

## Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

### *I Press On*

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Philippians 4.7-21

*But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, <sup>9</sup> and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, <sup>10</sup> that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; <sup>11</sup> in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. <sup>13</sup> 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 what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> 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; <sup>16</sup> however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.*

*<sup>17</sup> Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, <sup>19</sup> whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; <sup>21</sup> who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.*

This summer, we've been looking at Paul's Letter to the Philippians, a Prison Letter of influential friendship.

We've seen Paul use a series of examples/patterns (v.17) – he's showing what "the gospel" looks like in the lives of people who believe it... "this is what God's victory by Jesus Christ does to people who believe."

At another place, Paul referred to the gospel as the POWER of God to save (Romans 1.16). And here he's showing examples of salvation, lives being rescued and renovated. Two very tangible examples – Timothy and Epaphroditus... “to the point of death...”

And then Paul used a surprising example – his own past failures! He had tried to be righteous without God...and had succeeded...at least he appeared successful...had all the trappings of righteousness (the awards/accolades – v.7 “the things I once valued...”).

But, looking back he sees, “it really wasn't about righteousness...it was all about Paul...comparing myself to others...I was better and that led to this voracious appetite to be better/to be recognized...” Until Paul met a different kind of righteousness, to be right with God as a gift – received not achieved. What Schaeffer called “True Spirituality.”

Today, we ask, what are the goals of TRUE SPIRITUALITY? Are there goals? Is that just a Western/Industrialized Nation, efficiency question? Can the Christian life be measured or rated (two stars or three stars)? Is it possible to know you're progressing? And if there are GOALS in the Christian life – do you ever reach the goals? Because, if you reach them, don't you become proud – and isn't that the opposite of the goal? (We joke about the guy who wrote the book called “Humility and How I Achieved It” – isn't that a self-negating proposition?)

So here's #1 – A New Kind of KNOWING (which many people DON'T know) #2 A New Way of PURSUING #3 A New Practice of BELONGING

Toward the end of this passage, Paul speaks of “many” who take an opposite position on this idea of spiritual progress. He's already said that HE was once in that “many” category. He's warned about them, “Beware the dogs, the false circumcision, the evil workers”. And here again, he warns and weeps, (18-19) “For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”

And while we may assume that these are the many, many people who are hedonists and secular, anti-religious, notoriously bad people, but remember, Paul said that HE was once a part of these “many”. It's not the non-religious “baddies” that have Paul concerned – it's the religious “goodies.”

One way these MANY may view spiritual progress in a way opposite to the New Paul is their insistence on the checklist. Just as Paul jumped through all the prescribed HOOPS – circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, an outward conformity to the rules which was WAY better than YOURS – SO there were some in those

early Christian churches that wanted to turn Christianity into JUST another religious hoop contest.

They are enemies of the cross because they don't NEED the cross. They "got it goin' on!" They don't need that bloody mess of a perfect Man tortured and dying in their place – taking the justice THEY themselves deserve... How morbid and uncouth... "MANY" says Paul, "claim to make spiritual progress without the cross based on their own goodness and talents – they don't NEED the cross! And I know them well", says Paul, "I WAS ONE OF THESE MANY!"

"I got by on my own destructive comparisons (which led to the literal destruction, the public execution of Stephen as we saw last week). And my craving was NOT for God but for applause – my appetite for recognition WAS my god! My glory was my shame (i.e. I bragged about what SHOULD have made me blush!) and my mind was on earthly things!"

There will always BE both inside the church and out, many people who have this kind of one-size-fits-all, checklist approach to personal growth and progress. If you vote the right way, use the right jargon, have the right manners, do these few spiritual activities or experiences... then YOU ARE ON THE RIGHT PATH.

C.S. Lewis included this wonderful chapter in his book Mere Christianity called "Morality and Psychoanalysis" and he discusses what he calls our "psychological outfit" i.e. the gear we each have for making moral decisions and actions – the nature and nurture that are our LOT in life.

Imagine two people raised in two separate families and settings. Imagine a little girl raised with tenderness and generosity and love and encouragement. And she's got great genes. Then imagine a little boy completely neglected and treated with coldness and even cruelty. He's not naturally gifted and he's born with issues (as we might say).

She's raised with intentional training in love/truth and he is taught to ridicule love and to value selfishness. As they reach adulthood, they each enter life with these psychological outfits or gear.

And if you didn't know anything about this psychological gear they both carry, if you simply watched their daily routine and listened to their words you'd probably conclude that the young woman was vastly morally superior but actually the man has transcended his raw material...he's made more out of his lot than she has...she may be getting by on manners and refinements that she only mimics from her parents but which are completely insincere. (She's squandered her advantages).

She may have the checklist down pat but her real self is far worse than the poorly furnished young man.

He may be rough...his language and manners may be raw and even sinful but what we don't see is that he's improved on his lot and may have progressed far beyond his upbringing AND far, FAR beyond what she has. And Lewis makes the point that God doesn't judge on the basis of a person's raw material...but on what we do with it.

And the one-size-fits-all checklist approach to spiritual growth ignores this whole dynamic.

Another reality in Paul's NEW kind of knowing is that in real spiritual progress we both arrive and...yet...have not arrived.

So he speaks of those, like Paul who are "perfect" – that's an unfortunate translation. Better to say "who are complete or mature" and is also quick to say that he IS not "perfect...or complete ...or mature".

In some sense Paul can say he's arrived. He saved. He's clothed in the perfect complete righteousness of Christ...and yet he still hasn't found what he's looking for.

In our own day, you may have heard people fall on one side or the other of this. People may say, "I'm saved" and that language IS used in the Bible, by Paul himself. But for Paul that never means that he's become complacent or lazy or disconnected until he floats off to heaven. In fact it means just the opposite – "I'm saved therefore I press on..."

And the other side of this is that kind of cynicism and false humility that says, "Well, we're all just groping and journeying in the dark and it's arrogant and presumptuous to say we can know ANYTHING spiritually".

That sounds very humble but for Paul to journey means there must be a destination...a goal. And Paul can say that he KNEW something and at the same time TAKE no credit at all for the discovery... That's why I called it a new kind of knowing.

And that brings us to the second and much briefer idea of a new way of pursuing. For Paul, he could use all this athletic language and imagery. I press on, I lay hold, I reach forward, toward the goal, the prize, the upward call...as if there was something to be had, real PROGRESS is not only a possibility but an eventuality ...FOR PAUL, spiritual growth and development and change is HIS DESTINY...and not only in the next life but HERE AND NOW.

The key is that odd little sentence at the center of this text – v.12 – “... I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.”

For Paul, at the center of this quest to change, to know God, to grow and progress spiritual is a kind of paradox. He is seeking something that he has been sought to seek!

The way he puts it is this, “I press on so that I may capture THAT for which I was CAPTURED”. He believed that God sought him, God pursued him.

Now, I know this raises all kinds of philosophical and theological questions and mysteries like, “If God pursues us – does He always get His man? Do we have free will? Can God be resisted? Does God not pursue everyone?”

And there is some profit in asking these questions to a point...and then...you have to see it’s like a lump of clay disagreeing with the Potter...or like a block of marble arguing with the Sculptor.

For our purposes today, let’s just say this, “What energized Paul in His pursuit of God...and his spiritual athleticism – pressing on and straining, stretching ahead to seek the Kingdom was PAUL’S confidence that God was seeking HIM!

God has a destiny for me! He has loved me so much that He would rather die than lose me! “He sought me and He bought me with His redeeming blood.” And He opened my eyes to this – I saw MY infinite need MET by His infinite LOVE! AND while I am saved and secure from all alarm, this new kind of knowing has produced a NEW WAY OF PURSUING! My great inclination is to progress – “Come further up, come further in!”

I have been declared by God to be perfect – I don’t act perfect...don’t think or speak perfectly...I am a PAUPER who has been declared a PRINCE – and I know you’re laughing at me (“we’ll never be royals. It don’t run in our blood”) ...and I often laugh at myself...BUT BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN DECLARED A BEAUTY – a royal – a perfection...I have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ...therefore I am dying of curiosity. I want to know what I will look like when I do actually arrive at the goal...therefore, I press on!

You heard the words – did you wonder what they mean? What is IT? “Not that I have already obtained it” What is IT? “That I may lay hold of THAT...” What IS THAT?... “Brothers, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of IT yet...” What is IT?... “I press on toward the goal...” What IS this GOAL? “Toward the goal for the PRIZE...” “What is IT...what is this PRIZE? “Toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus...” What is IT...this goal, this prize, this call of God?

What is IT? It is the real you – it is the destiny for which YOU have been pursued and (if you are a believer in Jesus Christ) the destiny for which you have been seized/captured – therefore we press on!

On to the royal me, the way God already sees me, a Christ-like, self-sacrificing, completely loving and courageously giving person – who can become obedient even to the point of death...and do so with joy and composure. I want to be what God has destined me to be, what I have been pursued to be. I press on!

Last, a new PRACTICE of belonging. The Christian sees him or herself as simultaneously HERE and THERE. We live here but we are so destined to be there – to actually be entirely holy and radiantly loving without flaw – we are as good as there (v.20). “Our citizenship is in heaven”.

That’s Paul’s bottom line in this whole discussion. We are irresistibly headed there – we are already seated with Christ in heaven (as Paul put it in the Ephesian Letter). And because we believe that, our practice of pressing on, this vigorous, athletic seeking is practiced in light of my past, my present and my future.

My past is something God orchestrated. It is littered with both beauty and brokenness. I see ways I was damaged and hurt by others and by my own responses. I see my successes and my failings. I once relied on my successes to assure me that I am a good and worthy person (they still call to me like the Sirens). My past failings accuse me. But past successes or failures will not define me. “One thing I do forgetting what lies behind I press on!”

My present– as Brennan Manning said, “Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.” In other words, I am a bundle of contradictions, a sinner but holy and perfect in the sight of God – “Simul Justus et Peccator.” Declared righteous by grace and still marked by sin. But as I repent and believe, repent and believe, little by little my life is permeated by grace and the New Me, the Citizen of Heaven, the beauty of Christ does sometimes shine through. I’m seeking and pursuing to know Him. I press on!

And in the future – and I do live in light of the future! – I am eagerly waiting a Savior. He will transform this laughable donkey and will perfect His work, my destiny: I will become glorious like Him. He will exert His power and subdue me completely – and I want that. I want to become whom He has declared and destined me to be... and looking forward to that day (soon and very soon), I PRESS ON.