

Press on Toward the Goal

Philippians 3:12-21

Key Verse: 3:13b-14

“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

In chapter three, Paul deals with two enemies of the gospel: legalism and antinomianism. In verses 1-11, Paul warned the Philippians about legalism by using very strong language: dogs, evildoers, mutilators of the flesh. They were the circumcision group. They didn't deny Jesus' death and resurrection, but they advocated that Jesus was not enough for salvation. They claimed that it was necessary to keep the Law of Moses according to the everlasting covenant. So they insisted that their own works were a necessary part of salvation. Paul strongly opposed that. He taught that we can be saved only by faith alone. Our efforts to be righteous are like filthy rags before God. Jesus is sufficient for salvation; we need only Jesus, nothing else. So Paul considered everything a loss and garbage compared to knowing Christ. He had a master passion to know Christ. This was his life goal.

In verses 12-21 Paul deals with the other enemy of the gospel, antinomianism, meaning “against the law.” They claim that Christ gives perfect freedom, so they can do what they want, even sin. They say, “God forgives us, no matter what we do.” They misuse God's grace as an excuse to commit sin. Paul warns about them using a different kind of strong language, saying with tears, **“many live as enemies of the cross of Christ”** (18). These people ignore sanctification. They over-emphasize justification. They don't like the words “self-denial,” “repent,” “grow in the likeness of Christ,” and “take up your cross.” Their so-called faith does not impact their practical lives. Their lifestyle is not different than that of worldly people. This is why Christians have lost spiritual influence. We need a full acceptance of the gospel. The Bible says very clearly that we are saved only by faith, and after that we need to grow to be like Jesus. Paul tells us how to do this in today's passage by sharing his own testimony: First, set the right life goal (12,14); Second, pursue it with the right attitude (12-14); and, Third, follow the right examples (15-17). Then he tells us to have the right hope (18-21).

First, set a right life goal (12-14). Paul's language in verses 12-14 reminds us of a marathoner pressing on toward his goal, the finish line. Human life is like a long endurance race, not a sprint. From birth to death we are running toward something.

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Many people are just running without knowing what their goal is. Their destination is the grave. Some people have crossed the starting line and are celebrating as though they have crossed the finish line. They live as they please. We need a right life goal. It is not to have something, but to become someone. The German social psychologist, Erich Fromm, said, "Happiness is not from having, but from being." Yet sadly, many people's life goal is to get something, not to be someone. The novel, "The Overcoat," by Nikolai Gogol tells the story of an obscure Russian government clerk named Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin. He endured humiliation in his office due to his threadbare overcoat. So he decided to buy a nice new one. After saving his money for a long time, he was able to buy a fine custom-made overcoat. His office mates were so impressed that they had a party in honor of his new overcoat. But on the way home from that party, Akaky was waylaid by robbers who took his coat. Shortly after that, he fell ill with a fever and died. To all people in this world, there are many robbers, such as disease, accidents, tragedies, and eventually death, which take away what we have. If our life goal is to get something, we will surely be empty-handed and disappointed in the end. Our life goal must be for something truly fulfilling and meaningful with an everlasting value.

The Bible says that a Christian's life goal is to become like Christ. Romans 8:29a says, "**For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son...**" Paul said in verse 10, "**...becoming like him in his death...**" Paul set the right life goal. He said in verse 12b, "**...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**" Paul realized that Christ had a goal for him and he made Christ's goal his own goal. Christ's goal for all believers is the same. So Paul encouraged all believers to become like Jesus, saying in Colossians 1:28, "**He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.**" Setting a right life goal is very important. Without a right life goal, we deviate from the right path, miss the mark and end in destruction. What is your life goal? Let's set a right life goal.

Second, a right attitude in pursuing the goal (12-14). As setting a right life goal is important, so having a right attitude to pursue it is also important. If we don't pursue our life goal properly we will never reach it. Let's learn how Paul pursued his life goal. Verses 12-13a say, "**Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.**" There are some key words in these verses which help us understand Paul's attitude.

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In verses 12 and 14, Paul uses the words “press on.” In Greek it is the word “dee-o’-ko.” It is interesting that Paul uses this same word in verse 6 to refer to persecuting the church. Paul had persecuted the church passionately. Then Christ took hold of him and turned him around and guided him to a right life goal. Paul pursued this life goal with the same intense passion with which he had persecuted the church. Paul was like a hunter pursuing its prey. In the past, Paul said, based on the law, that he was “faultless” (6). This means that he was perfect and could say, “I’m done. I don’t need any further improvement.” But after meeting Jesus, he pressed on to become like Jesus. He realized that this life goal was too high to reach in this lifetime. It was like drinking the whole Pacific Ocean. When we realize that our life goal is too high, we easily despair, give up and stop struggling. But Paul never gave up. Rather, he pursued Christ, pressing on and straining toward him. How could he do that? It was not by his own strength alone, but by the help of the Holy Spirit. He said in Romans 8:11 and 26, **“the Spirit gives life to your mortal bodies,” “the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses.”** Every true Christian has the Holy Spirit dwelling within them (Ro 8:9b). The Holy Spirit helps us to press on to become like Jesus. So we need to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16). As we do, we are not moving toward a dead model, but toward a living Savior. Many people follow dead models. They receive no help from these dead models, and have to do everything in their own strength. But we follow a living Savior who helps us, guides us and pulls us to reach the goal. He helps us to press on, especially when we don’t have the strength to do so anymore. Thanks to Jesus, our living Savior!

Let’s read verses 13b-14. **“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** Here we find more things to learn from Paul’s attitude. He said, **“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.”** What is it that we should forget? We should not forget what God has done for us, especially his saving grace. We have to remember God’s saving grace again and again. However, we should forget what we have done, whether good or bad. When we cling to good things we have done we become proud and useless. When we cling to the bad things we have done, or to our failures, we despair and become useless. When we cling to our past deeds, we become useless. Our lives should not be bound to the past, but future-oriented. The problem is how can we forget our sins and wounds? Buddha said, “Just forget about everything.” But this does not work. When we try to forget our sins and wounds, they stick in our minds all the more. It is only possible by the blood of Jesus and the cross of Jesus. Hebrews 9:14 tells us that **“the blood of**

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Christ...[will]...cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” 1 Peter 2:24 says, **“...by his wounds you have been healed.”** We also need to forget our part in past victories. We can do so by recognizing God's role instead of our own, and giving glory to God.

When we think about who Paul was and what he had done, it helps us put this teaching into perspective. Paul was a mature missionary who had pioneered many churches, raised numerous disciples and written weighty letters which became the New Testament. His influence extended around the world and into the future generations. But he never said, “It is time to retire.” He said, **“Forget what is behind.”** At the same time, Paul was a man who had committed the terrible sin of consenting to killing Stephen, a servant of Christ. Paul had experienced many misunderstandings and conflicts with coworkers, even leading to painful division. But he was not overcome by regret or despair over his past mistakes. He did not stop doing gospel work with a sense of defeat, and he gives no impression of being an old man. Rather, he is young in spirit and eager to grow; he presses forward without looking back. We are forgiven sinners. Jesus' cross breaks the power of sin, heals our wounds and sets us free. It is important to forget any sentimental attachments to past sinful life. When the people of Israel faced difficulties, they reminisced about pots of meat, forgetting God's grace, and complained to God. Eventually they died in the desert. God wants us to go forward. Jesus said, **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God”** (Lk 9:62). Let's forget what is behind, strain toward what is ahead, and press on toward the goal.

Third, follow the right example (15-17). Paul set the right life goal and pursued it with a right attitude. In doing so, he became an example for us all in following Jesus. In verse 15, Paul said, **“All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.”** Paul believed that every mature Christian should have the same view of things that he had: set the right life goal to know Christ, and pursue that goal with a right attitude. But not everyone agreed with Paul. Some had a different idea. Paul did not argue with them. He simply said, **“God will make it clear to you.”** He knew that God himself would correct them, discipline them, and help them until they accepted the gospel way of life fully. The Lord is the Shepherd for each one of his people; he leads us into paths of righteousness. Instead of arguing, Paul encouraged them to keep following Jesus according to the understanding they had received from the Lord (16).

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Look at verse 17. **“Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.”** Many people say, “Don't follow my example, only follow Jesus.” We know how difficult it is to say, “Follow my example.” There is an interesting story. One day a mother crab told her son crab, “Son, why are you always walking sideways, not straight?” The son crab answered, “Mom, please show me how to walk straight.” It is easy to talk and teach. But to set a godly example requires a painful struggle of obedience. We Christian leaders, including me, should set a good example. Jesus always set a good example for his disciples to follow. Paul also set a good example by following Christ. So he said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, **“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”** Here we learn the importance of being and following good mentors. Many people ignore spiritual mentoring. They try to do something in their own way. They regard advice or counsel as interference with their human rights. As a result, they are disconnected from mature leaders and do not grow much. They are easily led astray. As Bible teachers, we must set a good example for our Bible students. As Bible students, we must learn to follow the good example of our Bible teachers. This is an essential ingredient to growing to maturity in Christ.

Fourth, have the right hope (18-21). In addition to setting a right life goal, having the right attitude and following the right examples, having the right hope is essential. In verses 18-21 there is a contrast between those whose hope is in earthly things and those whose hope is in heaven.

Verse 18 says, **“For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.”** These people called themselves Christians and talked like Christians, but the way they lived was as enemies of the cross of Christ. They were fake Christians. Paul often warned the Philippians about them and now did so again, even with tears. Paul called them **“enemies of the cross of Christ.”** Why did he call them this? It is because they did not like the cross. They liked everything else about Christian life, but not the cross. They liked prosperity, miracles, love fellowship, marrying a Christian spouse, and Christian music and art. But they were offended by the cross of Christ. The problem is if you remove the cross, there is no Christianity. Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”** (Mk 8:34). Jesus used the word “must,” which means it is absolutely necessary. There is no exception. The cross is the very center of Christianity. So Paul said, **“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Gal 6:14). He also said, **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the**

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power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). So we must love not only the cross necklace, but the cross of Jesus in our practical lives. However, these enemies of the cross misuse God’s grace. They say that they will be forgiven no matter how they live, so they do not struggle to restrain their sinful desires. Rather, they enjoy themselves freely, making their faith a license to indulge in every sort of corruption. We call them “antinomian.” Paul presented their position in Romans 6:1: **“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”** And again in Romans 6:15: **“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?”** Paul’s answer to the two questions was, **“By no means!”** In Galatians 5:13 he said, **“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another in love.”** God gave us perfect freedom through Jesus Christ. It is the freedom to come to God as we are anytime, anywhere, and the freedom to serve others in love. It is not freedom to indulge the sinful nature. In verse 19, Paul exposed the destiny and characteristics of enemies of the cross, saying, **“Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their minds are set on earthly things.”** In our times as well we need to be aware of these enemies of the cross.

Now, in verses 20-21, Paul talks about the hope that Christians should have: **“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.”** We Christians have two citizenships while we live on earth. One is to our native land. This is a temporary citizenship. It is not effective after death. But our other citizenship is in heaven, and it lasts forever. This is the most valuable citizenship. We should have pride as citizens of heaven more than national pride. Also, we have to put our hope in heaven, not in this world. Our King is not a worldly ruler, but our Lord Jesus Christ - our Savior. Paul said, **“We eagerly await a Savior...the Lord Jesus Christ....”** This refers to Jesus’ Second Coming. When he comes, Jesus will bring everything under his control and will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. Our transformed bodies will not be perishable, but imperishable; they will not be dishonorable, but glorious; they will not be weak, but powerful; they will not be natural, but spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-44). Apostle John tells us how having this hope affects our lives: **“But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure”** (1 Jn 3:2b-3).

Our citizenship is in heaven. So we should not conform to the pattern of this world (Ro 12:2). Rather, we should live as citizens of heaven even in this world.

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We should continue to grow to be like Jesus in his humility, love, gentleness, patience, obedience, servanthip, compassion, and so on. Let us not turn to the right or to the left, but press on toward the goal of becoming like Jesus.