

Pressing On
Philippians 3:12-16

Last week we read in verse 8 how the Apostle Paul expressed his life goals. They were lofty goals.

Phil. 3:8. "...that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

That I may gain Christ! And his mindset was focused upon "the righteousness which is from God by faith." That is the way by which Paul would come to know Jesus! This afternoon we see how he puts into practice the pursuit of that goal. He's not passive. He's not waiting for God to do something extraordinary. Instead, he uses some very practice and easy-to-understand language. I've summarized our whole text with just one simple and straightforward exhortation.

I. PRESS ON.

I'm going to use just one main point this afternoon, for emphasis. Just one idea. Press on. But this is really personally, and applicable to the very obvious aspects of our lives. Paul is speaking personally, autobiographically. He exhorts us by saying, "follow me." And as for himself, he says,

v.12

v.14

This afternoon, I will list six specific ways in which we are supposed to press on in our Christian lives. First,

A. You must have an understanding of the goal of the Christian life.

In other words, you need to know where the bar has been placed. And believe me, it is a high bar. Too often we settle for much less.

v.14

There is a goal, isn't there? And it isn't simply, "Get saved." The church at large, the worldwide visible church has been terribly, terribly afflicted with a focus on the wrong goal. For lack of a better word, let me describe that goal as a "decision." Make a decision for Christ. That's the focus. Decisions become the measure of a church's success. How many people made a decision. And putting that in its best light, not taking into account false decisions, the goal is how many people got saved.

But that isn't the great commission. The great commission isn't for the church to make converts.

Mat. 28:18 Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Go and make disciples. And what is a disciple? One who has learned to obey all that Jesus has commanded you. Obedience is the goal. Discipleship. Not simply conversion. But Christian maturity!

Heb. 5:12 "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the

word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. 6:1 Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. 3 And this we will do if God permits.”

“Let us go on to perfection.” Let me perhaps more clearly explain that word perfection with the translation “maturity.” Sinless perfection is not what Hebrews is addressing, but maturity.

It’s the same thing that Jesus refers to, Mat. 5:48 “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

The goal is maturity. That’s where we have to be heading. For Paul, that meant striving toward the goal of a prize. And the prize was his eventual glorification, what he calls “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Let me describe it this way. The goal of our Christian life on earth is to prepare for heaven! To become more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, to become more and more like Jesus. In character. In virtue. In obedience.

That’s what Paul wishes to lay hold of, in verse 12. The upward call.

The late James Boice tells of the son of a wealthy American family graduated from Yale University, who decided to go to China

as a missionary. His name was William Borden. Many of his friends thought him foolish to give up so much of this world’s goods and his future here to go. But he loved Jesus and wished to serve him. After only a short time of the field, and before he even reached China, Borden contracted a fatal disease and died. He had given up everything to follow Jesus. But at his bedside his friends found a note that he had written as he lay dying: “No reserve, no retreat, and no regrets.” Indeed, he had found a treasure that was beyond words. He accomplished his goals. Therefore he had no regrets.

I wonder how many Christians could face death with that attitude, whether they died young or old. No reserve, that is nothing held back. No retreat, no going back. And no regrets.

Full obedience and full commitment to Jesus Christ. Full submission to his will. Full and complete obedience to his law. That’s the goal. That’s discipleship.

So let me ask you to consider this important question, “What is your goal, your greatest goal in life?” Do you understand the nature of discipleship, the high standard to which you are called? Too often we can become lazy, complacent, satisfied with a plateau half way up the mountain, when Jesus calls you to scale the peak.

In practical, daily life issues, few of us really understand the goal, because we consider it unattainable. So we don’t try. And sometimes, we misunderstand the goal because we have a very externalized and superficial standard. Things like drinking and smoking, cussing, and in previous generations, playing cards and dancing. Don’t do those things and you are alright. Don’t kill anyone and you’re innocent. Don’t commit adultery, being physically intimate with another person, and you’re innocent.

That spirit could be properly called self-righteousness, and Jesus condemned it severely. Thinking yourself to be righteous based on outward appearances, when in fact, you are not all righteous on the inside. Jesus describe that as a white-washed tomb. Clean on the outside. Full of dead man's bones on the inside. And so to press on,

B. You must have a sense of your own sinfulness.

And with that, grief and hatred of your sin. You must realize that you fall short. I need to say at this point, that understand needs to stir you to greater effort, not cause you to give up trying. Look at what Paul says of himself,

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"I'm not there yet, I have more growth to accomplish in my Christian life." That's what everyone of you must say to yourself. I've not yet reached the level of Christian maturity that I am seeking, I fall short in my own sinfulness, THEREFORE I PRESS ON.

There must be the desire to change, the desire to grow. Not a New Year's resolution to lose ten pounds, but a life-long commitment to grow in grace and godliness. There must be that commitment, and where it is lacking there will be no maturity.

Sadly, I have often observed those who would quickly confess their own sinfulness, but then seem satisfied with their spiritual weakness and fail to do battle with the sin. Such humility is false, for the unwillingness to confront issues of sin in your life really does indicate the absence or insufficiency of repentance. You must let the sense of sinfulness stir you to press on toward the goal.

But in that, let me emphasize this, to keep all of this in the proper context.

C. You must have an assurance of the work of God's sovereign grace in your life.

In other words, as I have said before, this is not a course in spiritual self-help. This is not a religious motivational seminar. This is a spiritual crusade, and only through the work of the Holy Spirit within you can you succeed. Only by God's grace will you be able to press on. Only in God's strength and only with his sustaining power will you have the ability to reach that goal of Christian maturity.

v.12

This is similar to what we looked at in,

2:12 "Therefore...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

There is no contradiction, no tension at all in Paul's commitment to press on with all of his effort, and at the same time to realize that it is God working in him to do it. You see, God has laid hold of us for a great purpose, to conform to the likeness of his son.

Rom. 8:28 "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."

God predestined us to become like Jesus Christ! What an amazing thought! But that predestination doesn't take away our responsibility to work hard in pressing on. But it does give you

hope. It does give you encouragement. It does give you confidence and even assurance.

To understand my message this afternoon, to understand what the Apostle Paul is saying here in Philippians 3, you have to be absolutely confident that God is at work in your life. And ultimately, you have to be absolutely confident that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." You have to be confident that the Holy Spirit dwells in you, and that he is working in you to change you from the inside out.

So much in,
v.12

Now, let's get a little more pointed. And a bit more intense. Paul's language gets stronger.
v.13

Two things in that verse, one negative and the other positive. The negative first. "One thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind." I choose to explain that this way.

D. You must burn your bridges.

Forgetting the past.

Now, that's hard to do. And lots and lots of people have to go through lots and lots of counseling because things from the past are still haunting them. Circumstances where they have been sinned against, harmed and wounded. And circumstances where they have sinned and can't seem to escape their own guilt.

Part of that past would certainly include any attempts at self-righteous works salvation, any thoughts of your own goodness as sufficient to make you worthy before God.

But none of that is really what I'm getting at. Rather, it is the spiritual commitment of life and death. You're not experimenting with God. You're not trying God out to see if it works. You are selling out. You are giving him everything. No reserve. And no retreat.

We must forget all this is past. Jesus was insistent upon this. Consider,

Luke 9:57 Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." 59 Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." 60 Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." 61 And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

That's a radical commitment. Also,

Luke 17:28 "Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; 29 "but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. 30 "Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. 31 "In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods are in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. 32 "Remember Lot's wife. 33

"Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."

In other words, you have to die. You have to die with Christ. You have give up the old life, the old patterns of life, the old values and the old priorities. Everything has to become new.

This is precisely the point at which many people stop in their Christian growth. Their Christian life becomes "both and." Both and old and the new. You retain certain things from the past, certain areas of life that are not surrendered to Jesus Christ. For some, that is their work. Or a particular hobby. Or a personal relationship. Or a particular pet sin, which they are unwilling to put to death. And to that, they add the outward form of Christianity.

You can't do it. Remember what Jesus said to that Rich Young Ruler.

Mark 10:21 "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." 22 But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. 23 Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! 25 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Give up everything, that's the call of the gospel. Lose your life. Die with Christ. That you can live with him. Surrender is a word I often use to describe that essential commitment. That's the exhortation.

In writing to the Romans, Paul describes it this way, Rom.12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

A living sacrifice.

So, what about you?

v.13

Notice how forgetting the past is connecting with reaching toward the future. That's what pressing on is all about. Let me explain the illustration. Have you ever seen a video replay of a close track race, a hundred yard dash, for example? Ever watch the Olympic 100 meters? It's really incredible how fast they go, well under 10 seconds. And the race is almost always close. And if you watch carefully, what part of the runner's body is it that actually crosses the finish line first? What part of the body is shown on the video? It's the chest. At the end of a close race, the competing runners stick out their chest and strain with all its worth to get to the finish line first. And often, the one who can stick his chest out the farthest as he runs will be the winner.

That's the image of the words translated "reaching forward." Straining would be a better translation. I suggest to you that great, great effort is involved in that effort.

E. You must strain toward the finish line.

Paul uses that athletic imagery often.

1 Cor. 9:24 "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. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is

temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.”

In other words, run to win! Not run for the exercise of it. Run for the enjoyment of it. Run for the thrill of it. But run to win! Run to win the race, to win the trophy. That’s the biblical picture of the Christian life.

And us? We are complacent, self-satisfied, lazy, indulgent, mediocre runners who fill in the rest of the field.

I am sure that I will ever run in a marathon race, not even a partial marathon. I have never had the inclination or the disciplined training to consider such a thing, and at my age, my knees simply wouldn’t allow it even if the rest of me were willing. But I marvel at those men and women who can run that far, and especially those who are able to run to sin. Not just to finish. Not just to survive, or to get to the finish line in one piece, but to win. In the imagery of the Christian life, we are supposed to run as an athlete trying to win.

I admit that some days the object seems simply survival. Just getting through. And that’s OK, for short-term goals. Some days, that is as far as you get. But the long-term goal needs to be clearly defined in your mind. You are going to win the race. You are going to use every ounce of energy and strength you can muster in order to win! You are in the Olympic Games, and you have been training six hours a day for four years for this race that will take less than ten seconds. You will fix your eyes on that finish line, and nothing is held back.

Now, I wonder, how many Christians can describe their lives in those terms. How many of us? We need to repent of our carelessness. We need to repent of our laziness. And we need

to repent of how little energy we expend in the pursuit of Christian maturity. One final thing.

F. You must live up to what you already know.

That’s the idea of,

v.15-16

There are many books on my shelves that are still unread, which is why I seldom buy new books anymore. It hardly seems worth the money spent on new ones when there are so many old ones I still need to read. Often, that seems like a fitting illustration of our walk with Christ, books on the shelf that remain unread. Areas of spiritual growth that remain unaddressed. I suspect that would be true for every one of us, to one degree or another.

Quite plainly, that is exactly why many people reach a spiritual plateau and stay put. Because each step is built upon the previous ones, and if you haven’t walked up the steps that are before you now, there is no way for you to get near the top.

So the Apostles says to us, press on. Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. People of God, press on, that you may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has laid hold of you. Press on that you may lay hold of eternal life.