

Pressing on Toward Christ

Philippians 3:17-19

'I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'

Introduction: *"What is your relationship with Jesus Christ?* This is all at once a profound, simple, yet difficult question to answer for many. This past weekend I had the privilege to speak at a youth camp for two churches, walking through Philippians 1:27-2:30, the same passages we've walked through together. What was pleasantly affirming and beautiful was watching the staff and pastors spend time with each student and in some way, shape, or form, ask them this question. Some resisted, some still rejected, while some began to deal with sin, others committing to pursue, and one yielding his life in following Christ for the first time. Every student had an opportunity to evaluate their life in terms of a relationship with Christ, which is our hope of everyone here this morning.

We have walked through Philippians 3 for several weeks and a few things are abundantly clear: **1) We come to Christ in salvation NOT by what we do or contribute, but what Christ did for us.** False teachers in Philippi were committed to practicing circumcision as a means of righteousness, but Paul was quick to point out that anything done by himself for salvation was truly rubbish. **2) Gaining Christ, including His righteousness, meant that knowing Christ was the ultimate goal and value in life.** Knowing Jesus, like any relationship, required time, pursuit, and loving desire. We become like what and who we know, and as we pursue someone we invariably become like them. The more I am around someone, the more I talk, think, and act like them. When I hear my daughters say to each other *"suck it up buttercup"* when one is complaining, I know they are mimicking their daddy. **3) The goal is also our prize, in pursuing Christ-likeness, we become like Him and long for the day we will be with Him.** Paul said in verse 12 that we have not obtained it yet, but pursuing Christ-likeness becomes the **one thing** in our life, the primary focus, pursuit, and desire of our heart. We press on, strive, and strain for that goal. This is the definition of **maturity** in our Christian life (v. 15), and Paul's prayer was that anyone who did not think so would see it by God revealing it to them. There are a few questions that come out of this:

What is the implication of pressing on toward the goal for the prize?

It means that our life in Christ is NOT passive but active, not additive but transformative. Jesus did not save us simply so we could do whatever we wanted, but He is preparing us to live with Him forever. Far too often we are simply passive participants in our relationship with Christ, and though we may go through motions of activity and live relatively morally, we are not yearning for Him nor are we actively seeking to KILL OUR SIN. We view our relationship with Him like that gym membership that we are all about for a couple of weeks, and then stays on our keychain but never gets put into practice. Remember, desire for Christ is stoked like any other relationship: when we actually die to self and pursue, our desire grows, be it our spouse, loved one, or Savior.

How do I actually press on and know Christ?

This is the real question, right? This is the answer to the test question that we want so that we don't have a blank face when the question is posed. What does it look like?

Our goal: *"For those whom 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."* **Romans 8:29**

God is moving us to be more like Jesus, meaning we look outside of ourselves, not inside, fixing our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despised the shame, and sat at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 12:2).

Our means:

1) God's Word - *"Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."* **1 Peter 2:2-3**

"that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." **Colossians 2:2-3**

The Bible is where we ultimately come to know our Savior. We see how everything in the Old Testament points to Him, how the gospels display Him, how Acts shows His visible church, the epistles how to live in Him, and Revelation revealing how He will reign forever. God's Word transforms our minds as they are renewed (Rom. 12:1-2) since we have been given the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). But there is no way to truly know our Savior apart from knowing Him in Scripture. As we know Him, we become like Him.

2) Holy Spirit - *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit"* **2 Cor. 3:18**

The Holy Spirit, who is our guide in the truth and who brings conviction of sin (John 16:8, 13), will change us through the knowledge of Christ in the Word into conformity of His image. When we yield and submit to His leadership, our hearts are softened and minds conformed. This is the work of God in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

So the answer to the question is this. How do I know Christ and have a growing relationship with Him? We become like Him, growing in Christ-likeness as we long to be with him one day, by seeking Him in His Word and yielding to the leading of the Spirit.

But we might well say, *"That's great. I'm supposed to be like Jesus, but He was perfect. Yes, He learned obedience, yes He was tempted in every way yet without sin, yes He can relate to me since He experienced all of this as a man. But He was still perfect, and I am not. What do we do now?"*

I like the story from one of my favorite shows of all time, *The West Wing*. In showing support for a friend who was struggling with reactions from post traumatic stress after being shot, told a story. *"A man falls into a hole and the walls are so steep he cannot get out. The man calls up from the hole for someone to help. A doctor walks by and throws a prescription into the hole and walks on. A priest walks by and writes out a prayer and throws it into the hole. Then a friend walks by, 'Hey Joe can you help me out' and the friend jumps in the hole. The man says, 'Are you crazy, now we're both stuck down here.' The friend says, 'yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"*

What God gives us are examples to follow, those who have gone before who can model Christ-likeness to us, whose pattern of life is worthy of emulation, and who know what its like to struggle with sin, to deal with busyness, and face the trials of life. In this, Paul encourages the church to consider, observe, and imitate his example and those who followed the same pattern, and avoid the influences of those

who were enemies of the cross. As we approach these few key verses, the questions we should ask ourselves: ***who is most influential in my life? Who do I imitate, and who imitates me? In that imitation game, are we becoming more like Jesus or more like the world?***

Imitating Helpful Influences (17)

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

Life and pursuit of Paul himself

Paul was so confident in His knowledge and relationship with Christ that he could boldly assert for others to follow his example. He told the Corinthian church to follow/imitate him as he imitated Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), but also told them to simply imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16). He was a choice servant, one whom God used to spread the church throughout the known world and to write an immense amount of the New Testament. What do we get to see in the example of Paul:

- **Not perfection but relentless pursuit** - Paul was clear that he had not arrived at his goal of Christ-likeness (Phil. 3:12), but it was his constant pursuit. He was a man who struggled with sin after his conversion, of whom God gave a messenger of Satan to be a thorn in his flesh so he did not become too proud (2 Cor. 12:7). Why was that so necessary? Because Paul struggled with pride and selfishness like all of us, yet he was relentless in putting this sin to death.
- **Grace filled effort** - In 1 Cor. 15:10, Paul said "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*" Grace was the empowerment of his work, knowing that grace did not mean a lack of effort, simply a ceasing of earning.
- **Purposeful and laser-guided purpose** - Paul's pre-conversion life was a mess, a never-ending pursuit of trying to earn something with God. After Christ changed him, life was more difficult but extremely focused. He preached the gospel and suffered, with his goal to know Jesus Christ his Lord.
- **We get him in print** - One of the ways we learn in our relationship with Christ is to read those who have gone before, dead saints who faced what we do today with faithfulness. In fact, we would be well served as a church to invest in reading less of popular Christianity today and more of those who walked deeply with Jesus from decades and centuries before, from biography to theology, from Reformers to Puritans. The fact that we have Paul in print means we have access to his mind, life, and commands and can glean from his example every day.

But Paul was only one man who knew to power of trickle down discipleship and learning. He invested in faithful people who would invest in others and so forth down the line. That is why he encouraged the church to follow those who kept the same **pattern of life as he did**. But where do we find these, and what do we look for?

Finding models to follow

- **Start with leaders in the church** - "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*" Hebrews 13:7 Leaders who teach God's Word communicate just as much by their way of life as they do with well prepared messages. Leaders should be an example in **speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and purity**. (2 Tim. 4:12) There is admittedly a lack of godly leaders in churches today and a

propensity to lower the standard of leadership. But godly leaders are not perfect but their course of life are pointed toward Christ and they lead out in how they deal with their own sin, pressure, trial, and hardships. These are people who have grown in maturity and it is evident in their growth over time.

- **Look for process and progress rather than perfection** - One of the hardest areas for a believer to step up as a model/example is the feeling of inadequacy. In those who we follow, we are not looking for perfection in life or even Bible knowledge, but the progress of faith. I have learned from professors who can study the original languages, but I have also learned from plenty of men who have never read Calvin's Institutes or studies Greek. I look for men who love their wives, who's children respect and obey them, who are known servants, who point me and others to Christ, who have established faithfulness, and are keenly aware of their sin and need for grace.
- **Ask, don't wait** - The word Paul used for observe here is the word "fix your gaze on", or focus on those who walk according to this pattern. This does not mean some weird staring contest, following someone with a notebook taking notes. It means getting close enough to see a pattern of life, not just over coffee but in different aspects of life. Do you know the easiest way to start to follow someone's pattern? Ask them. I'm amazed that I have never been totally shut down from anyone that I asked if I could spend some time with them. This means there must be commitment on both sides, the mature and learner, to open up life to each other.

Identifying Hurtful Enemies (19-20)

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Enemies are always subtle

There will always be enemies of the cross, meaning those who are opposed to the work of Jesus Christ alone for salvation. The most dangerous enemies are always the most subtle, both the overly religious who **add** to the work of Jesus by requiring works for salvation, or those who diminish the work of Christ by minimizing sin, emphasizing love and focus on our glory, comfort, and satisfaction rather than God's. Overt enemies are easy to spot. But the subtle enemies were those that brought Paul to tears (Acts 20:31), knowing the wake they leave and how deceived they are and how many they deceive.

We are all products of influences. We live in a day and age that influences bombard us every day since we are so tied into each others lives through a proliferation of information. Everyone on social media is an expert, make definitive statements, and who make absolute truth statements from a foundation of emotion. In a desperate search for relevance we look for the newest, best, and up to date advice from cultural experts, some of whom claim to represent Christ. The problem we have is that we lose wisdom and discernment when we fail to intake all of that information from a **lens of Scripture** and instead read Scripture through a cultural lens. **Who influences you the most? What do you read, listen to, and glean wisdom? Who do you imitate? How do we vet out influences?**

How to spot an enemy

Enemies of the cross are as destructive as they are subtle. Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:22). Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give **approval to those who practice them.** (Rom. 1:32). The end of enemies of the cross is destruction. What are the marks of their teaching and life?

Their pursuits

Paul is not specific here about the source of the enemies of the cross, but it is broad enough to identify those who claim to know Christ at some level, yet who's life betrays them. **Their god is their belly, or their selfish appetites.** They are driven by their desires and have no motivation to quell them. The goal of their teaching is happiness and comfort, not holiness and Christ-likeness. Does this mean we cannot enjoy this earth, or enjoy creation or created things? By no means. The difference is that we enjoy God's creation because we enjoy Him, taking all things with **thanksgiving** and through our understanding of God's Word and prayer (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Are your influences moving you toward enjoyment of God in Christ and help you see how all things are done to God's glory, or are they simply moving you toward fulfilling your appetites and selfish pursuits?

Their boasts

Glorying in their shame is the same as "boasting" in their shame. The ultimate subtlety of sin is to **justify our sin**, to take something clearly sinful and move it from acceptable to approval. Its pastors who justify million dollar salaries on the backs of the church, leaders who convince themselves that adultery is the best course of action, and anyone who convinces themselves their freedom in Christ are designed for their personal enjoyment, rather than a willingness to give them up for other. We boast in these by posting pictures on social media, bragging to co-workers, and continuing to go through the motions of worship while habitually sinning during the week.

Are your influences encouraging you to deal with your sin, or are they passively ok with sin? Do you surround yourself with truth speakers or self-justifiers?

Their focus

Taken altogether, these influencers **minds are set on earthly things.** We are called to set our minds on things above (Col. 3:2), and to have the same mind that is our in Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5). Enemies of the cross are primarily, consistently, and persistently focused on earthly things, from desires to trying to preserve life here. Its true that there are things like marriage that make us more prone to earthly pressures (1 Cor. 7:28) in his focus on undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:33-35). But the enemy is solely focused on this life alone, rather than looking upward and forward.

Do your influences keep your eyes fixed on Christ and our future or are they only concerned with the present and this life?

Inventorying Our Influences

Our pursuit of Christ is not passive but active. We know what we pursue and become like who we know. So this morning is a good time do some inventory checks in terms of our influences:

Are you more influenced by God's Word or by outside influences like news, blogs, or media?
 Does what you read influence you to think deeply and move you toward Christ-likeness or worldliness?
 Who influences you the most in your life in your relationships?
 Do these relationships move you toward Christ-likeness or earthly thinking?
 If someone followed your life, would they move toward Christ-likeness?