

Practical Advice for Moving Toward Christ (Philippians 3:12-21)

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This morning we will be continuing our study of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians by taking a look at Chapter 3, vv. 12-21.

Last week we saw that Paul, at the beginning of Chapter 3, wanted to be sure the believers at the church in Philippi oriented their entire lives around what he described as the "*surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord.*" He was concerned about the possible influence of teachers from outside their church community pressuring his friends into the false belief that the Gospel -- the Good News of our salvation secured and given to us by Jesus -- was only truly effective if they added their own works to the mix.

While strongly rejecting the idea that we can somehow add value or effectiveness to Christ's work by bringing our own contributions to the table, Paul offered up his own life as an example and said, "Look, I worked hard and had everything I wanted and everyone admiring my life...but it wasn't until I was willing to lose it all that I really gained what really needed: a rich relationship with my God through my faith in His Son, Jesus Christ."

So in vv. 1-11 Paul made clear one boundary or guardrail for following Jesus: it is by grace through faith alone that we are saved. Our works cannot secure our salvation. Only the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus can do that for us.

However, this week in vv. 12-21, Paul lays down a second boundary: we may not secure our own salvation through our own works, but that doesn't mean we're free to live our lives in whatever way we wish. Now that we know about this wonderful thing Jesus has done for us and this incredible gift God has given to us, we should live in such a way that displays what we know. Our lives should reflect, should say something about what Christ has done for us and how much value and worth we place in knowing Him.

If we truly value and love Jesus, then we should probably think about how we can get to know him better and how we can live our lives in such a way that continues to move us down a path, within some healthy boundaries, that leads us closer and closer to Him.

But how do we do that? That's what Paul explains in Philippians 3:12-21. He offers up some ***practical advice for those who wish to keep moving toward Christ throughout their lives.***

One quick note before we begin: In this passage Paul gives us just ***SOME*** practical advice to help us as we live our lives of faith. Remember that Paul, like all biblical authors, was writing this letter to a specific group of people who were facing specific challenges and needed to hear specific encouragement and teachings. So while the tips we read in vv. 12-21 are indeed helpful and good, they are not everything we need to know about what it means to follow Christ.

Some of these tips might really be something you need to hear about and consider today. Some of them may not be that big of a deal to you right now, and that's okay. What I invite you to do this morning is to listen, consider, and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and form your faith according to what God wants you to be aware of, the ways He wants you to grow.

So, if you have your Bibles turn with me now to Philippians 3:12 and let's look at some of the ***practical advice for those who wish to keep moving toward Christ throughout their lives*** found in these verses today. I've broken it down into four "tips":

Tip #1: Commit yourself to getting this one thing right: Jesus is the prize.

12 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. 13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Maybe it is because throughout this passage Paul uses language that was associated with the games and races of his day, but all this last week I couldn't stop thinking about some of the most tragic, gut-wrenching, and embarrassing videos you can find on the internet.

I speak, of course, of the clips of athletes who celebrate their victories too soon.

There are, unfortunately, dozens of blooper reels full of runners thrusting triumphant arms into the air only to suddenly find themselves drop for first to second as their unseen competitor puts on one last burst of speed to leave the would-be-winner in the dust and with the bitter taste of 2nd place.

Any Dallas Cowboys fans with us today? The franchise has a long and storied history, but it also has the unfortunate dishonor of appearing regularly on Not-Top-Ten lists thanks to a defensive tackle named Leon Lett.

- During Super Bowl 27, while the Cowboys were soundly beating the Buffalo Bills, Leon Lett recovered a fumble and sprinted toward the opposite endzone, relishing the chance to enjoy the glory of a scoop-and-score on the sport's biggest stage.
- Unfortunately, he started showboating a few yards too early, extended the ball away from his body while still outside the endzone, and was surprised Bills Wide Receiver Don Bebee knocked the ball loose and recovered it for his team.
- Leon Lett lost his chance to score a touchdown all because he took his eyes off the goalline and tried to enjoy little extra glory a little too soon.
- (In fairness to Leon Lett: he was a fine defensive tackle, a 2 time pro bowler and 3 time Superbowl champion...and Dallas won Super Bowl 27).

It's always easy laugh at such blunders...until they happen a little closer to home. Saldy, K-State is not without its own celebration-turned-disaster moment. I speak, of course...of the dreaded Pasco Fiasco.

- Often found on lists with titles like, "Worst Mistakes in College Basketball History", poor Pervis Pasco will forever be remembered for the travel that cost the Wildcats an upset victory in the first round of the 2003 Big 12 tournament.
- With a mere 1.8 seconds left in the game, K-State led Colorado by 2 points. As the Buffaloes inbounded the ball for what surely would have been a desperation play, Pervis Pasco brilliantly intercepted the pass to secure Wildcat Victory.
- Only...in his excitement he forgot to check the clock, forgot to dribble the ball, and instead tucked it beneath his arm and walked off the court, one finger proudly thrust into the air. The referee, of course, called him for a travel.
- Colorado got the ball back, banked in a 3-point goal to take the lead, and Pervis Pasco's name lives on in ignorable infamy.
- (In fairness to Pervis: he was a fine basketball player, a leading scorer and rebounder for K-State, and a member of a traveling Big 12 All Star Team...no pun intended).

All these runners, football players, and basketball players have one thing in common: they took their eyes off the real prize they'd be working toward and missed crossing the finish line the way they'd hoped to by *just this much*.

In Philippians 3:12-14, Paul warns us that it is possible for Christians to do the same if they take their eyes off the prize that is Jesus Christ.

Last week, as we read Philippians 3:1-11, we found that Paul had one burning desire, one true and dominating passion in his life: to know Jesus and to value Him above anything and anyone else in the world (3:11).

Paul wanted this so badly that he had cast aside everything he had worked hard for that risked keeping him from reaching this goal. He was not about to celebrate, showboat, or proclaim himself to be No. 1 before his work was done and the full race of his life toward his Savior was complete.

So what did it look like for Paul, and what might it look like for us, to run this race well and keep Jesus as the true prize of our hearts and hard work?

First, I think it is important to confess along with Paul that we are not yet perfect, and that perfection in this life, on this side of the Kingdom of Heaven, is not the goal. The *prize is Jesus*, and enjoying His perfection, not our own.

Paul had offered his own life and his own testimony as an example of what it means to follow and love Jesus well. But he didn't want the Philippians to think that he was arguing that he'd already "arrived at his goal", or attained "perfection." In fact, he emphatically denies the notion in vv. 12-13.

For Paul, "perfection" -- a chance to finally become free of sin and righteous before a Holy God -- was indeed something he wanted, but he also knew it wasn't something he was going to get on his own. That blessing would come to him the same way it comes to us: by committing our lives to moving closer and closer to Jesus and eagerly awaiting the day when He graciously bestows His perfection on us through the power of the resurrection from the dead. The prize Paul wanted, and the prize we should desire as well, is union with Christ. A beautiful and flourishing eternal relationship with our Lord and Savior.

They payoff here, and what I certainly hope is good news for you as it has been for me, is this: *you don't have to be perfect (or make yourself perfect); you need to be persistent (x2)*. You don't have to get every little thing right, but you do need to keep moving forward toward Jesus.

If you need proof that this is true...just look to the Gospels. Look at how Jesus treats the people seek him out. Was any one of them ever perfect? No, not even close.

Levi was a tax collector who had exhorted his neighbors for personal gain, but when he moved toward Jesus his heart began to change and suddenly he desired to help instead of hurt others .

The woman at the well had a complicated, messy, and perhaps even morally suspicious life, yet Jesus shared the Gospel with her and she was so taken with its promise that she immediately became one of the Bible's first evangelists.

Paul had been actively persecuting the early church -- overseeing the execution of Christians -- when Jesus called him out on the road to Damascus and changed his understanding of everything forever. Paul thought he'd been pursuing righteousness by the power of his own works, but after meeting Jesus he realized that his own works didn't actually have the power for salvation he needed. Only Jesus had that...so, Paul followed Him.

To get this one thing right -- that Jesus is the prize -- you've got to lay aside any misplaced ambition or notion that you are going to be perfect right now. All Jesus is asking you to do is be faithful, not flawless.

He'll handle being perfect on our behalf. All he asks of us is to keep moving toward him. This is not an excuse to be sinful...it is an invitation to be grateful for the grace and forgiveness of our God.

There is a second helpful hint to running this race well that I want to touch on before moving further into the passage. While Paul may not be perfect, he is humble, and healthy humility is a crucial character trait for anyone attempting to follow Jesus.

There are two profound statements of humility in these three verses.

First, in v. 12 Paul says "*I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*" -- connecting us once again to a point that we saw in last week's passage: everything about our relationship with God is a product of the grace of God.

Paul says his entire purpose in life, the race he runs, the ministry he's committed to, the Gospel he preaches...it all began and flows from that moment Christ Jesus took hold of him. We believe because Christ reaches out to us. We know God because God sent His Son to reveal Himself to us. We learn to love God only because God first loved us. Our faith is not really our own. It is a beautiful, hand-crafted gift of the Lord.

Second, Paul says he stretches toward the goal to win the prize by "*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead*". I fear this is an often misunderstood passage. Paul is not saying he just forgets the stuff from his past, good or bad, and focuses on the future. He's not saying "get over" any hardships or trauma we may have suffered that still impacts us today. That is a really dangerous and unhealthy way to try and maintain humility. What has happened to us in the past shapes our present and our future, and ignoring it often only causes pain.

Also, we know Paul didn't forget his past -- he just brought it up in 3:1-11, and the events of his life, both before and after becoming a Christian, are frequently discussed throughout all his writings. So what is he trying to say here?

I think what Paul is saying is that in order to keep Jesus as the true prize, he doesn't dwell on or revel in his apostolic accomplishments or failures. In the same way that it wouldn't make any sense for a runner to stop in the middle of her race and say "hey, did you see how well I ran that last mile? That was so good they ought to give me a medal just for that bit right there", Paul doesn't stop in the middle of his life and say, "hey, did you see how many people I converted in Jerusalem the other day? Jesus really ought to let me into heaven for that haul of souls all on its own."

It's not that Paul isn't aware of the good work he has done. It's that he doesn't use it as self-exaltation. He's not going to Leon-Lett himself into a Pervis-Pasco style Fiasco. When he remembers the things he has done, it is always as a way to glorify the Lord and advance the Gospel message.

Letting go of perfection and taking up humility are two essential practices as we strive to commit ourselves to getting this one thing right: that Jesus is the prize.

This week, challenge yourself with this: What is one unfair expectation of perfection you can, by the grace of God allow yourself to let go? And what is one humble practice you can take on that will help you take one step closer to the prize of Christ Jesus our Lord?

Tip #2: Find some faithful leaders and follow them...and understand that you might be one, too.

15 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. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained. 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.

It may seem odd that Paul -- who just got done saying he isn't perfect and that everyone's focus should always be on Jesus -- then says that he, and others like him, are great examples of what believers should be like. Why and how, exactly, are we supposed to keep our eyes on Jesus and keep our eyes on other believers "who live as we do"?

To cut right to the chase, I think what Paul is trying to say is, "Follow me **as I follow Christ.**" He has gone to great lengths to make clear to his readers his devotion to Jesus, in part so they can rest assured that if they try to take up some of his practices and follow some of his commands, they will also be doing things that lead them closer to Jesus, since that's the direction Paul is headed as well.

Paul isn't asking them to imitate him in a mechanical, copy-cat sort of way. Rather, it's more that has a lot of practice and experience in keeping Jesus as the prize of his life, and he offers that up to his Christian brothers and sisters as a guide to help them along in their own journeys toward Jesus.

This the body of Christ at work. We help one another work on our Christlikeness. It's not a bad thing to say, "I want to be like so-and-so" as long as you can continue on to say, "because so-and-so wants to be like Jesus."

This leads us to ask two important questions:

1. Who are you following?

- a. Whose example do you follow? Who do you trust help you learn things like how to read the Bible, how to pray, how to confess with a contrite heart, or how to share your testimony?
- b. Who are you allowing to influence you and shape your heart and your mind?
- c. Do you imitate someone who helps you think, feel, and act more like Christ...or do you model your life after someone who wants you to look more like the products they are pushing, the brands they sell, or the perfectly presented version of themselves they carefully cultivate for the world to see.

Your role models matter. You need to find faithful leaders, who keep Jesus as the prize of their lives, and shape their character through Scripture, prayer, and fellowship within a believing community.

2. Who is following you?

- a. The flip side of all this is that you may very well be living a life others are watching and attempting to imitate. Is that frightening? Good, I think it should be a little!
- b. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ includes the humbling and awesome possibility that you may one day mentor and disciple another believer. And you might do it without even realizing you've done it. If you have the Holy Spirit living within you then I promise people are noting your character and watching how you interact with the world.
- c. In this last week...
 - i. Someone may have started to pray because they saw you praying at lunch.
 - ii. Someone may have been kind to a stranger because they saw you be generous to others.
 - iii. Someone may have picked up a Bible for the first time because they overheard you talking about a verse that impacted you during your time of personal devotion.
 - iv. Someone may have had such hard week that they lacked the willpower to keep believing in themselves or in God...but hung on because they've seen your faith in Jesus bring you through trials and hardships.
 - v. Someone may have committed their lives to Christ in a deeper way because for the past few

weeks, months, or years you have been patiently and persistently discipling them, proving to them with the example of your own life that Jesus is worth everything.

Find some faithful leaders and follow them...but also remember that you just might be one of those faithful leaders, too. Consider who you are following, and who is following you.

Tip #3: Be brokenhearted for your enemies

18 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. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

The flip side of Paul's instructions to follow faithful leaders and keep Jesus as the prize...is that there will be people who do not do this, who deny Christ, who dismiss their need for the Gospel, and who invest their lives in earthly things that will fail save them in the end.

The temptation is to identify such people and reject them as enemies. To keep them far away and to watch as they pursue their prize of eternal self destruction, of both legalistic and liberal self-satisfaction, and the hollow self-glorification that comes through cheap, worldly gains.

But look closely again at v. 18. What is Paul's attitude toward those who live as enemies of Jesus? How does he describe himself when he thinks about such people?

The thought of those who live as "enemies of the cross of Christ"...brings tears to Paul's eyes. He weeps for those who are not saved. His heart breaks for those who are actively opposed to the Gospel.

Paul loves his enemies. He doesn't sugarcoat the danger they are in, but he also doesn't reject them or preach any kind of superiority. Paul is brokenhearted for his enemies, and we should be too. This is a serious, direct application of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5 (NIV)

If you want to keep moving toward Jesus throughout your entire life, you must move toward your enemies as well.

And to be clear, it's not enough to just "know your enemy." You don't develop a broken heart for your enemies by knowing them or identifying them. Anyone can identify an enemy, identify someone who is offensively other to who you are or what you believe.

Christians do something entirely different. We don't just know our enemies. With tears in our eyes, we see them. Reach out to them. Love them, as Christ loves them. Part of our formation and transformation into Christlikeness happens as we learn to love our enemies.

A question to ask yourself this week: Do you merely know your enemies...or do you love them? Do you reject and push away the people who think and act and feel and believe and look different than you...or do you move toward them the same way Jesus moves toward them in love?

Tip #4: Embrace your Heavenly Identity

20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Here's a little something interesting about the citizens of the city of Philippi: they were really proud of being Philippians, and they were really, REALLY proud of being a part of the Roman Empire. The city was established as a colony of Rome after Mark Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius there in 42 BC. And the way Romans often established new colonies was by flooding the population with some of their most loyal citizens: retired army veterans. It is entirely possible that the church in Philippi had a number of folks who were Roman patriots. Their status as Roman citizens was important to them. It was a major part of their identity.

So it is no small thing for Paul to write, "our citizenship is in heaven". Especially because the word Paul uses for "citizenship" is really better translated "our commonwealth or governing body."

Paul is saying that the Philippians true authority is not Rome, but the Kingdom of Heaven. Their attitude, character, even national identity should not be primarily Roman. Instead, their Roman-ness should come in second and answer to their Christlikeness. They are in this world, but not of it. They are living in Rome, but now in Christ they are no longer of Rome.

We too, as followers of Jesus Christ are in this world, but not of it. We might be living in the United States of America, but in Christ we are no longer of it. Our attitude, character, and even national identity should not be primarily American. Instead, our American citizenship should come in second and answer to our Heavenly Citizenship. Our authority is Christ and Christ alone. Jesus is the prize, and a life moving toward him embraces His Kingship over our citizenship, no matter where it is on this earth we call home.

America is an incredible place to live, but it's not Heaven. The Constitution of the United States is an incredible document, but it is not the Gospel and not the Word of God. I'm not trying to be unpatriotic or disrespectful. I'm trying to make clear to us what Paul wanted to make clear to the Philippians: Our citizenship, authority, and only true home is in Heaven and under the Lordship of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

No matter how many fireworks you fired off in celebration of your freedom and independence as American citizens, it cannot compare to the awesome power Christ will unleash upon your body and life:

...by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Do you realize what that says? What that promises? Our mortal bodies get transformed into the likeness of our Savior's immortal body. And the power that pulls this off is the same power that grants Jesus sovereignty over all the universe. It is a mighty remaking of who we are, a transformation of our earthly identities into glorious eternal ones.

Take seriously your Heavenly Identity. Ask yourself, is it the primary and governing identity for your life or have you allowed it to slip into second and behind another, lesser definition of yourself?

So there they are, four practical tips for those who wish to keep moving toward Christ throughout their lives. Remember that Jesus is the prize. Find, follow, and be faithful leaders. Be brokenhearted for your enemies. And embrace your gloriously, grace-given heavenly identity as a follower of King Jesus.