

“Pressing On to Maturity”

Philippians 3:12-16

Turn with me in your Bible this morning to the third chapter of Philippians, where in just a minute we will begin reading at verse 12. I’m sure that you’ve found yourself amused at some point when you’ve overheard a conversation among children. Kids can say the funniest things. Three boys on the playground were bragging about their fathers. The first little boy said, “My daddy’s a poet. He scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a poem, and they give him \$50.” The second little boy said, “That’s nothing, my daddy’s a singer. He scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a song, and he gets \$100.” The third little boy said, “I got you both beat. My daddy’s a preacher. He scribbles some words on a piece of paper and he calls it a sermon, and it takes 12 ushers to take up all the money!” I love to hear the things that kids can come up with.

At some point, our conversation has to mature as we move from childhood into adulthood. And yet, you and I know our own tendencies to argue, to play a game of oneupmanship in our relationships with people, or to spend too much time on those things that have no eternal significance. We need to mature in our thinking and behavior as Christians. This is the emphasis to which we now give our attention here in Philippians 3. Paul is concerned with ‘pressing on’ toward maturity.

In the previous verses, Paul has described how he counted as loss all that he once valued. The things he thought that gave him standing with God are now considered by him as rubbish. The only thing that matters now is that he knows Jesus. His life truly began when he came to faith in Christ as his Savior and received His salvation by grace. Paul lists what he counted as loss in verses 4-7,

and then mentions what he had gained in Christ in verses 8-11. He says that he had gained a surpassing knowledge of Christ, a secure position in Christ, and a superior righteousness from Christ. He now lives with the purpose of knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection, sharing in His sufferings, being conformed to His death, and looking forward to the promise of future resurrection. Paul is a changed man with a brand new lease on life, and he wants to 'press on' to maturity.

You will notice that he uses the analogy of a runner in a race. Throughout his epistles, Paul often uses various athletic metaphors to describe the Christian. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 9:26, he compared the Christian life to a boxing match and says, "I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." Then in Ephesians 6:12, he compared the Christian life to a wrestling arena and says, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." But Paul's favorite metaphor is that of a runner in a race. He says in:

1 Corinthians 9:24-25—"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."

That's the same metaphor that he uses now in Philippians 3. Earlier in the chapter, he writes about receiving new life in Christ. Here in verse 12, Paul writes about the various responsibilities of our new life in Christ. And he says that the Christian life can be compared to running a race. As believers, we're in a race where we are pressing toward the finish line with the ultimate goal of being

like the Lord Jesus. The analogy of a runner is being used by Paul to describe the process of a believer's growth into maturity. Paul acknowledges the fact that he had not yet arrived at his final goal, but he was pressing toward the goal and will not let anything to hinder him from one day reaching that goal. To press on to maturity, let me give you three or four things to consider. First of all:

1—The priority is GODLINESS, so pursue it! (3:12)

“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own.”

Paul began his race on the Damascus Road where his life was forever changed by an encounter with the risen Jesus. And now, as far as his motivation for living is concerned, keep in mind what Paul has just explained in the previous verses. As a believer in Jesus, his number one aim now is to know Him and the power of His resurrection, sharing in His sufferings and becoming like Him in His death. And through any means possible, Paul himself will one day be resurrected from the dead. If you are like me, you read that and think, “That’s how I want to live!” And yet I realize just how much of my own life still comes up short. Some might assume that Paul had reached a level of spiritual perfection in his own life. We might even think that Paul is different from us and doesn’t have the same struggles that we have. Which is why his words in verse 12 ought to be an encouragement to the rest of us. I’m very glad he says what he does—“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.” It is an honest and humble admission of his own need to keep on growing in godliness. He wants his fellow believers to know that he too is a fellow runner in this race. He’s still a work in progress.

Alistair Begg—*“The man of spiritual maturity is aware of what he is not.”*

We live in a culture that is constantly urging you and me to be aware of what we are, to promote ourselves, to promote our achievements and so forth. We have carefully crafted social media profiles which, to the average onlooker, even give the impression that we have it all together. Even the worst light or background can be fixed with a simple filter. But when it comes to spiritual growth, there is no quick fix. There's no filter. There's only the grit and daily grind of the race. And some days may be better than others, but there is not a single one of us who can say that we've arrived. I, just like you, am a work in progress. Maturity in Christian living involves an awareness of what we're not. Christian maturity is not demonstrated by high-sounding talk, but in a life of humble, steady consistency.

Romans 12:3—“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

It is a sign of immaturity to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Maturity rejects any exaggerated claims. Instead, it is marked by an honest estimate of our spiritual progress. No matter how much we grow, there is always room for more growth. And the race is more like a marathon than it is a sprint.

In the fable about “The Tortoise and the Hare,” you will remember, the hare goes racing off. The tortoise is just plodding along while the hare's kicking up a trail of dust. In fact, the hare is so convinced that he's got the race locked up that he decides he'll sit down and relax and fall asleep. And as the fellow with the quick start falls asleep, the old tortoise comes along—same pace, slowly, slowly, slowly—until eventually the tortoise is the one that ends up crossing the finish line.

Speaking as a tortoise: Do you know what a pain in the neck it is to be surrounded by spiritual hares? Always leaping about, always making great aspirations, always saying where they're going, what they're doing, what they're achieving, how well they're doing, quoting all the various verses they learned, letting everybody know how well it's all going and how they're on their journey. And how discouraging it is as you just try and keep along the Christian life. You find yourself saying, "I don't even know if I'm in this Christian life. I don't even know if I want to wear this uniform. I don't know if I want to stand up to the plate."

John MacArthur — *"Though a Christian is a new creation with a new heart that has a new disposition, and though he is in union with Christ and has a new standing with God, and though he has the Holy Spirit living within and a future hope, the Christian has not yet arrived—he is still imperfect and struggles with sin and temptation and must continue to grow in grace to Christlikeness."*

2 Peter 3:18—**"Grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."**

2 Peter 1:3—**"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence."**

By His Spirit, God has supplied me with everything that I need to press on to maturity in Christ. We each have a race to run. There must be pursuit of the goal, and grace motivates me to win the prize. This is the answer for those who would use grace as an excuse to sin. Paul is not a super-saint. He says, "I've not yet arrived! I am not yet what I am going to be, but by the grace of God I am no longer what I used to be!" In Christ, he has been declared righteous before God. He has been brought into union with Christ who is his life. And now he

understands that his life is about being progressively conformed to the image of Christ. So that he is becoming more and more in terms of his practice who he already is in position. That's what we mean when we refer to 'sanctification.' It is the work of the Spirit in a believer's life to conform him or her into greater Christlikeness. And this 'maturity' in Christ is the goal of the Christian life, whether we call it discipleship or spiritual growth or sanctification. The priority is godliness, and so pursue it. But then a second thing to consider is this:

2—The past is GONE, so forget it! (3:13a)

"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind..."

Paul says, "I've not yet arrived." Perfection in this life isn't the goal, rather it is progress. He is calling for the pursuit of a prize that can only be fully realized in Heaven. And he confesses that he himself hasn't reached it but he's in daily pursuit of it. That's why he says in verse 13, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." Like a runner, he is pressing on toward the prize at the finish line. And to do that, he must refuse to look back so that he can run with concentration and with focus.

Any runner knows when it comes to running a race, you have to keep your eyes fixed on something ahead of you. You can't look to the left or the right. You can't run and look over your shoulder at the same time. You need the proper focus which says, "This one thing I do." And that phrase 'one thing' is very important. For example, when the rich young ruler came to Jesus one day and said, you I have kept all the commandments from my youth. Jesus said, "Well, there's one thing you lack. Go sell what you have, give it to the poor, and then follow Me." And then there's Martha and Mary, who had invited Jesus over to their house.

Martha was busy, busy. Mary is sitting on the floor, listening to Jesus. She's simply thrilled to be in His presence. Martha gets upset that Mary isn't sharing the work and complains to Jesus. He responds by saying, "Martha, you are distracted by many things, but one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen the better part."

And then there's the story of a blind man who was healed in the temple. The Pharisees came to him and said, "The one who healed you is a sinner." And the blind man said, "Whether He's a sinner or not, I don't know. But one thing I know—I was blind, and now I see." David writes in Psalm 27:4, "One thing I have desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after." And so here's the point—progress demands that we narrow our focus and concentrate on one thing, and that one thing has got to be the main thing! Paul says, "This one thing I do," not these many things I dabble at.

Joy is found in pressing on toward all that God has in mind for your life in Christ, and that means you have to put the past behind you. Some of the most miserable and joyless people are those who try to live their life while looking back over their shoulder. They can't move on from the past, but remain stuck in complacency or regret.

Chuck Swindoll — *"What's in the past? Only two things: great attainments and accomplishments that could either make us proud by reliving them or indifferent by resting on them...or failures and defeats that cannot help but arouse feelings of guilt and shame. And why in the world would anyone want to return to that quagmire?"*

The past may be a good place to visit from time to time, but it is a terrible place to live. Maybe it brings a smile to your face when you think of past victories. But if

you're not wise too much nostalgia can lead you to try and relive the good old days. Or, maybe the past is filled with the pain of regret over broken relationships, squandered opportunities, and wasted years. Dwell on it, and you're sure to be paralyzed in the present. Paul says, "But one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, I press on." The word he uses here is an important word that refers to intentionally putting something in the rear view. It isn't the forgetfulness of a bad memory, rather it is simply choosing to no longer dwell on the past. This doesn't mean that you lose your memory. It doesn't mean a failure to recall. (We tend to forget the things that we ought to remember, while we remember the things that we ought to forget.) It simple means you no longer let the past dominate you. You don't let the past influence your present. Listen to this:

Jeremiah 31:34—"For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

That does not mean that God has a bad memory, that He has a memory lapse. It simply means that He no longer is influenced by their past in dealing with them in the present. He doesn't hold their sins against them any longer. Your past is your past. You've fallen, you've blown it, you've made mistakes. So leave it, learn from it, and go forward, forgetting those things which are behind. If God says that He forgets it, why can't you?

If there is one person in the Bible who illustrates this better than anybody else, it has to be Joseph. He was hated by his brothers who were jealous of him. They sold him into bondage in Egypt where he was falsely accused. He spent time in prison. Eventually, he becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt. And there comes a day when his brothers meet him face to face, the day when Joseph could have looked at them and said, "Time for you to get what's coming!"

But instead, Joseph had forgotten the past. He says to them, “But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring it about as it is this day to save many people alive.”

If you want to be miserable, live your life looking back over your shoulder. But I promise it will affect the way you run your race. If you want to press on to maturity, then forget those things which are behind you. Leave them in the rear view mirror and look forward to what God has promised in Christ. Maturity understands that the priority is godliness, so we pursue it. The past is gone, so we forget it. And it also understands that:

3—The prize is GOOD, so embrace it! (3:13b-14)

“...and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

When we put the past behind us, we’re free to focus on the future that God has in mind for us. Paul says, “I’ve turned my back on the past, put it behind me, so that now I strain forward to what lies ahead.” And notice what he’s looking to—“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In addition to concentration, Paul says that he is going to run with dedication. He says, “I’ve not yet arrived, but I press on.” Verse 12, “I press on to make it my own.” Verse 13, “I strain forward to what lies ahead.” Verse 14, “I press on toward the goal.” The idea means I exert myself. I work up a sweat. Think of the Olympics, as the camera zooms into the face of the runner, sweat pouring down his or her face. They’re pressing on. They’re working hard. They’re giving it their all. And what is interesting is that the word Paul uses for ‘press’ is the same word he uses back up in verse 6 where he’s describing his previous life. He’s going through the list and in verse 6, he says, “Concerning zeal, persecuting

the church.” The word for ‘persecuting’ is the exact same word as ‘press.’ (Wrong vs. Right direction)

What he is saying is this—the same energy that I once put into tearing down the church I now put into building up the church. The same level of effort that I had before as an unbeliever, I now expend in the right direction. Grace is now Paul’s motive. Whereas previously he worked hard in an attempt to earn God’s acceptance, he now works hard as a man who’s already been accepted in Christ. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that the Christian life doesn’t involve effort and sweat. Maturity demands that you and I devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the goal. But now it is the life of Christ in me that keeps me moving forward in the right direction.

Colossians 1:28-29—“Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.”

God put an engine in your salvation. The power necessary in the Christian life is supplied through the Holy Spirit. He lives in and through you, but it demands intentional effort on your part. That’s why Paul said what he did earlier:

Philippians 2:12-13—“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Maturity comes as we ‘work out’ what God has ‘worked in.’ Which means that we ought to live each day with the prize in mind. And what is the prize? Again, look at verse 14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in

Christ Jesus.” It is the prize of knowing eternal joy. He calls it the upward call or the heavenward call in Christ Jesus. He understands that he is called to future glory. It is the same focus that Jesus had all the way to the cross. In Hebrews 12, that great passage, the Bible says that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Since this is true, we must lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings to us so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...

Hebrews 12:2-3—“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

One day, you’re going to cross the ultimate finish line by death or by rapture. And you’re going to be met there by Jesus, who will receive you into your eternal home. And that’s a good prize. It will be well worth any momentary suffering you experience in this life, whether it be the pain of disappointment, or the struggle with temptation, whether it be sickness, or loss. That’s why Paul could later write these words at the end of his race:

2 Timothy 4:6-8—“The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

4—The point is GROWTH, so realize it! (3:15-16)

“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”

Just as there are to be certain indicators that a person is maturing physically and mentally, there are also indicators spiritually. Notice verse 15 says, “Let those of us who are mature think this way.” In other words, there is a certain way of thinking and living that is characteristic of a mature faith. If we go back through the passage, we can see the markers for spiritual maturity that Paul lays down. He says that his number one goal in life is to know Jesus deeper in relationship. That’s what is in the driver’s seat for Paul.

- He wants to know Him personally

Which is to say that he’s not content with second-hand knowledge. Glance back up at verse 10 where Paul says, “That I may know Him.” His aim is to know Christ more and more. Not satisfied simply knowing about Him, but knowing Him. You can know a lot about a person without actually knowing the person. Can you say that your knowledge of Jesus is deepening through personal relationship? You know Him better now than you did when you first came to faith. Because that’s a sign of a maturing faith.

- He wants to know Him powerfully

He says in verse 10, “I want to know the power of His resurrection,” which is to say that he longs for the power of the living Jesus to continually be at work in his life. The power that raised Christ from the dead is the very same power which is now operating in me. That means I don’t have to go through life as a victim, but with victory. Far too many people want to blame everyone else around them for their problems. A maturing Christian doesn’t have to live that way, my friend.

Romans 8:31—“What then shall we say to those things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

- He wants to know Him passionately

That’s what Paul means when he says, “I want to share in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.” The idea is that he wants to know intimacy with the Lord through the hardships and pains of life. He understands that when Jesus Christ was crucified, he was crucified with Him. The old me is dead and buried with Christ, and the new is come. Now Christ lives in me and is working to shape me into what He wants me to be. That is what Paul meant when he said:

Galatians 2:20—“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

And now, if I want to know Him, I must say ‘no’ to me and ‘yes’ to Him. Maturing faith learns to say no to self and yes to Jesus. So now as we come to verse 12, Paul continues this same thought and says:

- He wants to know Jesus progressively

He presses toward the goal. This is how a maturing believer thinks and lives. Paul says that we ought to have a mindset toward growth and a mature attitude. There are no shortcuts to maturity, no scratch off tickets, only the long road of obedience with all of the tests and trials that we encounter along the way.

James 1:2-4—“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Now, that does not mean we will reach perfection. You and I will always be a work in progress as long as we are in this body. When James uses the word ‘perfect,’ he is referring to maturity. Trials stretch our faith muscles which produces steadfastness in our lives. And the full effect of this will be a maturing faith. It is the same thing that Paul is saying in verse 15, “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.”

Some commentators think there were some Christians in Philippi who had grown apathetic. They had slackened off in their pace. Or worse, they’re on the sidelines. Perhaps the thought was, “Look, I’ve fallen enough times. I’m just going to let go and let God. I’m not going to exert any energy. I’m just going to mosey my life through, maybe attend church from time to time, and hope I go to heaven.” So Paul says, “If that’s how they think, I trust that God will reveal that to them.” It could be that He enrolls them in the classroom of pain to stretch their faith. But one way or another, He will bring them to a place of deepening faith that depends on His grace. He does it for all His children.

But the point I want to make is the usage of the word “us” and “we.” Notice that Paul says, “Let those of us...let us hold true.” It is language that reminds us we are not alone in this matter of maturity, but are part of the family of faith. Maturity best happens when we are in a close relationship with others in the church. Runners will do better with other runners. You can run alone and you can train alone, but you will always do better—you will up your game—when you have other runners who are there to inspire you, to encourage you, train you by the way they run, hold you accountable. We need someone to say, “Come on, pick it up. You can do a little bit better than that. Get the lead out!” It’s been true in my own Christian experience that I don’t get as weary and discouraged when I am

walking in fellowship with other like-minded brothers and sisters who can help encourage me and hold me accountable. That is why the local church is so very important for our growth. I need the family of faith to grow into the man that the Lord desires for me to be. Verse 16, “Only let us hold true to what we have attained.” The NLT says it this way, “But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.” In other words, keep moving along the path that has brought you to where you are in your spiritual progress. Keep your eye on the ball. Keep moving forward. Don’t be lethargic or become complacent. Run with the same energy all the way to the finish line.

I’m going to close with a fascinating illustration which is a true story. I read where the world’s longest and toughest race is an ultramarathon that is 543.7 miles. It’s a race that begins in Sydney, Australia, and ends in Melbourne. Back in 1983, 150 world-class athletes converged on Sydney to begin this race. They’re all in shape. They’ve got the gear on. You could look at them and see these guys are really fit. Well, into the crowd walks a 61 year-old potato farmer and shepherd, no teeth, overalls, galoshes over his work boots. And he comes walking up. And people thought he was a local guy to watch the race. Instead, he wants to run the race. He walks up to the table, and asks for a number. And they looked at him like, you’ve got to be kidding, right? You won’t make it a mile, let alone 543. But they give him number 64. And the gun goes off. His name was Cliff Young.

Cliff grew up on a 2,000 acre farm, and was in charge of watching hundreds of cattle. On that farm, they did not have four-wheel-drive vehicles. They didn’t even have horses. When storms came in, Cliff would go out there and run around to herd those cattle. It sometimes took him two to three days of running to get them all where they needed to be. Well, when the race begins and the gun goes off, Cliff Young starts. Now, when he begins, everybody starts laughing,

because this is how they described it—he looked like he had this leisurely, odd shuffle. That’s how he was running. But 5 days, 15 hours, 4 minutes later, Cliff Young shuffled across the finish line in first place. He won the race.

Now, he didn't win it by a few seconds. He didn't win it by a few minutes. The nearest runner behind him was 9 hours and 56 minutes behind him. You say, “Well, how in the world did he win this race?” To run this ultramarathon, the runners had been conditioned to run 18 hours. (Some of us can’t run 18 minutes!) They would run 18 straight hours, and then go to sleep for 6 hours, do that for 5 days. That’s how they would train. Only nobody told Cliff Young. So he ran straight without sleeping for 5 days, 15 hours, and 4 minutes, and crossed the finish line in first place, and became a national hero. Even to this day, professional long-distance runners study and experiment with the Cliff Young Shuffle. Many have adopted it for its aerodynamic and energy efficiency.

What’s my point? Victory comes by endurance. Hebrews 12, “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” My friend, the Christian life is not a 100-yard dash. It’s not even a marathon. It’s an ultramarathon. But some of you may be at the point of discouragement in your race this morning. No matter how hard you try, there is still some persistent sin, some lingering issue, and you’re close to fatigue. Or maybe you’ve been teaching that same class for a number of years, and yet you have the same number of people you had when you first started. Or you’ve picked up your Bible more times than you can remember, started to read it all the way through, but got discouraged somewhere in Leviticus. Or maybe your past is still haunting you, and the enemy is whispering his accusations in your ear, and you wonder if you’re even going to make it. It is in those moments of discouragement and weariness that you need to live with the assurance that Paul

expresses here in the text—"I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own!" Others of you perhaps have not even started out on the race of the Christian life because you have not yet surrendered and placed your faith in the Lord Jesus. If not, don't wait another day! I want to invite you right now to come to Jesus for salvation. He will forgive your sin and change your life, and you too can experience the power of His resurrection life at work in you.