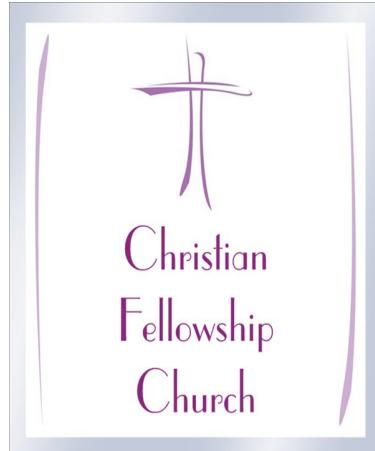




Sunday 05<sup>th</sup> June 2016



Ministry of the Word

*Sunday 05<sup>th</sup> June 2016*

by Vincent Gannon

**Scripture:** Philippians 3:12-16

**Subject:** Chapter 3, Part 9 – Reaching for the Prize

Four years of hard training soon come to the climax for all the athletes and sports people who hope that they have done enough to make it onto the team. I'm not either of those things, a sports fan or even mildly interested in athletes but I know this, to qualify and make it onto an Olympian team is a big deal. To be considered to have reached such a high standard in whatever event is high praise indeed. Then to be chosen onto, say, the "track" to run for your country is, I am assured by those who take part, an amazing honour and a thrill. It does not end there; each participant then has the responsibility to do even better, because the competition is of such high standard.

The participation is not like any even that they have ever known, it's a lot tougher, it's push their level of endurance. But, oh, to cross the line to the thunderous applauds and shouts, and excitement, the heart is coming out of your body and the fact that your first, the best, the winner, the hero of the hour makes it all worthwhile! No, no it's the prize that is the icing on the cake. Then the homecoming and the party that follows; your feet do not appear to touch the ground. Out of nowhere come congratulations, and everyone wants to know you

and be your friend. It's a dream come true, but it's the prize that assures you that it's real and not a dream.

Judging from the frequent use of athletic metaphors in his writings, the apostle Paul must have been a sports fan. Speaking of his desire to be effective in his Christian life, Paul wrote,

**"I box in such a way, as not beating the air"** (1 Corinthians 9:26b).

He described the Christian life to the Ephesians as a

**"struggle [the Hebrew word is pale; meaning a wrestling match or fight] ... not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places"** (Ephesians 6:12).

In what might be considered his epitaph, Paul declared triumphantly,

**"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith".**  
(2 Timothy 4:7)

and in 1 Timothy 6:12 turns his attention towards us and says.

**"Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses".**

In an allusion to the Isthmian Games (held in Corinth and second in importance only to the Olympic Games). To put it into historical context note that the **Isthmian Games or Isthmia** (Ancient Greek: "Ισθμία") were one of the Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece, and were named after the Isthmus of Corinth, where they were held. As with the Nemean Games, the Isthmian Games were held both the year before and the year after the Olympic Games (the second and fourth years of an Olympiad), while the Pythian Games were held in the third year of the Olympiad cycle.

Paul reminded the Corinthians,

**"Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."**  
(1 Corinthians 9:25).

Paul's favourite athletic metaphor is that of a footrace. He declared to the Ephesian elders,



Sunday 05<sup>th</sup> June 2016

**"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God"** (Acts 20:24).

To the Romans he wrote,

**"So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy"** (Romans 9:16).

Reminding the Corinthians of the dedicated athletes who competed in the Isthmian Games the apostle wrote,

**"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win."**

***Therefore, I run in such a way, as not without aim"***

(1 Corinthians 9:24, 26).

In Galatians 2:2 Paul expressed his

**"fear that [he] might be running, or had run, in vain"**

While in Galatians 5:7 he lamented to the Galatians,

**"You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?"**

At the close of his life, Paul could declare,

***"I have finished the course, I have kept the faith"* (2 Timothy 4:7).**

It is that metaphor of the Christian life as a race, expressed in the familiar fourteenth verse

***"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"***

this is the theme of Philippians 3:12-21.

The passage reveals Paul's passionate concern for spiritual growth. Not just his own growth but that of every believer.

The previous passage (3:4-11) described Paul's transformation when he encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus Road and understood the gospel. In that powerful and moving passage, the apostle recited his impressive religious credentials. Then, dramatically, he declared that compared to the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ,

those achievements were mere rubbish. Paul exchanged his useless human achievements for the knowledge, righteousness, power, fellowship, and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some in Philippi might have mistakenly assumed that, having gained those marvellous benefits, Paul had reached spiritual perfection. The Judaizers may also have taught the Philippians that spiritual perfection was attainable through being circumcised and keeping the Law. There were also heretics (forerunners of the second-century Gnostics) who taught that spiritual perfection awaited those who attained a certain level of knowledge.

To counter such false ideas, Paul added this passage, which is a forceful disclaimer of spiritual perfection. Though he was a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17), with a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), a new disposition that strongly desired holiness (Romans 7:22; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16), was united with Christ (Galatians 2:20), possessed a renewed mind (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23), had the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16), had right standing before God (Romans 8:1), had been justified (Romans 5:1), had been forgiven (Ephesians 1:7), had Christ's righteousness imputed to him (2 Corinthians 5:21), and was indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9,11; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Timothy 1:14), Paul was not perfect. He was still subject to temptation, still possessed his unredeemed flesh, and was still a sinner (Cross Reference Romans 7:14-25; 1 Timothy 1:15). Far from having obtained perfection, he was pursuing it with all his might. Like Peter, Paul understood that the Christian life is a lifelong process of

***"growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ"***  
***(2 Peter 3:18; cross reference with I Peter 2:1-2).***

This passage deals a devastating blow to the false doctrine of perfectionism that still prevails in some denominations and churches. Perfectionism is the teaching that believers can reach a place of spiritual and moral perfection in this life. Perfectionists teach that in a second work of grace, believers may instantaneously be made sinless. Some even go so far as to teach the eradication of the sin nature. The only way that I personally know how this can be done is "death".

But the apostle Paul, undoubtedly one of the most committed, dedicated, spiritually mature Christian who ever lived, confessed gladly that he had failed to reach spiritual perfection thirty years after his conversion. That confession was clear evidence of his true and mature spirituality. Who, then, could make a legitimate claim to have done so? To maintain the fiction that they have achieved sinless perfection, perfectionists are forced to make an unbiblical distinction between wilful sin and "mistakes".

Scripture teaches that any violation of God's law, whatever the intent, is sin. No Christian will ever become perfect in this life; that awaits the redemption of the body (Romans 8:23). Perfection in this life will always be a goal, never an achievement. If we say we do not sin, we make God a liar, because He says we do (1 John 1:7-9).

Some may question why they should bother to pursue spiritual growth. After all, believers are promised

*"an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for them"* (1 Peter 1:4).

But that question is a controversial point. Spiritual children, like physical children, cannot help but grow (cross reference with 1 Peter 2:1-2) because they have a built-in desire and drive for growth. Apart from that, there are several compelling reasons that Christians must grow spiritually.

**First**, it glorifies God. Psalm 119:66.

*"Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments."*

Remember what the Lord said to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 1:11:

*"And God said to Solomon, Because this was in thine heart, and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honour, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet hast asked long life; but hast asked wisdom and knowledge for thyself, that thou mayest judge my people, over whom I have made thee king"*

**Second**, it provides evidence that their salvation is genuine. John 17:3.

***"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.***

See also chapter 17:8.

***"For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me."***

**Third,** it adorns and makes visible the truth of God to others (cross reference with Titus 2:10)

***"not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."***

**Fourth,** it brings assurance of salvation.

**Fifth,** it preserves believers from the sorrow and suffering associated with spiritual immaturity.

**Sixth,** it protects the cause of Christ from reproach.

**Seventh,** it produces joy in believers' lives.

**Eighth,** it equips them for ministry to others in the body of Christ.

**Finally,** it enhances their witness to the lost world.

You may have a problem with ticking the boxes but if your problem is with the boxes then its worst then you thought. But now that we have them, what are we going to do? Nod our head in agreement, and say Amen! And that's it? We go away delighted that we have had a good word from the preacher, if not from the Lord, and we are happy but by next week we have forgotten, if not before we leave. A note book and pen would help if our minds are like mine or say look it up on line if we can manage it. Yet, that's not the problem "remembering" is it? No! it is down to one thing and one thing only, do we have the desire and will to grow? Do you want to know more about God and your Saviour? The doctor is right, "It's a problem with the heart".

Praise God! he goes onto say that something can be done to restore it to health, with the searching question. "Are you interested?" Now it's down to you personally, it's your decision, there is a cost in the treatment, it will be hard, difficult, painful, but in the end health.

"But I'm not feeling too bad at the moment don't you know?"

I think I can get by, anyway I need time to think and talk it over with myself".

It not only sounds mad, and it is, but it is insulting to the Lord for the reasons stated already.

In the next passage (3:17-21), Paul gives specific instructions on how to pursue the prize of spiritual perfection, which is Christ likeness. Later in this epistle, Paul reminded the Philippians that

*"our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21).*

The apostle John echoed that thought:

*"Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2).*

Christ-likeness is the prize that must be pursued, though that prize will not be attained this side of heaven. Before Paul writes of the pursuit, he first sets forth six necessary prerequisites for effectively striving for the prize of Christ likeness.

This is the doctrine of "perseverance". It's the opposite side of the coin to positional perfection; this is the practical side, our duty and responsibility before God. This is the course that we as believers are on and the one the devil never ceases to try and persuade us to leave. So too, the flesh and the world, in fact they persecute you for it. If you know or are aware of what to expect then you are forearmed and can prepare.

The effort requires from the believer a proper awareness, a maximum effort, a focused concentration, a proper motivation, a proper recognition, and a proper conformity. They are the six things that we will look at in the coming weeks together.

Amen.