

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

PRESSING TOWARDS THE GOAL!

Read Philippians 3:12-21

Introduction

In this second half of the chapter, Paul speaks of pressing on or straining toward Christ-like living (Philippians 3:12–21). He begins by stating that he is not yet perfect but is working toward living more like Christ (Philippians 3:12). He does not focus on the past, but on the future (Philippians 3:13). He is committed to the goal of the calling of Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14). All mature believers are to live this way (Philippians 3:15), holding on to the progress they have already attained (Philippians 3:16).

Paul then calls the believers to imitate him (Philippians 3:17). In contrast, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18), something that brought tears to Paul. These people were focused on their own satisfaction and were set on earthly things (Philippians 3:19). In contrast, the believer's citizenship is in heaven. Believers await the return of Christ (Philippians 3:20). Christ will change the human bodies of believers into a new body like Christ has, something that should bring believers joy (Philippians 3:21).

Still in a Work in Progress

“Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected...” (v12a)

The most common Christian cop-out is: "Well, nobody's perfect" and doing nothing about it. Paul doesn't settle for such a flip answer regarding a serious quest for Christ's fullness. Instead, he acknowledges that he isn't there yet, using two Greek verbs to describe where he hasn't yet arrived:

- "Attained" is “*lambanō*”, "take hold of or grasp." Paul hasn't yet taken hold of the fullness of Christ as he might have desired.
- "Perfected" is “*teleioō*.” It can mean either "complete, bring to an end" or "bring to its goal/accomplishment." God is still perfecting him, still pruning, and shaping, still opening up for him untapped areas of the spiritual life, new vistas of God's glory.

But Paul was ready to count all things as “loss” so that he might gain or attain perfection.

On the flip side and sadly, it is common for many Christian leaders to cultivate the attitude that they have already attained. Without saying the words, they put forth the image of constant triumph that gives the idea that they have already attained and are already perfected. We should all be in the perfecting stage of life with our efforts enabling the grace of God in perfecting our lives.

Pressing in to Take Hold

“... but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.” (v12b)

Because Paul realized that he had not arrived, there was only one option open for him. He had to press on. There was no turning back for Him. Literarily, the phrase “but I press on” meant that Paul had put his hand to the plough and refused to look back (Luke 9:62).

Paul pressed on for what Jesus wanted. His effort was put forth to do God's will, not his own. Paul began this verse with the idea that Jesus Christ had laid hold of him. This is an important idea; yet sometimes Christians react to that idea by being passive. They suppose, “Jesus got a hold of me; so that is it now. I

am a Christian and I am going to heaven.” Paul showed a different attitude; he was determined to lay hold for that for which Jesus had laid hold of him. So, one should ask, “Why did Jesus lay hold of Paul?”

- Jesus laid hold of Paul to make him a new man (Romans 6:4) – so Paul would lay hold of that and wanted to see the converting work of Jesus completely carried out in himself.
- Jesus laid hold of Paul to conform him into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29) – so Paul would lay hold of that and wanted to see the nature of Jesus within himself.
- Jesus laid hold of Paul to make him a witness (Acts 9:15) – so Paul would lay hold of both the experience of Jesus and to testify of that experience.
- Jesus laid hold of Paul to make him an instrument in the conversion of others (Acts 9:15) – so Paul would lay hold of the work of bringing others to Jesus.
- Jesus laid hold of Paul to bring him into suffering (Acts 9:16) – so Paul would lay hold of even that work of God in his life, wanting to know Jesus in the fellowship of His sufferings.
- Jesus laid hold of Paul that so that the Apostle might attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:11) – so Paul would lay hold of that heavenly hope.

Running Flat Out in the Great Race

“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (vv13-14)

Paul was focused on one thing and would not let those things which are behind distract him from it. He pressed on for the prize. We often let those things which are behind distract us, whether they be good things or bad things. Looking at what is in the past often keeps us from what God has for us in the future.

It is a deception to live either in the past or in the future; God wants us to press on in the present, because the present is where eternity touches us now. Paul knew that a race is won only in the present moment, not in the past or in the future.

The prize is the upward call of God. The prize is the call itself, not the benefits that come from the call or any other thing. The prize is being able to run the race at all, working with God as a partner to do the work of His kingdom. Because it is such a glorious call, it is worth reaching forward for it. The Greek word points out the strong exertions made in the race; every muscle and nerve are exerted, and he puts forth every particle of his strength in running. He was running for life and running for his life.

As everything else, this upward call of God is only in Christ Jesus. The legalists might say they followed the upward call of God, but they certainly didn't do it in Christ Jesus; instead they did it in the efforts of their own flesh.

An Example for the Mature

“Therefore, let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.” (vv15-16)

It seems that the occasion of Paul's explanation of his ongoing quest for God is that some in the Philippian church believed they had already arrived, that they were already perfect – that they had "arrived" or "apprehended" the ultimate in spiritual possibilities. Paul is clear that he makes no such claim. He challenges his so-called mature or perfect opponents to agree with his call for a continued, unremitting quest to knowing God more fully. Those who disagree will be corrected by God. Then Paul warns these

"perfect" Christians, "Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (3:16) In other words, if you claim perfection, let it show in your life.

Also, Paul would not allow a lack of understanding to excuse anyone from doing what he did know to be the Lord's will. What we don't know can never excuse us from failing to fulfil what we do know to do. Part of doing what we do know is being of the same mind. This is a call to unity (a unity of truth, against the potential division brought in by the legalists) that looks back to Philippians 2:1-2.

The Apostle's Example and Pattern

"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern." (v17)

We shouldn't think that Paul was being egotistical here. He knew that he was not a sinless or perfect example, yet he was still a good example. He could say as he also did in 1 Corinthians 11:1 – *"Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."* We need concrete examples. While it is wrong to put our trust in any man, it is hypocritical for any Christian to say, "Do as I say, not as I do."

As well, Paul wasn't so proud to think that he was the only one who could be such an example. He told the Philippians to note those who so walk in the way he spoke of, and he noted that the Philippians had us as a pattern (instead of saying that Paul was the only pattern).

Paul's goal in our verse is also to alert the Philippian believers that those who don't live out the Christian life in practice can't be trusted as guides to the spiritual life, no matter how "perfect" they claim to be. Beware!

Enemies of the Cross of Christ

"For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things." (vv18-19)

With great sadness, Paul realizes that there are many who walk in a manner contrary to what he teaches. He regards these people as enemies of the cross of Christ. The enemies of the cross were really the opposite of the legalists, who celebrated their supposed liberty in Christ to the indulgence of their flesh.

Paul had to contend with people like this in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and Romans 6, who thought that salvation comes without repentance and conversion, and who thought that as long as your soul was saved, it didn't matter what you did with your body. When we say that men are enemies of the cross, we do not mean that they are enemies of a physical representation of the cross. We mean that they are enemies of the Biblical truth of the atonement Jesus made for us on the cross and its ongoing power and effect in our life. These people were truly enemies of the cross of Christ, who did not want to follow Jesus by taking up His cross of self-denial.

And now tell you even weeping: The work and the end of these enemies was that they, in their disregard for God's holiness, gave ammunition to the legalist's accusation that Paul preached a cheap grace that required no commitment of the life. This is what grieved Paul so at their teaching.

A writer said: "I never read that the apostle wept when he was persecuted. Though they ploughed his back with beatings, I do believe that never a tear was seen to gush from his eye while the soldiers scourged him. Though he was cast into prison, we read of his singing, never of his groaning. I do not believe he ever wept on account of any sufferings or dangers to which he himself was exposed for Christ's sake. I call on this occasion an extraordinary sorrow, because the man who wept was no soft piece of sentiment, and seldom shed a tear even under grievous trials."

Paul's Conclusion about these people: Their end is destruction: The word translated destruction is the same word used for perdition in other places (such as Philippians 1:28). This can refer to either their ultimate damnation or to the present destruction of their lives. Probably their ultimate damnation is more in view.

Whose god is their belly: This describes the idolatry of these enemies. Not that they were necessarily focused on what they eat, but belly here has a broader reference to sensual indulgence in general. They live for the pleasures of the body, mind, and soul.

Whose glory is in their shame: This shows the misplaced priorities of these enemies. They gloried about things they should have been ashamed about.

Who set their mind on earthly things: This describes the focus of their life. It was not to please and worship God, but to get along in this world. Their attitude was the same as the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21.

Citizens of Heaven

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.” (vv20-21)

We need to appreciate all this would have meant to the Philippians, who greatly valued their Roman citizenship. Just as the Philippians could consider themselves citizens of Rome and were under Roman laws and customs (even though they were in fact far from Rome) so Christians should consider themselves citizens of heaven.

One paraphrase of citizenship is in heaven reads like this: “We have our home in heaven, and here on earth we are a colony of heaven’s citizens.” Paul is saying: “Just as the Roman colonists never forgot that they belong to Rome, you must never forget that you are citizens of heaven; and your conduct must match your citizenship.”

Just as the Philippians would eagerly await a visit from the emperor in Rome, even more so should Christians eagerly await the coming of their King – Jesus Christ.