

July 15, 2018

# Counsel for the Race

Philippians 3:15-19

The race for the prize is never easy but God's instructions will equip you to win.

LTS: 1 John 3:1-10

Returning now to Paul's discussion of sanctification, we are reminded that the great apostle did not view his role in Christian growth as a passive spectator. Rather he saw himself as a committed athlete striving to win a worthy prize. In fact, so worthy is the prize at the end of this race, Jesus Himself taught that it makes perfect business sense to sell everything you have to obtain it. What could be so valuable that one would be willing to give up all his social status, academic achievements, religious attainments, and personal reputation to get it? What treasure could be so priceless that one would gladly risk becoming an enemy to his own people to make it his own? Only this, to have the privilege of knowing Christ fully and becoming like Him in every way.

I don't know about you, but I found myself both encouraged and challenged by the message last week. Encouraged, because it reminded me that God is more concerned about direction than perfection. He knows we are weak. He understands human frailty. He is not surprised or disappointed that I am not further along than I am.

By the same token, however, I was also challenged by Paul's relentless pursuit of spiritual perfection. Yes, it's true that this side of heaven none of us will attain perfect and complete knowledge of Christ or become perfectly like Christ in every way, but that didn't inhibit Paul's determination to strive for it with all his might! On the one hand he confessed (12) "It's not that I have already obtained or become perfect..." Again (13), "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own." Nevertheless (12) "I press on to make it my own. And (14) "I press on to toward the goal for the prize..."

No sacrifice was too large for Paul. He understood that to sacrifice everything and receive the prize of knowing Christ would be no sacrifice at all.

Listen, beloved, it is a wonderful gift to be able to rest in the reality that every modicum of righteousness I will ever have or need comes to me as a gift from God through Jesus Christ. O the freedom! O the liberty that flows like a mighty torrent of living water from the deep well of Scripture! But we must never, ever, ever use that gift as an excuse for spiritual laziness and passivity. Paul does not allow it. Rather we find him saying things like:

- Work out your salvation (Phil 2:12)
- Run in such a way that you may win! (1 Cor. 9:24-27)
- Put on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:1).
- “Fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12)
- The hard-working farmer is the first to share in the crops (2 Tim. 2:6)
- Put off your former manner of life (Eph. 4:22)
- Put on compassion, humility, meekness, and patience (Col. 3:12).
- Put on love. (Col. 3:14)
- And Peter will say, “Make every effort!” (2 Pet. 1:5)
- And this is a merely sampling of such exhortations.

Of course, it is always appropriate to remind one another that we work out our salvation. We do not work For our salvation. Nevertheless, the working out of our salvation should be a kind of committed personal discipline that can be likened to an athlete striving for the ultimate prize.

Does that describe your personal pursuit of a deeper, more intimate knowledge of Christ? Is it an accurate picture of your proactive pursuit of becoming like Christ? This is what sanctification (Christian growth) is all about. It’s not merely learning facts about the bible. It’s not about mastering certain doctrines. It is about discovering in God’s word and in His world how wonderful and glorious Jesus is and striving to become like Him in every way.

This is Paul’s description of his own sanctification. But then, in our text for this morning he offers a prescription for how to do it. We might call it Counsel for Christian Growth. I see three themes to Paul’s counsel. First:

## **I. Stay True to What You Have Learned**

Read 3:15-16

1. After describing his view on sanctification Paul says (15) that “every mature believer should have this same mind (or attitude) about the subject. On the one hand they resist the pressure to fall into legalism. This is what the Judaizers were selling; the idea that the gospel of Jesus Christ is incomplete without circumcision and O.T. ceremonialism. For you and I that means we guard our hearts from any form of self-righteousness. We are never so good that we can earn God’s grace and we are never so bad that we are beyond the reach of God’s grace.

2. And that brings us to the other danger. Not only should we avoid Legalism, but we must also avoid the error of antinomianism. Antinomian means “no law.” Antinomians believe the law of God has no place in the Christian life. God doesn’t expect us to work hard or even obey. It’s the idea that since we are “in Christ” God views us as completely holy and therefore it doesn’t matter what we do. As long as I’m a Christian, my behavior is irrelevant. Ironically, this is also called Perfectionism because it is thought that in Christ God counts you as perfect and there is nothing one can do to contribute to that. But it is wrong-headed to conflate Sanctification with Justification. In justification God declares us holy based on the merits of Christ. However, in Sanctification God makes us more like Himself as we cooperate with the Spirit by pursuing the Knowledge of Christ and the likeness of Christ.

3. But Paul was no perfectionist. He boldly declared that he had not yet obtained full knowledge of Christ, nor had his life and character become perfectly similar Christ. But toward this end he strained forward and pressed on regardless of past failures or successes. He resisted the urge to become sluggish in his race or sit down on the track. He ran to win the prize. This must be every believer’s primary focus.

4. Paul’s words here may be an indication that the church in Philippi had become somewhat slack in their pursuit of the prize. Perhaps they had become lukewarm in their love for Christ, their desire to know and become like Him. It may be that some who started out so well had slowed to an easy-going stroll on the race track having lost their motivation to finish well. They needed encouragement to get back in the race. So, Paul is calling them back to exerting maximum effort in applying themselves to the disciplines of the Christian life.

5. For some in the church this was much needed correction. But Paul wasn't heavy handed about it. He loved this church and he wasn't scolding them. It was just a gentle correction. So, he concludes, "If anything you think otherwise, God will reveal it also to you. Only, let us hold true to what we have attained."

6. Then he concludes (16) with the words, "Only let us hold true to what we have attained." Again, I think the NAS is clearer where it reads, "However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." The word translated "hold true" (ESV) or "keep living" (NAS) was a military term that means "to line up", or "follow in line." The great apostle under the inspiration of the H.S. had already taught these things. Remember back in v.1 he said, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you." This view of sanctification was already well-established doctrine in the first century.

7. In Paul's day and in ours, believers are to keep disciplining themselves for the sake of godliness the same way as ever before. They were to stay in their assigned lane and keep pressing forward to the prize. There are no short cuts. There is no special spiritual secrets to growing in Christ. It comes, if it comes at all, as we daily apply the means of grace to our lives. to the same path that Paul had established. And if any of you think there is another way, God will reveal this to you. As you work out your salvation, God will work in your to make you grow. Or, as Paul said to the church of Corinth, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."

8. Like Paul, there were to stay in the race, press on to the end, and not allow anyone to divert us by any kind of teaching or philosophy that would veer us off course. This is what has been taught from the beginning, so stay true to what you have learned.

9. As you listen to this, is the H.S revealing in you an apathetic attitude toward your Christian life? Is it possible that you have become slack in your sanctification? Have you become undisciplined in your Bible-reading and study? Have you become careless in your prayer life? Have you become half-hearted in witnessing for Jesus Christ? If you have, I bet you have also lost your joy. Perhaps the H.S. is calling you to

repent. If you are slowing, strolling, or even sitting down in the middle of the track, its time to stand up and start running again.<sup>1</sup>

10. So Paul's first word of counsel is, "Stay True to What You Have Learned."  
Second:

## **II. Follow Worthy Examples (17)**

1. If the believers in Philippi wanted to know what this kind of life looked like they needed to look no further than to the apostle Himself. He writes (17) "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

2. Some have suggested that the word "us" is kind of a rhetorical plural which Paul meant as a humble way of diverting undue attention to himself. However, I think Paul was legitimately pointing out the fact that he was Not the only Christian in town who was living a godly life and whose example was worthy of emulation. Certainly Timothy and Epaphroditus were also examples of what it looks like to (1:27) "live a life worthy of the Gospel."

3. Beloved, this verse means nothing if it is not a call to personal discipleship. Banish from your mind the idea that the Christian life is a private thing; a relationship between you and Jesus exclusively. That is patently NOT what God has in mind. Yes, your relationship with Christ should be intensely personal, but not private. Each of us ought to be actively pursuing help from others. Find someone who is further along the race of Christian growth and take up a pace behind them.

- A. Listen to how that person prays and ask questions about how and why
- B. Watch how they read and study God's word. Pay attention and ask questions
- C. Observe how they share the gospel with unbelievers and how they defend the faith against the assaults of the cults and false teachers. Take notes and emulate their approach.
- D. Consider the fruit of the Spirit in their life. How to they express

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<sup>1</sup> Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith* (God's Word For You Book 18) (p. 170). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

graciousness, humility, patience, and love and follow in their footsteps.

4. Another way, as I have said many times from this pulpit is to read biographies of men and women who have truly made a mark on the world for the glory of God.

5. This week I read the following in Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

Is there anything that can be of greater practical value to the Christian who is anxious to live a truly Christian life than to follow such good examples? Is there anything that so helps us in our endeavor to attain unto the ultimate goal than to read the lives of God's saints, the biographies of good, godly men and women? Speaking for myself, I can earnestly testify that I have found nothing of greater value and encouragement. You see the truth in practice; you see it translated from the realm of pure teaching and put into operation. To me it is one of the saddest features of the life of the Church today that so often people are ignorant of the great saints of the past. Our fathers were familiar with them and spend a lot of time reading about them and these great biographies are still available. Surely nothing can do us greater good than to read and study them, that we may follow their example even as the Apostle exhorts us at this point.<sup>2</sup>

6. Stay True to what you have Learned. Follow Godly Examples, and then finally...

### **III. Learn from Bad Examples: (18-19)**

1. While it is essential to learn from men and women who are living faithfully for Christ, it is also instructive to take note of some who have shipwrecked their faith. Such men and women stand as a warning to us about what happens to those who compromise and eventually turn their backs on God. The bible talks about a number of such people. We read of Cain's treachery, Israel's apostacy, Achan's greed, Samson's lust, and Judas' betrayal.

2, All these men paint a vivid and instructive picture of what happens to people who turn their backs on God. Paul points us to such men in the next two verses

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<sup>2</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Joy and Peace*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1989), 344-345

3. One of the things I love about the Bible is that its narratives are so realistic. It isn't merely a book about spiritual heroes who were blessed of God and who never committed sin. Rather, the narratives we find in the Scriptures are just as relevant to us as the evening news. Time and again we read NOT only of people who got it right but people who really blew it! And perhaps the greatest example is that was Judas... disciple of Jesus Christ.

4. In the mid 20th century, however, we have another example. In my dad's generation there were two young gifted preachers. Both ministered primarily the U.S. Both were gifted evangelists. Both became very well known, and in fact they became good friends. The first was a man you may have heard of: Billy Graham.

The other was a man many of you have never heard of. His name was Charles Templeton. Together, they were affectionately known as the Gold Dust Twins. These two preachers, along with another man named Torrey Johnson, founded an organization called Youth for Christ. An article I read this week said that, "By all accounts, Charles Templeton was the more gifted preacher of the Gold Dust Twins: intelligent, handsome, winsome, eloquent, oratorical, brilliant, persuasive, effective. All those words were used to describe him. In fact, in 1946 the National Association of Evangelicals, gave him an award: Best used of God.

For some time, Charles Templeton overshadowed Billy Graham. He was the better speaker. The two of them went on an evangelistic tour through Europe, where they preached in England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, and a few other places, and they alternated as they went, preaching to large audiences. Templeton in the 1950s was even given an opportunity to have weekly television programs on NBC and CBS where he preached the gospel. He preached in the United States to as many as 20,000 people a night across the country. He preached in youth rallies again with thousands of young people. He became a church planter and a pastor. He attended Princeton Seminary and was an evangelist with the Presbyterian church. He had a week of gospel preaching ministry at Yale University. No one would ever have expected that there was treachery in his heart.

In 1957, however, Charles Templeton declared himself an agnostic. He rejected the Bible, and he rejected Christ. He connected the firmness of that rejection to his reading of Thomas Paine. And then he says in ten days he read Voltaire Bertrand Russell, Robert Ingersoll, David Hume, and Aldous Huxley. By the end of those ten days he was virtually an atheist. He left the ministry with \$600 in his pocket, returned to Canada (where he was from), and became a journalist for a while. After that he became a politician, and almost became the Prime Minister of Canada – so formidable was his personality and oratory skill. In 1957 he stepped into the eternal blackness of

apostasy, blasphemed Christ, and wrote his swan song. The title of which was Farewell to God.<sup>3</sup>

5. What happened to Judas? He became enamored with the wealth and power of the world. What happened to Charles Templeton? He became enamored with the philosophies of the world. And that's what happened to the men Paul writes about here.

Read 3:18-19

6. The fact is, the race of imminently rewarding rewarding, it is also dangerous. Do not think that you are so secure in your faith that you could not possibly turn your back on Christ. It happens every day. And it can happen to you if you are not careful. So be careful about who you admire. Be careful of who you idolize.

7. If you are a child of God your role models should NOT be Christ-rejectors, no matter how engaging their books, their music, or how amazing they are at throwing, catching, hitting, or running with a ball.

8. You are in a race for the ultimate prize: to know Christ and become like Him. Don't allow anything to distract you from that and lead you astray.

9. The race for the prize is never easy but God's instructions will equip you to win.

Gospel:

If you are listening to my voice right now and you are running from God, this message is not for you. What you need to here this today is something that you already know; namely, that there is God and you are accountable to Him. That's really bad news if you love your precious sin and are unwilling to repent. But the good news is that all your guilt and all of your sin has been paid for by the very God before whom you (and we all) will one day stand. You can be forgiven. You can be rescued from the wrath you deserve. I plead with you, come to him and bring your sin with you! Tell him that you surrender. Tell him that all you have to offer him is your sin. Tell him you believe that your only hope in this life and the next is His undeserved mercy, grace, and pardon. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/SC13-4/a-tale-of-two-preachers>



