

“PRESSING TOWARD THE MARK”

I. Introduction

- A. This past Friday was a significant milestone in the history of our congregation, as we were formally received into the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.
1. Changing denominations can be a difficult thing to do.
 2. Some churches have lost their buildings and all of their assets in the midst of a denominational change.
 3. The founding ministers in the OPC lost their pensions when they left the mainline presbyterian church.
 4. While we did not experience anything like that, there definitely was a measure of tension and stress.
 5. Now that the process has been completed, it is understandable that we would have a sense of relief.
 6. I know I certainly do.
 7. We should be glad that we are now in partnership with a denomination that is more in line with our commitments as a confessionally Reformed church.
 8. Having said that, we should not let ourselves think that we have somehow “arrived.”
 9. We should never think that way, not about the church in a corporate sense, and not about our lives as individual believers.
 10. We always need to keep pressing on in the faith.
- B. This is what Paul is talking about in these verses from Philippians 3.

1. In the preceding verses in this chapter, Paul said that knowing Christ is so valuable that it surpasses everything else.
2. The reason why this is true is because knowing Christ is the only way to lay hold of the righteousness that comes from God.
3. Everything else, including all righteousness of our own that comes from the law, needs to be counted as rubbish so that we might gain Christ and be found in him.
4. And even though it is through faith alone that we can participate in Christ and his benefits, true saving faith is not characterized by carnal security and careless living, but by striving to obey the Lord.
5. This is made clear by Paul's own example.
6. As the Puritan Thomas Watson points out, "Paul knew that nothing could separate him from the love of Christ, but who ever walked more holy and watchful than Paul?"
7. Watson makes a good point, but notice that in the verses that we have just read, Paul still says that he has not yet attained to his goal.
8. He is still running his race.
9. And as he presses on, he is careful to keep the finish line in view.

II. Take Hold of God's Good Gift (v. 12)

A. The first thing that we see in this text is that the Christian life involves diligently talking hold of the salvation that God has freely given to us in Jesus Christ.

1. This is the point that Paul is making in verse 12.
2. He begins by saying, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect".
3. The word "perfect" is from the same root as the word that is translated as "mature" in verse 15.

4. The purpose for which God has redeemed us and made us his own is that we might be made holy and perfect.
 5. Paul makes this clear in Romans 8 when he says, “those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”
 6. Seeing believers conformed to the likeness of Christ was the focus of Paul’s ministry, as he made clear to the Christians in Colossae when he told them that he and his ministry associates proclaim Christ, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Col. 1:28)
 7. The goal of the Christian life is not earthly happiness or material prosperity, though we should certainly be grateful for the many gifts that God gives in this life to cheer our hearts.
 8. But the goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to Christ.
- B. Paul tells the Philippians that he not yet attained the goal towards which he is striving.
1. Now, keep in mind that Paul was an apostle.
 2. He had gone on multiple missionary journeys to spread the gospel.
 3. He had endured severe opposition for his faith.
 4. In fact, he was writing this letter from a Roman prison.
 5. Yet he says that he has not yet been made perfect.
 6. He emphasizes this because the Christians in Philippi were being exposed to false teachers who were promoting a form of perfectionism.
 7. Paul refers to these false teachers as “dogs” and “evildoers” earlier in chapter 3.

8. These men were teaching that adherence to the law, especially the ceremonial law, has to be added to faith in order to attain a truly righteous standing before God.
 9. Paul responded to this in the preceding section by saying that we need to renounce any supposed righteousness of our own that comes from the law if we want to obtain the righteousness from God that depends on faith.
 10. The person who considers himself to be righteous on the basis of anything that he does is someone who is placing his confidence in the flesh, and the flesh is polluted by sin.
 11. True faith is defined as receiving and resting upon Christ alone for our salvation.
 12. Salvation is entirely of God's grace.
- C. Having made this clear in the first half of chapter 3, Paul now shows us that the gracious nature of our salvation should not cause us to be spiritually lazy.
1. On the contrary, he says, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."
 2. A more literal translation of the Greek reads this way: "I still press on so as to grasp it because I was indeed grasped by Christ Jesus." [O'Brien]
 3. Notice that the verb 'to grasp' is used two times in this phrase.
 4. The first is in the active voice, and the second is in the passive voice.
 5. When Paul is talking about his conversion, he uses the passive voice.
 6. He didn't grasp Jesus.
 7. He was grasped by Jesus.

8. But this does not mean that he can just sit back and relax.
 9. When it comes to our sanctification, we are called to take on an active roll.
 10. As Paul says earlier in this epistle, we are called to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, even as we know that God is the one who works in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
- D. Another way of thinking about this is to say that there is a tension between the “already” and the “not yet” in your salvation.
1. If you trust in Christ, then you have already been born again.
 2. You have already received the grace of justification and adoption.
 3. At the same time, you have not yet had your sin totally eradicated.
 4. You have not yet been made perfectly holy, and that is the reason why Jesus took hold of you.
 5. God’s purpose for you is to bring you into complete conformity to Christ.
 6. One day, that purpose will be brought to completion.
 7. The regeneration that the Spirit of God has already brought about in you inwardly will be confirmed publicly and completely when you are raised from the dead.
 8. As Paul said back in chapter 1, “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”
 9. That verse emphasizes that God is the one who does this good work.
 10. Salvation is his doing, from beginning to end.

11. But part of the means by which he carries out his work is by calling and equipping us to take hold of what he has promised us in Christ.
12. And the way we do this is by believing what God says and by striving to do what he commands.

III. Forget What Lies Behind (v. 13)

- A. The next thing that we see in this passage is that the Christian life requires us to forget what lies behind.
 1. Now, it is true that the Christian life also involves a great deal of remembering.
 2. The Bible frequently warns us against spiritual forgetfulness.
 3. But in this text Paul is speaking of a good kind of forgetfulness.
 4. There were some things in Paul's past of which he was not proud.
 5. There were other things in his past in which he might have been tempted to take pride.
 6. But the principle that is set forth here is that we should not dwell on anything in our past in a way that hinders our present progress.
 7. If we keep looking back at the things that are behind us, whether they are good things or bad things, we will not be able to see our way forward.
- B. There are several ways in which this truth can be applied to our lives.
 1. First, don't get bogged down in thinking about your past sins and failures.
 2. Every Christian has sin in his past, whether we are talking about the distant past or yesterday.

3. We do need to repent of those sins.
 4. We need to be humbled by them.
 5. We should certainly not try to excuse or rationalize them.
 6. That being said, we must not let our past sins paralyze us with guilt or despair.
 7. If you are a Christian, your sins are covered by the blood of Christ.
 8. There is now no condemnation for you.
- C. Second, don't let yourself drown in past disappointments and sorrows.
1. We all experience sadness and loss.
 2. Sometimes you may have regrets about past decisions.
 3. But if you let these things consume you, you will not be able to strain forward to what lies ahead.
 4. Remind yourself that the Lord is sovereign over everything in your life, even the difficult and disappointing things.
 5. Believe him when he promises that he will cause all things to work together for your good.
- D. And third, don't rest in your past achievements.
1. Don't let yourself think that the good things that you have done in the past are enough to satisfy God.
 2. The problem with that mindset is that it causes us to think of our accomplishments as meritorious.
 3. But the purpose of Christian service and devotion is not to do God a favor and earn his stamp of approval.

4. The purpose of your service and devotion as a Christian is to express your gratitude for the fact that God has freely given you a gift that you could never deserve and never repay.
5. And that service and devotion should be wholehearted and enduring.
6. God calls you to love him with all your being, and this means loving and serving him for as long as you have life.

IV. Press on Toward the Goal (v. 14)

- A. Instead of looking back, Paul keeps his eyes fixed upon the prize that the Lord has set before him.
 1. What is this prize?
 2. Paul refers to it as “the upward call of God.”
 3. This phrase may be drawn from the athletic contests that were held in the ancient world.
 4. When the event was over, the winner would receive a summons from the presiding official to come up and receive his prize.
 5. Typically, the prize would be a laurel wreath that was placed on the champion’s head as a symbol of victory.
 6. Sometimes there would also be a monetary prize or other honors.
 7. This is a picture of the glory that lies in store for believers in the life to come.
 8. Paul is talking about the prize that Christ has secured for us, the state of glorification and the eternal inheritance that is being kept for us in heaven.
 9. Because this is the end for which Christ has taken hold of us, it is to be the supreme goal towards which we are striving in this life.

- B. When Paul speaks of pressing on toward this goal, the image that comes to mind is that of a runner advancing toward the race's finish.
1. This is one of several instances in Paul's letters where he uses metaphors drawn from the world of athletics.
 2. We are meant to think of someone running a long race, perhaps even a marathon.
 3. If that runner lets himself think about how bad he is feeling at any given point in the race, he may start thinking that it is not worth going on.
 4. If he fixates on how much farther he has to go, he may get discouraged and give up.
 5. If he looks back and takes pride in the ground that he has already covered, he may falter and let others pass him.
 6. He has to keep his focus on pressing toward the finish line.
 7. This is a picture of the Christian life, except that in the Christian life you don't know how much longer you are going to have to run.
 8. Your race may come to an end very soon.
 9. Then again, it may continue for some time yet.
 10. Regardless of how much longer you have to go, you shouldn't focus upon how difficult things are right now, or despair of your ability to continue the race, or rest upon your past accomplishments.
 11. You need to keep moving forward, with your eyes fixed on the goal.
 12. There is a crown of righteousness laid up for you, a crown that the Lord will award to you on the day of his appearing.

13. Never lose sight of that glorious prize.

C. This text reminds us that being a Christian is not simply a matter of making a profession of faith in Christ.

1. It is also a matter of exercising and acting upon your faith, which means laying hold of God's promises and striving to obey God's commands amid the various situations of your life.

2. Your life is the race-course that the Lord has set before you, and he calls you to run the entire race — not just certain parts of it — in faith.

3. This race is not a sprint, but a long-distance run.

4. And there are no short-cuts or time-outs in this race.

5. It has to be run from beginning to end.

V. Conclusion

A. If you are a Christian, then Jesus Christ has taken hold of you.

1. He has not taken hold of you because of anything that you have done, but because of his unfathomable grace.

2. And he has taken hold of you for a glorious purpose: the upward call of God, the day when you will enter into the fullness of your inheritance as a child of God.

B. As long as you continue living in this world, you have not yet attained to that goal.

1. You have not yet completed the race that your God has set before you.

2. So make sure that you run the race of faith all the way to the finish.

3. Your salvation is a prize of surpassing worth.

4. Make sure that you do not neglect it.
5. Take hold of it day by day, and press toward the mark.