

Making Much of Jesus in 2021

Philippians 3:12–14

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Introduction

Well, this morning we have begun the second full week of 2021. And the festivities of the New Year often cause us to reflect on the previous year and how we've lived our lives, and to look forward to the coming year and consider how we might determine and resolve to do even better. We slow down, get perspective, consider the things that are important to us, so that when we will have come to the end of this next year we will look even more favorably on it than the previous one.

And while it's never a bad idea to resolve to eat healthier, exercise more, or decrease screen time, for followers of Jesus Christ, our New Year's resolutions take on a bit of a different character. As Christians, our first and greatest concern—the great passion and driving motivation of our life—is the magnification of glory of Jesus Christ. Our number one resolution for 2021—and for every year—must be to order our lives in such a way that most clearly displays the glory of Christ to the church and to the world. And the life that magnifies the glory of Christ—the life that makes much of the glory of Jesus—is the life lived in passionate pursuit of increasing communion with Christ.

Now that only makes sense, doesn't it? We magnify the worth of whatever it is that we pursue most passionately. We display the glory and the majesty of whatever it is that satisfies us, that captivates us—whatever it is that we find so satisfying that we shape our entire lives to get it. The athlete magnifies the worth of a world championship by disciplining himself to playing 162 baseball games, or 82 basketball games, or 16 football games at the highest level of athletic performance he can achieve—all so he can hold that trophy and wear that ring. The Olympic runner displays the glory of the gold medal by keeping a strict diet, by prioritizing his exercise regimen, by training for four years at a time—all so he can win that medal. The book we can't put down, the Netflix series we can't stop watching: It's an axiomatic truth: we magnify the worth of whatever it is that we pursue most passionately. “*This* is worth my attention! *This* is worth my devotion! *This* is worth the time and the discipline and the sacrifice that it takes to lay hold of it!”

Well in the same way, the Christian magnifies the worth and displays the glory of Jesus by ordering every aspect of his life in such a way that he can see, and know, and enjoy more and more of Jesus. “*Christ* is worth my attention! *Christ* is worth my devotion! Knowing *Christ* is worth the time and the discipline and the sacrifice that it takes to grow in my relationship to

Him!” This is what our lives must be about. This is what 2021 is about for us. Pressing forward to lay hold of greater communion with and greater likeness to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And as I thought about a text to stir us up to that end, my mind went back to a text in Philippians chapter 3. And if you’ve been in GraceLife for many years, you might remember hearing this sermon before. But I thought that, at this time of reflection and reorientation at the beginning of a New Year, this text serves us well to set us on course for magnifying the worth and glory of Jesus Christ, by setting us upon a passionate pursuit of knowing and enjoying Him more and more.

Now, in Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul is concerned to safeguard the church at Philippi from the damning effects of false teaching by clearly defining the nature of a true Christian and true Christianity. And he does so by giving a spiritual autobiography of sorts—by giving his own testimony, and telling his readers: the true Christian life looks like this.

In verses 5 and 6 he lists out all of the religious advantages that he had trusted in for righteousness before He met Jesus Christ. He trusted in his orthodoxy, his pure bloodlines, his social standing, his religious traditions, his religious devotion, his sincerity and zeal for Judaism, and the self-righteousness that he managed to obtain by an external conformity to the Mosaic Law. And he says in verse 7 that he had counted all those inherited privileges and religious achievements as gains with respect to establishing his own righteousness before God. In his mind they were all pluses, written in black ink in the “Assets” column of his spiritual ledger book. Surely, if any man had a shot at achieving righteousness before God by his own efforts, it was the Apostle Paul.

But in verse 7 he says, “Whatever things were gains to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ!” When Christ appeared in a blazing glory on the road to Damascus, the light of His holiness shone across the pages of Paul’s ledger book. And in that light, every fleshly advantage that he had written in the “Assets” column had been moved to the “Liabilities” column. All of Paul’s self-righteousness that once looked like gains to him were now like the heavy cargo on a storm-tossed ship, weighing him down and threatening to drown him in the sea of eternal punishment. He counted all of his religious credentials as loss, jettisoned the cargo of his self-righteousness overboard, and trusted in the righteousness of Christ alone for his acceptance before God. And that is what it is to be a Christian: to survey all of your religious accomplishments, and to cast them to the bottom of the ocean, as loss, for the sake of gaining Christ—trusting not at all in your own righteousness for acceptance with God, but in Christ’s righteousness alone!

But self-righteousness isn’t all Paul lost. He goes on to say in verse 8: “More than that, I [continue to] count *all things* to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus

my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of *all things*, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ.” Paul says that he has actually suffered the loss of all things. You see, not only did he abandon all confidence in himself and in his own religious performance. He also lost all the privileges in life that he would have enjoyed if he were to continue as a respected member of Jewish society. He was disowned and disinherited by his family. He traded his vocation as a respected religious teacher for the blue-collar work of tentmaking. He forfeited a comfortable lifestyle with an upper-class income for a life of beatings, imprisonments, homelessness, and constant conflict.

Money, possessions, reputation, status, comfort, easy living, even family—Paul lost them all. And as the false teachers are tempting the church to go back to the Mosaic ceremonies, the believers are looking at Paul and asking him, “Paul, you *had* all that! Do you miss what you had in Judaism? Do you ever wish you could have it all back?” And he says, “Not only do I not miss it, I count it all as refuse! Nothing more than the garbage that is fit only to be thrown to the wild dogs!”

How can he speak this way? What makes a man behold all the earthly glory of self-righteousness, possessions, money, property, reputation, status, comfort, ease, and ten thousand other things—and regard them as trash? Look again at verse 8: “I count all things to be loss *in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish *so that I may gain Christ*.” Paul can lose everything that this life has to offer and rejoice—He can lose everything and call it gain—because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

And so this intimate, personal, day-by-day communion with Christ is something that the people of God simply cannot afford to pass up! Because that knowledge of Christ is the unique source of spiritual strength that empowers us to sever ties with all of the idols that our world tempts us to worship—that empowers us to lose every comfort that this life has to offer us, if God wills it—and say, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain!” To make us say, “Jesus is worth more than a comfortable life! He is worth more than the approval of my family or the prestige of worldly fame! He is more satisfying than all of the pleasures that power, and money, and sex could offer me! I count them all as worthless in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!” And that is what it means to be a Christian—not only to trust Christ as your righteousness, but also to worship Christ as the treasure of your life, as your pearl of great price.

And that means that, whatever other New Year’s resolutions we’ve made for 2021, we must be committed to the passionate pursuit of communion with Christ. And as Paul continues defining the character of the true Christian and true Christianity in Philippians chapter 3, in verses 12 to 14 he pictures the true Christian as a runner in an Olympic race—ignoring every distraction, straining every muscle, and forsaking all rival pleasures for the sake of crossing that finish line.

And in the race of the Christian life, perfect holiness—perfect fellowship and unhindered communion with Jesus—is the prize that awaits us at the finish line. He is the goal of everything that we labor and strive for in this life.

And in our text, Paul teaches us how to pursue that goal. Follow along with me as I read Philippians chapter 3, verses 12 to 14: “Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

In this text, Paul provides us with **five principles for running the race of the Christian life**—five principles by which we must order our lives so that we can run this race of sanctification that is set before us with the intensity, and with the strategy, that it takes to reach the finish line and win the prize. If we are going to display Christ’s worth and magnify His glory in 2021, we need to give attention to the principles modeled for us in this passage.

I. A Sober Self-Assessment (vv. 12a, 13a)

And that **first principle, number one**, is: We must have **a sober self-assessment**. Look at verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect...” Paul is modeling for us **a sober self-assessment**. He says, “I’m not perfect! I’ve still got a long way to go! I’m still pressing on!”

You say, “Paul, you’re a new creature, 2 Corinthians 5:17. God’s given you a new heart, Ezekiel 36:26! He’s given you a new mind, Romans 12:2! You’ve been united with Christ in His death and resurrection, Romans 6! You’ve been forgiven of your sins! justified before God! you have Christ’s righteousness imputed to you! You’re even indwelt by the Spirit of God!” “Yes, all true. But I’m not perfect. I won’t be perfect until I attain to the resurrection from the dead,” verse 11. Paul had **a sober self-assessment**.

Now, I can’t imagine that there are too many of you sitting here this morning who need to be told that you are not yet perfect. If there’s anyone here who believes they’ve reached sinless perfection and are done with their sanctification, please come see me after the service; I’d love to meet you. No, the spiritual disease that is far more prevalent—but just as deadly—as the deception of perfectionism is the deception of complacency. “Well, I’ve come far enough. I’ve matured just enough. I mean, sure, I struggle. Sure, I could do better. But I’ve made some good progress. I’m OK where I’m at. I can afford to coast a little while.” Now you may not say that outright, but that’s the attitude. You’ve become lax in your spiritual growth, and you’ve grown content in that apathy.

But Paul had no category for that kind of thinking. He even repeats himself in verse 13: “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet.” But I press on. He has absolutely no desire to be misunderstood here. Even though perfection is never *achieved* in this life, perfection must be *pursued* in this life.

Now, the danger of what Paul’s warning against is apparent. If a runner believes he’s already crossed the finish line, there’s no reason to continue running the race! People who think they’ve reached a state of holiness where striving is no longer necessary will not give themselves to “pursuing the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord,” Hebrews 12:14. They become complacent, content with their current level of holiness. They relax. They become indolent. And in convincing themselves that they’ve reached an adequate level of spiritual maturity, they deaden their conscience and become desensitized to sin. In a sad irony, the claim that I’ve made satisfactory spiritual progress only catapults me further into sin.

But the godlier a person is, the greater their awareness of and sensitivity to sin. Did you get that? The godlier a person is, the greater their awareness of and sensitivity to sin. Someone who is growing in holiness has a growing ability to perceive the great standard of God’s holy law. His conscience has been trained by the Word of God to know how desperately far short his own character falls of that standard. And the one who is aware of and sensitive to his sin, is the one who is most fully engaged in battle against his sin. And that’s what Paul says he’s after.

And so if we, dear friends, are going to have any hope of faithfully pursuing Christ as all-satisfying in 2021, and thereby to display Him as glorious, we need to develop a holy dissatisfaction with our present spiritual state. By means of **a sober self-assessment**, we need to disclaim all thoughts of sinless perfection—or of the thought that we’ve matured just enough, that we’ve seen and enjoyed just enough of Christ. We need to be aware of how much more of Him there is to enjoy! We need to be aware of and sensitive to our sin, daily examining ourselves in the light of Scripture, and asking God, in the language of Psalm 139, to “Search me, and try me, and see if there by any hurtful way in me.” And even though it’s painful, and even though it’s sometimes exhausting, we need to daily reckon with how far short we fall of God’s standard—how far from the finish line we actually are. Only then will we have a clear picture of the race that is set before us.

II. A Sustained Effort (vv. 12b, 14a)

And only then will we heed the **second principle** for running this race. Not only does running the race of the Christian life require a sober self-assessment. It also requires, **number two: a sustained effort**. Look again at verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained it or have already

become perfect, but *I press on* so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ.”

This phrase, “I press on,” translates a Greek word that means “to run after, to follow hard after.” It describes a zealous pursuit, a strenuous attempt, an aggressive, energetic endeavor. It was used of hunters who were in active pursuit of their prey. In fact, this is the same word that Paul uses in Philippians 3:6, when he refers to his former manner of life in Judaism as a persecutor of the church. This is the word for persecuting people. Just as Paul had once followed hard after the followers of Jesus, and pursued them zealously, energetically and aggressively seeking them out in every corner where he could find them, in the same way he is now following hard after holiness. He is zealously pursuing it, strenuously straining for it, aggressively seeking it out in every corner of his life.

The Christian life, friends, is no passive endeavor. We’ve already quoted Hebrews 12:14 and noted that the Christian life is a pursuit. In 1 Timothy 6:12, Paul calls it a fight, as he exhorts Timothy: “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.” In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, using a similar metaphor to the one we have in our own text, Paul compares sanctification to the contests in Olympic Games. He writes, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”

Pursuit. Fight. Race. And just like Paul repeated himself about not having attained perfection, he repeats himself about this diligent, **sustained effort** he makes in sanctification. He’s already said he presses on to lay hold of that for which also he was laid hold of by Christ. And then in verses 13 and 14 he says, “One thing I do...I press on!” We are to make every effort, my friends, as we run this race of the Christian life (2 Pet 1:5).

And so, not only does this text put the lie to the perfectionists who say that there’s no need to pursue holiness any further. It also strikes at the heart of the great error of antinomianism, which teaches that holiness is a matter of indifference. If we’re saved by grace through faith alone, and if we can never attain perfection in this life anyway, efforts made in the pursuit of holiness are just fleshly. They’re legalistic attempts at self-righteousness. “We don’t *pursue* holiness; we *receive* holiness!”

But that’s not what Paul says here! “One thing I do: I sit back and relax and wait for holiness to *happen* to me.” No! “One thing I do: *I press on!*” Why? Because Paul wants to establish his own righteousness by pursuing holiness? No! He’s just said in verse 9 that he does *not* want a righteousness of his own derived from law, but the righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ. So pressing hard after sanctification is not the same thing as self-justification. In fact,

pressing hard after sanctification is the evidence of having been justified with the alien righteousness of Christ.

What does Paul say? I want a righteousness not my own, verse 9, but verse 10: I want to *know* Him. He says the Christian counts all things as loss and presses hard after holiness, not merely for holiness' sake, but because as we increase in holiness we get to see and know and enjoy more of the treasure that is Jesus Christ. There is treasure to be found on the path of holiness, friends. And that treasure is Christ Himself. Satisfying apprehensions of the glories of Christ's person and work are only enjoyed on the path of obedience. And so we make every effort to lay hold of that treasure. We press on to enjoy greater communion with Jesus. We run the race of the Christian life so that we may win the prize (cf. 1 Cor 9:24). And if we are to do that, we need not only to have a sober self-assessment that teaches us that we've not yet arrived. We also need to make **a sustained effort**—the maximum effort—in our pursuit of that prize.

III. A Solid Foundation (v. 12c)

A **third principle** Paul lays out for successfully running the race of the Christian life is, **number three**, that we must have **a solid foundation**. Look once more at verse 12: "...I press on so that I may lay hold of *that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ.*"

I want you to notice that all of Paul's sustained effort in vigorously pursuing Christ through increasing holiness—all of his pressing on to apprehend the prize—is grounded upon another, prior apprehension. It is founded upon Christ's apprehension of Paul at his conversion on the Damascus Road. Paul says, "Before I ever thought about pressing on in hot pursuit of Christian holiness, Christ laid hold of me. And it is only because Christ laid hold of me, and forgave me, and saved me from my sin, and justified me on the basis of His own righteousness—that I can make any progress in my sanctification."

You see, friends, justification—being saved—is the necessary prerequisite to sanctification—becoming holy. Put in the language of Philippians 2:12 and 13: you can't work out your salvation with fear and trembling if you have no salvation to begin with! If the Lord has never removed your heart of stone and given you a heart of flesh—if He's never breathed into your soul the breath of the divine life—if you've never truly repented of your sins and trusted in Christ alone for your righteousness—dear friend, don't try to make any progress in the Christian life. *Receive* Christian life as a gift, first of all, by turning from your sins and believing in Jesus Christ.

And yet if you *are* a true believer in Christ, you need to recognize that your pursuit of holiness is grounded upon the **solid foundation** of your justification. And that reality needs to affect the way that you run this race. As a believer, covered in the righteousness of Christ, you run this race

of sanctification—not as one who is trying to earn God’s favor—but as one who has already been granted God’s favor as a gift of grace in Christ. And that fact needs to fuel your fight against sin. We need to battle against sin—not as if we were just any other religious person with a strong willpower. You can get a strong-willpower, religious person to fly a plane into a building because he’s convinced it’s his duty. But that’s not the way God’s people—indwelt by the Spirit of God—progress in true holiness. We need to battle against sin in the strength and in the freedom of that Gospel-driven foundation: that I can be victorious over sin in my life, only because Christ has already conquered sin *in me* by virtue of His work on the cross.

But your justification also needs to affect your sanctification in another way. Look again at the text. Paul says, “I press on so that I may lay hold of *that for which also* I was laid hold of by Christ.” Paul is saying that Christ laid hold of him for a particular purpose. And whatever it is that Christ laid hold of Paul *for*, it’s that thing that Paul presses on to lay hold *of*. Paul’s goal in living is entirely consistent with Christ’s goal in saving him. Paul derives his purpose for life from the purpose for which he has been saved.

And what is that purpose? Why did Christ lay hold of him? Romans 8:29: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become conformed to the image of His Son.*” Conformity to Christlikeness is God’s aim in our salvation. He justifies us to sanctify us. Paul says the same thing in Titus 2:11–14, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.” You see? Justifying grace instructs us to live righteously and godly. Paul goes on to say that Christ “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.”

So you see: the reason that God saved you is to conform you into the image of His Son—to make you more and more holy throughout your Christian life! “This is eternal life,” John 17:3, “that they may know You, Father, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Again, Philippians 3:10, “that I may *know Him.*” And again: knowing Him and becoming like Him are the exact same pursuit. And so if this is the purpose of our salvation—if Christ has laid hold of us in order to show us Himself and thereby make us more like Himself—then we’d better order our entire lives according to that purpose. We’d better make whatever adjustments in our schedule, and in our routine, and in our priorities that we need to make in order to live according to that purpose.

Do you know what you call a life that’s not lived according to the purpose of its Designer? Wasted. It’s a wasted life. Dear friend, don’t waste your Christian life—don’t *waste* the life that God has given you in 2021—fooling around with the passing pleasures of sin that rob you of communion with Christ, and thus rob you of true and lasting joy! Don’t waste 2021, still enslaved to the cancer of impurity and immorality, when it’s the pure in heart that shall see God (Matt 5:8). Don’t waste 2021, enslaved to the fear of man, when the fear of God is the fountain

of all blessedness. Don't *waste* 2021, enslaved to pride and boasting and an overinflated view of yourself, when God looks upon the one who is humble and contrite of spirit and who trembles at His word (Isa 66:2).

Dear Christian, Christ has laid hold of you in justification in order that you would know Him, and in order that that knowledge of Him would conform you into His own image, in sanctification. So run the race of the Christian life grounded upon that **solid foundation**.

IV. A Singular Focus (v. 13b)

There's a **fourth principle** for running the race of the Christian life in this text, and that is, **number four**: we must have a **singular focus**. Look with me at verse 13: "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; *but one thing I do...*"

This is a forceful, emphatic interjection. Literally, Paul says, "*One thing! One thing!*" He had a **singular focus**. This is the highest priority of pursuing Christlikeness with all his might. It "captivates his full attention and demands total concentration" (Hansen, 253). You know sometimes you're talking to someone—and too often I'm guilty of this—and they're reading something on their phone? A text, or a tweet, or something? And you're talking to them, and they're giving you one of these: "Uh huh. Yeah. Mmhhh." You know, that whole "I'm listening to you but not really listening to you" thing?

How often, brothers and sisters, do we do that to Jesus, in our relationship with Him? "Oh, I pray in the shower." Or, I do my devotions in the car, listening to the audio Bible on my drive into work, while I'm trying to survive my commute on the 5 freeway!" But Paul doesn't say, "But many things I juggle." He says, "One thing I do!" This is a **singular focus**! This is undivided attention!

And this only makes sense. Have you ever seen a race where the runners are looking all over the place—back behind him to see where his opponents are, down at his feet to analyze his form, out at the crowd to look for his fans? No! The moment a runner in a race is doing any of that, what happens? He starts to go off his course. He starts running out of his lane. He starts deviating, and even faltering. But Paul says the runner in the race of the Christian life has a **singular focus**. And that is the finish line. That is Christ Himself. That's why the author of Hebrews calls us to "lay aside every encumbrance" (Heb 12:1). Every distraction is to be thrown aside, and we are to fix our eyes on Jesus alone. The whole bent of our mind is to be given exclusively to this upward call of God in our sanctification. Christ is to be our constant preoccupation.

We must give ourselves, friends, to **singular devotion** in this task of sanctification. We need to heed Solomon's words in Proverbs 4:25 to 27. He says, "Let your eyes look directly ahead and

let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you. Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right or to the left.” Our world continues to invent more and more things to distract us from this business of pursuing holiness. John Piper once wrote, “One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.” Endless distractions! And look, you can use social media in a way that glorifies God. You can enjoy any number of lawful recreational activities. But not if they distract you from your pursuit of God in Christ. Not if you’re tweeting when you ought to be praying. Not if your hobbies—whatever they are—crowd out your Bible reading.

No, we need to have **a singular focus**. Our pursuit of Christ must be the orienting principle of our lives. He must have the priority. And that means that when life gets busy and your schedule gets tight, the first thing to go cannot be the devotional time. And it’s going to take intentional thought and planning to figure out what *is* going to go. But no matter what, you need to protect this time of personal communion with Christ.

Paul tells us that this *one thing*—this pressing on to lay hold of Christ—is characterized by two activities. The first is: “forgetting what lies behind.” And we mentioned this. A runner doesn’t look over his shoulder to see how much ground he’s already covered, or to see how far ahead of his competitors he is. He doesn’t turn around to admire how great of a jump he got off the blocks. And if he got a bad jump, he doesn’t turn around to lament that either. The moment he does any of that, his concentration is broken, and he starts to veer off course.

Paul says the Christian runner in the race of sanctification does the same thing—he forgets what lies behind. He’s not discouraged and incapacitated by past failures, and neither does he seek to live on the past successes of the “good old days” to fuel his present performance.

And how easy it is to fall into one of those two traps! On the one hand you have people who can never get over the guilt of their past failures. Sins they committed years earlier are paralyzing their growth in the present. “How could God ever forgive me for that kind of sin? I just did it over and over again. And it would be one thing if I wasn’t a Christian, but I’ve searched my heart and I believe I was *saved* when I did those things! No, I just have to live with the reality that I’m a second-class Christian. I’ll never be able to make progress in sanctification like those normal people.” Rather than looking to Christ and His righteousness as the ground of their acceptance, they make too much of their own spiritual performance, and they despair of ever making adequate progress in the race.

But then on the other hand, you have those who look to some golden age in their spiritual experience to validate their present stagnation. They say, “Oh, back when I first got saved, oh boy, you should have seen me! I *devoured* those Scriptures, man! I was reading five chapters every day. I read through the entire Bible in six months!” And you ask them, “How many times

have you read it since?” “Oh, uh, well... Hey, you should have seen me back then! I really dug into the deep stuff and studied the Bible—study Bibles and commentaries and dictionaries: the whole bit! I even taught Bible studies, and I used to evangelize all the time. Man, you couldn’t shut me up: I’d tell everybody about Christ!” And you say, “Who in your life, currently, are you praying for and making it a point to speak the Gospel to now?” And the answer’s the same: “Oh, well, um... Aw you should have seen me back then!”

You see, when you’re trying to live your Christian life on the basis of past successes, you get complacent; you get content. You lose that holy dissatisfaction that we spoke about earlier. You lose your grip on that sober self-assessment. But Paul says the Christian *forgets* what lies behind. Any past remembrance that would detract from pressing forward—the Christian intentionally banishes that from his mind.

And then, to put it positively, he says he also “reaches forward to what lies ahead.” This word that gets translated “reaching forward” “describes stretching a muscle to its limit” (MacArthur, 247). And if “minding what lies behind” was pictured by a runner looking back over his shoulder, “reaching forward to what lies ahead” pictures the runner “straining every nerve and muscle as he keeps on running with all his might toward the goal, [with] his hand stretch[ing] out” as if he was laying hold of that prize right then and there (Hendriksen, 173). The dictionary translates this word, “to exert oneself to the uttermost” (BDAG, 361). This is maximum effort. Friend, does it describe your life? Are you straining every muscle? That’s what Paul calls for.

V. A Steady Gaze (v. 14b)

Well, we’ve seen that in order to run the race of the Christian life, we must have a sober self-assessment, we must be marked by a sustained effort in sanctification, we must be standing firm on a solid foundation, and we must be captivated by a singular focus. The **fifth principle** for magnifying the worth of Christ in 2021 is that we must have **a steady gaze**. Look with me at verse 14. Paul says, “I press on *toward the goal for the prize* of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Now this word, “goal,” is the word *skopos* in the Greek, and it’s where we derive the English word *scope*. The commentators tell us it refers to “a mark on which to fix one’s gaze” (MacArthur, 248; O’Brien, 430). For an archer, the *skopos* would be the bull’s eye on the target. For a runner, like our passage talks about, the *skopos* is the finish line. And that runner keeps looking at the finish line. He concentrates on that finish line. He disregards everything else but that finish line. And if at some point of the race he gets tired, or gets a cramp, or for whatever reason begins to feel like he can’t make it—he raises his eyes to the finish line, and the sight of his goal so close within his reach causes him to bear down and give it everything he’s got.

Many of you have heard the story of Florence Chadwick, who, in 1952, set out to swim the 26 miles between Catalina Island and the California mainland. A few small boats accompanied her as she swam, in order to watch out for sharks and to come to her aid if she got hurt or grew tired. After about fifteen hours, a thick fog set in off the Southern California coast—so thick that she could barely see the boats right next to her. But she continued on. But after another hour, she began to cry out to the people in the boats to be taken out of the water. Her mother, who was in one of the boats to encourage her, called out and said, “You’re close! Don’t give up! You can make it!” But Florence was exhausted. She stopped swimming and was pulled into the boat. When she got on board, she found out that the shore was less than half a mile away. And at a news conference the next day, she said, “All I could see was the fog. ... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it” (Alcorn).

And friends, if we would turn our eyes from regarding vain things—whether the false glory of the idols of our hearts, or the cycle of unbroken chaos and doomsaying on the nightly news—if we would lift our gaze from the fogginess of all the distractions of this life—we could see the shore. We could see the prize—we could see the Lord Jesus Christ Himself! There! Waiting for us! and beckoning us! and cheering us on to give it everything we’ve got! And if we could but see Him, brothers and sisters, the sight of His glory would provide every ounce of strength and endurance that we could ever need or ever want to finish this race. Oh, if only we would look to Him! If we’d only **fix our gaze** on Him!

This is why the Apostle Peter, when he exhorts the churches of the dispersion to greater holiness, in 1 Peter 1:13, he says: “Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, *fix your hope completely* on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” You want to make progress? You want to be prepared for action? Then fix your hope completely on the grace that is to be brought to you when Christ appears, when you will finally see Him face to face.

It’s why the author of Hebrews writes, “Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us [and so easily clouds our vision,] and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” How? “*Fixing our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:1–2).

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, *while we look* not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.” And just a chapter earlier, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, in what is probably the most foundational statement in the New Testament on sanctification, Paul says, “We all, with unveiled face, *beholding* as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” It is by

beholding the glory of Christ, that we are transformed into the image of that glory. We are sanctified as we behold—as we **fix our gaze steadily**—upon the glory of Jesus.

Oh GraceLife, do you want that prize? Do you press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus?

In The Master’s Seminary Library, there are various plaques hung on the walls with quotes from Pastor John—there to inspire and encourage the seminarians in their studies. One plaque hangs on the wall at the bottom of the stairwell leading to the basement, which is the main room of the library. And in my first year of seminary, I remember walking past this plaque every day. The quote engraved on the plaque eventually became engraved on my mind. It reads: “VISION. If you properly value the heavenly prize, it will compel you to give of yourselves and of your resources. Fervency springs from a *vision* of heaven’s reward.” Dear friends, look to the reward. Keep **a steady gaze** upon the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will find in that vision of Him—that sweet revelation of all the beauty of His holiness and grace—all the strength necessary to run this race with endurance.

Conclusion

Don’t waste your 2021. Make 2021 the year that you lay aside *every* encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles, and run this race of the Christian life **in passionate pursuit of communion with Jesus Christ**. Keep a sober self-assessment—a holy dissatisfaction—with your present spiritual state. Exert a sustained effort; embrace the necessity of diligence and devotion and intentional activity in the pursuit of holiness. Run on the solid foundation of your justification, in the freedom of knowing that you don’t have to earn God’s favor, but have already been granted God’s favor by faith alone. Maintain a singular focus, eliminating all distractions, keeping your pursuit of Christ the number one priority in your life. And keep a steady gaze upon the prize of gaining His glory—of the consummate blessing of face-to-face fellowship with Him. Cut through the foginess of this life, and see the shore. Look to the reward.

Remember friends: the true follower of Christ magnifies the worth of Christ and displays the glory of Christ by ordering every aspect of his life so that he can see, and know, and enjoy, and finally gain Him. Press on, reach forward, keep running. Lay hold of the prize. Lay hold of Christ.