

Philippians 3:12-16

### **Introduction**

The words “spiritually mature” can have different meanings for everyone. For some of us, they conjure up the idea of a “super Christian.”

We all have an idea of what a “perfect” Christian looks like. It can intimidate and discourage us, especially when we recognize our own shortcomings and failures. This passage in Philippians speaks not only to those who feel insecure and immature in their faith, but also to those who think or act like they have arrived. Paul’s words serve to comfort the insecure and convict the complacent as he describes what a mature Christian looks like.

### **Philippians 3:12-16**

**12** Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. **13** Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, **14** I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus. **15** Therefore, let all of us who are mature think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you. **16** In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained.

Immediately preceding this passage, Paul describes what his “goal” is in verses 10-11:

**10** My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, **11** assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.

His goal is twofold: he wants to “know” Christ completely and he is also looking forward to the reality that death will not be the end for him - he will be united with his Savior in heaven.

He wants the *whole* rescue that Jesus promised: he wants to see God - and, in the seeing, to become like his sovereign Savior. - Johnson

With all this in view, Paul then moves into what it looks like for a follower of Christ to be maturing in their pursuit of knowing Christ fully.

This leads Paul to an all important statement, the reason why this is his goal: he has been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. This becomes the crux of everything talked about in this passage.

So, we must ask ourselves: what does a life look like that has been taken hold of by Christ? And, as we move through this passage, we will have to ask ourselves the all important question: has my life been taken hold of by Christ Jesus?

## **I. Maturing, not Perfect (12)**

A. Paul starts with some helpful context for all of his teaching: he is not perfect.

1. It would be easy to read Paul's writings and create a mental image of who he is and forget that he is not actually perfect himself. Paul realizes that and so gives this context.
2. This can happen to us today. Separation between the pulpit and the pew.

## **B. Maturity is recognizing your immaturity**

1. He had not attained to the perfection of the resurrection of the dead. - Hughes
2. 'He knows Christ, but does not yet know Christ as he longs to know him. He has not "gained Christ" as fully as he desires, and has not "made his own" all that Jesus has won for him.' - Dennis Johnson

C. Spiritual dissatisfaction

1. Not the sinful kind of dissatisfaction, but a hunger and thirst
  - a) Spiritual dissatisfaction is a blessed state (Matthew 5:6)
2. A sublime cycle of dissatisfaction and satisfaction and dissatisfaction and satisfaction - Hughes
3. We recognize our constant need for growth and maturity - we "press on"

D. Thinking/acting like you have made it is one of the biggest signs of spiritual immaturity

1. We live in a world that values having it all together
  - a) Don't show weakness
  - b) Don't admit you're wrong
  - c) Make sure everyone thinks you have it together.
  - d) A Christian lives antithetically to this worldview
2. Important principle for life
  - a) What you say or think matters very little in comparison to how you act
  - b) Most of us would not *say* that we've arrived, but we may act this way
    - (1) How do people experience you?
  - c) Especially those in authority
    - (1) Bosses, parents, leaders, teachers
3. A believer's life must be marked by a humble recognition of their need
  - a) Type A people may struggle with this
  - b) Our lives are an open loop

## II. Forward, not Backward (13-14)

- A. The repetition by Paul is meant to communicate his sincerity
  1. Hand on the shoulder - I'm being serious
  2. "Paul is not feigning humility. He is speaking sober reality, which is as true of every believer on earth as it is of Paul himself" - Johnson
  3. Paul - "I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it" It would be arrogant for us to think that we have
- B. Forgetting what lies behind
  1. Some of you struggle with living in the past
    - a) Sometimes this can just be mildly annoying: example of lying in bed at night
    - b) Positive
      - (1) You know that person that can't stop talking about "back in the day?"
      - (2) Don't turn over in your mind the good old days - Hansen

(3) What Paul “forgets” probably includes his credentials before Jesus seized him - Johnson

c) Negative

(1) If anyone had reason dwell on his past sins - it was Paul

(a) Imagine how what he had done would torture him if he was not able to move past it

(b) Because Christ had taken hold of him he was able to move on

(2) Some of you can't get over what you have done or what has been done to you

(a) This is not saying there shouldn't be repentance/restitution, etc.

(b) What steps do you need to take to be able to leave your past behind you?

i) Conversations

ii) Repentance

iii) Forgiveness

iv) Therapy

(3) Forgetting gives you freedom - Hansen

C. Focus on what is ahead

1. The prize of knowing Christ fully that can only happen when united with him - Fee

### **III. Stimulant, not Sedative (15-16)**

A. Do you see your salvation a stimulant or a sedative?

1. Does the fact that Jesus has reached down into the pit and grabbed you out and imparted unto you his righteousness inspire in you any desire to know him more?

2. Or does it sedate you, thinking that “well, at least now I won't go to hell,” and just do whatever you want

3. A life taken hold of by Christ Jesus is a life that pursues him in grateful love as a response

B. This is humble, steady, hopeful, focused perseverance

1. This is not frenetic activity for activity's sake. - Johnson
- C. Don't go backwards
1. There is no such thing as a "holding pattern" in your relationship with Christ
  2. Stagnation example
  3. Paul recognizes this. Not moving forward means moving backward

#### **IV. Application: Yet Not I, but Through Christ in Me**

- A. In Acts 9, we read about Paul (here called Saul) on his way to Damascus for the express purpose of taking Christians captive. Make no mistake, he *hated* Christians.
1. Now Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest **2** and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. **3** As he traveled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. **4** Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul said. "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting," he replied.
  2. Can you imagine a more dramatic transformation? A 180 degree switch from who he was to who he is.
  3. Galatians 1:13 - For you have heard about my former way of life in Judaism I intensely persecuted God's church and tried to destroy it.
  4. This is the same man who now says "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, **14** I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus." This same Jesus that he formerly persecuted.
  5. This is what a life looks like that has been taken hold of by Christ. He can now declare that he is striving and pursuing after Christ
    - a) The violence of Paul's declaration - based on the violence of his calling.  
Gracious, loving violence - Hughes
  6. "Taken hold of" a gentle, gracious violence - a rescue operation

- B. At the beginning we said this passage would encourage the insecure and convict the complacent - and that is exactly what the application of this passage should do
- 1. If you are here today and feel insecure and immature in your walk with the Lord - be encouraged that understanding your need for growth is part of spiritual maturity, and allow the gracious hand of the Lord to draw you closer**
  - 2. If you are here today and are complacent - thinking or acting like you have made it - be convicted that your pride is antithetical to spiritual maturity. You will not be able to grow spiritually if you do not see the need for it**
- C. There is a third type of person I want to speak to. This is the person that has been striving after the goal of knowing Christ, but can't seem to make progress. You feel stuck. Frustrated. Maybe you're giving up. Is this Christian thing even worth it?
1. A simple reality: if you haven't been taken hold of by Christ you won't strive toward the goal
  2. *Why* do you want to know Christ?
    - a) Do you want to know him because your friends/family want you to?
    - b) Do you want to know him because you think it will make your life better?
    - c) Do you want to know him because you want to have all the answers for life?
    - d) Knowing Christ needs to be the goal. The only goal. "One thing I do"
  3. What does it mean to be taken hold of by Christ?
    - a) Knowing the right things doesn't mean Christ has taken hold of you.
    - b) Being around the right people doesn't mean Christ has taken hold of you.
    - c) Listening to the right music and reading the right books doesn't mean Christ has taken hold of you.
    - d) Praying a prayer does not mean that Christ has taken hold of you.
    - e) Do you consider the prize that Paul talks about to be a prize?
    - f) Do you value the things of this world over everything that the Lord has to offer?
    - g) Is your goal in life to know Christ fully, simply for the sake of knowing Christ and one day being united with him?
    - h) Can you agree with Paul that this is your "one thing"?

- D. I of course am not speaking of perfection, as we've already said. We all struggle with being seduced by things of this world, and it is at times *so* hard to keep going in pursuit of Christ. But, Jesus has made us his own (completed action), so we press on to make the goal our own (uncompleted action).
- E. I don't want to drive anyone to fear but I can say with certainty, and in agreement with Scripture, if you would say that you are a follower of Christ but you have never felt a desire to pursue the things of the Lord, it is time for you to soberly assess whether or not Jesus has taken hold of your life.
  - 1. This is the best place that you can ask that question. This is a safe place for you to humbly admit that even if you have been coming to church for years, or have been claiming the name of Christ for years, that maybe today you can finally experience the joy and freedom of having the Lord Jesus Christ reach down in gentle violence and grab hold of your life.

## **Conclusion**

Christians live a life that makes no sense to the outside world. We live for a reality that is beyond this world. We are striving after a goal that is beyond this life, and so we see everything as loss in comparison to knowing Christ. This is not a hopeless, fatalistic life. There is hope and purpose beyond anything that this life can offer.