

XI. Lesson 11 Called to Perfection/To Imitate or to Avoid – Phil. 3:12-19

February 21/22, 2007

Aim: To consider the nature and roles of goals in the Christian life.

A. Called to Perfection (Phil. 3:12-16)

1. An Important Confession (3:12a)

It is significant that Paul confesses that he is not yet ‘already perfected’ (*teteleiomai*). In doing so he may well be contrasting himself as a true disciple with the claims of the false teachers he feared might influence the Philippians with their talk of ‘perfection.’ As a true pastor, Paul is concerned to identify himself with his fellow-Christians; he is still on the road, with much ground to cover; he is a fellow-pilgrim.

So strong and apparently spiritual is the claim to have experienced perfection that less-well-instructed Christians can easily be deceived by it. In fact, it seems to answer a deep longing every Christian knows: we long to be free from sin and failure! If after such wide spiritual experience and usefulness, displaying such Christ-centered zeal, Paul is not yet perfect, then the Philippians should be wary of those who claim to be.

A backward glance to the preceding verse with its reference to the resurrection of the dead suggests that what he had in mind is that perfection which will be his only at the resurrection; and this state he obviously has not yet attained. By his allusion to the future resurrection he makes it clear that the work of sanctifying grace is progressive, that the believer lives within the tension of salvation begun now but not yet final.

2. The Path to Perfection (3:12b-14)

Three stages to the full and final knowledge of Christ are traced in verses 12-14.

1. *God calls us to it* (v. 14). That call was like the starter’s pistol sounding in the ears of an athlete; the race for ‘the prize’ was on. By ‘calling’ (*klesios*) (e.g., Rom. 8:30; Gal. 1:6, 15; 1 Th. 2:12; 2 Tim. 1:9), Paul means a summons which produces its desired effect. It is a call which beckons us to keep moving forward and upward in our knowledge of the Lord. We have been ‘called’ by God in Christ to win the prize. But the Christian life is not a brief sprint; it is a marathon race over a life-long course.

2. *Christ holds us to it*. What was the goal of Paul’s life? In v. 12 he says it was to ‘lay hold (*katalabo*) of that which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me (*katelempthen*).’ The aim of the apostle is to make for his own possession the purpose for which the risen Christ appeared to him. Paul was keenly aware of Christ laying hold of him. Christ ‘made him His own’ on the Damascus road. The Lord Jesus seized and saved Paul in order to bring him into an intimate knowledge of Himself. He realized that his salvation did not depend upon anything that he had done, or that he continued to do. He knew that his redemption rested solely on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul emphasized the sovereignty of God when he said that Christ took hold of him. The expression also implies that the Lord held on to him with a very firm grip. In fact, that grip was so strong that nothing was ever able to make Christ let go. That hold is the reason for our

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spiritual security too. All believers without exception are laid hold of by God, who opens their minds to see their sin and the sufficiency of Christ, and who grants them faith. That is how Christ takes hold of every believer. When He truly saves us, we can be sure that we remain His forever. We will persevere to the end of the race because He keeps us going (Jn. 10:27-28).

3. *Paul pressed on to it.* He knew there was more to being a Christian than just the initial experience of coming to faith in Christ. Paul wanted to press onward to what was ahead. In vv. 12&14, ‘press on’ or ‘press toward’ (*dioko*) is a hunting word meaning ‘I pursue;’ it is also used of foot-racing. It is a strong expression for active and earnest endeavor, having the sense of ‘pursue and overtake,’ or ‘chase and capture.’

In v. 13, he says that he does not consider himself to ‘have apprehended’ (*kataleilephenai*). This Greek word is a different form of the word he uses twice in v. 12, meaning ‘to take hold of.’ Although Paul was firmly in the grip of Christ, he desired to take hold of that salvation for which Christ had taken hold of him. In other words, although he knew he was safe forever, he realized that he had not yet been made perfect. Paul is not saying in this passage that it is possible to reach a state of sinless perfection while we are still on this earth. Nevertheless, he knew that one day, when he reached heaven, he would be free from this body of sin and death forever. Then, in glory, he would be perfect.

Paul’s goal was to keep moving up and up in his knowledge of and fellowship with the Lord. What is necessary to reach the goal? Paul answers by using the illustration of a runner (*cp.* 1 Cor. 9:24; 2 Tim. 4:7; Acts 20:24). He pressed onward, with the intention of winning ‘the prize’ (*brabeion*). In athletics, the prize is not awarded before the race is completed, and, therefore, it can only be looked for after the finish line and not before it.

The prize which those ancient Greek athletes gained was a wreath made of leaves. It was a very great honor to win it, but it eventually faded away and died. Our reward is so different; it is far better than that: the crown which we shall receive at the end of our Christian lives will last forever and ever (1 Cor. 9:25; *cp.* Luke 19:17; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pe. 5:4).

In order to win that prize the runner, or charioteer, had to keep his eyes on the goal or finishing-tape. Only citizens of Greece could take part in those races; they were not open to just anybody. In the same way, no one can make a start in the Christian race until that person has been born into God’s kingdom. All those who are true believers should be running the Christian race.

In an earthly race there can only be one winner, but the Christian race is very different. In Christ we can all be winners. This means that every believer should be straining or pressing (*dioko*) towards the ‘goal’ (*skopon*), or finish line. We, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, should run as athletes run (1 Cor. 9:24).

As we run this race, we must be determined to win (3:13). ‘Forgetting what is behind’ is a glance at the apostle’s past life, whether in regard to his Jewish prerogatives which are enumerated in verses 5-6, or in reference to his past experiences as a Christian, the successes and failures, triumphs and miseries which came to him as an apostle.

Paul overcame the temptation by a deliberate and continuous forgetting (*epilanthanomenos*). He will not regard his past as having any bearing or influence upon his present spiritual outlook or conduct. Paul did not allow himself to be distracted from his mission. Nothing would put him off from the task to which God had called him. He had his eyes on the goal. We too should be single-minded in our devotion to Christ. We should allow none of the excitement which is going

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on in various churches to distract us from our pilgrim pathway. We should not be drawn into the discontent that so many Christians are engaged in. Neither should we be like so many who are tired in say they cannot make it to the Bible Study and prayer meetings of the church. Very many people in these days seem to lack that vital quality in the Lord's work called 'stickability.' Let us allow none of these things to divert us from our task.

Rather than look back to see how far he had traveled in his pilgrimage, Paul pressed on towards Christ (v. 12). He resisted an all-too-subtle temptation that comes to Christians in the mid-years of their spiritual journey; to feel that they have come a reasonable distance. Why is that a mistake? Because we cannot look back and simultaneously keep our eyes fixed on Christ! We must approach the Christian life without looking back to our failures or successes.

We must keep ever in mind that our goal is to know Christ better, and we must daily put forth the effort to reach that goal. Paul presses on 'toward the goal' (v. 14). He is flat out for Christ. Each of us should seek to work for the Lord with that same kind of determination. The picture here is of the runner reaching his hands as far forward as they will go, straining every nerve, in order to reach the winning-post first. The prospects of finishing and the prize of victory spur him on so that he may 'finish the race' (Acts 20:24). He must make sure that he does not look back to the failures of his past life. Instead he must exert all his strength as he continues to make progress in his Christian life.

- *Paul developed the race imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and 2 Timothy 2:5. What is the prize for which the Christian runs? What does Paul say about how he was running? What does he say to Timothy about running? Read Hebrews 12:1-2. What does this author tell us about the Christian race?*

3. Not Sinless, but Mature (3:15-16)

The forgoing discussion on Christian perfection was set against a background of controversy. Apparently in the Philippian church there were those who tended to think differently. Paul calls those who 'think' (*phronete*) differently to 'have this mind' (*phronomen*). The use of the verb *phronein* (to be minded in a certain way) shows that it was more than an intellectual difference; it betrayed a different outlook affected the conduct of those whom Paul had in mind. Clearly there were some who were teaching that it was possible to be 'perfect' in a final sense here and now.

Paul insists on a true evaluation of perfection in terms of maturity which ever seeks fuller maturity. 'Spiritually mature' (*teleioi*) signifies 'complete, fully developed according to a present standard' (see 1 Cor. 14:20; Heb. 5:14). Paul is opposing a relative and progressive 'perfection' which he expects of every Christian to the impossible claim of final perfection which must ever be future while we are still on earth.

We do not reach perfection in this life. Yet we do not remain in spiritual infancy and immaturity throughout our lives. To live in the past is to hide from the reality of the present and the challenges of the future. Those who are mature in Christ will be characterized by a whole-hearted pursuit of fellowship with Him which looks to the future.

Verse 16 is a tacit and tactful way of calling the readers to an acceptance of the truth as Paul has expounded it earlier in the chapter. Meanwhile, he says, until you have fuller light, be content to be open-minded and teachable, and guide your life by the light you have received. A desire for Christ is the unifying hallmark of those who have begun to grow spiritually. Yes, Paul

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acknowledges that in various other areas we do not yet see things in the same way. But he assures us, if the Lord has brought us to a common mind about Jesus Christ He will progressively bring us to a common mind about secondary things too.

- *Why, when Paul denied possessing it, have some Christians claimed ‘perfection’? Paul seems to have believed that one of the marks of maturity is modesty about our spiritual progress. What is the explanation for this paradox?*

B. To Imitate or to Avoid (Phil. 3:17-19)

1. Imitation (3:17)

‘Imitate me,’ says Paul. Strange words indeed for someone who, in his previous breath, has told us that he is not perfect! Is he now blinded by his own self-conceit, talking as though he had arrived spiritually? After all, we usually say to others, ‘Do not imitate me; imitate Christ.’ There is no spiritual megalomania here. Paul tells the Philippians to follow him only after candidly confessing he was far from perfect (3:12). Salvation means being transformed into Christ’s likeness (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). God’s people are therefore living illustrations (albeit imperfect ones) of Jesus Himself. Paul makes it clear he is not asking anyone to follow him blindly, no matter what he does, but to follow him only so far as his life corresponds to the teachings of Christ.

At the root of Paul’s exhortation is the principle he states clearly in 1 Corinthians 11:1: ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.’ They could follow Paul *because* he followed Christ; we should follow fellow-Christians only insofar as they follow Christ.

Paul realized that he could not appeal to the Philippians to follow his teaching if they were not able to see it lived out in flesh-and-blood terms in his own life as an ‘example.’ Literally, he calls them to be ‘fellow imitators’ (*summimetai*). Paul may have learned the lesson of the importance of Christians being models of the gospel in the events which surrounded his own conversion. In his death Stephen had wonderfully reflected the grace of his Lord Jesus.

There was another reason why this principle was so important for the Philippians: they did not have the entire New Testament as we do. Think of living the Christian life without Romans! For that reason the role of the apostle’s example was tremendously important. After all, as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ he had received a special calling and was a special emissary for the Lord. Serving as an example to others was part and parcel of the apostle’s calling.

There were other fine Christian leaders, such as Timothy and Epaphroditus, whom the Philippians knew personally. Paul said that they should ‘note’ (*skopeite*) their way of life, the way they ‘walk’ (*peripatountas*). In other words, they should aim their lives according to the ‘pattern’ (*typos*) which he and these other men set before them (see 1 Tim. 4:12).

Thank God, we, too, are not completely without the example of godly men and women since the time of the apostles. The examples of godliness are there. It’s our responsibility to look for them and to pattern our lives after them. Do we look for, admire, and imitate the Christ-likeness we see in others? Do we pray for ourselves lest we cause others to stumble by bringing shame to the name of our Lord?

For us to follow the apostles’ teachings and way of life means being earnestly enthusiastic about the Bible. We should be daily reading it, meditating upon it, praying over it, and seeking to

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practice it. The Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6) enables us to apply gospel teaching to our modern situations.

- *If ‘models’ are valuable for living the Christian life, how can we be guided to follow the right ones?*

2. Avoidance (3:18-19)

We cannot be absolutely certain about the identity of those against whom Paul warns his brothers here. Because of their claims to perfection, some scholars believe they must be a different group from the Judaizers Paul had opposed earlier in the chapter. For example, some think he was referring to Gentiles who had professed faith in Christ but were living in a grossly sensual and immoral manner. But is it quite possible that an emphasis on Old Testament regulations co-existed with a claim to perfection. Whoever they were, these weren't people who had merely slipped into error, but rather believed it and practiced it; the word ‘walk’ (*peripatousin*, cp. v. 17) denotes an ongoing way of life.

Martin believes that these verses describe Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians 10-13, *i.e.*, Jewish Christian gnosticizing teachers whose false ideas were a relaxation of the moral law. They had succumbed to a tendency known as antinomianism, *i.e.*, a throwing off of the moral code and decent behavior on the mistaken ground that the body was an irrelevance once the mind had been illumined and the soul redeemed. Hence moral restraints could be ignored, and no carnal sin could stain the pure soul.

Perhaps it is good that Paul left the identity of these people vague. Had he clearly identified a certain group, we might connect the danger only with that one group and forget that false teaching and sinful living can come at us from any side. Whatever the specific identity of these people, the great value in what Paul says about them lies in the tests he gives us for discerning false teachers and their teaching.

1. They are ‘enemies (*echthrous*) of the cross (*stauros*) of Christ.’ The cross is the touchstone of both true doctrine and true practice. Where the cross (Christ's death as the means of the forgiveness of sins) is denied or ignored, there we may begin to suspect enemies of the cross of Christ. The cross was so central to Paul that he had absolutely no patience with any doctrine that in any way minimized it or disparaged it. Those who deny the atoning death of Christ are not merely opposed to the cross; they are actually living, day by day, as enemies of the cross. Anyone who teaches that one can be saved and go on living in the very sin from which Christ died to deliver us is attacking the innermost meaning of the cross!

2. ‘Their destiny (end, *telos*) is destruction (*apoleia*)’ (Mt. 25:46; 2 Th. 1:9). Those who don't take the cross seriously and live for physical gratification are destined for destruction (cp. 2 Th. 1:9). Eternal and irreversible separation from God and all that is good—that is what Paul means by destruction!

3. ‘Their god (*theos*) is their belly (*koilia*),’ refers to sensual appetites. What they worship is their fleshly desires and appetites. Their sole purpose in living is to gratify the lusts of the flesh. Not only is the doctrine of the cross denied in the preaching of these teachers, its significance for Christian living is repudiated in their lives, which are marked by a sad self-indulgence. They have no time for the real God. They are only interested in physical gratification. They worship what gives them satisfaction.

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4. ‘Their glory (*doxa*) is in their shame (*aischune*).’ These people were proud of the way in which they behaved. Their moral values are so topsy-turvy and confused, they actually go around boasting of things they ought to be ashamed of!

5. ‘Their minds (*phronountes*) are set on earthly things (*epigeia*).’ This was because they refused to have the mind of Christ (2:5). Instead their minds were controlled by their sinful natures. They live as though God is dead, as though heaven and hell are myths, and as though this life is all there is. They were attracted by possessions, reputation, and position. These were the things that filled their minds, and the hidden agenda behind all of their activities (*cf.* 2 Cor. 4:2).

The message is clear. Follow Christ, the crucified Savior, and those whose lives provide Christ-like examples. Do not set your mind ‘on earthly things’ like them, and be on your guard against their teaching and influence. Christ is the goal; Christ and Him crucified is the message; taking up the cross is the way He calls us to live. Follow Him; follow Paul as he boasts only of Christ and His cross; follow those that walk the narrow way. It may be that there are others who are watching and will follow you.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Paul had clearly defined goals of at least three kinds: short-term, long-term, and life-time. Think of your own life within these three perspectives. What goals should you be setting? Discuss what principles should be involved in setting them.*
- *What are the distinctive principles which guide Christian goal-setting?*
- *What was involved in Christ ‘making Paul His own’ (see v. 12)?*
- *How would we recognize someone who lives as an ‘enemy of the cross of Christ’?*
- *Why is self-indulgence a mark of counterfeit spirituality?*
- *‘There is a cast of mind that betrays the message of the gospel’ (p.92). How can we (i) recognize this and (ii) avoid it?*

For next time: Read Philippians 3:20-4:3 and Ferguson chapters 22-23