

Have you heard of the “Bannister effect?” Prior to 1954, no one had ever ran a mile in less than 4 min. Experts said it was physically impossible. Roger Bannister trained his tail off to prove otherwise. And eventually he did. What is remarkable is within one year of Bannister breaking the 4 min mark, 300 other runners did the same. They saw it happen. It was possible. That barrier was as much psychological as physical. If Bannister could do it, so can I. And many did. Now, over 1800 runners have broken the 4 min barrier. So, business leaders and coaches speak of the Bannister effect: when someone breaks through what was previously thought to be impossible, and others are inspired by their success and follow through into the new possibility.

Well, Banister ran the miracle mile in May of 1954. It was the first race for two men to run a sub-4 minute mile. With only about 90 yards to go, the Australian John Landy looked over his left shoulder right at the moment that the English Roger Bannister passed him on the other side. Of that instant John Landy said, "When Lot's wife looked back she was turned into a pillar of salt. When I looked back I was turned into a pillar of bronze!" There is a statue of that exact moment in Vancouver.¹ In running and in life, you look back you lose your focus. / We are in the book of Philippians this morning, 3:12-16 (922 This is . . .). Main Point: Press on with the singular focus of growing in spiritual maturity.

I. An Acknowledgment of the Lack of Perfection 12-13 – Paul has not obtained perfection. Now, you say, of course he hasn't. No one has, besides Jesus. But “perfection” here does not mean what it means to us. It does not mean sinlessness or moral perfection. This verb for “perfect” here is *teleioō*. You can hear the word *telos* in it. It means to complete an activity, or bring to an end, finish, accomplish, to overcome an imperfect state of things, to bring to full measure. The best way to think about it is being morally complete. It is wholehearted dedication to God. Undivided.² Paul says I am not morally complete yet. None of us are. We are not there. All a mess in process. Christians are not those who have it all together; we just know the One who does.

So, Paul is not there yet but he presses on to make it his own, *because* Jesus has him his own. **2:12-13**. You remember that sermon?: synergism is based on monergism. We strive to make it our own because Christ has made us his own. We can only press forward to make completeness our own because Jesus has first made us his own. I get the picture of a toddler just learning to walk tumbling toward his Momma with hands outreached and she leans down and scoops him up into her arms. The same form of this word is used in **1:6** (*epitelēō*).

Paul says “brothers,” meaning family. From the same womb. Born again into a new family with God our Father and Jesus our older brother. We share a common membership in the family of God. / He has not yet made perfection his own. Let me say a word to our saints who have been following the Lord for a while. Paul has been walking with Christ for 30 years as he writes this. The temptation after being a Christian a while is to think you have arrived. The temptation for the spiritually mature is to look around and compare yourself favorably to newer believers. But when we do that we fall right back into what Paul considered rubbish earlier in chapter 3: confidence in the flesh.

How does Paul respond to the reality and acknowledgement that he has much room to grow? Does he check out? Does he just decide to coast along? Does he blame people or circumstances? As we'll see, no not at all. So brothers and sisters, stay engaged. Don't let off. Finish strong all the way till the end. Don't let off the gas. Realize you have much ground to gain, more Christ to know. If you know your own heart at all that should be

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bannister_and_Landy.jpg

² Pennington, 75.

evident. There is yet much room to grow. Ask your spouse. Rev 2:4-5: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” (Heb 5:11-14)

Stay in the race. Don't give up too soon. “Always run through the line.” Have you ever seen the end of a race when runners start celebrating too soon and get passed up at the last minute. There was an Oregon runner raising the roof and a Washington runner passes him at the last minute.³ Humble pie. Here is a **pic** of my fav.⁴ Always run through the line. Keep your eye on the finish line. Don't pull a John Landy. But the stakes are so much higher! / Saints acknowledge you have much room to grow, much maturity yet to attain.

II. The Path to Perfection – 12-14 - We are not complete yet, but that is the goal. Spiritual maturity. That is why we are here. You see, this is often missed in Evangelical circles. There is a good amount of cheap grace in the air. That we are only here to receive our “get out of hell free” card and then live life as if Jesus was still in the tomb and the Spirit had never come. There is lots of “decisionalism” – this idea that we just want to obtain decisions from people and that's the main reason why we are here. Just get people baptized. But baptism, or making a decision for Christ – is just the starting line, not the finish line. It is just the beginning. The first step of a life-long marathon of pursuing spiritual maturity. Lewis said, “How little they know of Christianity who think that the story ends with conversion.” Our vision statement as a church is this: “SSBC exists to help move people from wherever they are to where King Jesus wants them: submitting every aspect of their hearts and lives to his gracious Lordship.” Every aspect of our hearts and lives. That is a lifelong pursuit. Then Paul lays out three steps along the path to perfection:

1) Don't look back. Paul says he forgets what lies behind. He had just listed all his past achievements, positive and negative. He now has a new perspective on the past in light of Jesus Christ: Filth (Phil 3:8). / The contemporary psychobabble of the day would have you enslaved to your past. Would have you think you are a helpless victim due to your past. What a debilitating lie! Paul's present wasn't determined by his past. The enemy wants to think your past will always haunt you. Saint, its not true. Regardless. Past failure doesn't define your future. Paul killed Christians – **3:6a**.

And again, don't look back at some past decision you have made to determine the vitality of your present faith. Don't say I was baptized or prayed a prayer or walked an aisle. Are you pursuing the knowledge of Christ *today*? / Don't look back.

2) Press on. Have a forward-looking faith. Press on to make completion your own (12b). Pursue spiritual maturity. Strain forward to what lies ahead (13c). We have more race imagery here. Keep running. Calvin said God has assigned to each believer a race of repentance that is to be ran their whole lives long. Keep going. Endure. Persevere. Press on. This will take effort. Sanctified sweat. Not to gain a right standing – remember v. 9 – that has been given to us as a gift from God through faith.

Grace is both pardon and power so we strain forward. It means to exert oneself to the uttermost but often with the connotation of stretching out or straining toward something. The image is of a runner with her body bent over, outstretched arms, head fixed forward, never even glancing back, eyes fixed on the finish line. Its

³ 1st 14 seconds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWa9iYYPF4>

⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3151098/Moment-American-marathon-runner-celebrated-victory-early-gets-beaten-finish-line-British-competitor.html>

not an aimless, but a purposeful straining forward with the goal in sight. / Grace is not opposed to effort, but to earning (Willard). Do you put out effort in your Christian walk? Do you know those folks whose holiness is so above yours that it is just embarrassing? They didn't stumble into that.

He uses the same metaphor in **1 Cor 9:24-27**. Reminds one of Rocky: "there's one thing I want you to do for me: win.⁵ God has given us a race to run. Friends, races are hard work. There is training, early hours, blood and sweat involved. The race is not over until the finish line **3:11**.

Sanctification is a life-long process. You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." There is some truth to that, but we are much more than "just forgiven." I think Paul would write, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven and therefore striving for perfection." D.A. Carson writes, "Paul cannot be satisfied with a brand of Christianity that is orthodox but dead, rich in the theory of justification but powerless when it comes to transforming people's lives."

Friend are you maturing spiritually? Are you making progress in the Christian life? Do you know his Word better and better? Is the fruit of the Spirit evident in your life? Are you a more patient, giving, humble, gracious, joyful, loving, content person than you were a year ago? Do you know and love Christ more now than ever? Are you more like him?

14 – Press on toward the goal. The word for "goal" here was the marker at the finish line on which the runner set his sight and toward which he ran with all his might.⁶ Runners know that you don't look back, you don't take your eyes off the goal. Don't be a John Landy! / He presses on toward the goal for the prize. The prize is what the runner won. The prize is knowing Christ, indeed the prize is Christ himself.⁷

The upward call of God in Christ Jesus is God's call. This call is a divine summons. 2 Tim 1:9: "he saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." Older theologians call it the effectual call. It is effective. Rom 11:29: the call of God is irrevocable.

And it is an upward call: upward – directed toward the Lord. He calls us upward. We direct our life toward God. We aim at heaven. Lewis: "If you read history you find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither." We don't look back, we press on, and we focus forward.

Col 3:1-2.

What is your goal? What is your prize? What are you after? What are you running for? My greatest concern as a minister in Abilene, TX is people basing their lives on the wrong foundation. Building for the wrong thing. Wasting your life. You don't want to be the person who climbs and climbs and at the end of your life realizes

⁵ I owe this illustration to Chandler, *To Live is Christ*, 126.

⁶ Witherington in Harmon, 358n159.

⁷ Dean Flemming, 186.

that that ladder was leaning against the wrong building the entire time. Don't mislive! I have shared this quote from a stoic philosopher before and it is worth sharing again: "There is a danger that you will mislive – that despite all your activity, despite all the pleasant diversions you might have enjoyed while alive, you will end up living a bad life. There is, in other words, a danger that when you are on your deathbed, you will look back and realize that you wasted your one chance at living. Instead of spending your life pursuing something genuinely valuable, you squandered it because you allowed yourself to be distracted by the various baubles [trinkets] life has to offer."

Heb 12:1-3: "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." Press on all you saints, press on till the end. Press on toward that blessed shore. Don't look back, press on, and:

3) Adopt a singular preoccupation. Paul is an example for us. He was single-minded. "I am not complete yet, but one thing I do. **1:20-21, 3:8-11**. Paul is consumed with knowing Christ, with making spiritual progress, with growing in Christ-likeness. Here is how Count Zinzendorf put it: "I have one passion: it is He, He alone."

15 Mature. This is part of the same word family as the verb "perfect" in v. 12. So King Jimmy translates verse 15 this way: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." Verse 12 is *teleioō*. Here the word is *teleios*. It means attaining an end or purpose, fully up to standard, being mature or full grown, fully developed in a moral sense. Complete. It is used in Eph 4:13 where pastors equip the saints for the work of ministry until we all become *mature*. In Col 1:28, Paul says he teaches and warns everyone so that we may present everyone *mature* in Christ. In Col 4:12, Epaphras ministers to them so that they may stand *mature*. James 1:4 says that trials make us *perfect* and complete (2:8, 22, 3:2). In Heb 5:14, the author rebukes those who are still on the bottle and need to be on meat and he calls them *mature* (6:1, 9:9, 10:1).

Jesus uses this word in the SOTM. Matt 5:48: you must be perfect/mature/complete as your heavenly Father is perfect. Again, the idea is not moral perfection or sinlessness, but fully mature, whole-heartedly complete, having a unified heart for God. William Barclay says this word *teleios* describes something perfectly suited to the end for which it was created.⁸ In that context it is to have a unified heart for God unlike the Pharisees who only practice righteousness in order to be seen. It is having a whole new person, not just new external actions. The idea is wholeness or singleness of devotion, complete, virtuous.⁹ The word means whole-hearted dedication to God. An all of life orientation toward God. Being unified in heart and action. As one NT scholar says, "To say that disciples must be *teleios* as God is *teleios* is to say that they must be whole or virtuous – singular in who they are – not one thing on the outside but another on the inside."¹⁰

Spiritual maturity is the goal and here Paul says true maturity consists in part in knowing that you are not yet fully mature. Christian perfection is knowing your imperfections and resolving to pursue perfection until the resurrection. / The mature will think this way. For the 5th time, Paul uses that key verb "to have a mindset"

⁸ Boice, *Matthew*, 93.

⁹ Pennington, *SOTM and Human Flourishing*, 69-85; Pennington, *SOTM and Human Flourishing*, 70.

¹⁰ Pennington, *SOTM and Human Flourishing*, 205.

(*phronēō*). Remember, that term means a mindset that a believer adopts, a worldview, a frame of reference through which everything else is evaluated. / To think “this way” is to adopt a singular preoccupation. To pursue one thing: the pursuit of Christ above all things. If you are mature, you will think this way. And if you don’t, God will show you.

And Paul is confident that they’ll come along. Paul is a patient pastor who trusts God’s promises to persistently and progressively mature the church. He is confident in the ongoing work of the Spirit. Providence keeps him from pastoral panic. God will grow you.

16 Hold true. Don’t drift. The world and the flesh and the devil are pushing. Stay strong. You must be awake and alert. Like when in the ocean. . . We must hold firm. Outside of the NT, this word refers to soldiers moving in formation. It is the same verb used in Gal 5:25: let us keep in step with the Spirit. F.F. Bruce says, “Paul encourages the Philippian Christians to continue to march forward as a united community, shoulder to shoulder, according to the teaching which they had received from him since first he brought them the gospel.”¹¹ / The Christian life is a group of runners in a race and a group of soldiers in a war. **2 Tim 2:1-7.**

So the question is: are you maturing? Are you pressing on? Or falling back? Listen, I know. Progress is slow. Measuring our sanctification can be like watching the grass grow. We often don’t see it. Like with your kids. On the day to day, you don’t notice their growth, but then you look at pictures from three years ago and ask where the time went! In *Mere Xy*, Lewis wrote, “Do not sit down and start watching your own mind to see if it is coming along. That puts a man quite on the wrong track. When the most important things in our life happen we quite often do not know, at the moment, what is going on. A man does not always say to himself, “Hullo! I’m growing up.” It is often only when he looks back that he realizes what has happened and recognizes it as what people call “growing up.” You can see it even in simple matters. A man who starts anxiously watching to see whether he is going to sleep is very likely to remain wide awake” (Book 3, Ch. 12).

Church, we have room to grow. We will always have room to grow. And we should make it our singular preoccupation to grow together in spiritual maturity. Press on all you saints. Don’t look back. Focus forward.

¹¹ *Phil*, 126 in Harmon, 368.