

July 8, 2018

Direction, Not Perfection

Philippians 3:12-16

God does not expect you to be perfect, but He does expect you to actively pursue Christ-likeness.

LTS: 1 John 2:1-17

As you read the letters of Paul it becomes evident that he enjoys the use of metaphor. He often uses illustrations from the world to communicate truth about the Christian life. In fact, there are four categories that he was especially fond of alluding to. 1) the military (“Put on the whole armor of God”), 2) architecture (“You are the temple of God”), 3) agriculture (“Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap”), 4) and athletics. In the paragraph before us on Philippians 3, Paul imagines himself as athlete to illustrate what it means to live the Christian life.¹ In Paul’s mind the following Christ is like a footrace.

Notice (14) how he points to the end of the race when the champion is called upward to the winner’s podium to receive his prize. Observe also (12 & 14) where he speaks of pressing on to reach that lofty goal, the prize that comes from winning the race.

The verb "press on" (*dioko*) means to run or flee, to catch a person or thing. Lawson points out that “It is a word used of a sprinter running a race. The idea is that he is running swiftly after something... pressing on to the finish line. Picture the runner widening his stride, pumping his arms, accelerating his legs and pushing out his chest for the finish line. This is Paul’s all-out effort to pursue Christ.”²

This is how Paul viewed the Christian life. More specifically, this is how he viewed progressive sanctification, which is just a fancy word for the process of spiritual growth. While it’s true that salvation is something that one receives as a gift of grace, sanctification is an active thing. Growing in Christ-likeness requires effort on our part; strenuous effort that can be compared to a runner pushing his body to the extreme that he might win the prize.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 88). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith* (God's Word For You Book 18) (p. 167). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

Now before we dive into the details of the text, let's stand in reverence for God's word and read...

Philippians 3:12-16.

There are several things we learn about sanctification (i.e. Christian growth) from this text. First we see:

I. The Ultimate Goals of Sanctification:

1. Now, I have already revealed what I believe is the main point of the text; namely, sanctification. But let me show that from the text.

A. Paul says (12) "Not that I have already attained this..." (of "It" NAS). What does the word "this" point to?

B. Again he says, (12-13), "I press on to make it my own," and "I do not consider that I have made it my own." Again, we should ask, what is the "it" referring to?

2. The answer is found a few verses earlier where Paul says (8) "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of Knowing Jesus Christ my Lord." Again (10), "That I may know Him..." And then (10) "becoming like Him..."

3. Sanctification is all about growing in the personal, experiential knowledge of Christ. It's like after a man and woman get married. They think they know one another on their wedding day, but really the wedding is merely the consummation of their getting to know one another. They will spend a lifetime digging deeper and deeper into one another's lives, seeking them, learning them, enjoying them. And so is the experience of the Christian with Christ. Salvation is not merely your ticket to heaven! It is the beginning of a personal, ever-deepening relationship with the living Christ!

4. This is what sanctification is about. It's about growing in personal, experiential knowledge of Christ. And secondly, it is about growing in the likeness of Christ. The more we know him the more like him we become. IN fact, that is the H.S.'s goal for your life, that you will (in Paul's words) be conformed to the likeness of God's Son. Or as Paul writes in 2 Cor. 2:18, as we behold the glory of the Lord, we are "transformed into the same image from glory to glory."

5. These are the ultimate goals of sanctification: to know Christ and become like Christ. And notice that is not just Paul's goal, it is also Christ's goal. In verse 12 Paul says, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own" (ESV). I think the meaning is little clearer in the NAS where it reads, "I press on so that I may lay hold

of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ.” In other words, when Jesus laid hold of Paul on the Damascus Road, he had a goal in mind. It was Christ’s ambition to change Paul. And that change would come through an ever-deepening knowledge of Christ that conforms him to the likeness of Christ.

6. That was Jesus’s goal, and for Paul it would be the ultimate prize; namely, to know Christ and to become like Him. These are the ultimate goals of sanctification.

II. The Imperfect Progress of Sanctification:

1. Notice Paul’s honest disclosure in verse 12. He says, “No that I have already obtained this or am already perfect...” And in v 13 he says, “I do not consider that I have made it my own...” Or, as the NAS translates it, “I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet...”

2. In other words Paul is saying, when it comes to sanctification I, the Apostle Paul, have not arrived at a state of perfect knowledge of Christ, nor have I become perfectly like Christ. I still have a long way to grow. Does that encourage you? Does the realization that the great apostle Paul was dissatisfied with his level of spiritual growth make you feel like maybe you’re on the right track? I can tell you, it encourages me. I too am frequently dissatisfied with my knowledge of Christ and my conformity to Christ. Sometimes I wonder at how slow my growth seems to be. And the closer I get to Christ the more clearly I see my sin, so that less sin looks like more. It makes me realize how far I still have to grow and how dependent I am upon the H.S. to produce the growth.

3. On the other hand, this is encouraging to me. God’s goal for you is more about direction than perfection. Contrary to what John Wesley once erroneously taught, no Christian has ever attained spiritual perfection in this life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones is blunt on this point. He writes,

There is no such thing as perfection in this life and world. It is impossible. The case of the great Apostle alone is, in and of itself, quite sufficient to satisfy us upon the matter once and forever.³

4. Here is an important principle to remember. God does not expect you to be perfect, but He does expect you to be growing.

A. Eph. 4:15 “Speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, even Christ.”

B. 1 Peter 2:2 “Like new born infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *The Life of Joy and Peace: An Exposition of Philippians*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1989-90), 320.

by it you may grow up into salvation.”

C. 2 Pet. 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

5. God does not expect you to be perfect, but He does expect you to be growing. Are you growing in your personal relationship with Christ? Do you love Him more than you did a year ago? Is your spirit more docile to His word? Do you love to obey Him? Can you see how you are becoming more like Him? Have others noticed the changes?

6. Some have used Paul’s language here to justify being passive in their Christian growth. But that’s ironic, because Paul was anything but passive. Paul talks about the ultimate goals of sanctification, and the imperfect progress in sanctification. But then he speaks of...

III. The Need for Effort in Sanctification.

1. Notice that even though Paul knew that he would not achieve perfection in this life, it didn’t keep him from striving for it. Notice, once again the language of an athlete: (12) “I press on to make it my own.” Again (14) “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

2. Paul’s approach to sanctification did not consist of a “Let go and let God” theology. He understood full well that in and of himself he would make no progress. Apart from Jesus he could do nothing. Apart from the Spirit’s empowering, he could accomplish nothing. Apart from the Father’s electing and calling He could achieve nothing. Nevertheless, God has designed Christian growth in a way that grants us the joy and privilege of being directly involved in the changes God is bringing about in our lives. After all, it was Paul in this same letter who said (Phil. 2:12-13) “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

2. Now note the two specific ways in which Paul presses on:

A. First: (13) “Forgetting what lies behind.”

a. Can you imagine the guilt Paul was tempted to carry around with him for all the sins he committed against the Lord and His church? Paul had a past. It was a terrible past. But He was convinced that the blood of Jesus the demands of God’s righteous wrath which he deserved.

b. Listen, my friend. If you find yourself debilitated by past sin; if you feel disqualified in the eyes of God and man because of your past failures know this, “There is no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. You don't need to figure out how to forgive yourself. You just need to repent of not receiving God's forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that he purchased at great cost to himself, and he is offended by your rejecting it.

- c. If you have confessed your past sins, God chooses NOT to remember them against you because of the finished work of Christ. So, humble yourself and receive it.
- d. But I suspect Paul was tempted by past achievements. After all, he was a highly educated man, and he has become an internationally known teacher. But Paul threw all of that in the dumpster when he was arrested by Christ.
- e. What matters to God is not your past failures or past achievements, but whether or not you tremble at His word; whether or not you trust and obey as a sheep follows a shepherd, or as a child follows his father.
- f. So Paul was diligent to forget what lay behind.

B. Second, (13) Paul strained forward to what lay ahead.

- a. Paul was no passive Christian. He was always the athlete in training. He was always on the track running drills, learning new techniques, mastering new disciplines. In his mind, he was always running to win.
- b. We might say, he was always applying the means of grace to his own life. What are the means of grace? They consist of such spiritual disciplines as reading Scripture, meditating on the Word, Prayer, Fellowship with Christ through fellowship with his people. Paul didn't see Sunday church as something optional, but something essential. He was there to take the Lord's supper, and be reminded of Christ's resurrection when people were baptized. Moreover, he was always active in ministering to people. Participating in the means of grace made him into a pipeline of grace for others.
- c. Too many professing Christians think that God is going to do it all for them apart from the means that he has established. Paul didn't see it that way. And neither should

we.

d. And that is why we will be participating in the Lord's supper right here is just a few minutes.

3. But before we do that, let's consider...

IV. The Fruit of Sanctification:

1. There are many benefits that we might refer to as the fruits of sanctification, but I want to focus on one that stands out in a prominent way in this short letter. What is it? It is the fruit of joy.

2. This brings us full circle where we find ourselves revisiting verse 1 of this chapter where Paul throws down a strong command. Do you remember what it is? "Rejoice in the Lord!" Again, in 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say it: REJOICE!"

3. Have you lost the joy of your salvation? Perhaps it's because you are not as serious as you should be about your sanctification – your personal spiritual growth. Perhaps you have become a little lazy. Maybe you're waiting for God to do something amazing in your life that will transform you instantaneously. Beloved, that is not God's usual way of changing us.

4. It is because He loves you that he invites you into relationship with Him; He invites you to come to know Him in ways that change you. But he usually does that through the basic means of grace.

5. Be encouraged. Jesus is more devoted to your spiritual growth than you will ever be, and his goal for you is about direction rather than perfection.

6. At the end of the day God does not expect you to be perfect, but He does expect you to actively pursue Christ-likeness for His glory and for your own joy.