

The Pursuit of a True Christian -- Philippians 3: 12-16

Introduction and Outline

- Scripture reading: Philippians 3:12–16; 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.
- Three ways to be a loser in life: 1. Setting no goals, just following the flow of life; 2. Setting a goal but not striving toward it, having only a desire but no action; 3. Setting a goal and striving toward it, only to realize in the end that it's a wrong goal leading to hell.
- The only way to a victorious life is to set the right goal and strive toward it!
- Outline:
 - Title: The Pursuit of a True Christian
 - 1. Having a Holy Dissatisfaction (v12a, v13a)
 - 2. Pressing on Toward the Goal (v12b, v13b-14)
 - 3. Making No Excuses (vv15-16)

Having a Holy Dissatisfaction (v12a, v13a)

- “Not that.....already obtained it.....have already become perfect”: No one has the experience, life and power of Paul. If he still needs to press on, I have no excuse to take it easy. People always try to find some easy shortcut to perfection. The false teachers of Judaizer perhaps used this mindset to promote their religious rules. In our day, some teach the so-called “second blessing,” saying the first blessing is initial salvation and the second blessing is what brings you to spiritual perfection so you can obey God perfectly in this life. The practice of “speaking in tongues” of Charismatics originated from the teaching of the second blessing.

Once a man thinks that he is perfect, there is no need to pursue growth. Obviously, this attitude of self-satisfaction will hinder the pursuit of sanctification. An important attitude in sanctification is to be unsatisfied with your current state, knowing that you're far from the goal.

A holy dissatisfaction is an urgent emotion. It makes you feel unsatisfied and urges you to press on and to change continuously. True Christians will strive continuously knowing they will never be perfect in this life; while false Christians will give up striving knowing the same truth. The fact they'll never be perfect in this life is a constant motivation for true Christians and a constant excuse for false Christians.

Pressing On Toward the Goal (v12b, v13b-14)

- “press on”: It is often used to describe the pursuit of the enemy, often translated as “persecute.” It is the kind of pursuit that strives with maximum effort and does not give up until reaching the goal, just like an athlete running toward the finish line stretching every muscle to the maximum.

- “may lay hold”： Not that Paul is uncertain whether he would be able to lay hold of the prize in the end. Rather, this expresses his humility that he does not take it for granted. Not that “Hey, God has already chosen me, so He’ll make me perfect no matter what”; but I must pursue it in such a way *as if* I wouldn’t get it if I don’t pursue it. Paul doesn’t want us to throw away our assurance of salvation (Ephesians 1:4); Rather, he is emphasizing the diligent effort to pursue the goal, as if there is only one runner who can receive the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24).
- “I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus”： The significance of the two “lay hold of” is this: The goal I want to lay hold of is the same goal for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. His goal is my goal. This goal is for me to be perfectly sanctified, to be perfectly like Christ Himself. (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 8:29; 2 Thessalonians 2:14).
- “but one thing”： Nothing else matters. Many times Christians are slow in sanctification because their minds are distracted by many things and not “but one thing”. You want to be sanctified, but you also want to be rich and popular; You want to be sanctified, but you also want to enjoy this life to the max.....
- “forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead”： Jesus says “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”(Luke 9: 62). Forgetting what lies behind includes both good things and bad things. No matter how wonderful or pitiful you were in the past, whatever success or failure, the past is past and you must forget it!

How many people are so chained to their past that they just wouldn’t move on! They constantly fall back on either the hurtful memories of their past failure or the boastful memories of their past spiritual attainment, either way they just wouldn’t move on! Memory can be such a hindrance that it binds your hands and feet so you can’t run! Now, Paul has such bad memory as being a persecutor of the church, and he also has such wonderful memory as being taken up to the third heaven. How can he ever make progress if he allows himself to dwell on either side of these memories?!

Forgetting what lies behind does not mean you can be irresponsible and not deal with what you must deal with. Nor does it mean to physically erase all memory from your brain. It means you don’t *live* in the memory of *yesterday* so much so that you can’t put forth *your best effort for today*.

- “I press on toward the goal ”： The goal is Christ. It’s imitating Christ, to be conformed to Christ’s likeness, that is, completely sanctified.
- “for the prize of the upward call ”： Therefore we need to “set our mind on the things above” (Colossians 3:2). The prize is the goal, and the goal is the prize. It is always the goal as we strive for it in this life; and it becomes our prize when Christ comes again.

Application: Pressing on requires the same diligence and zeal for everyone, but specific applications vary depending on your God-given spiritual gifts and responsibilities. For you, pressing on may mean that you serve your family more diligently, to be a worshipper at home; it may mean it's time for you to finally become a church member, to be more committed to church life and serve one another which is God's will to every Christian; it may mean spending less time surfing the internet or playing video games; it may mean you max up your effort to kill that big old sin in your life; or it may mean spending more time at the feet of Jesus like Mary, to simply listen to His Word with a quiet and submissive heart; for some, pressing on may mean that you need to take more responsibility of leadership!

Making No Excuses (vv15-16)

- “as many as are perfect”: Not any kind of *absolute* perfection (v12). Paul is being sarcastic about those who *think* that they have already become perfect. If you are not pressing on, you are saying with your action that I am perfect and no need to pursue. Are you perfect? Paul asks. So then, have this mind – to know you're not perfect and to press on toward perfection. A “perfect” man is someone who *knows* he's not perfect and *strives* toward perfection. Only this kind of pursuing life can *ultimately* be *made perfect* by God.
- “if in anything you have a different attitude”: This is to say, if you have *any excuse* for not pressing on. “I just became a believer, no need to be so into it.” “I have been a believer for the longest in our church. Pressing on is your job, I can take it easy now.” I'm burnt out. No power left. Let me take five years to rest and recover.” Lord, if you solve this problem, I will then pursue you. I'll wait till my husband becomes a believer, or till my kids leave home for college.”
- “God will reveal that also to you”: I have said all I can say. If you still won't listen, God will deal with you Himself.

The way God reveals that to you may be through today's message to pierce your heart; or it may be through your own Bible reading; or, it may be through a more severe kind of grace - discipline! Many among the Corinthian church were “weak and sick, and a number sleep”(1 Corinthians 11: 30), why? It's God's way to get their attention so they can finally be serious about their sin and pursue sanctification!

- “However”: Why should you wait for God to deal with you? Why do you have to be so foolish? Isn't it better for you to live by the same standard to which you have attained? Why wait for the Lord to discipline you?
- “that same standard to which we have attained”: It's not how long you've been a believer or how spiritually mature you are, no, Paul is not putting Christians into different classes. The next verse is very clear: “Brethren, join in following my example”! The “standard to which we have attained” is implied in the word “brethren”! There are only two standards, saved and

unsaved. Are you one of the brethren in the Lord? Have you attained to the standard of a Christian? Have you attained to the place where you have been redeemed by Christ's precious blood and you know God's will is for you to be perfectly sanctified? Then do it accordingly!

Summary and Application

- Illustrations: Sailing against the current, coasting (driving on neutral), going to the gym only to get some cool air.....Some professing Christians go to the church as if it's a place to relax and social! They have no pursuit for sanctification; they don't open their mouths during worship singing; they don't open their Bibles during the preaching; and they won't even think about serving at all. Isn't this the same as going to the gym just to get some cool air?
- “You are legalistic!” How am I legalistic?” You tell people all the time to go to church, to read your Bible, to pray and to serve. Isn't this legalistic?” How do you respond to such an accusation?
 1. You can speak the truth in love: “This is the result of my salvation. I'm not doing these things to be saved. But since God has graciously saved me, I'll of course respond with willing and joyful pursuits to please Him!”
 2. You can give the standard theological answer——Philippians 2:12-13. God wants us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.
 3. Or, you can challenge your accuser with a rhetorical question: “Wait a minute, you aren't one of those who have crept in unnoticed, ARE YOU?” Jude v4 says “certain persons have crept in unnoticed.....who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness.” This isn't talking about you, IS IT?

Christians, get it right! Obedying Bible teaching is NOT legalism! Pressing on toward sanctification is NOT legalism! It is the expression of true salvation! After all, this isn't about who are better Christians, but who are the TRUE Christians! Pressing on isn't just for some “super-disciples”. It's not only for pastors, ministers, and missionaries. It is the ESSENTIAL ATTITUDE for each and every true Christian.