

Text: Philippians 3:12-16

Title: Energetically Pursuing Christ

Truth: The Christian is engaged in a focused pursuit of Jesus Christ.

Date/Location: Sunday April 3, 2022 at FBC (rewrite of May-Jul 2011)

Introduction

In his autobiography, Paul regarded all the high achievements of Pharisaic Judaism as belonging in the loss column instead of in the positive section of his resume. He regarded them as rubbish because he realized it would be far better to:

- gain Christ;
- be found in Christ;
- have the righteousness of Christ instead of his own righteousness;
- know Him;
- experience resurrection power in His life;
- know the sharing in Christ's sufferings;
- be made like Christ in Christ's death, that is, to be obedient and to live for the same purpose for which Christ died;
- attain to the resurrection from the dead, however God works out the circumstances of our lives.

Paul now goes on to explain how he lives his ongoing Christian life.

This talk about himself serves an important purpose: it underscores the warning against false teaching Judaizers who have a great confidence in the flesh. Paul has none of that confidence. He depends on the Lord to help him progress in his life with Christ, not through external rituals but through a pursuit of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. His example is one that we must follow—and not follow the false teachers. Fleshly ordinances do nothing to progress us in Christ-likeness or in knowing Him, nor in suppressing the fleshly tendencies of our hearts (Col. 2:23). A lively relationship where we gratefully acknowledge His righteousness, and diligently pursue knowing Him, the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, and being conformed to His death—these are the “things” Christians seek after.

I. The Doctrine of Imperfectionism in This Life, v. 12a

12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected.

- A. You may have heard about the religious teaching of perfectionism which says that a person can reach a higher plan of spiritual life in which they “possess perfect love” or “commit no more known sin.” That is a false and dangerous doctrine (1 John 1:8-10). Under this heading falls any understanding which emphasizes the identity of the Christian in Christ so much that obedience is washed out and becomes inconsequential. The fact is that obedience *is* necessary, lest we fall into antinomianism.
- B. The Apostle Paul subscribes to the doctrine of “imperfectionism.” That word is not in my spell-checker, but it conveys the idea very well. Paul was a humble spiritual giant. He had progressed far in his walk with Christ, but there were two incomplete projects...
- C. He had not already obtained/attained/reached the goal of the gains that he hoped for in Jesus Christ. Those things we listed above He had not gotten yet in their full measure. Oh, he had something: and He was declared righteous; and He was in Christ—same as you who have trusted in the Lord Jesus. But the fullness of the blessing of God awaited for the redemption of his body (Romans 8:23).
- D. Furthermore, he had not already been made perfect by God, meaning that he was not fully mature or perfected yet. Yes, Christians are “complete in Him” (Col. 2:3) which means that there is nothing outside of Christ and His provision that is required for us to be in good standing with God. But even in that completeness, we lack maturity and are not fully perfected. The key word here is “perfected”: a verb of passive voice with a tense that happens to be called by grammarians the “perfect” tense (not to be confused with the meaning of the verb itself!). In this context, the passive voice indicates God is the operator, and the tense indicates a completed work with ongoing results. In this case, the work is *not* completed yet, because God has *not* finished that work yet (but He will—Phil. 1:6).

E. Besides the especially important truths already mentioned, I see a couple of implications. First, if *Paul* has not reached the goals that God has set for the Christian, then *I* have not, and *you* have not either. Let's be realistic: our current standing in Christ, as wonderful as it is, is not everything. We have a good distance to go before we are outfitted for dwelling with God. The second implication is that I see there are two participants in our ongoing Christian life: **I** want to gain Christ and know Him, etc. and **God** is involved in the maturing work.

These implications push us to ask: so what do I do now?

II. The Pursuit of Godliness, v. 12b-14

12b but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 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, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

- A. Like Paul, we recognize that progress in the Christian life is not automatic. It requires our energetic effort. So, we “press on” to lay hold of that same thing for which Jesus laid hold of me.
- B. Unpack that: to “press on” means simply to pursue, make every effort, to strive (like Isaiah 13:14, Haggai 1:9). It is the greyhound *pursuing* the rabbit at full speed. The Greek dictionary that I use (BDAG) says that this word means “to move rapidly and decisively toward an objective, hasten, run...” **Do you have this focus?**
- C. **Do you have an objective? Do you know what objective you *should* have? Do you care?** Paul states his objective in 12b somewhat vaguely: “to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of me.” What is *that*? He defines it as, “what Christ wants for me, that’s what I want.” Do you want for yourself what Christ wants? Do you will to do His will? Are you submitted to Christ that way, or are you your own boss? Paul is a great example of submission to Christ’s Lordship.

We can think about it a little more precisely by noticing that Paul has *already* told us what *that* is that he pursues—in verses 8-11. It boils down to knowing Christ. Stating it in the language of Romans 8:29: “to be conformed to the image of His Son,” that is, Christ-likeness. We are called to be like the human side of Jesus. This is what most glorifies God and pleases Jesus Christ.

D. Back to the idea of perfectionism, Paul does not think that way, so **we should not either**. “I do not regard myself as having achieved them.” He has not achieved them, and he does not make up a mental mind game that he has somehow mystically achieved them.

E. Instead, Paul does one thing, and he says it very neatly: “but one thing: on the one hand that stuff which is behind me I forget, and on the other hand, the things in front of me I stretch toward.”

Now, does Paul do *one* thing or *two*? I take the package as the one thing. In the single-minded pursuit of Christ-likeness, he cannot be dragged backward by things that were in his past.

F. Note the kind of things in Paul’s forgotten past: religious accomplishments that formerly seemed good but now “not so much.” Not all of these things were bad in themselves, but considering them as meritorious before God was bad. Now, suppose that you have some things just like that in your past? **Forget them. Consciously decide to put them aside.**

And what if you have some *really bad* things in your past? **Forget them.** Useless things in your past? **Forget them.** Sins you did against yourself (1 Cor. 6:18)? **Forget them too.** If you believe you cannot “forgive” yourself, then you are living in the pre-Christ mindset, for if Christ can forgive you, the sins are forgiven. You cannot hold something against yourself that Christ is not holding against you. Or are you better and more strict and less gracious than He is?

G. You do not have time or energy to “think” about these things. There is time and energy for one thing and one thing only: pursuing Christ. There is no profit in chasing after those religious things—much less bad things—from your past life. You are a new creature.

H. The greatest desire of Paul is to know Christ and be found in Him and all that package of godliness. In verse 14—look at it with your own eyes—he calls that the “prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The prize and the upward call are the same thing, but in their full heavenly manifestation. The goal will finally then not be “out in front” like the greyhound rabbit, but will be in his possession. Oh what a glorious day that will be!

III. Like-Minded Pursuit, v. 15-16

A. The mature in Christ will be of like mind with Paul. It is that simple. Mature thinking tracks with these Bible verses and grasps them intuitively, though it may admit it falls short of a full experiential understanding! Those who discard Paul or look down on him are gravely mistaken. With such an attitude toward a major portion of God’s word, you are near to destruction. Instead, you should receive Paul’s word as it is in truth—not as the word of men, but the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13). Then, this thinking will lead to proper living.

B. Those who are thinking differently than Paul are in error. Example: someone who thinks they have already obtained everything that salvation offers, or a perfectionist, or someone who says there is no need to confess sin once saved. Such folks are mistaken in their mindset. They think they have obtained perfection but in reality they have not. Their mindset and the facts do not match. They certainly do not have a mindset like Paul is exhorting here.

C. To remedy this situation, they can get into the word of God and learn God’s revealed will for them too and begin to run the same path of pursuing Christ-likeness. If they did not, God would show them, not by some divine or angelic visitation from on high, but by using regular means at His disposal. That could include the exhortation of fellow believers, humble reading of the Word, the ministry of the Bible in the congregation, or chastisement and trials. A true believer will not remain in fundamental (or even non-fundamental) theological error forever, because God will see to it that he is corrected.

D. Paul concludes with an exhortation that however far we have come in the attainment of Christ-likeness, we should continue in it. We must live based on what we know in the Lord already, lest we be subject to a severe judgment (Luke 12:47-48). And, if we reject what we already know, God will take even that which we know away (Mark 4:23-25). How you respond to what you have been taught will determine how much you receive in the future. If you reject what Word you are being taught, then it should be no surprise that you will not get more in the future, whether because God withholds it, or because you draw back and do not put yourself in a position to hear it anymore. How is your mindset for hearing the Word right now? How is your mindset for living at the level of maturity that you have attained? If it is positive, you are moving forward. If it is negative, you are moving backward, and should not be surprised if even that which God has given you find disappears.

Conclusion

There is no resting on laurels in the Christian life as if we have "arrived" at whatever it is we think we have arrived at. There is no such thing as a "lazy Christian."

There is always "pressing on" the upward way, new heights gained every day, etc. But the author of that hymn, Johnson Oatman, inconsistently it seems to me, believed in complete sanctification, "the washing of the soul of a true believer from the remains of sin."¹ That appears, on his view, to happen in this life. No, no no! We move from one level of glory to the next until we reach final glorification (2 Cor. 3:18) in the presence of Christ.

There is a life-focus here that keeps its eye on Jesus all the time. He saves us from start to finish and our life is to be growing in our relationship to Him, our likeness to Him, our pursuit of Him and His heavenly calling.

MAP

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/im_pressing_on_the_upward_way,
<https://ihconvention.com/devotional/march-14-2/>