

## PURSING THE PRIZE

### Philippians 3:12-14

There was *a teaching* that was prevalent with the *Judaizers* in Paul's day, and still prevails in some *denominations*, *churches*, and *televangelist* today...that is the *false doctrine of perfectionism*. *Perfectionism* is the teaching that *believers can reach a place of spiritual and moral perfection within this life*. *Perfectionists* teach that it's a *second work of grace*, and in it, 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*, and *spiritually mature* Christian who ever lived...*confessed* that he had *failed to reach spiritual perfection*...even *thirty years after his conversion*. And that *confession* was *clear evidence* of his *true and mature spirituality*.

No Christian will ever become *perfect in this life*. That must await the *redemption* of the body (**Romans 8:23**). But even with that truth, *perfection in this life should always be pursued*...realizing that it *will never be achieved*. "*If we say we do not sin...we make God a liar, because He says we do*" (**I John 1:7-9**). Biblically, *perfection* refers to *complete or whole...being mature*...not as I described *perfectionism* before.

There are *several reasons* why the believer should *continue to grow and mature* in their *spiritual life*.

- *It glorifies God.*
- *It provides evidence that our salvation is genuine.*
- *It adorns and makes visible the truth of God to others* (**Titus 2:10**).
- *It brings assurance of salvation.*
- *It preserves us from the sorrow and suffering associated with spiritual immaturity.*

- *It protects the cause of Christ from reproach.*
- *It produces joy in our lives.*
- *It equips us for ministry to others in the body of Christ.*
- *It enhances our witness to the lost world.*

*Christlikeness* is the *prize* that must be *pursued*, though realizing that the *prize will not be attained* this side of *heaven*.

Judging from the frequent use of *athletic metaphors* in his writings, **Paul** had to have been a *sports fan*. He used...

- *Boxing...not beating the air* (**I Corinthians 9:26b**).
  - *Struggle*...the word that translates *wrestling* or *fighting* (**Ephesians 6:12**).
  - That he had *fought the good fight* (**II Timothy 4:7**).
  - In reference to the **Isthmian Games** (held in **Corinth** and *second in importance only* to the **Olympic Games**), he reminded the **Corinthians**, "*Everyone who competes in the games exercise self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*" (**I Corinthians 9:25**).
  - But his favorite *athletic metaphor* was that of a *foot race*. He declared to the **Ephesians** elders, "*But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.*" (**Acts 20:24**).
- To the **Romans** he wrote, "*So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy*" (**Romans 9:16**).

To the Corinthians, “*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win...Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air...*” (I Corinthians 9:24, 26).

## I. THE PRIZE AWAITS: (vs. 12a)

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect (vs. 12a)...

The prize that Paul is alluding to is back in verse 10...

“*That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*”

~Philippians 3:10

Not that...emphasizes that Paul had **not yet obtained** the prize he pursued.

**Obtained**...means *to acquire* or *receive*...the prize he pursued. He had **not yet become perfect**.

**Become perfect**...means *to attain perfection, reach a goal, or accomplish something*.

**Already**...the *twice-repeated* word indicates that Paul was *still imperfect* when he wrote this epistle.

Keep in mind that we are *not judged* on our *performance*. We *aren't judged* on a *perfect performance*. All that we are as a *child of God*...all that we are *when we are “in Christ”*...and all that we will *enjoy in heaven* is *eternally fixed* by God (I Peter 1:3-5). That *spiritual reality* and *promise* can't be improved on. But as believer's we *must strive* for that *virtue* of *completeness* or *perfection*.

Knowing that we are not now *what we should be*, or *what we will someday will be* in *glory*, must produce a *desire* and *passion* for moving in the direction of the *prize*.

**Disclaimer of spiritual perfection.** When we come to Christ for *salvation*, all that we are *in Christ*...we...

- Become a *new creature* (II Corinthians 5:17)
- Become a *child of God* (Romans 8:16-17)
- Have a *new heart* (Ezekiel 36:26)
- Have a *new disposition* that strongly desires *holiness* (Romans 7:22; II Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16)
- Are *united with Christ* (Galatians 2:20)
- Possess a *renewed mind* (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23)
- Have the *mind of Christ* (I Corinthians 2:16)
- Have a *right standing before God* (Romans 8:1)
- Have been *justified* (I Corinthians 2:16)
- Have been *forgiven* (Ephesians 1:7; I John 1:9)
- Have *Christ's righteousness imputed to us* (II Corinthians 5:21)
- Are *indwelt by the Holy Spirit* (Romans 8:9, 11; I Corinthians 3:16; II Timothy 1:14)

...But *we are still not perfect*. We are still subject to *temptation*...we still possess our *unredeemed flesh*...and we are still a *sinner* (Romans 7:14-25; I Timothy 1:15). Far from having obtained *perfection*...we should still *pursue it* with *all that is within us...with all our heart*.

Obviously, *pursuing* the *prize of spiritual perfection* begins with the *realization* and *dissatisfaction* with one's *present spiritual condition*. Those who think that they've *reached spiritual perfection* will not see the need to *pursue* being *refined* or the need for *maturing*. Why should they *seek something* that they think they *already have*?

*“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”*

~II Corinthians 3:18

## II. THE PRIZE PURSUED: (vs. 12b)

But I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus (vs. 12b)...

When the *true believer* recognizes their *need to improve* their *spiritual condition*, they will *diligently pursue it*.

**I press on**...means *to run* or *follow after*. It speaks of an *aggressive, energetic effort*. Paul *pursued* the spiritual prize with *all his might, straining every spiritual muscle* as he *ran to win* (I Corinthians 9:24).

Here's a *paradox*...Paul was *totally dependent* on God's power *working in his life*, yet he also described the Christian life as *laboring* and *striving* (Colossians 1:29) and *fighting the good fight of faith* (I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 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 (Romans 8:17).

**So that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus**...This phrase states the goal of Paul's *effort*. The **verb** translated **I may lay hold of**...and **I was laid hold of** could be translated *to overtake, seize, or catch*. This is another *paradox*...in essence, Paul was *running spiritually to catch* the very thing for which Jesus had *pursed him*...his *salvation* (verse 10). Paul's goal was to *run spiritually* to **proclaim the Gospel** for people to be *saved* in order that they all (Paul and everyone else) *may become conformed to the image of Christ*.

God *chose Paul*, as He did *all believers*, to *make him like* Christ Jesus...*to conform us into the image of Christ*.

*“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.”*

~Romans 8:29

## III. THE PRIZE MOTIVATES: (vs. 13)

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead (vs. 13)...

To make a *maximum effort* in any athletic endeavor requires the participants to *concentrate* on a point straight ahead. The *eyes*...one's *focus*...determines *success*.

Brethren...a *gentle, intimate, and affectionate* term. A means to move the *hearts* of the **Philippians** from the *Judaizers* towards him.

Paul then adds the *disclaimer*...**I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet**. Despite the *false teaching's* claim, he wanted them to know that *spiritual perfection isn't attainable* in this *life*.

**But the one thing I do**...Even though Paul hadn't achieved *spiritual perfection*, it still motivated him to *pursue* it. As a matter of fact, it had become the *one pursuit* of his life.

When *believers* have *one driving compulsion*...that is, *to be like Christ*...they will *pursue spiritual perfection* with *all their heart*.

**Forgetting what lies behind**...Paul's *past isn't relevant*. Everything that man would have *counted as important*, Paul had already *put behind him*. *Perfectionist, legalist, and religious elite* look to their *past achievements* to

*validate* their supposed *spiritual status*. Paul makes a break with everything in his *past*...both good and bad.

The is true with *believers* today. We cannot live on *past victories*, nor should we be *debilitated* by the *guilt* of *past sins*. God is interested in our obedience *now* and in the *future*. That's why He says that He *separates our sin as far as the east is from the west*.

*“But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God’.”*

~Luke 9:62

Reaching forward to what lies ahead...Reaching forward is a **compound verb** that describes *stretching a muscle to its limit*. It *pictures a runner straining every muscle to reach the finish line*.

Paul summed up this *pursuit* that he had when he wrote...

*“Of this church, I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”*

~Colossians 1:25-29

Pursuing *Christlikeness* here and now...*until we are made like Him in glory*...defines the *progress* of the Christian life and the mark of *true spiritual maturity*.

#### IV. THE PRIZE REWARDS: (vs. 14)

**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (vs. 14)...**

This verse is the heart of this passage.

**I press on...** a **present tense verb** that denotes Paul's *continuous effort* in *pursuing the impossible*...and *defeating the unbeatable foe*. It expresses Paul's *single-focused determination* to continually bear down on his *calling*...to *fix his eyes* on the *target*.

*“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”*

~I Corinthians 9:24

The **prize** is what motivated Paul to *run to win*...all the time knowing that *perfection* isn't attainable in this *life*. The *finish line* is the *threshold of heaven*, where the *rewards* will be handed out (the *five crowns*).

*“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.”*

~I John 3:2

Only in heaven will Paul receive the **prize** which he so *diligently pursued*. It will be like a runner *triumphantly pumping his fist* in the air as he *crosses the finish line*.

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future 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.”*

~II Timothy 4:7-8

#### **LESSONS WE CAN LEARN:**

- **The awareness of the need to improve one’s spiritual condition is a necessary prerequisite to pursuing the prize of SPIRITUAL PERFECTION...growing and maturing spiritually.**
- **The Christian life is a life-long pursuit of CHRIST-LIKENESS.**
- **Only in heaven will we receive the CROWN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS...Christ’s righteousness perfected in us. Only then will we receive the prize which we so diligently pursued.**