportunity for revenge and justice, he instead moved toward his brothers in restoration, forgiveness and care. How was he able to do this? He knew God was not only in control, but that the future was better than his past:

"As for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones. Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" Genesis 50:20-21

Notice that Joseph recognized that he was treated from a motive of evil by his brothers. In other words, he realized that from a worldly perspective, he got hosed. However, **what God was doing in his present and future was greater than his past**. This means we can deal with the bitterness and anger of our hearts from past wrongs and not let them weigh us down into the future. I am convinced we all have these and some level and it means we cannot move forward in joy until we can choose to not remember them and be influenced by them.

Straining forward towards a better future

The picture is vivid. A runner's muscles straining with every effort to gain every ounce of power, acceleration, and speed all with the goal to move FORWARD, since the finish line was ahead. The future is much more difficult to focus on instead of the past, since the future is embraced by faith and the past by experience. Yet is our future that motivates and where our prize awaits. In the resurrection we will see what we have only believed by faith: we will see Christ and be like Him (1 John 3:2). So to fix our eyes on what is ahead, we must work hard to that end, which will invariably help us forget our past.

I asked my mother-in-law about how she was processing a stage 4 cancer diagnosis, what changed or what she thought about. I was impressed. Not only did nothing radically change in every day life, signaling that she was living by faith *before*, but she picked up the book *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn. This not only helped set her focus on what was to come, but she reviewed the passage on being assured of salvation. Now she has walked with Christ for almost 50 years, living by faith and obedience, but she wanted to evaluate and examine herself again, which affirmed and confirmed her standing with Christ. Why is this so good? This frees her to strain toward what lies ahead even as she feels the pain of sorrow in the present.

Attaining Christ means mature thinking is essential (14-16)

I press on toward the goal for the **prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus**.¹⁵ Let those of us who are **mature** think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Determination of a new mindset

In order to gain Christ, we must grow up to **mature manhood** (Eph. 4:13), able to digest truth properly: "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by **constant practice** to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). Maturity knows that in order to get a good paying job, you cannot sleep most of the day, or give half effort, or choose recreation a majority of the time. Maturity in our life in Christ means we see the **prize** and discipline ourselves to grab it. **But what is the prize?** In the context, it is our knowledge of Christ and our hope to be with Him in the resurrection. Peter put it this way: "*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*" 1 Pet. 5:10. f

How do we mature? We put away the things of our past and pursue the pure milk of God's Word in order to grow (1 Pet. 2:1-2). What does maturity look like? A willingness to discipline ourselves for this one thing, allowing all other things to cascade from it. Maturity recognizes that without the truth of God's Word, the leading of the Spirit, and the knowledge of Christ we cannot grow, will not have joy, and will not attain the prize.

Unity of a disciplined mindset

Paul's final word of the section was to his opponents, declaring that the truth of pressing toward Christ was so obvious that he did not have to argue against it, but would let the Lord reveal it to them. In other words, we cannot **force reality** on anyone, but God will have to reveal it. We can model it, teach on it, demonstrate it, but not force it. Until an individual sees and tastes the reality, they will not be motivated to run the race. However, when we all begin to mature this way (which is the purpose of the church), we move in the same direction we will not only experience joy, we will be most effective.

Are we there yet? Nope, but we are moving toward the prize. The question this morning: are you maturing and upward moving, or are you stuck in the past, content in the present, and unmotivated by the future? None of us have arrived, we all need to strain forward, and have a role to play with each other toward that end. Let's press on together.

Concluding Questions for Discussion:

- Why do we struggle with focused effort in our pursuit and disciplines in moving toward Christ? Read 1 Timothy 4:6-16 and compare bodily training (like going to the gym) and training for godliness. Which is more valuable? Which is more difficult? Why?
- What areas of life do we need to say "no" to in order to do the "one thing" well? What does it look like to secure undivided devotion to Christ?
- What areas of our past do we struggle with the most? Are there areas of like where we have held on to bitterness and anger? Read Hebrews 12:14-15
- Why is it so important to be aware of our future to deal with our sin in the present? See Colossians 3:1-8 for a hint.
- What are areas for you individually that you need to mature?