

Series: To Live is Christ
Title: Onward in Christ
Text: Philippians 3:12-16
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Verse 12

In verse 12, Paul continued his conversation concerning spiritual progression. He transitioned, however, from reflecting back on his past religious life to talking about his future spiritual life. He said, “Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). Though he spoke about his own experience, the apostle’s words were aimed at a certain false teaching in Philippi. Some promoted a form of spiritual perfectionism. They believed that one could become morally perfect while on Earth.¹

Such teaching was rampant in the first-century world. It is for this reason that we find so many references to false teaching on perfectionism in the New Testament. When he wrote his letters, John rebuked perfectionist doctrine. He called those who said they had no sin liars, saying, “If we say, ‘We have no sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). He also held up Jesus Christ as the path to true freedom from sins, saying, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

For both John and Paul, perfection from sin was not deemed as possible on Earth. Total freedom from indwelling sin was something for the New Heaven and the New Earth. John said, “Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Though believers are made positionally perfect before God at salvation (Romans 8:1-2), they will not be made practically perfect until the Lord makes all things new (Revelation 21:1-4).

Absolute moral perfection is not available for believers until their mortal bodies are changed and made sinless. The Bible refers to such an end-times change as “glorification” (Romans 8:28-30). Although believers have received salvation through Christ, their lives on Earth are marked by a war against sin. Such a war is played out via a process known as “sanctification” (John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:18). Consequently, as long as one is still in his or her mortal body, he or she cannot boast of sinless perfection.

Paul upheld such doctrine by using a variety of phrases. He first said he had not “reached the goal.” His language depicted the act of one receiving or grasping an object.² As used in Philippians 3:12, the term appeared in the aorist tense, pointing to activity in the past. Paul’s intent was to reflect on the moment of his conversion (Acts

¹ Martin, 159.

² Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 243.

9:1-9). He knew he did not inherit absolute moral perfection when he met the Lord on the road to Damascus. Yes, he understood that he received a certain sort of positional righteousness at salvation (Romans 5:1; 8:1), but he knew he hadn't attained the type of sinlessness of which the false teachers at Philippi boasted.

Paul continued his discussion on such matters by admitting that he wasn't "already perfect." He shared his admission in the perfect tense. Thus, his language referred to an action in the past with abiding results. Paul's point was that he had not arrived in his spiritual journey. He regarded spiritual maturity as a developmental process, not a destination. From personal experience, he knew he still had struggles with indwelling sin. He spoke of such things in Romans 7:15-21. A.T. Robertson has commented on Paul's perspective, saying, "Paul pointedly denies that he has reached a spiritual impasse of non-development. Certainly he knew nothing of so-called sudden absolute perfection by any single experience. Paul has made great progress in Christlikeness, but the goal is still before him, not behind him."³

Without a doubt, believers have received all they need for life and godliness through Christ (2 Peter 1:3). They are completely justified of sin and wrong doing and they enjoy a righteous standing before their Heavenly Father (Romans 3:24). They have been left on Earth to progressively grow in Christ likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18) and to serve God (2 Corinthians 5:20) so that He might be glorified through their lives (Matthew 5:14-16). However, complete and finalized spiritual perfection is a "not yet" type of thing for the child of God. It will only be fully experienced at the culmination of all things (1 Corinthians 15:51-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

The ironic thing about perfectionist doctrine is that it actually keeps believers from true perfection. Throughout the sanctification process, believers are called to "be perfect" as the Lord "is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). However, if one believes he or she is already perfect because of some mistaken, mystical notion, he or she will inadvertently miss out on the type of perfection that can be experienced in Christian sanctification. By believing that one has arrived, one keeps him or herself from the true pursuit of godliness. The process of progressive sanctification (2 Peter 3:18) is sabotaged by a fake facade of religiosity.

Paul continued his description of his mindset in spiritual development by saying, "... I make every effort to take hold of it" (Philippians 3:12). What is the "it" of which Paul spoke? It was the "goal" he mentioned earlier. Paul realized he would not reach the goal of perfection while on Earth, but he strove for it diligently. One has said that Paul constantly pursued a "relative perfection on Earth."⁴

Paul's testimony highlights a salient feature of true Christian living. It is at this exact point that many stumble. Some err by espousing a bent toward legalism, while others err by boasting of liberty. Both seem to have misconceptions of the way salvation, sanctification, and glorification work together to eradicate sin from the life of a believer. Some fail to see that salvation renders the believer free from the penalty of sin, sanctification renders the believer free from the power of sin, and glorification

³ Robertson, 454-455.

⁴ Martin, 159.

renders the believer free from the presence of sin. Again, in this life, perfection from sin is always a “not yet” type of thing for the child of God.

This is central to Christian maturity — though we will never be perfected until glorification, we strive for perfection through sanctification. The legalists who brag of perfection and the libertines who shun it are both wrong. There is a tightrope mature believers must walk, a balancing act they must maintain. In one sense, they are always mindful that sinlessness is impossible in this temporal life. In another sense, they hotly pursue it, knowing that without holiness “no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

Paul emphasized the human role in divine sanctification by telling his readers to “make every effort.” His language was used in ancient times of the Roman footrace.⁵ It depicted a runner pressing forward and running toward a goal.⁶ It conveyed ideas of intense and strenuous effort. The picture was of a sprinter sparing no expense in order to obtain a prize.⁷ Paul used the verb in the present tense of the Greek language, depicting habitual, ongoing action. His intent was to convey the way Christian sanctification involves a strenuous, lifetime pursuit of perfection. Though one may never reach such perfection, one strives for it.

Through his language, Paul depicted perfection as a prize that can never be obtained in this life. Christian virtue and maturity can both be incrementally gained throughout one’s earthly pilgrimage; however, such things will never be fully realized until the New Heaven and the New Earth. Thus, strong Christians pursue perfection, but they understand that they won’t fully possess it until the Lord makes all things new. Paul used the same verbiage rendered “make every effort” when writing to Timothy, saying, “Flee from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

Paul explained the motivating factor for such a hot pursuit of Christian virtue. At the end of verse 12, he said, “...but I make every effort *to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus.*” In his understanding of the gospel, Christian maturity began with him being “taken hold of by Christ Jesus.” The language of the text was passive voice, depicting an action performed upon Paul (previously known as Saul). The apostle’s choice of verbiage portrayed the Holy Spirit moving upon his own soul at the moment of salvation. If it wasn’t for the Lord’s intervention on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-4), the blaspheming persecutor would have remained in his sin.

For Paul, the Lord’s undeserved display of grace in his life provided fuel for his pursuit of holiness. Paul wanted to “take hold” of spiritual maturity precisely because the Lord had taken hold of him. The verb rendered “take hold” was used in the ancient world of an athlete receiving a prize after a strenuous completion.⁸ In one of his letters to the church at Corinth, he said, “Don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24). Though they will never be fully perfected this side of the eternal

⁵ Martin, 159.

⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

⁷ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

⁸ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

state, believers are to zealously pursue after sanctification like a dedicated athlete who works hard for an earthly reward.

Verse 13

In verse 13, Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead...” (Philippians 3:13). Using the same Greek term from verse 12 (here translated “taken hold of”), the apostle reiterated the fact that he did not consider himself as having reached a state of perfection. Though he pursued perfection (Philippians 2:12), he knew he did not yet possess it. The apostle embraced neither a posture of arrival nor apathy. One has said Paul had “...no complacency which cuts the nerve of progress or stifles the hope of final perfection and no sinful contentment with his own present position.”⁹ Paul had a forward attitude in his Christian development.

The apostle’s forward perspective was marked by a singular focus. Note the way he spoke of “one thing.” The original language of the text gave the idea that Paul was focused on a single task.¹⁰ Interestingly, the words “I do” do not appear in the original language. The text literally reads, “But one thing — things behind I am forgetting and the things ahead I am reaching for.” The syntax of the verse placed emphasis on Paul’s singular focus in life.

The act of “forgetting” was portrayed by a middle voice verb in the Greek. Thus, Paul’s word choice depicted him performing an action on himself. His intent was to depict himself taking personal responsibility for forsaking his past religious accolades. Through a gospel-centered and faith-driven act of the will, Paul removed his focus from man-centered religion so that he might pursue true righteousness in Christ.

In one sense, a good spiritual memory is important. Believers should be careful to remember God’s faithfulness in the past (Hebrews 13:2; James 1:24); however, believers should also be vigilant to forsake and forget past life experiences that do not contribute to true Christian progress. Instead of looking back on past failures or supposed religious achievements, believers are to look forward. Such was the perspective of Paul. He committed himself to “reaching forward to what is ahead.” His words were drawn from language associated with the Roman footrace. His picture was of “the racer — bent forward, his hand outstretched toward the goal and his eye fastened upon it.”¹¹ Used figuratively, Paul’s language suggested “...intense effort as well as firm purpose” in one’s Christian development.¹²

To experience true Christian progress, believers need the perspective of Paul. One’s attention cannot be focused on past religious achievements or accolades. One must have a forward perspective — always pressing on for more growth and progress. There is always more knowledge of God’s truth to be gained, deeper experiences in prayer to be had, more souls to be won and discipled, and more spiritual growth to be

⁹ Zodhiates, [CD-Rom].

¹⁰ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

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¹² Louw and Nida, [CD-Rom].

realized. Mature Christians have an ever “not yet” perspective. They know that perfection and progress has not been fully actualized in their lives, so they press on for more fruit and faithfulness.

Verse 14

Paul continued his discussion of Christian sanctification by saying, “I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14). The word translated “pursue” was another metaphor from ancient athletics. Used earlier in verse 12, it could be translated “I make every effort.” It figuratively depicted the act of striving for a crown or reward.¹³

Unique to verse 14 was Paul’s focus on a “goal.” The apostle’s terminology was borrowed from the Roman games. It was used for the mark or finishing line at the end of a race. Normally, sprinters and racers kept their gaze fixed on such a mark, exerting maximum effort until they crossed the finish line.¹⁴

What was the mark upon which Paul fixed his gaze? It was the “prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s language referenced the physical prizes distributed at the end of a first-century competition. Paul used the term figuratively and spiritual to point to “the rewards of virtue in the future life.”¹⁵

Paul elaborated on the nature of the prize he pursued by associating it with “God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.” What was the calling of which Paul spoke? The term was used frequently in the New Testament as a descriptor of Christian salvation. It emphasized the Lord’s role in summoning people to salvation by the calling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 1:26; Ephesians 1:18). Such a calling is often regarded as the basis for holy living in the New Testament. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul said, “Therefore I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” For Paul, the glorious calling of salvation was fuel and fodder for his pursuit of holiness.

Verse 15

In Philippians 3:15, Paul said, “Therefore, let all of us who are mature think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you.” The word rendered “mature” was the same Greek term Paul used back in verse 12. It meant “complete” or “perfect.”¹⁶ Remember from verse 12 that Paul did not regard himself as being fully mature. He said, “Not that I have already reached the goal or am already *perfect*...” (Philippians 3:12). If Paul wasn’t perfect, how could he say that some within Philippi were?

It is necessary to note an important distinction in Paul’s writing. His words in verse 12 were intended as a rebuttal against false teaching in Philippi. Some boasted

¹³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 456.

¹⁵ Zodiates, [CD-Rom].

¹⁶ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

of sinless perfectionism. Paul unequivocally denied that he had arrived at such a state; thus, he said he was not “perfect” (Philippians 3:12). However, the apostle knew there was a type of perfection for believers to experience. He understood the true meaning of Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:48 — “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Paul knew believers are never perfect on this Earth, but he also knew they can experience a sort of perfection as they pursue maturity in Christ.

Those who were following Christ’s path of sanctification at Philippi could be regarded as “mature” or “perfect.” For such individuals, Paul encouraged them to “think this way.” What is the “this way” of which Paul spoke? His words pointed to the content of his teaching in verses 12-14. Mature believers at Philippi would have agreed with all the apostle said about Christian growth and progress in those verses. The spiritually immature would have been more inclined to listen to the non-apostolic teaching of the Judaizers.

While there were mature believers in Philippi who would agree with Paul’s doctrine, there were others who weren’t so strong. For whatever reason, they showed a degree of sympathy with the doctrines of the circumcisers. Concerning such people, Paul said, “And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this to you” (Philippians 3:12b). In the Greek, Paul used a type of conditional statement that indicated the condition was true. Some indeed “thought” differently than the way Paul thought about progressive sanctification. It seems there were some proverbial fence riders in Philippi. Perhaps they tried to find a “happy medium” between the doctrines of the Judaizers and the doctrines of the apostles.

Paul’s words displayed great grace to the spiritually confused in Philippi. Some didn’t know what to believe. They didn’t have full doctrinal discernment. The apostle knew that such individuals would become convinced of the truth eventually. If they honestly sought the Lord’s perspective concerning the place of circumcision in the New Covenant, the Lord would reveal His truth to them.

Paul’s perspective concerning the doctrinally weak in Philippi is instructive for modern believers. There are many perspectives concerning the proper modes and means of sanctification nowadays. For those who have a clear conception of the Bible’s teaching on such matters, it can be exasperating to dwell with those who don’t. Spurious doctrines and immature approaches to Christian growth can be irritating, even infuriating. For the body to grow into what Christ wants it to be, it is required for all members to be patient with those who seem torn between the ways of the world and the ways of the Lord. If Christian grace and charity is extended to those who are weak, eventually such individuals may have their eyes opened to the truth. In an article entitled “Speaking Appropriately,” Pastor Peter Barnes has noted:

There are people who are not strong in the faith, and the best thing we can do for them is to work it through in a spirit of kindly mercy. We must be patient with all (2 Tim. 2:24-25). It is not Christian to push every view at the same rate (Phil. 3:15-16). Sometimes Jesus was harder at other times — compare Luke 9:50 (‘the one who is not against you is for you’) and Matthew 12:30 (‘whoever is not with me is against

me'). He could weep over those who rejected him and he could denounce them (Luke 19:41; Matt. 23:27).¹⁷

Verse 16

In verse 16, Paul said, “In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained” (Philippians 3:16). It is important to note that the Greek word for “truth” does not appear in the original language. Later manuscripts include a word that was often used of a standard. Earlier manuscripts simply included a verb that is translated “live up to.” The verb was often used in military contexts to speak of soldiers marching in formation.¹⁸ In Roman contexts, such soldiers would line up in rank behind appropriate standards. Banners or insignias made out of metal were usually used for such purposes.

Paul utilized a well-known concept from the Roman army to convey an important reality related to sanctification. Believers are only able to progress toward true Christian perfection as they line up behind the standard of Christ. False teachings will abound until the New Heaven and the New Earth. The only way believers can stay safe is by staying rank and file behind Christ and His doctrine. Jesus Himself indicated that His truth is the standard for Christian growth and maturity. In one of His prayers for the church, He said, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

In the Greek of Philippians 3:16, Paul used a present tense verb. Such language portrayed continual action. The apostle intended to depict the faithful in Philippi as continually marching behind the standard of Christ. Though the journey of sanctification may have traversed much distance, the believers were to stay step-in-step with Jesus’ doctrine. One has noted that Paul’s words were intended as an encouragement in the face of monotony.¹⁹ At times, the way of Christian progress can seem boring and unappealing. New doctrines and trends can allure disciples away from the plain paths of discipleship. Such was likely the case in Philippi. A return to ritualistic religion dazzled weary believers. Paul urged such individuals to stay in line behind the standard of Jesus’ truth.

Paul’s words in verse 16 also revealed that believers have a responsibility for what doctrine they know. He urged the people at Philippi to “live up to whatever” truth they had “attained.” He knew there were varying degrees of Scriptural awareness amongst the church. Each believer was only responsible for obeying the truth he or she knew. However, if each would follow the standard he or she had received, the church would inevitably continue in the course of Christian progress and perfection. Paul’s words were in concert with Jesus’ warning to first-century Jews who dismissed His truth — “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be expected” (Luke 12:48).

¹⁷ Barnes, Peter. Speaking Appropriately. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: 709, October 2022.* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 11.

¹⁸ Zodiates, [CD-Rom].

¹⁹ Robertson, [CD-Rom].