

## **Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

### **Reaching for the Prize**

Scripture: Philippians 3:12-16

Code: 50-33

Let's open our Bibles now as we come to the study of God's Word to Philippians chapter 3...Philippians chapter 3. We're going to be looking at a great, great portion of Scripture, verses 12 through 16 I am sure in many ways the most familiar portion in this whole epistle.

I think it is obvious to any student of the New Testament and any student of the letters of the Apostle Paul that he must have loved athletics, as many of us do. And the reason I say that is because he so often uses athletic analogies, or athletic metaphors to illustrate spiritual truth. One of his athletic analogies is that of a runner, running a race. The runner to him is the picture of the Christian, the race is the Christian life. And frequently in his writings he alludes to this running metaphor, this...this picture of maximum effort as the Christian moves along toward the finish line. That is essentially the underlying picture of the passage before us. Look then at chapter 3 verse 12 and let me read to you verses 12 through 16.

Not that I have already obtained it or already become perfect but I press on in order that I may hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to lies ahead I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore as many as are perfect have this attitude, and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you. However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Now obviously the heart of this passage is the very familiar fourteenth verse, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The theme here then is pursuing the prize. The analogy is that of a runner who is running to win in order that he might gain the prize. The spiritual point here is the matter of pursuing the spiritual prize. If you will, Paul is talking about Christian effort toward growth. Now he has just given his personal testimony of the experience of his own conversion from his viewpoint from verses 4 to 11. We have studied those passages there in some detail.

You'll remember that he has lived as a Jew and he recites his credentials in verses 5 and 6, circumcised the eighth day of the nation Israel, the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to the righteousness which is the law found blameless. And as he lived as a God-fearing law-abiding Jew he had learned to put his trust in those achievements for his salvation. So he had this prophet column in which he assumed that all of these

things made him right with God. Then on the Damascus Road he was confronted with the living Christ. And he saw that all of those works and all of those achievements not only did not make him right with God, they hindered him from being right with God. And that he would have to abandon them all and receive Christ. And so, in effect, in verses 4 through 11 he says, "When I saw the value of Christ and when I saw that salvation was only in Christ, I took everything that once was gained and counted it loss and I abandoned it all for Christ." And so you had then in verses 4 through 11 an insight into the heart attitude of Paul at the time of his conversion when he discounted all of those things once precious, put them all aside to embrace Christ.

In verses 8 through 11 then he began to recite what he gained in Christ. Verses 4 through 7, what was loss, verses 8 through 11 what was gained. And what did he gain in Christ? Remember there were five things. He gained the knowledge of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, the power of Christ, the fellowship of Christ and the glory of Christ. Frankly, quite an amazing list of spiritual blessings.

Now, saying that I set all of this aside, received Christ and in Christ I gained all of this might lead someone to assume that Paul had reached spiritual perfection. It might lead someone to assume that the beginning for him was also the end. Or that the start was also the finish, that having come to Christ he was instantaneously made perfect...nothing more to become, nothing more to seek, nothing more to pursue, he had arrived.

It is also quite possible that the Judaizers, the Jewish teachers who were plaguing the Philippian church, were telling the Philippians that spiritual perfection was available if they would be circumcized and keep the law. It is also true that there were heretics floating around at that time who believed you could reach a certain level of knowledge in which you attained perfection. So to answer the Gnostics who thought they had reached that level, to answer the Judaizers who thought they had reached that level through circumcision and law keeping and to answer anybody else who might assume that because he had the knowledge, the righteousness, the power, the fellowship and the glory of Christ he was therefore perfect, he quickly in verse 12 launches into a passage which is a total disclaimer of any spiritual perfection. That's his intent in this passage. He wants us to know that he is not perfect. He has not reached moral perfection, he has not reached spiritual perfection even though he is a new creation, even though he has a new heart and a new disposition which desires strongly holy things, even though he had union with Jesus Christ and a new mind, the mind of Christ, even though he has new standing before God and is accepted by God and entitled to heaven and has the righteousness of Christ covering him, even though he has the indwelling Holy Spirit who is the power of God, even though he has promised future glory and indwelling glory in that Spirit, he has not arrived...he is not perfect. He is still temptable. He is still the possessor of his unredeemed flesh. He is still a sinner.

Thus, any thought of perfection must be set aside in favor of pursuing the perfection that every believer must recognize he doesn't have. That's the point. He had already been placed in Christ, already accepted by God, already gifted with all of these tremendous things and yet he was not

perfect. He had not arrived.

Peter understood it when Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:18, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." He was saying the same thing Paul is saying here. There's a growing process. When you're saved yes you receive the knowledge of Christ, yes you receive the righteousness of Christ positionally imputed to your account, yes you receive the power of Christ in your life, yes you receive the fellowship of Christ in communion with Him, yes you receive the glory of Christ but not in perfection. And so there must be growth. There must be the pursuit of the goal. There must be the running of the race. That's his point. The pressing toward the mark.

You say, "Well why? Why should I bother? I mean, if I'm already entitled to heaven and I already have these things guaranteed to me and promised to me and I will some day enter into the fullness of them in the presence of God, why bother to grow?" Well in one sense it's kind of a moot point because if you're a new creation in Jesus Christ you will desire to grow. So it's not as if you're going to stand there and say, "Well now that I'm a Christian I think I'll have to debate whether I want to grow or not." Having been born into the family of God you are born with a hunger, in fact in many cases an almost insatiable hunger. There is a built-in desire and drive and longing for growth.

But apart from that there are some very important reasons why you should grow, reasons why you should pursue the prize and run the race. First of all, it glorifies God. And that's what a Christian is supposed to do with his life is bring glory to God. Secondly, it verifies regeneration. It makes demonstrable the fact that you are truly changed because you're in the progress of making it visible that your life is being changed. Thirdly, it adorns the truth. It lets you literally wear the truth of God so others can see it. Fourthly, it grants you assurance. When there is spiritual progress in your life there is the sense that you belong to God because you can see His work and your calling and election become sure. Not only that it preserves you from the sorrows and the tragedies of spiritual weakness which are not enjoyable to any believer any time.

Furthermore, pursuing the prize, running the race, seeking the goal protects the cause of Christ from reproach because when you live a godly life and you pursue the goal, your life is consistent with the character of Christ and the character He upholds in Scripture and thus you're not a reproach to Him. Seventh, when you pursue the prize and run the race and grow spiritually it produces joy and usefulness in your life and thus you can minister capably to the church. And finally, it enhances your witness to the lost world.

There are myriad reasons why then to run the race, pursuing the prize. So, Paul like a runner in a race is doing just that. This is not a new picture for him as I mentioned a few moments ago. In 1 Corinthians 9 in verse 24 he says, "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. And 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, therefore I run in such a way as not without aim...and then he says in verse 27...I buffet my body and make it my slave." He says I do everything I can not to be disqualified, to run the race with maximum effort and maximum conformity to the rules. I don't run half-heartedly, I run all out. I don't violate the rules, I don't take spiritual steroids, whatever you want to say, I stay within the rules. I compete as I'm supposed to. But I run the race.

Now, let me add another footnote here. The Apostle Paul is trying to show the readers in Philippi that because he is a Christian does not mean he has attained perfection. But beyond that, I believe he is trying to teach all of us and all generations that perfection in this life is a goal, not an achievement. It is something you pursue but never reach. I think this attacks effectively the false doctrine of perfectionism. I don't know if you're familiar with that. If you've come from a Methodist background or a Wesleyan background or a Nazarene background you perhaps remember them teaching perfectionism, or as it was called total sanctification, or complete sanctification. That is that a believer in this life on this earth before death can reach a place of spiritual moral perfection. They teach that. They do not teach that that is a result of progress, they teach that as a result of a momentary instantaneous second work of grace, like salvation, you are momentarily instantaneously made sinless. And, in fact, some have gone so far as to say it encompasses the eradication of the sin nature. That's perfectionism. It basically goes back to Pelagianism, to Arminianism, was crystallized in more modern times by John Wesley and became a very important part of Wesleyan tradition, Wesleyan theology.

The Apostle Paul deals a devastating blow to this doctrine of perfectionism. By the way, the only way Wesley could make it fly was to say that there's a difference between willful sin and making mistakes because anyone who claimed sinless perfection would have a very difficult time convincing the people who were close to them that it was really true. And so they came up with a dichotomous definition and said that those are mistakes that are unwilling, they don't count, they're not the willing sins that are the result of the sin nature. So Paul, I believe, deals a death blow to that particular perfectionist's theory, he denies it and he calls for a pursuit of a prize that can only be fully realized in heaven. And by the way, in this passage he confesses that he hadn't reached it, he hadn't attained it, he hadn't acquired it, he hadn't arrived at perfection and this is thirty years after his conversion. And if the singularly unique Apostle Paul, perhaps the most committed dedicated Christian who ever lived, after 30 years had not achieved perfection, who in the world are any of us to claim such.

Now, verse 12 launches his thought, "Not that I have already obtained it or already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." There is an instantaneous disclaimer. Paul is saying I have knowledge in Christ, the righteousness, power, fellowship, glory of Christ, I have all the great blessings that God can give in Christ but I have not attained moral spiritual perfection in my own life. That's the disclaimer. And then he goes on in verses 13 through 16 to talk about how we must pursue that.

Now, the basic thrust of the passage then is a call to pursue the prize. It's a call to pursue the goal, the prize which is spiritual perfection. We are to give our whole life to this, that's what he's saying in verse 14. "I press toward that." The word "press" meaning I pursue, I chase it, I run after it.

Now, in this passage we have six principles for pursuing the prize, and I want to share them with you. Six necessary elements if we are to effectively pursue the prize. Number one, an awareness of the need to pursue a better condition. Please note I didn't say a better position, your position in Christ is fixed by God's grace through Christ. But your condition must be improved. You are not what you should be, you are not what you can be, you are not what you will be some day when you see the Lord. So there must be beginningly an awareness of the need to pursue a better condition. And you see perfectionists don't do this. Anybody who thinks they've reached spiritual perfection has no awareness of pursuing a better condition. You know what the people in perfectionism do? They get to the point where they think they've arrived at the level of spiritual perfection therefore there's nothing left to pursue. So they become content with their condition, and worse than that, they spend the rest of their life instead of pursuing a better condition, defending themselves as perfect to people who aren't convinced. It all starts with a dissatisfaction. Please note verse 12. "Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect." And that's where he starts, an awareness that he hasn't arrived.

Paul the Apostle, 30 years after his conversion is saying I'm not what I ought to be, I'm not what I ought to be. I can stand here and echo that testimony after all the years of walking with the Lord and all the years of ministry, I am not what I ought to be. I haven't arrived. I'm not spiritually perfect. I'm not morally perfect. I haven't reached Christ's likeness. I have not reached God's perfect standard. I am not what I ought to be, I am still in process. There is still a pursuit in my life as there is in the life of every believer. And as F.B. Myer said, "Self-dissatisfaction lies at the root of our noblest achievements." Whatever we achieve spiritually begins with dissatisfaction. I am not pleased with where I am in my spiritual life. I am not content with my spiritual condition. If you are content, you have reached a very dangerous point. It is a point at which you will find yourself insensitive to sin and defending yourself when you ought to be admitting your weakness and pursuing spiritual strength.

So spiritual growth, this whole pursuing starts with a recognition that you're not where you ought to be. It's a runner at the beginning of the race saying the whole idea is to get to the end of this thing. I'm not there, I've got to run this course. So Paul saw it right. He knew what he had in Christ. But he knew also that he wasn't perfect. So he says...notice the first two words in verse 12..."not that," that's an instant disclaimer to correct any erroneous impression that may have come from his words when he recited everything he had in Christ. He says, "Not that I have already obtained it," the word here means to receive, to grasp, to seize, to acquire, to attain, to obtain. I don't have it, is what he's saying, I don't have it yet. What is it? Keep reading, "Or have already become perfect," that's what it is. I haven't become perfect. I have not already...perfect passive with continuing present results...become

perfect, become complete, become morally, spiritually like Christ. He uses the word already twice. And he's emphasizing that now, that's what already means, now I haven't attained, I haven't attained it yet, it's still future, I'm not yet perfect.

You say, "Paul, but you have the knowledge of Christ." Yes, but 1 Corinthians 13 he says, "Now we know in...what?...in part, then some day shall we be known as we are known." "But, Paul, don't you have the complete righteousness of Christ?" Yes, put to my account I do, because I put my faith in Christ, but practically...2 Corinthians 7:1...let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. And he includes himself with the sinful Corinthians as one who needs to perfect his flesh. Yes he had righteousness, but not perfect practical outworking of that.

You say, "But, Paul, don't you have the perfect power of Christ?" Yes I have the power of Christ but I don't have it so perfectly in my life that I never sin and never fail, and that's why God, 2 Corinthians 12, has put a thorn in my flesh and allowed me to be debilitated to keep my ego in check because if I didn't have this my ego would run away with me because of my many revelations. So I do not yet know in my flesh how to perfectly work with the power of Christ.

"Well, Paul, don't you have the fellowship of Christ?" Yes, but it isn't a perfect fellowship. I don't even know how to pray as I ought to pray so the Spirit has to make intercession for me with groanings which cannot be uttered because of my ignorance. So how can my fellowship be perfect if I can't understand the things that the Lord understands?

"But, Paul, don't you have the glory of Christ?" Yes, in me is the indwelling Spirit but I am waiting...verse 20 of Philippians 3...I am waiting for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory. I haven't yet attained that full glory. That's yet to come.

So, he says, "Look, I have all these things but not in perfection in my own life. I must grow. I must pursue the prize." And, beloved, that's where it starts, with an awareness that you're not there, an awareness that you haven't arrived, that you've got a lot to learn and a lot to perfect in your life and a lot to yield over to the power of the Spirit of God and a lot more to know than you already know. And if you have gotten to the place where you feel satisfied, that's a very dangerous place to be...very dangerous. If you've had enough prayer and enough church and enough teaching of the Word of God and enough of the Bible and enough of Christian fellowship to satisfy you, you are in a very dangerous condition. For if not theological perfectionism, you have arrived at a sort of pragmatic perfectionism where you're as perfect as you care to be and that assumes that you're as perfect as God cares you to be when the truth is if you're not pursuing the prize with all your might, you're misjudging your present condition. Awareness of the need to pursue a better condition is where all spiritual progress starts. You start out of blessed discontent, blessed dissatisfaction, a recognition you're not what you ought to be.

Number two principle, if you're going to pursue the prize effectively you must give maximum effort to pursue that better condition. First to know you need it, secondly to pursue it. There must be maximum effort to pursue that better condition. Look at verse 12 again, so he says, "I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." I press on, dioko, I run, I follow after, I pursue, I chase. It's used of a sprinter and the word means aggressive energetic endeavor. He says I'm running after this thing with all my might. There's no quietism here. There's no crucify yourself, let go and let God kind of theology here. This is the straining of every spiritual muscle, this is running to win, 1 Corinthians 9. This is pursuing the prize with all your might. This is fighting the good fight, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7. This is running the race to win, Hebrews 12:1 and 2, laying aside every weight and the sin that does so easily beset us and looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith who is the one before us. Paul's saying I run, I pursue, I chase, I haven't arrived, maximum effort.

And, beloved, that's what it takes. It takes maximum effort using the means of grace provided to you by God to pursue spiritual perfection. You say, "Well, what's he after?" Now follow, marvelous, verse 12, "I am pursuing in order that I may lay hold of..." Oh, he's after a prize, he's after something specific. That's right. He wants to get a hold of something. The verb means to seize or grasp. I'm after something. "What are you running after, Paul?" Well here it is, "I'm after that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Now that is a fascinating statement. You see what he's saying? He's saying I'm pursuing the prize so that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. "What do you mean by that, Paul?" I mean that I'm pursuing the very thing that was the reason Christ pursued me. Did you get that? In other words, my goal in life is consistent with Christ's goal for my salvation. He saved me for a purpose that purpose of His in saving me has become my purpose in my spiritual progress. You see? That's a very, very significant truth. The reason Christ redeemed me has become the goal of my life. My will is now His will, I want for me what He wanted for me and saved me to accomplish.

You say, "What was it? What is it?" Look at Romans 8, Romans chapter 8 verse 28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose," talking about Christians. Now, follow this, "For whom He foreknew, or chose, that's all believers, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of...whom?...His Son." Now why were you saved? Why did God choose you and then save you? In order to make you like what? His Son. What's the goal of your Christian life then? It's the same thing for which you were saved, He saved you to make you like His Son and that purpose for which He saves you becomes the purpose for which you live. You see? That's what we're all about. We're all in a life-long pursuit of Christ's likeness. And you may think that you have arrived at some point of spiritual perfection, but I think if you put yourself against Christ you're going to be a little more realistic. Christ's likeness is the goal. Christ's likeness is the issue here. And it is that for which we were redeemed that we might be made like His Son. That's the point.

Beloved, is that a marvelous truth? In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 2:14 it says we've been saved in order to gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. What a statement. So Paul says, "Look, I make a maximum effort, I make a maximum effort, I am pursuing with all my might that very thing for which Christ pursued me." Why did Christ pursue Paul, slam him into the dirt on the Damascus Road and redeem him? In order to make him like Christ. He says that goal of Christ has become my goal...my goal. Is that a worthy goal, would you say? Does it require a life's commitment? Is it worthy of that? Of course, of course. So he says I run, I run to win, I run with all my might, I pursue hard after this goal for which I was saved.

What is necessary then in pursuing the prize? Number one, is the awareness that there is a better condition. Number two is the maximum effort required in moving toward that better condition. It demands all of me, all I have to give to run to win, to box to hit my opponent.

Third principle, in pursuing the prize it is required that there be focused concentration to pursue that better condition. Not only maximum effort but focused concentration. Any athlete knows that when you're running in a race you have to fix your eyes on something ahead of you. You cannot watch your feet or you'll fall on your face. You cannot watch the people around you or you will trip or somebody will pass you on the other side. Your focus is straight forward on the goal that is ahead. And that is precisely what he is saying here. In making maximum effort there's a concentration point beyond you upon which you focus.

Look what he says in verse 13 about that. "Brethren," and by the way, that's a term of affection. I believe he uses it here as a gentle term of intimacy to move the hearts of the Philippians toward him because they've been moved toward the Judaizers who have been battling the church. And so in an expression of warmth, he tugs their hearts a little bit his way. "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet." That's a third time he's said that. You say, "Why is he so repetitious?" Because there's a polemic nature to this passage. That is to say it carries an argument directed at people who are teaching error so he wants to make his point abundantly clear because a lot is at stake in this particular polemic. So he basically says it again, another disclaimer, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet." And I don't care whether those Judaizers claim to have it or not, it's not possible. It leads me again to believe that the Judaizers were claiming they had reached perfection through law keeping and circumcision. But he is saying I do not think, I do not believe that I have laid hold of it yet.

By the way, the word for "lay hold" here is a compound verb, very strong with a prepositional prefix meaning I haven't fully wholly completely totally perfectly attained to it. And he says the same thing again. And then this, "But one thing..." and then the editors have added, "I do," because it's implied. But all he says in a staccato brief impassioned abrupt way is, "But one thing...one thing I do," boy, there is the key, folks, one thing I do. The man was so focused. The man had an unbelievable level of



concentration.

This is necessary for being a great athlete, I believe. It is those totally focused people who succeed in athletics. It is those totally focused people who succeed in life. You know, the world...the world is full of people who are clever at much and successful at nothing because they never can focus their life. They're like the guy who jumped on his horse and rode off madly in all directions, a lot of energy and a lot of fury and a lot of action, no progress. They're not focused. That's why the psalmist prayed, "Lord, unite my heart, give me one thing." That's why James warned about a double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways and he's blown all over the place. Here was a man with a focused concentration. And the focus of his life was one thing, one thing...this one thing. What was it, Paul? It was pursuing the prize, verse 14, "This one thing, I press on toward the goal for the prize." That's the one thing in my life. That's what makes a great man.

I've told you before, my grandfather said to me, "Just do one thing right in your life and you'll be way ahead of most people." That's right. Just one thing, don't criticize that one dimensional person who is eminently successful at what they do. In the spiritual dimension it is equally true. When your life has one driving compulsion and that is to be like Christ, you're moving in the right direction.

Soren Kirkegard(?), the great Danish philosopher, wrote a book with an interesting title, the title of it Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing.. Purity of heart, he said, is to will one thing. And, of course, the powerful motif of that book just booms in every chapter is that Christians are only pure when they renounce all other things and pursue one thing. And what is it? The truth of God. As you pursue the truth of God, you narrow to one thing. Purity of heart is to will one thing. He has a prayer in the book in which he prays, "So may Thou give to the intellect wisdom to comprehend that one thing. To the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding. To the will, purity that wills one thing. In prosperity, may Thou grant perseverance to will one thing. Amid distractions, collectedness to will one thing. In suffering, patience to will one thing." One thing.

Now such focused concentration is the result of a negative and a positive. Notice the negative in verse 13, in order to will that one thing Paul says, "Forgetting what lies behind," that's the negative. And then he says, "And reaching forward to what lies ahead," that's the positive. Willing one thing means, number one, negative, you eliminate the past. Don't look back. We've all watched a runner look back over one's shoulder and get passed on the other side. Don't look back. It is irrelevant. Nothing happening back there is relevant. You've heard runners interview...being interviewed and they say, "Did you feel the pressure of the persons coming up?" "No, I run my own race. It is not relevant to me what is going on around me, it is only relevant that I make the maximum effort. I worry only about my own effort." Don't look back. Make a break with the past. This is such good advice. O my, so important. Perfectionists? Ha, they're always looking at the past, reminding everybody of their past achievements. Legalists always looking at the past, it's the basis on which they have their present quote/unquote spiritual status.

The Judaizers in Galatia wanted to dig up the past and push it off on the Galatian church. And Paul says, "Don't you dare let them entangle you in the yoke of bondage from which you've already been liberated." Now what does he mean by the past? He means the past...forgetting those things that are behind. What things? Everything. Now follow this, okay? Good things and bad things, achievements, virtuous deeds, great accomplishments, spiritual ministries, as well as bad things...sins, iniquities, failures, disasters. All of it. You say, "Forget it all?" That's right. Why? Because it has nothing to do with the future. Did you understand that? It has nothing to do with what you're doing right now, absolutely nothing to do with it. You cannot live on past victories. You cannot celebrate your value by your past. You should never be debilitated by your past sins, iniquities and burdens of guilt. And yet most people are so much distracted by the past that they never get around to running the future. From a positive standpoint...Well, you know, I used to teach and I used to study the Bible and I used to be in a Bible study and I had...I remember when I led a guy to the Lord, it's all back there...and you can't move forward that way, you're anchored to the past. Or it's all, "You know, my life was so bad and I so wretched and I was so immoral, how can God ever forgive me?...and they're all hung up on the guilt of the past. Forget it all...forget it all.

The clearest vision is given to the one who forgets the past. You hear people in the church say, "Well, it's just not like it used to be. I remember the good old days and we were all involved doing this, and we were all involved doing that, and we were doing this, and it was like this, and this is how it was. And it was all so great." It's absolutely irrelevant. It means absolutely nothing to the moment except it will paralyze you. I mean, the runner doesn't go to the blocks in a sprint and sit there and getting ready for the race say to the guys around him, "You know, I just want you to know I've won a lot of races in the past. Boy, I've run fast in the past. I remember when I ran fast over here, and I remember when I ran..." Who cares, man? Get in the blocks. This is another race. We're really not interested in that. It doesn't matter because if you don't look good today, you're not going to win, that's all. Forget that stuff.

And they don't want to hear some guy get in the blocks and say, "Oh, you know, I have so many sins in my past and oh, last night I ate a hot fudge sundae, I know it will weigh me down, I'll never be able to run this race. I will never be able to succeed. I know I'm not going to win. And then I got the worst lane in the draw and this is not going to work out." I mean, shut up and run the race. Nobody's interested in all of that stuff out of your past. Nobody's interested, I'll tell you right now, nobody's interested in what you did in the past, nobody's interested in what I did in the past. What God is interested in is what are we going to do now and where we going in the future? Churches are full of people who are holding all kinds of grudges, bitternesses, perspectives and junk from the past and they're paralyzed by it. The recollection of what you were in your former unconverted state shouldn't paralyze you and it shouldn't discourage you. Disappointments and temptations of the past must not depress you. Put your hand to the plow, don't look back and move, pursue the prize.

And that takes us to the positive in verse 13, forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. Let's go, let's move. The word here, "reaching forward," I love it, *epekteinomi*, *ektenes*, means to stretch a muscle to its limit, *epekis* double prepositions added to it, it means to...I don't know what...stretch stretch, out after would be *ekout*, *epa*after...out after. I mean, your extreme effort is in view here. This is a runner stretching every muscle to reach what is in front of him, the prize. Focused concentration, nothing with the past, just looking at the goal, moving as fast as possible.

Now ask yourself a question...do you have that kind of focused concentration? What are you focused on? Even as a minister of Jesus Christ, my goal in life is not to build a big church, my goal in life is not to succeed in the church, my goal in life is not to develop programs, my focused goal in life must be to be like Jesus Christ and in the pursuit of being like Jesus Christ, out of that's going to flow an impactful life. That's the pursuit. That's the one thing I do, that's the one thing Paul did. Perfection in Christ, the only goal, the only legitimate perspective. Paul said it. We want to present every man perfect in Christ, Colossians 1. We want men to come to the fullness of the stature of Christ, Ephesians 4. We want Christ to be fully formed in you, Galatians. And I have birth pains until I see it happen. So what he said to the Corinthians, he says, "Be perfect, that's my prayer." What's Epaphras doing? He's praying for your perfection in all the will of God, Colossians 4:12. That's the issue. This one thing I do.

So what does it take to effectively pursue the prize and grow spiritually? One, recognition of the need for a better condition. Two, maximum effort in pursuit of that better condition. Three, focused concentration on the one goal of that better condition. Number four principle, spiritual motivation to pursue that better condition...spiritual motivation. We've already alluded to this and Paul is very repetitious. Notice verse 14, the heart of the passage, "I press or I pursue," continuous effort, present active indicative verb, I continually pursue toward...marvelous word, *kata*, means down, it means to bear down on. "I continuously bear down on...what?...the goal." I continuously bear down on the goal. What's the goal? What did we say it was? To be what? Like Christ. The same thing He saved you for is what you pursue. So you bear down on that goal with that focused concentration, that maximum effort.

Why do you do that? Why do you bear down on that? I'll tell you why. Look at it, verse 14, here's the motive, "For the prize..." You say, "Well, isn't that a little crass?" No. You do it for the prize...you want to win the prize. Run to win. You say, "Well that's wonderful. So you bear down on the goal for the sake of the prize." That's right. What's the goal? What did we say the goal was? To be what? Like Christ. What's the prize? To be made like Christ. That's why he says, "You bear down on the prize which is the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." What's going to happen when that upward call comes? You're going to be like what? Like Christ. The goal is the prize, the prize is the goal. So Paul says, "Look, the goal of my life is to be like Christ and that's also the reward of my race." You say, "You going to reach that goal in this life?" No but it's still the goal...it's still the goal. But some day I will

be like Christ, that's the prize that God gives to the one who runs the race. The goal is to be like Christ, perfection in Christ. The prize is to be like Christ, perfection in Christ. Some day we'll be like Him for we shall see Him as He is, 1 John 3 says.

What motivates me? What motivates you? The upward call. We have to live in the light of the Rapture, don't we? We have to live in the light of being called out of this world in to presence of God and at that particular point we will be given glory, we will be given an eternal reward, we will be made like Christ. And if God is so gracious to be willing to give us that prize, how committed should we be to run the race? I mean, look at it, folks, wretched, wicked, vile, godless sinners on our way to hell. God in sovereign grace picks us out, chooses us for salvation in order that He might eternally make us like His own Son. What grace! That is the prize. I don't know about you but that motivates me to run toward the goal.

Paul saw it at the end of his life when he wrote his last letter and he said, "I have finished the course and I'm waiting for the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day." What is the crown of righteousness? It's the crown which is righteousness. What kind of righteousness? Perfection. I'm waiting for perfection which God's going to give me the day I see Him. That's the prize.

So, pursuing the prize means realizing your need, means making a maximum effort, it means focused concentration and it means being motivated by the greatness of the prize itself. Number five, this too is a very important principle. In pursuing the prize we must recognize divine resources to pursue that better condition. I'm so grateful for this verse, it gets overlooked a lot, verse 15, but it's very important to me. Verse 15, "Let us therefore as many as are perfect have this attitude and if anything...if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you."

Now follow this thought here, very important. You say, "Why would Paul throw that word perfect in there? That just confuses the clarity of the text." I'll tell you why. I think it's sarcastic. And again I think in this polemic against the Judaizers, he's dealing with the fact that the Judaizers were talking that they were...talking to the Philippians as if they were perfect, saying, "You know, we've reached perfection." So there's a sort of sarcasm in there that bites a little bit at the claims of the Judaizers. But he says, "As many of us who are the truly perfect need to have this attitude."

He feels that and every pastor would. My prayer for you is that you'd have that attitude. That if you're a true Christian, your desire would be to pursue the prize, that you'd see your own need, that you'd make maximum effort, that you'd have focused concentration, that you be motivated by the great prize and that you would pursue with all your might that prize. By the way, that phrase "have this attitude" literally in the Greek means to think this way, or be intent on this, or set one's mind on this. On what? Pursuing the prize.

But, Paul's not stupid. So look what else he says. "But if in anything you have a different attitude." Do you think that's a remote possibility? Sure. The church is full of people who aren't interested in pursuing the prize. They're interested in looking at the past. They're content with where they are. And so they want to spend the rest of their life justifying the level of their attainment and convincing everybody around them that they're really very spiritual. Instead of recognizing their need, instead of making a maximum effort with focused concentration and motivation, they just are content with where they are and they want to spend their life justifying where they are. Or they're so hung up on the past they can't move. Paul says, "Look, if any of this stuff you have a different attitude, you don't see the importance of pursuing in this way, or you believe you've already arrived wherever you would like to be you've settled there, or some of you even believe that now that you're saved you can live any old wretched way you want like those described in verses 17 to 21 who were supposedly Christians, whose end was destruction and their God was appetite, if you think anything other than what I've said about pursuing the prize, and you won't listen to me," look what he says, "Then God will reveal that also to you." He simply says I have to leave you to God. If you're ever going to get the message and you won't get it from me, then you'll have to get it from God.

Every pastor does that, I've done that. I do that. "Lord, I've poured out my heart, I've said all I can say, and I know there are people who continue to live non-committed lives and all I can say is, Lord, I can't do it, You're going to have to do it. You're going to have to reveal Yourself." The word "reveal" is apokalupto, to unveil. You're going to have to open their minds and unveil reality to them. And you know how the Lord usually does it? Through...what?...trials, suffering, chastening, things like that. Through some special circumstance of life that plunges us instantly back to spiritual reality.

So, Paul says, "Look, you'll have to recognize that in this pursuing the prize you're dependent on divine resources." And for all of us...for all of us, there will be those times when we won't have this attitude and the Lord will have to discipline us to move us along, right? Sure...all of us. So that's what he says. Paul, I know this for me, and I know this for you, that there are times when we have a different attitude and only God can move us. And so he's saying I want God to do that, I want God to bring into your life whatever it takes to move you on the path of pursuing the prize.

What does it take? It takes recognition of need, effort, concentration, motivation, and divine help for those times when we fail to have that right attitude. And lastly, there is one more element in pursuing the prize, let's call it conformity necessary to pursue that better condition...conformity necessary to pursue that better condition. We're really talking about consistency which might be a better word. It doesn't happen by intermittent effort, it demands a consistency. Look at verse 16, "However," that really means nevertheless, or better, one more thing. It's often used at the end of a paragraph to express a final thought. "One more thing, by the way, let us keep living by that same to which we have attained."

In other words, look, keep moving along the path that has brought you to where you are in your spiritual progress. That's the idea. You'll be interested to know that the verb here is translated "keep living." It actually means to follow in line, to line up. It's what it means. So what he is saying is, spiritually stay in line and keep moving from where you have arrived by the same standard or principle that got you where you are. Fall in step. It's used of armies marching in battle order, stay in line, stay in step, be consistent, keep moving. Wherever you are spiritually by the same principles that got you there, keep moving ahead. Consistency, conformity, live up to the level of your present understanding and by the principles that brought you there, keep moving ahead, stay in line, hold the principle tightly and move down the track. Stay in your lane, if you will, and move as fast as you can from where you are. Whatever strength and energy got you where you are, use it to move ahead. If we were talking about the runner metaphor, we would say you've run this far in your lane with great effort, it's gotten you so far, keep that same effort up in that same lane until you hit the finish. Pursuing the prize.

Now, what are the ingredients that help us do that? Four of them, one is the Word. As newborn babes desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow, constantly in the Word, constantly in the Word will keep you consistent, it will keep you on track. It will keep you moving, it will keep you pursuing the prize.

Number two is prayer...prayer. Paul in writing to the Thessalonians illustrates this point when he says, "We night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face and complete what is lacking in your faith." We're praying that your faith will be complete. Stay in the Word, be in prayer.

Third principle, follow an example. Look at verse 17, the following verse in our text, "Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us." Find somebody to pattern your life after. Get a discipler, a spiritual mentor who can help you pursue the prize consistently. It takes the Word, it takes prayer, it takes a model to follow and one more thing. It takes trials. First Peter 5:10, "After you have suffered a while, the Lord make you perfect." James 1, "Trials have their perfect work."

So, in the pursuit of the prize, the Word, prayer, following a spiritual model, you move along and God brings enough trials in to your life to perfect you, to knock the dross off so that you're pure. Paul says, "Look, in Christ I have much, I have great gain but I have no perfection in terms of my practical living. That I must pursue with all my might."

"Why do you do it, Paul?" To gain the prize.

"How hard do you do it?" With maximum effort.

"How focused are you, Paul?" I concentrate on nothing else.

"How dependent on God are you?" When I fail I trust that He will reveal to me my failure and move me out.

"What's the secret, Paul?" Consistent time in the Word, consistent time in prayer, consistently following an example and God bringing the sufficient trials to shape my life.

Ask yourself the question, are you pursuing the prize? Are you growing? Or are you standing in one spot looking backwards and spending most of your time defending yourself? Or are you willing to say I'm not what I ought to be but I'm moving?

A lot of people have died climbing the Alps, falling off of precipices. At the foot of one of the many mountains that has been attempted a number of times is a little grave, it's the grave of a man who tried to climb to the pinnacle and fell off a precipice to his death. The tombstone there is very simple. It gives his name and then it says, "He died climbing." That really should be the epitaph of the tomb of every Christian, "He died climbing." Let's pray together.

Would you in your heart just pray silently before the Lord and perhaps refresh your commitment to pursue the prize, to climb, to run the race? If you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior, at this very moment would you say I want to start the race? Would you receive Jesus Christ into your life? If He's already there but you've obviously reached a point of spiritual satisfaction, you think you know enough, you've heard enough, you've done enough and now it's just about time for you to stop the process of pursuit, would you ask God to forgive you and to move you along toward the prize?

Father, we pray to that end that You would save some today and that You would call to a fresh commitment all of us to run the race, focused, motivated with maximum effort, dependent on Your resources for those down times, consistent in the Word and prayer, following a pattern that we might be like Christ, as much like Him as we can be who will some day be like Him in Your presence, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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