

Pressing on in the Gospel – Philippians 3:12-16

Main Idea: Christian maturity is not measured by having arrived at perfection but by continuing to pursue Christ with perseverance, knowing that our pursuit is grounded in the reality that Christ has already taken hold of us.

I. Philippians 3:12-16

As Paul begins this section of Philippians, he immediately dismantles a misunderstanding that could easily arise from the preceding verses. After speaking so clearly about counting everything as loss for the sake of Christ and longing to know Him in the power of His resurrection, one might assume that Paul had somehow already attained the fullness of the life he describes. Yet Paul begins with a startling admission: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.” **Even after decades of following Christ, after missionary journeys, suffering, imprisonment, and fruitfulness in ministry, Paul openly confesses that he has not yet arrived.** This honesty reshapes our assumptions about what spiritual maturity truly looks like.

The word Paul uses for “perfect” carries the sense of completion or full maturity. He is not denying the real transformation that has taken place in his life through the gospel. He has been justified by faith, radically changed by grace, and set apart for Christ’s service. Yet the process of sanctification, the ongoing work of being conformed to the image of Christ, is still unfolding. The New Testament consistently describes the Christian life in these terms. **Believers have been made new in Christ, yet they are still being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). They have died with Christ, yet they continue putting sin to death (Rom. 6:11–13).** The work has begun, but it has not yet been completed. Recognizing this protects believers from two dangerous extremes. One extreme is pride. **Long familiarity with Scripture, theology, or church life can quietly create the illusion that we have moved beyond the need for correction or repentance.** Paul refuses to allow that mindset to take root. If the apostle himself says he has not arrived, then no Christian should imagine that they have outgrown the need for growth. The other extreme is despair. Some believers feel overwhelmed by the gap between their current struggles and the holiness they desire. **Yet Paul’s confession of incompleteness does not lead him to discouragement. Instead, it propels him forward in pursuit of Christ.**

Paul explains why in the second half of verse 12: “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” This statement reveals the foundation of the entire passage. **Paul’s pursuit of Christ is not an attempt to earn acceptance from God. It is the response of someone who has already been claimed by Christ.** Christ has taken hold of him. The risen Lord confronted him on the Damascus road and transformed the direction of his life. From that moment forward, Paul belonged to Christ (Romans 6:22). This reality transforms the motivation for Christian obedience. **The believer does not pursue holiness in order to secure God’s love. Rather, obedience flows from the assurance that we already belong to Him.** Scripture repeatedly describes salvation in terms of union with Christ. Believers are united with Him in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5), crucified with Him and raised to new life (Gal. 2:20). Because Christ has taken hold of His people, their pursuit of Him is not driven by anxiety but by gratitude and devotion.

This truth stabilizes the Christian life. Without it, believers tend to swing between pride and despair; confident when they feel spiritually strong, discouraged when they feel weak. **But union with Christ anchors identity in something far more secure than personal performance. The believer presses on not toward uncertainty but from security.** Christ’s hold on His people guarantees that the work He began will ultimately be brought to completion (Phil. 1:6).

To Ponder:

1. What are some ways believers today mistakenly measure spiritual maturity? What is the danger in doing so?

2. Are there any ways you struggle with trusting that your faith depends on Christ's hold on you and not on your feelings on a given day?

Paul continues by describing what this pursuit of Christ actually looks like in practice: "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." The imagery shifts into the world of athletics. Paul pictures the Christian life as a race in which the runner's entire body is stretched forward toward the finish line. To forget what lies behind does not mean erasing memory. Paul frequently recalled his past, including his persecution of the church, to magnify the grace of God. The point is not amnesia but orientation.

The believer refuses to allow past failures or past successes to determine present obedience. Regret can paralyze a Christian who constantly revisits former sins or missed opportunities. Yet the gospel reminds us that the cross has decisively dealt with guilt (Eph. 1:7–8). Because Christ has forgiven the past, believers are free to pursue faithfulness in the present. Past success can be equally dangerous. **Faithful ministry, years in the church, theological knowledge, and previous obedience can subtly lead to complacency.** Paul himself had every reason to look back on a remarkable ministry. Yet he refuses to live off yesterday's obedience. Instead, he strains forward. The Christian life is sustained not by nostalgia but by hope.

Paul explains the goal toward which he presses: "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." This prize is not earthly recognition or spiritual achievement. It is the final realization of salvation, the day when believers see Christ face to face and are fully conformed to His image. **Scripture describes the Christian life as living between what God has already done and what He has promised to complete. Believers have already been raised with Christ, yet they await the fullness of resurrection glory (Col. 3:1–4).** This future hope shapes present obedience. Pressing on rarely appears dramatic. More often it looks like steady faithfulness, repenting of sin, persevering in prayer, continuing to serve when circumstances are difficult, and trusting God's promises when the path forward is unclear. The Christian life is not a sprint but a marathon of endurance. The mature believer is not the one who has finished the race but the one who continues running toward Christ.

Paul concludes by describing the mindset that characterizes spiritual maturity. "Let those of us who are mature think this way." **Maturity is not sinless perfection but a settled orientation of the heart toward Christ.** Mature believers recognize that they have not yet arrived, yet they continue pursuing Christ with perseverance. They refuse to settle into complacency, and they refuse to collapse into despair. "Only let us hold true to what we have attained." Growth in the Christian life does not require inventing new spiritual strategies. **Instead, believers are called to remain faithful to the truth they have already received.** By clinging to God's Word and walking in obedience, the Spirit continues to shape and mature His people. In this way, the church grows steadily in Christlikeness as it presses on in the gospel.

To Ponder:

1. What does "straining forward" toward Christ look like in everyday Christian life?
2. Are there any areas of your life where you have grown complacent in your relationship with Christ? What are the dangers of being complacent?
3. How can a church encourage all of the saints to continue to grow into maturity rather than allowing people to remain spiritual adolescents?