



Ministry of the Word

Sunday 19th June 2016

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Scripture: Philippians 3:13-16

Subject: Chapter 3, Part 11 – Pursuing the Prize of Christ-Likeness

There are some things that really find, as they say, 'an echo in our heart'; like a poem, a hymn, a song, a saying, even a chapter or verses of Scripture. Maybe a better way to describe it is a special place in our hearts. We never seem to forget it no matter what and what's more, it can be a great comfort, a source of security to our mind.

For the early church it was whatever Scriptures they had that they loved and held dear. Remember the Bible or 'cannon' of the New Testament as you and I have it, did not exist in its completeness till well after John wrote Revelation in around 98AD. Well after that, the first Bible was put together as you and I have it today. However, the church always had a Bible in as much as the Old Testament has the New Testament contained in it but it's only by the New that the Old is explained. God has never left mankind without His precious Word.

So the believers at Philippi had only what was in front of them, and maybe a copy the Old Testament (also remember that not everyone could read). You and I have the privilege of having the Bible as it is before us and being able to read it for ourselves. We can see that it is inspired, inerrant, complete, authoritative Word of God, and it is also in complete harmony

with the rest of Scripture. That being said, we need to remind ourselves that it primarily addresses the believer and then, of course, to the rest of mankind. If we are accepting that, we need to be clear in our own mind and heart as to how we are going to apply its truths to our lives. That after all, is its main purpose. This I trust will steady us as we come to look at the final points in relation to the prerequisites that Paul sets out before us.

Last time it felt like boot camp as we examined the first two practical ways to successfully run the spiritual race which were, 'a proper awareness' and 'a maximum effort'. We considered our sinful nature and our desire to be a holy people. If only the church took hold of the truths we find here, it would be a force to be reckoned with. However, it's not my brother nor my sister, but it's me Lord that stands in need. So let's press on and realise what we can learn about 'Pursuing the Prize'.

A Focused Concentration

"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13)

A maximum effort without focused concentration is useless. Every athlete knows that runners in a race must fix their eyes ahead of them for those who watch the crowd or their own feet are likely to trip and fall. To make a maximum effort in any athletic endeavour requires the participants to concentrate on a point straight ahead. So the experts tell us!

Paul addressed the Philippians with the gentle, intimate, affectionate term **brethren** to move their hearts away from the Judaizers and toward him. For the third time in this passage, Paul adds the disclaimer *'I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet'*. The apostle's intent is polemical, that is, controversial. He is directing his argument at those who were teaching error and he wants to make the truth abundantly clear. Despite the false teachers' claims to the contrary, spiritual perfection is not attainable in this life.

Though Paul had not achieved spiritual perfection, he had that blessed discontentment that motivated him to pursue it. In fact, it had become the one pursuit of his life, expressed in

the phrase '**but one thing I do**'. Paul communicates his single-mindedness in a very abrupt manner. The apostle's focus on his goal was intense, his level of concentration was acute.

It is such singularly focused people who succeed in athletics and in other pursuits of life. Many people dabble in much, but succeed at nothing. Despite all the energy they expend, they accomplish little. Their lives are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. James called them

"double-minded, unstable in all their ways" (James 1:8).

To avoid such lack of focus the psalmist prayed,

"Unite my heart to fear Your name" (Psalms 86:11),

and Solomon counselled,

"Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left" (Proverbs 4:25-27).

When believers have one driving compulsion, to be like Christ, they will move toward spiritual perfection.

Such concentration possesses both a negative and a positive aspect. Negatively, Paul maintained his focus by **forgetting what lies behind**. A runner who looks back risks being passed or stumbling even not being ready for what is coming next on the track. Nor does a runner's performance in past races guarantee success or failure in present or future races. The past is not relevant only if you learn from it so as to improve or to use the knowledge; what matters is making the maximum effort in the present so as to sustain momentum in the future. Perfectionists and legalists look to their past achievements to validate their supposed spiritual status or to criticise. The Judaizers sought to ensnare the Galatians in the past, prompting Paul to write,

"But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" (Galatians 4:9).

Paul made a break with everything in his past, both good and bad. Religious achievements, virtuous deeds, great successes in ministry, as well as sins, missed

opportunities, and disasters; all must be forgotten. They do not control the present or the future. Believers cannot live on past victories, nor should they be debilitated by the guilt of past sins.

Churches are full of spiritual cripples, paralyzed by the grudges, bitterness, sins, and tragedies of the past. Others try to survive in the present by reliving past successes or that they were so bad before Christ, sure look at them now! They must break with that past if they are to pursue the spiritual prize. God is interested in what believers do now and in the future.

"No one," declared Jesus, "after putting his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

The clearest vision belongs to those who forget the past. I'm not saying that we neglect our responsibilities from the past or forget the Word of God that is always relevant, and there is no need to add or take away from it.

Positively, Paul maintained his focus by **reaching forward to what lies ahead. Reaching forward**, describes stretching a muscle to its limit. Picture a runner straining every muscle to reach the finish line. As already noted, the goal on which believers must focus is being like Jesus Christ. It was also the goal of Paul's ministry to

"present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28).

He also expressed that goal to the Ephesians:

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming." (Ephesians 4:11-14)

To the Galatians, Paul wrote that he was

"in labour until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).

He exhorted the Corinthians to

"be made complete" (2 Corinthians 13:11),

and his co-worker Epaphras prayed that the Colossians would

"stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (Colossians 4:12).

Pursuing Christ-likeness here and now, until we are made like Him in glory, defines the progress of the Christian life and the target of ministry. If that is not the goal, then what would or ought it to be?

A Proper Motivation

"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 3:14)

As noted earlier, this verse is the heart of the passage. The present tense verb translated, **I press on**, denotes Paul's continuous effort to pursue the 'impossible dream' and defeat 'the unbeatable foe'. The root meaning of the Greek word **toward** is 'down'. Again, Paul expressed his single-minded focus, saying,

"I continually bear down on the goal a mark on which to fix one's eyes."

That **prize** was what motivated him to run to win (1 Corinthians 9:24). Believers will not receive the **prize** (Christ-likeness, with all its eternal benefits) until **the upward**, (literally meaning 'above', denoting both the source of the call and to where it leads) **call of God in Christ Jesus** ushers them into God's glorious presence in heaven. As we have noted, perfection is not attainable in this life. The finish line is the threshold of heaven, where the rewards will be handed out (cross reference Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15). It is not until Christ

"appears, that we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is"
(1 John 3:2).

Like a runner triumphantly pumping his fist in the air as he approaches the finish line, Paul declared at the end of his life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Only "in the future" in heaven would Paul receive "the crown of righteousness" (Christ's righteousness perfected in him); only then would he receive the **prize** which he so diligently pursued.

A Proper Recognition

“Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you” (Philippians 3:15)

Paul was not in the spiritual race alone; it includes all Christians, described here by the phrase **as many as are perfect** (cross reference Hebrew 10:14). The apostle is not speaking of practical perfection; that would contradict what he said earlier in the passage. Practical perfection does not come until believers are glorified. Rather, in a play on words, he describes believers as those who are positionally **perfect** in Christ. Since this is a polemic passage directed against those who taught that perfection is attainable in this life, Paul's use of **perfect** may be a bit double-edged, with a tinge of sarcasm. Those false teachers were not perfect in practice, and also were not perfect in position.

Every true Christian must **have this** same **attitude** that Paul had. **Have this attitude** literally means ‘to think this way’, ‘to be intent on this’ or ‘to set one's mind on this’. It might be translated "continually think like this." Like Paul, believers must be totally focused on making the maximum effort to pursue the prize of Christ-likeness. We know how Christ thinks because the Scripture gives us His mind (1 Corinthians 2:16). When we think biblical, divine thoughts, viewing all of life from the Lord's perspective, those thoughts will move our behaviour to become like His (cross reference with Colossians 3:16).

But Paul was an experienced pastor and knew that not all believers would share the strength and relentlessness of his focus on pursuing the prize. To them Paul says, **if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.** Those who refuse to heed Paul's message will hear that same message from God. He will correct them through His Word, His Spirit, or through chastening. God will do whatever it takes to make believers recognize their need to pursue the prize of Christ-likeness. He will also provide the resources they need to do that (2 Peter 1:3).

A Proper Conformity

“however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.”

(Philippians 3:16)

The word, **however**, could also be translated ‘one more thing’. It is often used to express one final thought. This last prerequisite for pursuing the prize might also be described as consistency. Having developed a proper awareness, effort, focus, motivation, and recognition, believers must consistently **keep living by that same standard to which they have attained**. Note the phrase, **keep living**, means ‘to line up’, or ‘to follow in line’. Believers must keep to the spiritual path that they have been following. To use the metaphor of a race, they must keep running in their lane, but you need to insure that it is the true one.

Four divinely provided resources help believers to consistently pursue the prize of Christ-likeness.

1. First is - **The Word of God**.

Peter wrote,

“Like new-born babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2).

2. Second is - **Prayer**.

Paul prayed that the Corinthians would

“be made complete” (2 Corinthians 13:9).

3. Third is - **following a Godly example**.

Paul exhorted the Corinthians,

“Be imitators of me” (1 Corinthians 4:16; cf. 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:7,9; 1 Timothy 4:12; Hebrew 13:7; 1 Peter 5:3).

4. Finally, God uses **trials to mould believers into the image of Jesus Christ**.

“After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10; cross reference with James 1:2-4).

At the foot of one of the Swiss Alps is a marker honouring a man who fell to his death attempting the ascent. The marker gives his name and this brief epitaph: "He died climbing".

The epitaph of every Christian should be that they died climbing the upward path toward the prize of Christ-likeness. Paul does not leave it at that, he goes onto giving us, by God's grace, the procedures the way we can attain such. We have the target in view but now all we need to do is to hit it.

Amen.