

Philippians 3: 12-16—“10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12Not 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. 13Brothers, 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, 14I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. 15All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

10I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

- The power of his “resurrection” is the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead. According to Paul, that same “incomparably great power” (Eph. 1:19)—the power that raised Jesus from the dead—is the power that is at work in us to make us holy.
- (Eph. 3:14-19) to strengthen us so that we have great endurance and faith and lives constantly characterized by thanksgiving (Col. 1:11-12). It takes extraordinary power to change us to become like that.
- Paul said he wanted power; not power so that he might be thought powerful; but power so that he might be conformed to the will of God.
 - Only the power that brought Jesus back from death will do.
- Nothing is truly known until it becomes part of daily conduct ‘To depart from evil is understanding.’
 - *Ills.*: A person who told me about a book on finances changed their life. When I asked if they were debt-free the answer was no. How had it changed their life?
- When Paul says he wants “to know Christ,” what does he mean?
- The Bible uses the expression “to know” usually of close intimacy. For example, we’re told that Adam “knew” Eve. What happened? She became pregnant.
 - “To know” is speak of the closest of ties—not simply cognitive information.
 - The Bible speaks in this way, not through reticence on sexual matters, but because this is what marriage is and this is what knowledge between persons is – deep, intimate union.
- In personal relationships, to ‘know’ is to enter into the deepest personal intimacy and union.
- How surprised we often are “as we say” like brings its trails to us! But what did we expect”? Do we want to be made like Christ or not? Christ likeness must lead to Calvary.
- ‘All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’; we must not ‘be surprised at the fiery ordeal...as though something strange were happening...But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings’.¹
- But in dwelling on ‘becoming life him in his death’ we have taken the verse out of order. We must now retrace our steps.
- Why does he speaks of the resurrection of Christ before he has mentioned his death. Surely he has reversed the events of our Lord’s experience?
- For Christ, death preceded resurrection, but for the Christian, the power of the risen Christ is the first fact of experience.

¹ 2 Timothy 3: 2; John 15:20; 1 Peter 4:12f.

- ‘to be made like him’, even to the extent of sharing his sufferings, his risen power is made available to strengthen, keep and lead us.
- ‘sharing’, or ‘fellowship’ in, his sufferings.

11and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

- Paul is not the sort of leader who is prepared to tell his converts how to suffer but who is unwilling to suffer himself.
- Yet there is no trace of spiritual masochism in this. Paul does not want to suffer simply because he likes to suffer.
 - The Christian faith is not asceticism.
 - Also, the fact that someone has gone through hardship is no guarantee that they have learned from it or been changed for the better.
 - *Ills.*: I know of a graduate school that has large number of students in its counseling program (some 95% of the students in the school are working on a degree in counseling). Of the 95%, roughly 90% are divorcees.²
- If Philippians 3:10 were our watch-word or if we, like the first apostles, learned to rejoice under persecution because we “had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41), inevitably our own perspectives would change when we faced a whiff of opposition.
- Paul holds the End in view: “and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”
- By this wording he does not mean to inject doubt as to whether or not he will himself attain the resurrection from the dead.
- The word “somehow” in the original suggests that Paul is uncertain as to the timing and circumstances of this experience.
 - Might it come to him in his life? Or will he die and then rise from the dead? Either way, “somehow,” he will “attain to the resurrection from the dead.”
 - The resurrection is certain; the intervening events are uncertain.
 - We neither know how many days we have left on earth nor what those days will contain, but we do know that, be they many or few, smooth or rough.

12Not 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.

- He is not setting himself up as a guru who has already “arrived.” He is a model in transition to greater glory.
- What he is aiming for is the attainment of the very purpose for which Christ called him. Anything less would be a betrayal of that calling.
- Refusing to stand on past triumphs, Paul eagerly strains forward to the glories to come.
 - This is a sharp caution for any of us who have experienced the incredible reality of God in worship or in other ways.
- He assess *the past* (Not that I have already obtained), *the present* (I press on), and *the future* (to make it my own; cf. RV).
- Three truths are stated here. First, the new perceptions which conversion brings.

² I want to stress that this illustration is not an attempt to take a cheap shot at anyone who has gone through a divorce. It is only to illustrate the above point that just because someone has gone through a hardship it does not mean that they have necessarily learned from it. I don’t recall the actual percentage, but the percentage of marital counselors that have been divorced is startling.

- Once upon a time Paul thought that he had ‘arrived’, for he judged himself ‘as to righteousness under the law blameless’.
 - But hear his estimate now: *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.* Sinless perfection is not the experience even of an apostle this side of glory.
- He sees something else: that he is personally responsible to *press on*.
- Paul, who, in verse 9, reminded us that we cannot by our efforts obtain the righteousness which is from God, is now determined to make every effort to live the righteous life. He says, I press on. The word is vigorous – ‘I pursue,’ ‘I persecute.’
- We learn what is the inner story of conversion: Christ Jesus has made me his own.
- **Motyer:** “Did Paul choose Christ: Indeed he did, but only because Christ first chose Paul. Christ’s was the real choice; anything we did was derived from what God in Christ had already decided. We responded to, and were indeed enabled by, his prior choice.”³
- **John 15:16**—“You did not choose me, but I chose you.”⁴
- [C.S. Lewis: The Silver Chair]
- (One of the necessary functions of reading the bible is that passages like this (and others like it) interpret our conversion experience.
 - Our experience does not tell us what the text means, but it may illustrate and drive home the reality of the text.
- Thus the effort Paul describes in Philippians 3:12-14 is not expended in working for his salvation but in working out his salvation.(cf. 2:12-13)
- In fact, the best commentary on Philippians 3: 12-14 is Philippians 2: 12-13: “Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to act for his good pleasure.”

13 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,

- As if the one disavowal is not enough, Paul repeats himself: “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.
- **Motyer:** “‘To make it my own.’ The revised Version is quite explicit ‘that I may apprehend (i.e. grasp, accomplish) that for which I was apprehended by Christ Jesus’. What did he have in mind when he took hold of me? In one sense there are as many purposes as there are individuals because, for ... every converted person there is an identical goal: to be satisfied with Jesus and to grow into his likeness.”⁵
- In the matter of progress towards perfection Paul is a brother among brethren.
- **A caution to leaders:** It is easy to be a leader and to forget to be a Christian, to encourage others to prayer and Bible-reading and to let one’s own attention to these means of grace become perfunctory or even negligible – always with the excuse of the next duty, the coming meeting, the pressing appointment.
- It is for the brethren, the whole range of believers.
- There is an impressive activity about Christian progress.
- There is no room for indolence in the Christian life.

³ Motyer, 171.

⁴ Jn. 15:16

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 172.

- Equally impressive is the emphasis on concentration. V. 13 says literally, ‘One thing! Forgetting what lies behind...’ We are not to imagine Paul forgetting God’s past mercies. Nor would he forget the valuable lessons of the past.
- What, then, is this forgetting of the past which he urges with such emphasis? It is the sort of dwelling on the past that hinders our present effort and our future progress. We do well gently to remind ourselves that a bereavement can sometimes make Christians live in the past; similarly we easily harbor a persistent bitterness about past wrongs (real or supposed). There are few things that have such power to lock us into the past. Again, there is despair over past sins which, in its severest form, can make believers doubt if they will ever be forgiven or which, in less tragic forms, gives rise to defeatism and backward-looking.
- The point is not: never look back. The point is: only look back for the sake of pressing forward. Never substitute nostalgia for hope. Memories of successes can make you smug and self-satisfied. Memories of failure can make you hopeless and paralyzed in your pursuit of God.
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14I press on toward the goal to win the prize

- Determination: straining forward...I press on. Here is the runner in the games, ‘extended’ in every fiber of his being.
- *I press on*, literally ‘I pursue’
- The “Miracle Mile”
- This is a far cry from the teaching on sanctification which calls believers to ‘let go and let God’. There was not much ‘letting go’ about Paul, but rather an example of the truth that the regenerate believer must appropriate the sanctifying grace of God by actively obeying him. “The obedience that comes from faith” (*Romans 1: 4*).
- How do we avoid legalism on this?
- **Motyer**: “In this active doctrine of sanctification which Paul is preaching by his example, he is not abandoning justification by faith; he is not denying that salvation is free. It is in fact because both our salvation and our sanctification have been perfectly and fully accomplished for us by Christ that we can be saved by responding in faith without works, and sanctified by responding in faithful obedience.”⁶
- What holds Paul’s gaze as he turns from the past and preoccupies himself with the future? It is the goal...the prize.
- **So what is our goal, our prize?**
 - a. The Lord’s “Well done!”⁷
 - b. “The crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day.”⁸
 - i. Paul had just talked about how God had imputed righteousness to him. Paul’s gaze was looking forward to the day when the Lord would confirm him in holiness. Nothing short of the eradication of the sinful nature.
 - c. The “unfading crown of glory”

⁶ Motyer, 178.

⁷ Lk. 19:17

⁸ 2 Timothy 4:8

- i. Think of perhaps the greatest day of your life. Some day when you received the highest honor you ever had. It may have been the day you graduated from college. It may have been your wedding day. It may have been the day of the state cup in some sport where you or your team won and took highest honors. I always think about things like Academy Awards and those that win one. That night is inevitably one of the highest moments of their life. They party early into the next morning. But somewhere along the way life begins to press in and they have to move on. The glory of the moment begins to fade into the background. But on the day Paul has in mind those who are faithful will receive a crown from the Lord that will not fade. Life will not begin to press in; the party will not end in the wee hours of the morning. It will keep going. It won't be a momentary high and then a drop back to reality. The pinnacle will continue.
- d. The unending presence of the Lord.⁹
 - i. Some of you have experienced times of intense intimacy with the Lord. The Lord's presence has been so real and profound. But then somewhere along the way His presence seems to fade away or withdraw. The day that Paul has in view will be a time when the Lord's presence will no longer withdraw. The richness of his presence will only become greater.

for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

- *Motyer*: "A study of the idea of 'calling' in the Epistles of Paul will reveal that its meaning is not 'invitation' into gospel privileges but the power of God over the wills of his people. It is not God's invitation to be saved; it is God's determination to save."¹⁰
- *Stephen R. Holmes*: "[Jonathan] Edwards describes his own conversion as an event that was not fundamentally intellectual (that is, about understanding the gospel in any better way) or even moral (that is, about desiring to follow Christ), but aesthetic: doctrines of God's absolute sovereignty, which had appeared 'repugnant' to him, suddenly seemed beautiful."¹¹
- Not for a moment is Paul suggesting that his stance is unique, or one that is expected only of apostles, because he goes on to say...

15All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.

- Paul was confident that he held a key place in relation to other Christians. In other passages in his letters he asserted his authority as an apostle in matters of doctrine. Here his claim touches upon his manner of life: he sets the pattern which every Christian is to follow.
- He believes that every mature Christian will want to adopt the apostolic lifestyle (be thus minded).

And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

⁹ 1 Thes. 4:17.

¹⁰ Motyer, 178.

¹¹ Stephen R. Holmes, "A Mind on Fire," in "Jonathan Edwards: The Warm-Hearted Genius Behind the Great Awakening;" Christian History, Issue 77 Vol. XXII, No. 1).

- He is not saying that in religious matters any individual's opinion is not saying that in religious matters any individual's opinion is as good and valid as that of any other.
- Paul, therefore, is not envisaging a situation where people stubbornly maintain their personal whims or intuitions or opinions, but rather a situation where each Christian must be faithful to what he knows of Christ.
- Even though Paul knew that he possessed this authority in the church, however, the spirit in which he writes to the Philippians is very far from authoritarian.
 - Bishop Moule wrote at one point in the margin of his Greek New Testament, 'Apostolus, non papa!' - 'An apostle, not a pope!'
 - Paul exercised authority, not dictatorship.
- He faces the fact that not all will at once concur with his teaching. Not one of intolerance: 'Look out! I am the final arbiter in such things.' Rather he commits all to what God will reveal and enunciates a rule of life. Only – that is to say, 'understand all I have said in the light of this'.

16Only let us live up to what we have already attained."

- The verb translated "let us live up to" indicates that he has in mind a thought-out and maintained lifestyle, based on and displaying the truth of Christ as the individual knows it.¹²
- Growth to maturity, involves risk, for it has to make room for a process of trial and error. A child guarded by over-fond parents from every knock of life and every adverse result of its own behavior will never emerge from childhood.
- **Thielman:** "The totalitarianism of an all-provident ecclesiastical authority, complete with all the answers, shouldering all the responsibilities, cushioning from every adversity, sounds safer. But such safety can be purchased only at the expense of fixation in spiritual infancy."¹³
- In order to grow we must discover what the Bible teaches.
- This call to exercise 'private judgment' does not put a premium on isolated 'individualism.'
- On the other hand he shows his unwillingness to break fellowship with or lash out against those who think differently on this matter. Instead he trusts that God will make the truth clear to them in his own time.

Application:

- Wesley deduced that the Christian must be imperfect in some sense in this life and perfect in another.¹⁴
- The senses in which the believer continues to be imperfect, he said, are in "ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations," but the believer can and should attain freedom from outward sins and from sins of the heart, including "evil thoughts" and "evil tempers."¹⁵

¹² This verb is *stoicheo*, 'to walk according to rule', 'to practice a rule of life'.

¹³ Frank Thielman, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹⁴ John Wesley, "Christian Perfection," *John Wesley's Fifty-Three Sermons*, ed. Edward H. Sugden (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 508-9.

¹⁵ Wesley, "Christian Perfection," 512, 523, 525.

- The Reformed response to this emphasis has focused on the depth and complexity of sin's inroads into humanity and the present incompleteness of God's eradication of sin.
 - The apostle John has said that it is self-deception to claim that we have no sin.
 - Jesus instructed us to pray for forgiveness for our sins (Matt. 6:12).
 - The believer is the battlefield on which the fallen flesh wars against God's indwelling Spirit (Gal. 5:16-17).¹⁶
- Wesley claimed that he came to his conclusions after a careful study of the Bible, "the only standard of truth and the only model of pure religion."¹⁷
- Wesley stressed the biblical evidence that God had overcome sin in Christ and that the Bible called upon all believers to live in undivided devotion to their Savior.
- ***The Westminster Confession of Faith***: "There abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part" of the believer and that this condition would remain until the final day.¹⁸
- After saying that it is possible to be a Christian without attaining "evangelical perfection" and that all are far removed from that state, Calvin qualified his position this way:
- ***Calvin***: "What then? Let that target be set before our eyes at which we are earnestly to aim. Let that goal be appointed toward which we should strive and struggle. For it is not lawful for you to divide things with God in such a manner that you undertake part of those things which are enjoined upon you by his Word but omit part, according to your own judgment... Only let us look toward our mark with sincere simplicity and aspire to our goal; not fondly flattering ourselves, nor excusing our own evil deeds, but with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself."¹⁹
- Wesley, on his way back to England from America in 1738, expressed his understanding of perfection in the following verse:

O grant that nothing in my soul
 May dwell, but Thy pure love alone!
 O may Thy love possess me whole,
 My joy, my treasure, and my crown;
 Strange fires far from my heart remove;
 My every act, word, thought, be love!
 ~ John Wesley
- His point, like Calvin's, was that the believer's heart should be undivided in its devotion to God. Wesley appropriately commented, "I never heard that anyone objected to this. And indeed who can object?"
- Emphasized the necessity of striving for complete godliness. That should be the emphasis of every believer.
- Jerry Bridges: *The Pursuit of Holiness*.
- C.S. Lewis has said, when we stand before God on the final day, then we will see ourselves as are really are, and this moment of revelation will contain surprises.²⁰

¹⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, "The Reformed Perspective," *Five Views on Sanctification*, 59-90 (here, 83-84).

¹⁷ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: Epworth Press, 1952), 6.

¹⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 13.2.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:688-89 (3.6.5).

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 86.

1. **Strain Forward to What Lies Ahead**

- The final step in going hard after God is *to strain forward to what lies ahead* (v. 13). Paul provides his own illustration of straining forward:
- **1 Corinthians 9:25–27**—“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”
 - The way to go hard after God is with all the discipline and self-denial of an athlete.
 - **Ills.:** When I began to train for a triathlon discipline was the natural byproduct of focusing on the goal.
 - **Ills.:** The Neurophysiology of Self-Discipline.
 - **Piper:** “I doubt that there has ever been a Christian who reached heights of knowledge and joy and obedience without plan and discipline and self-denial. God does not promise his riches to aimless people.”²¹
- Jonathan Edwards followed a very strict manor of life for this very reason. Writing of Edwards:
 - **Sereno Dwight:** “He carefully observed the effects of different sorts of good, and selected those which best suited his constitution, and rendered him most fit for mental labor...In this respect he lived *by rule*, and constantly practiced great self-denial; as he did also with regard to the time passed in sleep. He accustomed himself to arise at four or between four and five in the morning: and in winter spent several of those hours in study which are commonly wasted in slumber. In the evening he usually allowed himself a season of relaxation in the midst of his family.”²²
- Set yourself a goal to know more of the Word of God, to grasp more of the will of God, to love more of the wonder of God; and then make a plan of prayer and study and worship and go for it with all your might.
- Take the class I’ll be teaching on Romans (starting Tuesday, January 30)
- Begin listening to MP3s of some quality teacher, etc.
- Hebrews 11: 6 says, “6And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

2. **Develop Holy Dissatisfaction**

- "I do not regard myself to have obtained." There is a connection between how little earnest pursuit of God there is today in the church and how much we are told to think well of ourselves.
- The first step in going hard after the holy God, then, is *to develop a holy dissatisfaction with your spiritual life*.
- Someone might say though, "Anderson, you are completely out of touch with the real world. People do not need a negative appeal to think more about their guilt. The malaise of

²¹ John Piper, “Going Hard After the Holy God” (January 8, 1984), http://www.desiringgod.org/Resource-Library/Sermons/ByScripture/34/420_Going_Hard_After_the_Holy_God/.

²² As quoted by Thielman.

American culture inside and outside the church is an epidemic of guilt and bad feelings about ourselves. Don't tell people that what they need is to develop more dissatisfaction about themselves. Do you really think the people in your congregation like themselves?"

- No, I don't. But I think real humbling guilt is extraordinarily rare. And I think 99% of our bad feelings about ourselves is rooted in pride. For example, suppose you go to a dinner party and find out when you get there that you are dressed wrong; and then you spill your coffee; and then you don't know which fork to pick up first; and then the joke you attempt falls flat; and when you are leaving, you call your hostess by the wrong name. How do you feel about yourself when you get home? Rotten. You hate yourself. You're depressed. You don't want to show your face. You feel like quitting your job. What's the use when you're such a klutz? Now I ask, where does all that low self-image come from? Whence all these depressing, immobilizing, self-denouncing feelings? Is the answer: God's offended glory or your offended pride? People who are depressed and immobilized and angry because their behavior has injured the glory of *God* are very, very rare. But people who are depressed and immobilized and angry because their behavior has prevented them from having a reputation of being cool and competent are very, very common.
- I am asking for something rare, not common. I'm not asking you to feel worse about your inability to appear cool and intelligent. I'm asking you to feel worse that you possess so little of Christ.
 - If you have been on the same plateau of both knowledge (“doctrine”) and experience (“life”) for the past twenty years, there is something dreadfully wrong. It is mandated of all of us that we grow.
 - Holiness becomes more and more attractive the more you taste of it. The glories of the world-to-come make all the glories of this world fade into dull grays by comparison.
 - ***Hosea 6:3***—“So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.”
 - ***I Want to Know You More (Steve Fry)***