

Book: *Philippians*
Series: *Rejoice in the Lord!*
Lesson 12: *Characteristics of Christian Maturity*
Text: *Philippians 3:12-21*
Date: *December 1, 2013*

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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Next Lesson: *Philippians 4:1-9*



TEACHING TIP

Consider the implications of a lesson like this for “Resolution Sunday.” This is a wonderful passage to review as we prepare for that spiritual exercise, but it also reminds us that such resolutions (i.e., “one thing I do”) should be daily concentrations.

To help you frame our passage within its context, consider Warren Wiersbe’s overview:

In Philippians 3, Paul is giving us his spiritual biography, his past (Phil. 3:1–11), his present (Phil. 3:12–16), and his future (Phil. 3:17–21). We have already met Paul “the accountant” who discovered new values when he met Jesus Christ. In this section we meet Paul “the athlete” with his spiritual vigor, pressing toward the finish line in the Christian race. In the final section we will see Paul “the alien,” having his citizenship in heaven and looking for the coming of Jesus Christ. In each of these experiences, Paul is exercising the spiritual mind; he is looking at things on earth from God’s point of view. As a result, he is not upset by things behind him, around him, or before him—things do not rob him of his joy!¹

INTRODUCTION

In the last 23 verses of Philippians, Paul has offered three examples to us—Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself. The first two (2:19-30) modeled what it meant to consider the sanctification stakes and “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” in gospel partnership. In 3:1-11, Paul himself illustrated what it meant to “rejoice in the Lord” by repudiating one’s own performance and resting in a relationship with Christ.

We are certainly helped by such examples and are wise to consider them. Visit any bookstore, and the abundance of biographies in all spheres of life demonstrates our natural inclination to look for and look to models with which we can evaluate, stir, and direct our own selves. However, biographies also have the unfortunate problem of often painting a person as larger than life. The ability to sit down and read in just a day or two what (we often forget) really took 50, 60, 70 or more years to accomplish can give us the inaccurate idea that the person was just a unique human being that we couldn't possibly be like.

It is easy to have that mindset after reviewing these examples, especially Paul's. After all, he had just recited his impressive credentials, attained through heritage, ritual, performance, and zeal; then, he related how he had come to compare them as mere rubbish in light of knowing, gaining, and being in Christ. His biography records his life-changing exchange of personal performance for a righteous relationship with Jesus. And that part of his biography was written with such a tone of resolve, triumph, and satisfaction that we were compelled by his confidence and marvelled at his maturity. It's easy to look at his life and become a bit discouraged at the seeming lack of similarities in our own life. **Illustration:**² It's like he's the clean-up hitter who just unloaded the bases with a 2-out grand slam, and we're up next, batting .160, knowing that we'll probably be a bit of a letdown, and wishing to ourselves that we could sneak away so as to not be compared with that great hitter.

We probably aren't alone in that despair. **Illustration:** In a sermon on this passage, Alistair Begg creates a situation in which a Mr. and Mrs. Levi (247 Bridge Street, Philippi), a passionate and teachable Hebrew couple in this young Philippian church, become disheartened after visiting a house meeting in which they hear a Judaizer arrogantly demand a works-righteousness while illustrating it with his own lofty spiritual accomplishments. This well-meaning, zealous couple who desire to know and please God, find no encouragement there, especially as they compare themselves to his standard and see themselves as woefully behind

and unable to arrive. So, with heavy hearts and fallen faces, they gather with their local church family on Sunday, two days after Epaphroditus has returned with this letter. Epaphroditus begins reading, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." The letter is read in one sitting and Epaphroditus comes to 3:8-11, "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him..having...the righteousness from God...[and] that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that...I may attain the resurrection from the dead." At that point Mr. Levi gives his wife a nudge and a knowing glance. He whispers, "Here we go again! This is the same thing we heard down the street. This guys is..." His wife shushes him, and he continues to listen, and what he discovers in verse 12 brightens his countenance and enlivens his heart. He hears that Paul has not only written down his aspiration to know Christ in this way, passionately and progressively, but has immediately added, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect."³

See, Paul knew he wasn't perfect. Yes, he had correctly repudiated a works-righteousness and a self-salvation, but he also repudiates any sense of false pride and inaccurate self-evaluation that his commitment to Christ may have provoked. So, he openly acknowledges his lack of perfection, and what an encouragement such a transparent proclamation must have been to Mr. and Mrs. Levi.

Paul is a wise spiritual leader. As MacArthur writes,

[He understood that] some in Philippi might have mistakenly assumed that, having gained those marvelous benefits [in Christ], Paul had reached spiritual perfection....To counter such false ideas, Paul quickly added this passage, which is a forceful disclaimer of spiritual perfection.⁴

We can almost picture Paul pausing after verse 12 and thinking, “I’d better add something here lest anyone has gotten the wrong idea—lest anyone thinks that heaven is my present experience, lest anyone assumes that I am experiencing in the present the perfection for which I hope, lest anyone misunderstand that this Christlike attainment is a prospect along a journey and reaches its fullness in heaven.” So perhaps he said to his secretary, “Do me a favor and add another line or two here, would you. Write this, ‘Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own.’” What a beautiful chapter in this biography, then, as Paul makes his own example seem more lifelike and attainable.⁵

In verse 15, Paul gives us our key phrase for this passage. He writes, “Let those of us who are mature think this way.”⁶ The word “mature” is the same word translated “perfect” in verse 12. Clearly, then, Paul indicates that there is a sense in which believers are not perfect (v. 12) and a sense in which they are (v. 15). Or, we could say, Paul uses this wordplay⁷ to demonstrate what true Christian maturity looks like. It doesn’t exist in one’s mere profession or performance (v. 12), but in a mindset (v. 15), an attitude, a character that Paul describes throughout this passage. Like Paul, *you should embrace the characteristics of Christian maturity.* To help you do so, we’ll review them in this lesson.

HUMBLE RECOGNITION (vv. 12a-b, 13a, 15b)

Christian maturity actually begins with self-awareness. Now, our secular society would advocate such a trait, but it knows little of it, although it would say it does. The fruit of secular self-awareness is usually proud and perhaps rebellious self-sufficiency. Honest self-awareness, however, will never produce such fruit. Instead, true self-awareness is a humbling experience, because it unveils the weakness and sinfulness of our own selves (cf. Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:18). We can summarize Paul’s humble recognition about himself in this passage with three statements.

1. “I have not arrived” (vv. 12a, 13a).

Paul says in verse 12a, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.” He echoes that assessment in verse 13a, “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.” In spite of what others may have thought about him, Paul was aware that (in the vernacular) he had not arrived. The word “consider” is an even stronger term of evaluation than “count” in verses 7-8. It means “to determine by mathematical process: reckon, calculate.”⁸ He knew himself too well, and having done the spiritual math, his self-awareness would allow him no excuses or dishonesty. The spiritual goals, aspirations, hopes, and desires expressed in 3:7-11 had not yet come to completion—he was not yet perfect.⁹

In what areas did Paul recognize his imperfection according to 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 7:1, 2 Cor 12:9, and Phil 3:21? *Open discussion.*

True Christian maturity, then, is cyclical:

The more we come to know Christ, the more we will come to sense our need to grow. And when we imagine that we have arrived, stagnation sets in. We must understand that Paul’s prayer—“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”—is a prayer of humble dissatisfaction that opens us to the blessing of God—and to a sublime cycle of dissatisfaction and satisfaction and dissatisfaction and satisfaction.¹⁰

The mature Christian knows in real experience the beatitude of Matthew 5:6—“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” MacArthur describes what this looks like over the duration of the Christian journey:

*Only those who continue to recognize the need to eliminate sin and cultivate holiness...will make progress in the Christian life. This pursuit by the power of the sanctifying Spirit produces a decreasing frequency of sin and increasing love for holiness, which makes less sin feel like more. The truly mature and godly have the most sensitive awareness of their sins, and are the humblest before God because of it.*¹¹ [Cf. the chronological order of Paul's self-awareness statements: 1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:8; 1 Timothy 1:15]

If you want to be marked as a “mature” Christian, this is where you must humbly, thirstily, and prayerfully begin.

2. “I want to attain” (v. 12b).

Instead of allowing an honest evaluation of himself to drive him to frustration or complacency, Paul essentially stated secondly, “I want to attain!” (v. 12b). He writes in the second phrase of verse 12, “I press on to make it my own.” The word underlying the phrase, “make it my own,” is used two other times in this paragraph (v. 12 2x, v. 13 1x). This word, when used “in allusion to the public games, [means] to obtain the prize with the idea of eager and strenuous exertion, to grasp, seize upon”¹² [cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24; also, Romans 9:30]. Thus, this word itself supports our second characteristic, as we will see later. For our purposes here, however, we note Paul's earnest desire expressed in this goal—Paul wants to attain (“take hold of”—NET, NASB, NIV) the aspirations of 3:7-11.

If you have no desire, no drive, no devotion, then you are not spiritually mature. Paul models for us (v. 17) such Christian maturity, and we should follow his active and targeted zeal.

3. “I may be apathetic” (v. 15b).

Right after exhorting us to maturely “think this way” about our Christian lives,¹³ Paul writes, “If in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you” (v. 15b). Here Paul addresses (1) those who read this passage with little or no application to their own Christian lives and are subsequently immature (i.e., inconsistency), and (2) those who are applying these mature characteristics to some areas of their lives, while overlooking others (i.e., inadequacy). Paul doesn't fret over those people. It is true that he “toiled” and “struggled” to “present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28-29), but he also knew that he wasn't people's “god.” He could only do so much, and here he is doing all he can, to mandate, model, and motivate people to Christian maturity.

If they failed to respond, Paul rightly left that in the hands of the One who's ministry can not be frustrated. He understood God's covenant-commitment to His purposes for His people (cf. Romans 8:28-30), and he knew that God would do whatever it took to perfect the image of Christ within them. The word “reveal” suggests that the beginning of that work is internal conviction (cf. John 16:8), but that same word is used by Jesus to demonstrate that God may also use public shame (Matthew 10:26; Luke 12:2). God has more tools and more effective tools than we do in the work of maturing His people.

MacArthur summarizes our thoughts on this point,

Paul was an experienced pastor and knew that not all believers would share the strength and relentlessness of his focus on pursuing the prize...Those who refuse to heed Paul's message will hear that same message from God. He will correct them through His Word, His Spirit, or through chastening. God will do whatever it takes to make believers recognize their need to pursue the prize of Christlikeness¹⁴ [cf. Hebrews 12:1-11]

If you desire to “think this way” about Christian maturity, then you must root out any area of apathy and respond to the all-seeing and chastening eye of the Lord (Psalm 139:1-12) with David’s prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Application: Evaluate the three statements above—“I have not arrived,” “I want to attain,” and “I may be apathetic.” Do you struggle confessing one of those statements? Is there a statement that you need to personally and honestly express? Remember, Christian maturity begins at the doorway of humble recognition. Be brutally honest with yourself, claiming the freeing promises of James 4:6-10—“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”...[So] cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Transition: You should adopt the characteristics of Christian maturity that Paul exemplifies in this passage. That means that you should first adopt an attitude of humble recognition. Then, you should add to it a focused exertion.

FOCUSED EXERTION (vv. 13b-14, 16-19)

Paul’s epistles seem to suggest that he enjoyed sports (cf. boxing [at the Isthmian Games]—1 Corinthians 9:25-26; wrestling—Ephesians 6:12; competing—1 Timothy 6:12) and perhaps had a special interest in running (Acts 20:24; Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 9:24, 26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7). At the very least, he saw illustrated in the athletic realm several truths which had bearing on his Christian life. One key lesson comes to Paul’s mind in this context—the “one thing” (v. 13b) that characterizes all successful athletes: they “press on toward the goal for the prize”

(vv. 12b, 14a). The word “press on” carries the intensity of a pursuit and is often used for persecution (cf. this same word in v. 6). Applied metaphorically, as it often is in Paul’s epistles (transl. “pursue”—Romans 12:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 14:1; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:11), it means to have a goal in mind and to apply aggressiveness in attaining it. So, mature Christians know a focused exertion applied with maximum effort and minimal excuses.

Similarly, spiritual athletes or mature Christians apply a focused exertion to their pursuit of what they know to be incomplete in their lives—that is, knowing and showing Jesus Christ. As we saw in Lesson 8 over 2:12-13, they practice “gospel-vigilance” by applying “continuous, sustained, strenuous effort” as they seek to “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” You can’t read Paul without discovering this pattern of focused exertion!

The “let go and let God” mentality was foreign to Paul. He was totally dependent on God’s power working in his life (2 Cor. 12:9; Col. 1:29). Yet he also described the Christian life as “labor and striving” (Col. 1:29), and “the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12; cf. 2 Tim. 4:7). He taught that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22), and repeatedly stressed the inevitability of suffering in the Christian life (e.g., Rom. 8:17; 1 Thess. 3:4; 2 Tim. 1:8; 3:12).¹⁵

Another commentator echoes with colorful language:

The present tense Paul used describes an ongoing, grasping, strenuous pursuit. It is a gritty, “I will not be denied,” rough-and-tumble pursuit—a sublime violence—which Christ approved and approves of. He said, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matthew 11:12).¹⁶

Simply put, Paul “ran to win” (1 Corinthians 9:24)! “One thing I do,” he exclaimed! His goal of achieving the spiritual perfection found in Christ was his single-hearted focus (cf. Psalm 86:11;

Proverbs 4:25-27), driving passion, and active engagement. One commentator brings out a telling detail in the text:

*I do is not in the Greek text, but was added by the translators because it is implied. In the Greek text Paul communicates his single-mindedness in a staccato, brief, impassioned, almost abrupt manner. The apostle's focus on his goal was total, his level of concentration acute.*¹⁷

Paul's focused exertion voiced in verse 14 (i.e., "I press on") has two tangible dimensions evidenced in the participles in verse 13: "forgetting what lies behind" and "straining forward to what lies ahead" (v. 13b). A third dimension, discovered in verses 18-19, follows his call to "imitate" him in verse 17. Let's explore these three dimensions.

1. You must forget the past (v. 13b).

Paul determined to "forget what lies behind" (v. 13b). Runners must not turn to look at opponents behind them, lest they lose their momentum, waver in their concentration, stumble over an obstacle, and be overtaken. Neither must runners look to their past performance as indicative of success or failure in the present.

Likewise, mature Christians need to have a proper perspective on what "lies behind" and live in the present. That is primarily what Paul has in mind here, for he himself has just repudiated his own past perspective (3:4-11). A Christian who fails to do this is in danger of being tripped up by their backward. Spiritual athletes need to "move on" from, "let go," and "forget" the things of their past in order to maximize their focused exertion now. Too often, believers determine their spiritual status based upon perceived successes or failures in their past. These include:

Successes—

- former accomplishments and past fruit
- previous areas of victory
- previously gained Scriptural knowledge
- sinful attitudes of pride, complacency, or comparison that may arise from such a perspective

Failures—

- previous moral failures
- former relational disasters
- missed opportunities in the past
- sinful attitudes of bitterness, pessimism, or guilt that may arise from such a perspective

Paul rebuked the Galatians for returning to their past perspective on performance (Galatians 4:9), and Jesus Himself explained, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Illustration: Towards the end of his career, as his body begins to wear out, his competitiveness wanes, and his ability decreases, an athlete (and his fans) comes to find his status as a sportsman in his past performances. Retirement from his sport officially marks the end of his athletic career (and, usually, his ability to play at a high professional level), and if he retires at the "old" age of 40, let's say, he will spend the last half of his life watching the replays, enjoying the memories, reliving the highlights, and wanting to redo the low points.

That is where Paul's athletic illustration breaks down here, and indeed stands in direct contrast to what he is seeking to convey. Mature Christians never know retirement; instead, they are strenuous sportsmen until their dying breath. They don't watch the replays; they don't glory in the highlights; they don't mourn the failures. No, they "forget what lies behind," lest the good times fill them with arrogant complacency and the bad times fill them with bitter despondency.

If you want to “think this way”—think Paul’s way, the biblical way—about Christian maturity, then you must live your Christian life with a focused exertion that refuses to live in the past. Lessons learned from the past and memories of God’s working should be taken with us, but the mature Christian must develop “a conscious refusal to let [past successes or failures] absorb his attention and impede his progress.”¹⁸

2. ***You must pursue the goal (vv. 13c-14).***

The second dimension of mature, focused exertion is “pressing on” by “straining forward to what lies ahead.” We’ve already considered the meaning of the phrase “pressing on,” noting that it pursuing, like the hunter for the hunted. The word underlying “straining forward” is a pictureque word, literally describing the physical stretching out towards a goal, like a runner throwing his chest out to snap the ribbon at the finish line. Applied as a metaphor, it means “to exert oneself to the uttermost.”¹⁹

In keeping with his running metaphor, the “goal” is the finished line. He doesn’t know what it looks like or when it will be crossed, but his point is that he has a focused purpose in life that he is not deviating from—“I press on toward the finish line!” For Paul, “It is the vision of the end of the race that ever directs and speeds his hastening feet.”²⁰

Paul knows that there is a prize awaiting him at the finish line. He writes, “I press on toward the goal *for [or, in order to receive] the prize.*” Paul knew that whenever he crossed the finish line, at the time of God’s choosing, he would obtain a prize. Again, in a breakdown of the athletic illustration, this prize is not awarded only to those who finish first, but to those who simply finish (1 Corinthians 9:24-25; 2 Timothy 4:8).

Paul has already excitedly examined the prize in 3:7-11, and it “is the full and complete gaining of Christ, for whose sake everything else has been counted loss....The greatest reward is to know fully, and so to be in perfect fellowship with, the one who had apprehended Paul on the Damascus road.”²¹ Paul knows that Christlike perfection is a prospect along a journey and reaches its fullness in heaven (3:11, 20-21), so he runs the Christian race in order to come to the finish line and receive that prize.²²

Mature Christians must diligently pursue the prize that awaits us at the finish line. Hebrews 12:1-2 exhorts us, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.” Only that kind of maturity results in the spiritual confidence expressed in 2 Timothy 4:7-8—“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.”

If you want to be a spiritual athlete, “imitating” (v. 17) the humble-yet-confident apostle Paul, then you must perseveringly “press on toward” the finish line, thoughtfully “fix your eyes” on Christ (NASB), and willfully “strain forward” toward the prize of attaining Him and His glory. Dear Christian, keep *the end* in mind, and run!

3. *You must ignore distractions (vv. 16-19).*

a. *Some distractions are personal (v. 16).*

Our passage briefly touches on that in verse 16—“Only let us hold true to what we have attained.” The verse essentially calls us avoid apathy (v. 15b) by “living up” to what we already know, by attaining the standard that we have clearly seen, by “running in our lane.”²³ Peterson puts it in the vernacular and writes, “Now that we’re on the right track, let’s stay on it.”²⁴ Other Bible passages remind us what personal distractions may cause us to deviate from our standard or lane:

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. So I do not run aimlessly; 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. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Hebrews 12:1-4).

b. *Some distractions are people (vv. 17-19).*

Immediately after encouraging us to “join in imitating me and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us” (v. 17), Paul identifies his enemies—those who do not “think this way” (v. 15) and should not be followed, but instead spurned. In reality, they were not so much his enemies as they were opponents of Christ, for they “walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18b). By labeling them this way, Paul doesn’t specify their false teaching, but demonstrates that whatever it was, they were against the true gospel. Generally, two predominant forms of false teaching are encountered in the New Testament, and both undermine the gospel of the cross—Judaizers with their works-oriented legalism and Gentiles with their gnostic libertinism.

Although these false teachers and their false teaching are not explicitly labeled in this passage, Paul does provide four marks of such enemies—“their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (v. 19).

- **condemned** — “their end is destruction”: “The Judaizers deserved this fate because they added human works to the cross of Christ...The Gentile heretics deserved their fate because they stripped the cross of Christ of its power to transform lives.”²⁵
- **idolatrous** — “their god is their belly”: “The false teachers...did not worship God but bowed down to their sensual impulses...the Judaizers’ emphasis on keeping the Jewish dietary laws...or...[the Gentile’s] unrestrained pursuit of sensual pleasures” (cf. Jude 4).²⁶

- **shameful** — “they glory in their shame”: “This is the most extreme form of wickedness—when the sinner’s most wretched conduct before God is his highest point of self-exaltation. The Judaizers boasted in their ‘rubbish’ (3:8)...The Gentile libertines...boasted of their supposed freedom to pursue sensual desires...(cf. 1 Cor. 5:1–2).”²⁷
- **earthy** — “with minds set on earthly things”: “Their earthly focus offers evidence that the false teachers were not saved....The Judaizers focused on ceremonies, festivals, feasts, sacrifices, new moons...(Col. 2:17). The libertines focused on the passing sensual pleasures of the world.”²⁸

Paul had already addressed such “enemies” in 1:28 (general) and 3:2 (Judaizers, in specific). In typical Pauline fashion, he had warned the Philippians against such heretical enemies many times—he attests, “I have often told you [of them] and now tell you even with tears” (v. 18a; cf. Acts 20:28-31). Paul was so diligent in exposing and warning against these false teachers, because he knew they posed a threat, not only to the blinded unbeliever, but also to the immature professing believer. It is easy for the spiritual athlete to get distracted by these skewed-gospel teachings, and to no longer apply the focused exertion necessary to reach the finish line and attain the prize.

If you desire Christian maturity, then you must ignore the internal distractions of your own personal excuses and the external distractions of people. You must refuse false behavior and reject false teaching. You must “keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in” spiritual athletes who have gone on before (v. 17).

Application: Evaluate the three dimensions of focused exertion above—“you must forget the past,” “you must pursue the goal,” and “you must ignore distractions.” Which one of those dimensions do you need to make your exerted focus this next week.

In Lesson 1, we saw that Paul partnered in ministry only with those whose gospel-commitment extended to their passion? That being true, would Paul partner with you? Or would you be one of those distractions/hindrances? Interestingly, two passages in Hebrews serve as helpful evaluations for us to determine whether or not such focused exertion is true of us, and both passages deal with the local community and partnership of faith. These passages suggest that if we are disengaged from such a community, we are probably not as focused in our exertion as we may think. Those two passages (Hebrews 3:13; 10:22-24) teach us to evaluate our focused exertion this way—do you have the focused exertion that draws near to Christ, holds fast to your confession, and considers how to stir up others to do the same? If you are disengaged from fellow runners, you are probably also diverted from the goal.

Transition: If you want to adopt the characteristics of Christian maturity you must practice a humble recognition and a focused exertion. Finally, this passage reminds us that we need to consider the proper motivation.

PROPER MOTIVATION (vv. 12c, 14, 20-21)

This passage instructs us with several different phrases that our motivation in being a spiritual athlete or mature Christian is found in God Himself and His performance towards us.

1. ***We have been possessed (v. 12c).***

All the translations correctly reveal that the word underlying the phrase “make it my own” occurs three times in verses 12-13 with this understanding—“I haven’t taken hold of the prize yet (v. 13a), but I want to take hold

of it (v. 12b), because that is why Christ took hold of me (v. 12c). Paul simply declares that Christ's taking hold of him is the reason He desires to take hold of Christ. As the ESV puts it, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own."

Paul was running spiritually to catch the very thing for which Christ Jesus had come after him. In other words, Paul's goal in life was consistent with Christ's goal in saving him.

What was Christ's goal in saving Paul? The apostle stated it in Romans 8:29: "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren." God chose Paul, as He did all believers, to make him like Jesus Christ. That purpose for which God saved us is also the purpose for which we live. "It was for this He called you through our gospel," wrote Paul to the Thessalonians, "that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:14). The Christian life is a life-long pursuit of Christlikeness. That was the Lord's goal in saving Paul and was his goal in response.²⁹

What glorious privilege to be possessed by Christ! What incredible confidence to know that we have been taken hold of by Jesus! What unfailing motivation is this, to know that Christ Himself undergirds all our focused exertion with His own initial activity! We have been possessed by God, claimed by Christ, and nothing can separate us from that love (Romans 8:30-39) or pluck us from His hand (John 10:28-29). Truly, then, we love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19); we pursue Him, because He first pursued us!

2. *We have been picked (v. 14).*

Here we come back to the qualifying statement after the word "prize" in verse 14. This phrase does not describe the nature or content of the prize, but its grounds or guarantor. We could translate the whole phrase this way—"the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." Paul is referencing a familiar theme in his writings, that it, what Jesus said in John 15:16—"You did not choose me, but I chose you." In other, more technical terms, Paul is rooting his humble, honest, focused exertion in sanctification upon God's real, past, unchanging election of him (cf. 2:12-13).³⁰

The noun κλήσις ["call"], like its cognate verb καλέω, frequently refers to God's initial and effective call to salvation through the gospel: it is a summons to enter the kingdom (cf. 1 Thes. 2:12), Christ's peace (Col. 3:15), or into fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9), so as to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29-30), and to receive salvation (2 Thes. 2:13-14) and eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12; cf. Eph. 1:18; 4:1, 4; 2 Thes. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:9).³¹

Paul even references this call with the present tense at times (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:12) to convey that the "divine call keeps ringing in the hearer's ears, as God summons Paul and other Christians in a heavenward direction and to holiness of life."³²

Dear Christian, we have been selected by God for the prize of Himself in prospect now and in fullness to come! This is a tremendous motivation, if we are thinking rightly. Instead of allowing such a gracious and unchanging choice to excuse us (Romans 5:21-6:2), it should excite us. Motyer explains:

It is for this reason that, in the other passage where he mentions a “prize,” Paul depicts himself fighting “not as aimlessly” or “uncertainly.” His final salvation, with all the glories of its rewards, was secured for him by and with God’s calling of him in Christ.³³

3. We have been promised (vv. 20-21).

Our passage ends with two wonderful “high notes” in verses 20-21. In contrast with the “destruction” of our enemies and their “earthly” mindset (v. 19), “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.” Brothers and sisters, this is our promise! Paul’s aspiration in verse 11 to “attain the resurrection from the dead” was grounded on a guarantee from the “Firstfruits” Himself—He will “transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body by the power” of His own resurrection! Run, therefore, with all your vigor and all your might, for “your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58, KJV).

Application: If you want the maturity that Paul considers in this passage to characterize you, you will need the proper motivation. Only the motivation that is derived from the gospel—who Jesus is, what He has said, and what He has done—will energize you spiritually and sufficiently to pursue Christ. All of your activity is subsequent to His, all of your energy was lit by His, and all of your desire pales compared to His. He has possessed you, picked you, and promised you—let us then endure until the end, when the glory of His promised rest erases the suffering of the present rigor (cf. Romans 8:18; Hebrews 4:11).

CONCLUSION

One commentator describes Paul in this passage with these colorful words:

No obsessive hatred ever dogged the heels of its adversary with more tenacity than the apostle held to the target of Christian perfection....[Here is] an example of the truth that the regenerate believer must appropriate the sanctifying grace of God by actively obeying him.³⁴

Brothers and sisters, we enjoy the possession, election, and promise of God. We have turned in our works-righteousness for a relationship with Him, and we have learned what it means to “rejoice in the Lord” (3:1-11). But, we have not arrived. The prospect for what we long is not our complete possession. And in that humble recognition, Christian maturity begins. With a dissatisfied satisfaction we “press on” in focused exertion to reach the finish line and receive the “prize” that we have tasted and long for. Friend, adopt these characteristics of Christian maturity—humble recognition, focused exertion, proper motivation. Don’t allow arrogance, complacency, past success, previous failure, or present distractions to squelch your passionate pursuit of Christ, for He has passionately pursued you!

Illustration: In the renowned film *Chariots of Fire*, Harold Abrahams is found sulking in the bleachers after a crushing loss. His girlfriend, Sybil Gordon, sits with him in unbroken silence. Finally, Abrahams bitterly whispers, “If I can't win, I won't run!” Sybil quietly, but wisely applies the remedy, “If you don't run, you can't win.”

Dear mature Christian, “We have not already obtained this and are not already perfect [humble recognition], but we press on to make it our own [focused exertion], because Christ Jesus has made us His own [proper motivation]” (adapt. v. 12).

ENDNOTES

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 87–88.

² Adapted from Alistair Begg, “Christian Maturity,” a sermon preached on June 28, 1998 over Philippians 3:12-16, <http://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/christian-maturity>.

³ That he basically states this three times demonstrates his earnestness to undermine the false teaching of the self-righteous Judaizers.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 242.

⁵ This passage also confronts a wrong view of sanctification called, among other things, perfectionism (aka Keswick Theology). MacArthur writes, “This passage deals a devastating blow to the false doctrine of perfectionism that still prevails in some denominations and churches. Perfectionism is the teaching that believers can reach a place of spiritual and moral perfection in this life. Perfectionists teach that in a second work of grace, believers may instantaneously be made sinless. Some even go so far as to teach the eradication of the sin nature. But the apostle Paul, undoubtedly the most committed, dedicated, spiritually mature Christian who ever lived, confessed gladly that he had failed to reach spiritual perfection thirty years after his conversion. And that confession was clear evidence of his true and mature spirituality. Who, then, could make a legitimate claim to have done so? To maintain the fiction that they have achieved sinless perfection, perfectionists are forced to make an unbiblical distinction between willful sin and ‘mistakes.’ But Scripture teaches that any violation of God’s law—whatever the intent—is sin. No Christian will ever become perfect in this life; that awaits the redemption of the body (Rom. 8:23). Perfection in this life will always be a goal, never an achievement. If we say we do not sin, we make God a liar, because He says we do (1 John 1:7–9)” (MacArthur, 243).

⁶ The “this way” refers back to his own personal example in verses 12-14. Thus, when he encourages us in verse 17 to “join in imitating me,” he is issuing a similar exhortation. Therefore, verses 12-21 are seen to be part of an entire unit, and while we could treat verses 12-16 in this lesson and verses 17-21 in the next, we can just as easily and accurately consider it all under one theme in one lesson. Motyer agrees with our assessment and writes (J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, The Bible Speaks Today [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984], 173):

A bird’s-eye view of verses 13-21 reveals that they are held together by two repeated ideas. According to verses 15 and 17 Christians are called to model themselves deliberately on the pattern set by Paul, and according to verses 14 and 20 this apostolic pattern of life is to be lived out by keeping our gaze steadfastly upon the future. The ‘calls’ issued by verses 15 and 17 are not substantially different from each other, but the future on which we are to look is variously expressed by the other two verses. According to verse 14, we have a goal to be attained, and according to verse 20 we have a Saviour to be awaited. Thus, there are two aspects to the life modelled on the apostolic pattern. On the one hand it is a life of personal commitment, effort and determination (verses 13-14); on the other hand, it is a life resting upon great certainties, in particular the abiding truths of the cross (verses 18-19) and the coming (verses 20-21) of the Lord Jesus. It is a life, therefore, of consecration and conviction.

⁷ He repeatedly and purposefully used irony throughout 3:1-11.

⁸ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 597.

⁹ “This was not the subjective confession of an oversensitive, overwrought soul who is blinded to his own progress. Rather, it was grounded in facts that are verifiable. He had not attained to

the perfection of the resurrection of the dead” (R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, Preaching the Word [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007], 147–148).

¹⁰ Hughes, 146.

¹¹ MacArthur, 245.

¹² Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

¹³ This, incidentally, is the same language he used in 2:5 when exhorting us to “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (NASB).

¹⁴ MacArthur, 249.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁶ Hughes, 147.

¹⁷ MacArthur, 246–247.

¹⁸ Kent, 142.

¹⁹ Arndt, 361.

²⁰ J. H. Michael, 162, quoted in Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 430.

²¹ O’Brien, 432-33.

²² Contrary to a common interpretation, we won’t take “of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” as the content of the prize. Instead, as we’ll see in a later point (main point 3, subpoint 2), this “upward call” was the basis or guarantor of the prize. The prize is simply what Paul had already stated in verses 4-11—knowing, gaining, being in, and sharing with Christ.

²³ MacArthur, 250.

²⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Php 3:16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁰ “We treasure the memory of our conversion, when we reached out the empty hand of faith to Jesus. But, behind this, making it possible, giving it reality, was the act of God who chose and took hold of us. Did Paul choose Christ? Indeed he did, but only because Christ first chose Paul. Christ’s was the real choice; anything we did was derived from what God in Christ had already decided. We responded to, and were indeed enabled by, his prior choice. Thus Jesus himself said: ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ (Motyer, 171).

³¹ O’Brien, 432.

³² *Ibid.*, 432.

³³ Motyer, 178.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.