

Philippians 3:12–16 (NKJV)

**12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. 16 Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.**

What is life for?

What is **your** life for?

What is its **ultimate purpose**?

What is its ultimate **goal**?

Why does God keep allowing you to wake every day and breathe his air?

What does He want you to do with your life?

What is God attempting to accomplish with your life?

Paul is going to help us this morning.

Paul will tell us what we should **pursue**.

Paul is going to share the proper relationship of the **past** to the **future**.

Paul will give us a realistic vision of what to expect

Paul will tell the proper motivation for this pursuit.

He is leading us by example.

Let's start on verse 12.

**12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected;**

Here is Paul, the master preacher, teacher, evangelist and discipler. If there is anyone in the pages of scripture, other than Jesus, wouldn't we expect Paul to be as perfect as a person might be? So when Paul says here that he is not perfected, we can safely assume one thing. **Perfection in this life is unattainable.**

I only bring up this point because there are many traditions that teach otherwise. These are people with whom we would have fellowship but we might have very strong disagreement.

I am quoting here from a study referenced by a web page. **There are traditions that arose out of the Wesleyan movement, including the Methodist, Holiness, and Nazarene traditions.**

**John Wesley taught a form of perfectionism.**

**The basis of his theory was that after a Christian become a believer by being spiritually reborn and indwelled by the power of the Holy Spirit, at some point after a period of growth in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ there was an instantaneous act of sanctification. Therefore, even though there was gradual growth in sanctification after the believer was justified by God, after a “final, all-surrendering act of faith in Christ, it reaches an instantaneous completion through the act of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier.”[11] According to Greathouse, the teaching of John Wesley was that this initial work of gradual sanctification may be “cut short in a moment, by faith, when the heart is cleansed from the inward root of sin – pride, self-will, atheism, or idolatry – and perfected in the love of God. As a consequence of this deeper cleansing of the heart the Christian is enabled to grow more normally toward perfected Christ-likeness.”**

We sing a song about reaching a higher plane than I have found. That song has its roots in perfectionism. While that is normally not what we mean when we sing it, that is where it came from. It differentiates between the **spiritual** Christian and the **super spiritual** Christian. This theology has all kind of degrees, and many of their quotes we could agree with. But Paul here shows us that the foundational assumption is **wrong**. There is no spiritual experience that will free us from the need of **continual striving** for a deeper sanctification. That frees us from the guilt or frustration we might feel if we thought such a thing was possible. The answer is never to pursue an experience. It is always to pursue knowing and pleasing **Christ** more relentlessly than we did the day before in whatever circumstances Christ has placed us in.

Paul started verse 12 by saying “Not That.” He is referring to something he has already said that the Philippians might get the wrong idea about.

In verses 7-11 Paul told us he put the **past things behind** and did it so that he may **gain Christ** and **be found in Christ**, having righteousness through Christ by faith. So that Paul may know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings that in the end He will receive the resurrection from the dead.

Paul was probably concerned that he may have created the wrong impression. He did not want anyone to conclude that this would be completely accomplished

in this life. He did not want people to expect the Christian experience to be anything but what it is. And that is such a great comfort. How would you feel after a failure if you thought the normal Christian experience was one of continual spiritual victory and success? Would you not soon think, I must not be a Christian at all? I might as well give up?

Paul protects us from falling into that trap. No. There is no spiritual experience that will free us from waking up tomorrow in **an eternally important race** that we need to run for our lives. That is the Christian experience. And it is one with a prize that will be worth every effort.

So Paul says in verse 11 that he is working to know Christ and Christ's power more and more, and that it would lead to Paul attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Now Paul says, just to be clear, that has not happened yet. I have not reached that state of perfection yet. That is a future event. That is a future status.

John MacArthur says **Perfection in this life will always be a goal, never an achievement.**

So Paul continues in verse 12- **But I press on.**

Here is another refrigerator slogan. But I press on.

Maybe it would be good to put above our ironing boards? Not that I have much experience with that. **But I press on.**

The words Paul uses here are energetic. It means "to run" or "follow after". It is an aggressive endeavor, the kind of thing that Paul describes in 1 Cor 9:24

1 Corinthians 9:24 (NKJV)

**24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.**

We **run** like everything depends upon how we run, and we **trust** like everything depends upon how we trust. And we keep doing both at the same time.

We really need to get this. Paul did not sit back and expect to wake up the next day more spiritual than he was the day before. He did not expect the temptations to be easier. He did not expect the obstacles to be smaller. That is not how he viewed his life.

He expected that each day would be a day to get up **and run**, to **fight**, to **labor**, to **strive**. And those are all verbs used in the context of his efforts to **know** Christ and to **fellowship** with Christ. They are all used to describe his internal spiritual battle to **grow in Christ**. They are words describing the normal Christian life, not the exceptional work of Paul. They are "every Christian" words.

Why does Paul press on?

**13 that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.**

We might want to stop here and say, Paul which is it? Are **you** laying hold of it or is **God** laying hold of it **through you**?

Paul might smile here and say, "Yes".

This is very much like the concept we looked at earlier where we work because it is God who is working in us. It is the same idea.

The word for laid hold means to seize or to catch. Paul is telling us here that Christ seized Him. That is an interesting way of describing salvation. When you decided for Christ, did you feel seized? Most people don't. They feel like they are doing something smart, something virtuous, something true.

That just goes to show us for the millionth time that our seemers are broken.

They do not naturally portray spiritual reality. Our seemers tell us we had the perfect freedom to choose for Christ or against Him. And we, being the smart people we are, chose **for** Him. Maybe after a period of God showing us how stupid we were being. But that is not our salvation from **God's perspective**, the **true** perspective. We must go to God's word for that. Paul tells us that Paul was **seized** for a purpose. And once he was seized, now he lives for the same purpose **for which** he was seized. Now he is seizing the same thing that God seized him for.

Paul says it another way in

**Ephesians 2:8–10 (NKJV)**

**8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.**

God seized us for good works. Now we, being seized live to do good works.

So what is the ultimate purpose for which we are seized?

**Romans 8:28–30 (NKJV)**

**28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. 29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified..**

The purpose that God seized us was for **conformity** to the image of Christ, so that we will be eternally alive in Christ's family. And we are first justified and then we will be glorified.

So what is God's endgame in **sanctification**? It is **glorification**. And what is glorification. Well one way of seeing it is when the level of our **sanctification** reaches the level of our **justification**.

Glorification happens when the level of sanctification reaches the level of our justification.

How were we justified? Was there anything lacking? Was there a sin that was missed in our justification? No. If there were, we would be damned. So our justification placed us in the perfection of Christ's record. **All** of our sin was purged by the blood of Christ.

When we are fully glorified, our position and our behavior will finally, for the first time in any of our lives, be **fully congruent**. And that is the thing that will most glorify our Lord and it is the greatest glory a human can ever be gifted with.

When I hear the word perfect, I think of that as being something hard. Something unobtainable. It is almost a punishment type of word. We know we cannot do it.

But that is not how scripture teaches a believer to view his life. It is more like this. Suppose there is an earthly king who actually rules like a King.

Suppose he has a child in his bloodline that he is not aware of.

This child has grown up in the slums. The child has done whatever he **must do** to keep alive. He has many base instincts. He is untrusting. He has no real manners. He has no idea how to live in a manner fitting royalty.

Now this King finds out about this child and brings him into his family. What is that king going to want to do with that child? He is going to want to make the child's **behavior** congruent to the dignity of his **position**. Now the child will need to learn **table manners**. The child will need to wear **different clothes**. He will have to change how he thinks about the world. His behavior will need to change in a million different ways. And he will always be fighting against his prior life experiences.

Does the King do this because he wants to hold this child to a standard he knows the child cannot ever attain? Does he do it out of cruelty to the child? Of course not. He is loving this child. And he knows that the child will be most glorified when the child's behavior and demeanor most glorify the King. The child will be happiest in his new family when he learns how to live congruent to his newfound identity. The more he acts like the King's child, the more the king will be glorified by him.

So is perfection the goal? Yeah. He needs to continue to strive to perfectly conform to his new identity. But is it the measurement of his identity? No. The identity has already been fully given to him. He is not learning to live like royalty to **Become** royalty. He is learning to live like royalty because he already **IS** royalty. That is his **true identity**.

The moment after we die, or Christ comes back, we will lose all the incongruities. We will be perfect. We will no longer awake to a battle. We will wear the garments of Christ like we are family. Because that is exactly what we are. That is the way we should view the perfection. We will act perfectly because it is congruent to **who we are** in the **new environment** we are in.

And even now, our pursuit of perfection is not meant to be a legalistic scorecard. Mike used to say the Bible does not come with a scorecard. Like God will love me more if I attain a certain level. No, perfection is pursued in the relationship of **knowing Christ more**. We are in His family already. Now by faith we think about living with Christ forever. And we want to be as ready for that new environment as we can be. We want to know how to walk and talk and set our plates. And we want to display the traits of our King **now** while we live in this life to **show off** what that King has done in our lives. Sure, we want to live perfectly. Our desire is to live in complete conformity to the new identity we have been given. We want to act like a **king's** kid. Why wouldn't we. And yeah, it should bother us when we don't. Of course it would. But at the end of the day, our imperfections will never separate us from the love of our Father. How could it. We are kin.

That is the framework from which we should see this perfection. **It is God working in us to be conformed to the image of His Son**. Going back to Paul's words, that is what we were **seized** for.

So Paul's goal is lay hold of that. Paul's goal is to be perfectly conformed to the image of Christ, to perfectly fit into this heavenly family.

Now how does Paul assess his status. How does he evaluate his progress. This is just so encouraging I think. See if you think so.

**Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended**

Paul is warmly including his Christian family in this intimate self evaluation. He starts by saying "Brethren". Brothers and sisters, my family in Christ, the Christ I am trying to be like.

He says I do not **count**.

This is the same word that is used when we are told by Paul to count ourselves to be dead to sin. Reckon is an accounting word. It is used, among other things, for taking an inventory.

Paul is saying when I count this up, when I look at the facts, When I hit the equals sign, I can only conclude one thing. I am not there yet. I have not seized that thing yet. I have not arrived at the end for which I seek.

And I think, **oh good**. Because in my experience, I don't have to do much **accounting** to know where I am in that regard. All the evidence shows me is that, while I may look **slightly more** like Christ today than, say, three years ago, at the same time I often think I look nothing like Christ at all. Thanks Paul. Thanks for revealing this. You have encouraged me this morning.

I hope you feel the same way.

So Paul's status is, I am not yet fully conformed to Christ. I am not yet perfectly reflecting my new identity.

**but one thing I do,**

Remember how Jesus scolded Martha and told her that there was one important thing and that Mary had chosen that thing? This is like that.

We could say this a bunch of different ways.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be added to you.

All of it is congruent to our new identity. And that is how **directed** Paul's focus was.

Purity of heart is to will only one thing. Paul got this. I am sure Paul had a **to do list**. But at the end of the day **this** is one sure thing that would be attempted. The **one thing** that I do, Paul says. The thing that is driving all the other things.

Maybe an aid in our lives would be to evaluate, "**what are my things like this?**"

What do I not feel complete with if I do not finish this thing in a day? What will I be sure to include in my day? And then compare it to what our lives are **for**.

Compare it to what scripture says is important.

So what does Paul do? Paul puts a phrase in front of what he does to show, I guess, what he needs to do in **preparation** to **do** that one thing.

**forgetting those things which are behind**

Evidently Paul is using running imagery in this text. So the most direct application of this would be that we should not look behind us to see how we are doing. We look ahead at the goal. Maybe there is imagery being used to tell us not to try to look how we are doing compared to everyone else. That is not how the race is to be won. It is to be won by focusing on the finish line, by focusing on the goal of conforming to Christ.

But I think there are other applications as well.

I had never noticed this before, but look at the things Paul just told us that he counted as rubbish. They were a list of all of his **human accomplishments**. It was all his **fleshly credentials**. It was in essence his **spiritual resume**. All the things that he thought, by doing them, he was earning his salvation.

Here it is as if Paul is saying this one thing I do. And he says, I start by burning my resume. As the flame rises over the paper we see it consuming these words: **circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.**

Paul is removing everything that would have given the least bit of evidence of a righteousness apart from the justification he received by the blood of Christ. He is forgetting everything that would make him, in his flesh, look good.

Is there anything like that in your life? Character traits you are proud of? Virtues that you take credit for? Things that make you think you were a pretty good person? If so, if those things give credit **to you** for being **inherently good**, those are the first things to forget. We might be able to get to those things if we ask, when I want to see myself as a good person, what do I bring to mind? It is kind of funny. **My** list is often things that I **did not do**. And that makes me really nervous. Because that was what the Pharisee who prayed used as **his** evidence too. He said "I am not like these other men." We are a tricky lot.

Now also look at the word Paul uses.

### **Forgetting.**

This is a different kind of forgetting than what God does with our sins. This forgetting is a forgetting of **neglect**. It is like forgetting how to use a pager. It is useless information. Of course you forget it. It is no longer needed for anything. It serves no meaningful purpose. When we understand where all of our righteousness comes from, anything else is no longer **important information**. It isn't like we need to **try hard** to forget. I think about a cell phone and I no longer consider pager information anything of value. That is the kind of forgetting being done.

I think it merits saying here that Paul is not telling us that **everything in our pasts** should be carte blanche forgotten for every purpose. Paul sometimes reminds people what they were when it serves a useful purpose to make a point. So we cannot apply the "I forget what is behind" to every single life memory. We may find that sometimes our pasts contain memories or ideas that are **lies**.

Sometimes we ascribe a lie to something we experienced in the **past** and that



thing continues to hold sway over our **current** lives. Maybe memories hit us and immobilize us. Maybe we have inordinate reactions to things in our lives that are the result of learning wrong lessons. Those things should be revisited so we can replace the lies in the inmost places with truths in the inmost places. Our negative memories from our pasts should never be allowed the power to control us. When they **do**, we know it is time to do business with them. That is not the place to quote, “forgetting what is behind”.

And it is equally true that the successes in our past should not be rested upon. Paul certainly could have allowed **that** to happen. He could have rested on his laurels based on all the great work he did. But he shows no signs of that. I have noticed a temptation now that I reach retirement age. It is tempting to think, I have done my service. Now it is someone **else’s** turn. That is **another** reason it is necessary to forget what is in the past. Paul only had two courses of action that he would allow himself to choose from. **Serve or die**. He serves as our model. When what we remember of our past is used as reason to **stop pressing forward**, we will do best to forget that past.

Again a quote from John MacArthur

**Paul made a break with everything in his past, both good and bad. Religious achievements, virtuous deeds, great successes in ministry, as well as sins, missed opportunities, and disasters must all be forgotten. They do not control the present or the future. Believers cannot live on past victories, nor should they be debilitated by the guilt of past sins.**

We will look at this more closely next week, Lord willing.

But for this week, if you have not gained any other applications, we might do well to ask:

Am I waking up each morning with the mindset of needing to **energetically press on** in order to make progress in the Christian life?

What is the “**one thing I do**” that an observer would notice if they watched our lives for a week? What does that tell us about our lives?

Are our past successes or failures a **distraction** from what we need to do today to energetically press on in our Christian lives?

Are there things in our **past** that jeopardize our present lives because we have **never done successful business with them**? We should **do business** so that we CAN forget them cleanly like Paul says he does.