

Philippians XXII – Press On (Phil 3:12-14)

Introduction – Finishing well. How are we to do that today? Having trashed his works-based justification, Paul does not now take up the banner of works-based sanctification, although it could be misread here. Paul is describing what it looks like, what the manifestation is of one who has been ‘righteoused’ by Christ. With only the banner of Jesus to wrap oneself in, the picture of the runner is of one who fixes his eyes upon the goal and strains to achieve it by any means he has been given.

The Text - *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Present Condition (v12) – Throughout the scripture we are taught that we are saved while at the same time we are being saved and that there will be a final day where we will be saved. The point is not to confuse us. The point is to teach us the nature of faith. Faith is the instrument by which we come into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. This Spirit-wrought faith hungers for the manifestation of final and complete holiness. Jesus told us to be perfect like His Father (Matt 5:48). But the gospel is not for those who think they have attained to perfection in any way by their own means. And when we have Christ’s righteousness, His Spirit in us drives us to hunger for its manifestation, so that a justified man cries out, “*Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes!*” (Psalm 119:5, also v80).

Pressing On – Paul distances himself from any teachers of perfectionism. But he shows neither despair nor apathy over his state of pursuing holiness. His pursuit could be described as almost obsessive – nothing will get in his way. This is the zealotry taught to us by the gospel (Titus 2:11-14).

What God Commands... – “that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.” It is clear, as in Phil 2:12-13, that whatever God is requiring of us He is giving to us. The pursuit of holiness comes because the Holy One has pursued and laid hold of you.

The Goal (vv13-14) – While Paul has the resurrection and heaven somewhat in mind, it seems the prize is more expansive than that. It is Christ Himself (Phil 1:21, 3:7-11, 1 John 3:2-3). Here, our gospel call is not pointing towards the beginning of our new birth, but its telos, its completion. Here we see the work and goal of God’s free grace, that (as the WSC teaches) “...we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

Forgetting That Which is Behind – Paul uses the metaphor of a runner in a race who would never look behind him to see where he’d come from. In the context of all of Chapter 3, the thing which Paul is not looking back to is the dung-heap of his prideful arrogance in his own works-based salvation. To turn back to that would be disastrous (Gal 3:1-4).

Reaching Forward To Those Things Which Are Ahead – While we must not entertain a works-based system of sanctification, we must not either be afraid of the language of the scriptures. We are to “*work out our salvation.*” We are to “*press toward the goal.*” We are to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us.*” (Heb 12:1-2). All of this must be understood in light of seeking the means of grace that God has given to His people to grow in faith and holiness.

Obsessed With Holiness – “*...but one thing I do...*” Paul sees everything that he does as profitable if it is aimed at this one goal, “*the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” He was saved by grace through faith, and he will progress and persevere and be perfected by grace through faith. Holy habits, therefore, are not merit-earning activities. They are means given by which, by faith, God’s Spirit grants us more and more of this ‘knowing Christ’ – union and communion with Him.

Running for the Prize – Therefore, none of our activities are done to impress God or men. They are done because we are pursuing God towards the call He has given us and according to His promises. This should change the way we view our holy habits. Reading, meditating and studying the Word (and especially hearing the Word in preaching) is a means by which we run, that is, by which we grow in grace. So are the ordinances of baptism and the Supper. So is the gathering of the saints in this service of worship. The prayers, private and corporately, of the body is God’s gift to us to obtain grace by His Spirit. Our fellowship, hospitality, and service to one another are other means. Shepherding by the elders individually, the Men’s meetings, Ladies Fellowship, the NWCRR are even more.

Imitate Those Who Are Imitating Christ – Jesus knew He was in the Father’s care but pursued to the end His upward calling. Paul knew He was in God’s grace but pressed to the end towards His upward calling. Neither waited for life to slow down or for the difficulties to subside to get after that calling. Faithfully living in the midst of those trials by seeking more grace, more union and communion with Christ, was the pursuit of the prize. It is for you today as well.