

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 18: Reaching for the Prize—Part 1: The Prerequisites

Philippians 3:12-16

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

Paul has spent the chapter so far outlining the futility of trying to attain a right standing before God through law-keeping. And he then confessed that the righteousness that he (and all others) need is the righteousness of Christ imputed to them through faith. That is the end to which all people must come. They must come to the point of brokenness over their sin, where they realize that even their best works are nothing more than filthy rags before God. But where Paul has taken us in this chapter so far is really only the beginning of faith. He has brought us to the proper starting point, and oriented us in the right direction to run. It's at this point where he shows us how to reach the goal.

The words that Paul will give us in this portion of scripture will now serve to challenge another equally dangerous crowd of believers: the morally liberal group. Quite the opposite of the moral perfection group, this group is quite prevalent in the modern church today. They sing alternate hymns like “Jesus paid it all, I don't owe Him anything” and “I'd rather you not take my life and consecrate it Lord”. All sarcasm aside, believers are saved to a much higher calling than a one-time transaction sprung out of an emotional decision that you made as a teenager. If you are a believer, you are a child of God, adopted into His family and cared for deeply. It is only natural that a child of God grow to maturity like any child would. Paul is after the maturity of the believer in our text today. I'm reminded of 1 Peter 2:2-3, **“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.”** Even Peter is convinced that if a life isn't growing, it may not be a life after all.

Paul's words in our text today will challenge the believer who has convinced themselves that salvation is completed at cross, and that holy living is optional. Paul will show us what it is to **“press on”** and **“strain forward”** and **“hold true”**. MacArthur gives us nine rapid-fire reasons that all Christians must grow spiritually that I must share with you. He writes, *“First, it glorifies God. Second, it provides evidence that their salvation is genuine. Third, it adorns and makes visible the truth of God to others (cf. Titus 2:10). 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.”*⁹¹

This lesson is titled “Reaching for the Prize—Part 1: The Prerequisites”. There are six prerequisites that we will find in the text of this lesson, they are: Awareness, Effort, Concentration, Motivation, Recognition and Conformity. Every believer must have a right and balanced aspect of these prerequisites if they will ever reach for the prize as Paul did. Let's begin with the first, awareness. Verse 12, **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect”**. Paul begins this verse with a double negative. He had not obtained the goal yet. He had not completed the race. He was still running. All that he knew of Christ, all of the progression that he had made in the faith up to this point had not brought him to the finished state of glorification. He was still in the flesh, he was not perfectly alive with the Lord

⁹¹ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 243)

forever yet. Paul's desire was to **"gain Christ and be found in Him"** (3:8-9), and to **"know Him"** (3:10). This is the only time that Paul uses the verb *teleioo* (already perfect) in his writings, but he speaks of being "perfect" using cognate adjectives seven other times throughout the NT, each giving us another aspect. For example, in Romans 12:2, he speaks of being perfect as meeting the highest standard of goodness and virtue, **"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."** In 1 Corinthians 4:20, he uses the same word (although we translate it differently in English), this time highlighting perfection as attaining maturity, or being fully grown, **"Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature."** Later in 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul presents the aspect of future perfection by comparing our future glory with our present state, **"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."** This last verse I believe is the exact point that Paul is after in our text in Philippians.

Some today might want to help Paul see his self-worth and true potential. They might want to help him with his apparent depression and lack of self-esteem. But Paul isn't wallowing in self-pity, and he most certainly hadn't given up the fight for holiness. The next prerequisite that see in Paul is that he always gave the maximum effort. Philippians 3:12 continues, **"But I press on to make it my own."** The term *press on* means to move quickly and decisively towards something. It's the idea of seeing something and wanting it so badly that you take it. Interestingly enough, the same word Paul used for *press on*, he used in 3:6 speaking of his zeal for persecuting the church. IOW, he had the same passion to know Christ and make Him his own, as he once had to extinguish the church of Christ.

Paul was zealous to know Christ. He fought with all of his might to know Christ and to own Him as his own. And the reason why is clear at the end of verse 12, **"Because Christ Jesus has made me His own."** Walter Hansen writes, *"Christ's apprehension of Paul means that Paul has been captured by Christ, taken hold of by Christ, and Christ will not let go of him. Because he has been apprehended by Christ, Paul has all the reason, the endurance, the assurance, and the joy he needs to pursue Christ even if he has not already comprehended Christ. He is running hard after Christ with his heart wide open to receive Christ because Christ has already received him and arrested him by His love. Divine grace is the source and goal of the human pursuit."*⁹²

Verse 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..."** The third prerequisite that we find in our text is that Paul always had a focused concentration. You might have noticed the repetition of Paul as he continues to remind the Philippians of his shortcomings. He's not needlessly repeating himself, he's underlining the contrast between the true assessment of God of the human soul, and the teaching of the Judaizers that spiritual perfection is attainable in the here and now. There was once thing that Paul did everyday: He forgot his forgiven past, and fought with all of his might for the holiness that lay ahead of him. The Pharisees always looked to their past. That's where perfectionists and legalists find their worth. Paul made a point to forget it all, both the relative good and the bad. Both the seized opportunities and the missed ones. Both the glorious moments and the most heinous. He did not allow one shining moment to spark pride, nor did he allow a prior sin to debilitate his work with guilt and depression. He single-mindedly and whole-heartedly sought Jesus Christ. MacArthur comments, *"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" (Ps. 86:11), and Solomon counseled, "Let your eyes look directly ahead and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you."*

⁹² Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 252)

Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left” (Prov. 4:25-27). When believers have one driving compulsion, to be like Christ, they will move toward spiritual perfection.”⁹³

Paul didn’t look back. No one wins a race looking intently behind them. Instead, he strained forward toward the goal of his calling in Christ. I appreciate the English translations that we have of the Bible that help us to grasp with great clarity the original intention of the author. The NLT has what I believe to be one of the weaker translations, when it says that Paul “looked forward” to the goal. I don’t dispute that he most certainly looked at the goal, I just mentioned the danger of looking backwards, but that doesn’t quite define the word *epekteino* that Paul used. The NASB, NIV, NKJV and HCSB all get closer I believe, when they translate Paul “reaching forward”. They get more of the meaning of the word, because Paul did more than stare at the goal, he aggressively reached for it. But I like the ESV translation the best, when it says that Paul “strained forward”. This finds Paul’s true intent, he wasn’t just reaching, he was stretching his muscles to the farthest extent in order to reach this goal.

Fourthly, Paul’s next prerequisite is that he had the proper motivation. Verse 14, **“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”** You may be reminded of Paul’s racing/boxing analogy in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, **“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”**

At the end of his life, Paul finishes well when he writes to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, **“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.”**

So we see Paul having the proper motivation of the crown of righteousness that is awaiting him in glory someday. Does that sort of thinking challenge what motivates our actions day by day? How often do we pray for the coming kingdom of our Lord? Surely we all eagerly await our Lord’s return, and our emotions are stirred when we are reminded that we live for our Lord and His coming kingdom. But I ask you to reflect on how often your daily speech and thought and action is centered around the imminent reality of the Rapture of the church to be with her Lord. It is my position that when a believer is immersed in the Word of God, and prayer in accordance with that Word, that their hearts will be properly motivated to live in a complete and radical devotion to Him. So that at the moment of death, that Christian may confidently say that they have run their course well and finished the race.

We should heed the words of James who said, **“But be does of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”** (James 1:22-25) How quickly do even the saints of God forget themselves and wander like sheep. We need to be an aware people, who stay focused and concentrate on our lives. Only then will we keep a proper motivation to serve our Lord well.

⁹³ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 247)

Fifthly, the next prerequisite for believers is that they have the proper recognition. We find that in verse 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.”** Here lies another example of how a Bible translation can help us to better understand scripture. If you’re reading from a NASB Bible, as some of you may be, you’ll notice that the text reads **“as many as are perfect”** where the ESV reads **“those of us who are mature”**. The NASB translation have led some to believe that Paul is saying that there are some believers who are perfect. But we know that Paul just finished saying in verse 12, **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.”** I believe that the ESV, as well as many other respected English translations chooses a better word by using “mature” instead of “perfect”.

Remember that he is combatting the Judaizers who promoted a legalistic religion where moral perfection and righteousness were the goal in this life. Paul listed every prior religious accomplishment as dung, and found his righteousness in the resurrected Christ alone. Then, in verse 12-14, Paul speaks of the necessity of leaving the past and striving with all might to the goal. Now when he says, **“Let those of us who are mature”**, he is drawing a line in the sand between those who truly are mature in the faith, and those who aren’t. The Greek word for mature is *teleioi* which signifies “complete, fully developed”. IOW, those who have truly been born again and adopted children, will mature to the same recognition that Paul has laid out in this entire third chapter. And Paul is so confident that he has adequately countered this false teaching with godly counsel, that he adds, **“and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”** Paul knew that God Himself would agree with His words and would write the same truths on the hearts of the younger believers.

The final prerequisite that we will talk about today, is that believer must have a proper consistency. Verse 16, **“Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”** Hansen writes, *“Paul now points to the real progress that has been attained and that sets the course of direction for the whole community. Now they must all continue “on in this direction! – no extravagances to right or to left!” Paul’s affirmation of the attainment that they have already achieved assures his readers that he is not criticizing them for lack of progress or coercing them to move in a new direction. These believers are not being forced to conform to some standard outside themselves; they are being called to live up to their own experience of God’s gracious work in their community to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose (2:13).”*⁹⁴

Paul uses the term “hold true”, or in your version it may say “live up to” or “keep living” or “hold fast”. The word is *stoichen* which gives the idea “to line up” or “to follow in line”. So Paul is exhorting these believers to continue to walk carefully in the ways of the Lord as they have been instructed. Paul used the same term with the Galatians in 5:25, **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”** Paul also used the word to describe walking in the faith in Romans 4:11-12.

A believer will only press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus after they have the proper awareness, effort, focus, motivation, recognition, and consistency. These are the prerequisites for all believers. They are found in scripture, developed in prayer, encouraged through fellowship with mature saints, and refined through trials.

MacArthur ends, *“At the foot of one of the Swiss Alps is a marker honoring 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 Christlikeness.”*⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 260)

⁹⁵ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 250)