

The One Thing

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Bible Verse: Philippians 3:12-16
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It is said that when Charles Spurgeon stepped up to his pulpit and ascended the steps into his pulpit, that his pattern was to repeat to himself, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit." The point being that the urgency of eternal matters, the urgency of preaching the gospel was something that he understood that he could not do in his own strength and that without the help of the Holy Spirit his labor was in vain, because to speak to people who are dead in their trespasses and sins, there's nothing you can do in human power to bring them to life, you need the help of the Holy Spirit; to sanctify a person, to sanctify a church, must ultimately be the work of the Holy Spirit because it's something that's beyond human power to accomplish; to convict people of sin, to humble the proud, is something that must be a work of the Holy Spirit because it is something that is beyond human power to accomplish. I was thinking those things as I was walking up even in the brief steps to the pulpit tonight because of the things that are on my mind to say in the passage that we now come to in Philippians 3, and I want to read the text and then make some preliminary remarks before we explain it in greater detail.

Philippians 3, beginning in verse 12, our text tonight will take us through verse 16. Philippians 3:12-16. And let me just preface by everything I say tonight by saying that this, what I have to say especially in these introductory remarks are not directed at anyone in person in particular, we're going to be talking in principles but I'm sure that there are principles that we need the great powerful help of the Holy Spirit to apply them properly to each heart tonight to search our hearts and to respond rightly to what God says in his word.

Philippians 3, beginning in verse 12 says this,

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 Jesus. 13 Brethren, 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, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude,

God will reveal that also to you; 16 however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

The context of this text, what was leading up into this text was Paul's description of the reality of Christian salvation and as it pertained to him in particular. He had stated in the first six verses the high extent of his attainment in Jewish legal righteousness and that his prior life as a Jew was exemplary, but he forsook all of that for the sake of having Christ. In fact, it's not just that he forsook it, he considered it to be dung, he considered it to be equivalent to human excrement compared to the reality of Christ and who Christ is and having Christ. His legal righteousness was nothing compared to the deity righteousness of Christ himself. He forsakes all of that so that he could have the righteousness of Christ.

Look at it there in verse 9. He is saying that he is relying on the righteousness of Christ alone to reconcile him to God. He says, "I want to be found in Him," verse 9, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." If ever there was a righteous man in human terms, excluding our blessed Lord from the discussion, if ever there was a man who attained to righteousness on his own, it was the Apostle Paul. Everybody else falls short of him and Paul says, "My righteousness is nothing. My righteousness is filth compared to Christ himself." Well, if that's true of the highest human attainment in righteousness in the Apostle Paul, then all the rest of us are even more subject to considering our own righteousness as being nothing more than dung, is the effect of this text, that we need a righteousness from outside of ourselves given to us by God if we are going to be right with him, if we are going to survive judgment at his throne, if we are going to be declared righteous by a holy God. It's obvious that it could not be based on our own human righteousness because Paul didn't do it, we certainly fall short of Paul to say nothing of how we fall short of the glory of God. So we must be relying on the righteousness of Christ or we are not saved at all and we are of all men going to be miserably doomed.

Paul goes on to say that, this is just a little bit of review of our prior couple of messages from Philippians, he goes on and explains that this justification that comes from trusting in the righteousness of Christ alone, this righteousness, this regeneration that takes place yields into, leads into a life that is seeking sanctification with the ultimate goal of glorification. And it's all very compressed, you see justification in verse 9, in verse 10 he says, "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." From the moment of my justification, the moment that I was born again up until the time that I die, I want this window of my lifetime to be defined by the pursuit of Christ, growing in the knowledge of him and growing in greater consciousness of my union with him and the fellowship of his sufferings. I just want to be like Christ. That's what matters to me in this life. That's my supreme priority, Paul says, with the ultimate outcome, the ultimate final goal of it all, verse 11, that he might attain to the resurrection from the dead. That when Christ returns and there is a bodily resurrection to take place, Paul wants to be numbered among those that are with Christ in the bodily resurrection and to be glorified with him, ultimately to spend the eternal ages of ages unfolding in the blessed presence of our Lord Jesus Christ

so that, so that to be born again, to put your faith in Christ and to be justified leads to a life of sanctification that ultimately ends up in heaven in the glorified presence of Christ, made like him as he says and he points out and makes very clear that this is what he has in mind at the end of Philippians 3. I'm conscious, increasingly conscious when I preach that I talk really fast when I get animated about stuff and that makes it hard to absorb what I'm saying. I try to slow down but it's very difficult for me.

At the end of Philippians 3:20 he says, "our citizenship is in heaven." Where our heart really belongs is in heaven. The mark of a true believer is one that he's got his heart set on heaven, not on the things of earth or the things that are taking place in this world or what's going to happen to my earthly life. That's so secondary in consideration to a true born again believer who understands something about the purpose of God in saving him. I am destined for the throne and therefore that consumes my thought and everything else is secondary by comparison, or tertiary by comparison. He says at the end of chapter 3 there, "our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." Our citizenship is in heaven. If you are a Christian, that's where your real citizenship is and that, for a true Christian, that's what he most wants and everything else pales into shadows by comparison to understanding that reality. And when that time comes when we have the resurrection from the dead, we are going to be transformed and made into the likeness of Christ.

Now those are great lofty realities that are at the centerpiece of true Christianity. Now having understood that from verses 9 through 11, Paul steps back, as it were, and talks a little bit more about his present experience and what his desires are during his Christian life so that he says twice in the first three verses of our text tonight, he says, "I press on." Look at it there in verse 12, he says, "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." What was he laid hold of for Christ? Well, to attain Christ-likeness, to ultimately be transformed and to be in his glorious presence, and he says, "That's what I'm pressing toward." In verse 14, he uses that same verb again when he says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Twice in those three verses he says, "I press on." This is a really important pivot point in the message for you to understand and everything kind of hinges on this hinge, you might say. What Paul is saying is that, "True regeneration in my life, actually being a Christian has produced a result in my heart that has a dominating influence on all of my priorities and all of my affections. I press on, and that result is that I press on for these spiritual things.

Sanctification is what matters to me. Glorification is my ultimate goal and that is what possesses my mind and motivates everything that I do." Here's the thing that you need to understand to follow the thought in this text, is that true regeneration, truly being born again produces sanctification in a man without exception. The Spirit of God saves a man, gives new life to a man, and that new life inevitably manifests itself in increasing transformation and being made into the likeness of Christ. That certainly happens in every true believer because that is the purpose of God in it. That is what God saved us for is to make us like Christ and to expand a congregation of believers, not speaking

congregation in a local church sense, expanding the number of people who are replicating in some manner or another the character of Christ in their lives. That's what God saves people to do.

So an understanding of Christian salvation produces a spiritual pursuit in the life of one that is truly born again. Let me say that again: an understanding of Christian salvation produces a spiritual pursuit in the life of the one who has truly been born again. Paul in verse 9 talked about justification, verse 10, sanctification, verse 11, glorification. It's not just that this was unique to Paul, this is the whole purpose for everyone as we're going to see, but if you understand these realities and if you participate in these realities, then there is an inevitable consequence that takes place and it is the inevitable consequence of this spiritual pursuit.

The verb, "I press on," is a single word in the original language and it's a verb that indicates an intentional pursuit or a chase. It's something that you're conscious of and you are pursuing it because you want it. Paul is expressing his zeal to attain Christ-likeness and he runs after that goal like a sprinter in a race running for the finish line, straining with every power in his body, the sprinter presses and reaches forward that goal so that he can win the prize of the race and win the medal that attains it. Paul uses that physical picture as an indication of where his spiritual heart is at. "I am pursuing these things. This is what salvation has produced in me and this is what defines who I am as a man."

So that's a little bit of an introduction to the text here this evening. Now what I want to do here is to step back and add some parallel thoughts from other parts of Scripture so that we understand the significance of what's being said here this evening. We can kind of reverse engineer it. We need to reverse engineer it a little bit. I like that phrase, reverse engineering it. It sounds so intelligent and I don't know a thing about engineering so it's really kind of foolish for me to use terms like that, but you know what I mean. To reverse engineer it, you see the result and then you work back to see, you know, what led up to that result.

Well, here's what we need to understand, very simple point that I'm about to make but profoundly important is that if this spiritual pursuit is the inevitable result of true salvation, then what are we to make of people that don't really have that pursuit alive and living in their heart? They have all the outward appearances of spiritual life but the reality of the matter is that they're dead to these things and their pursuits and their interests in life are really defined entirely by earthly matters and have nothing of a vertical pursuit of Christ, of wanting to see him glorified in their lives, to see Christ reproduced in their life and his character and, you know, they're just consumed with whatever it is that interests them in the world. What are we to make of people like that? You say, "Well, they claim to be Christians, maybe they're still Christians." Well, do you know what? Let me say this. Let me say this and I'm going to be far too transparent for my own good here this evening, but I think hopefully this will be helpful to you and maybe the Lord will use it to open somebody's eyes who need their eyes opened. As I interact horizontally with people as a pastor, I, and I think our elders generally speaking and I think this is the right way to do ministry, is that we optimistically and hopefully take at face value someone's

confession of faith in Christ, and if someone tells us they're Christian, we're going to accept that. You know, if it's backed by any kind of reasonable description of an understanding of the gospel and a reasonable description of some kind of change taking place in life, when someone comes to me and presents a testimony like that, I will deal with them on the assumption that they are a Christian so that I am not taking a severe look and cross examination of every testimony that I hear. I don't live that way. I don't minister that way. That's a terrible way to minister and so, you know, we take it at face value.

At the same time, when I'm alone in my study, when I'm alone before the word of God and I see what the word of God says about what's produced in the life of a true Christian, you know, it drives me to prayer for some of these same people because I say, "Lord, I look at what Scripture says about what a true Christian is," and as optimistically and as generously and as graciously as I want to look at someone's life, I say, "You know, Lord, I'm just not sure. I'm just not sure. If the power of God and the power of the Spirit of God is residing in someone's heart, Lord, I don't understand the priorities by which they live. God, I don't know. God, do something in them. God, bless them. God, help them because, God, you know, this is beyond my power and beyond my ability to rightly and infallibly discern."

And there's biblical reasons why a pastor would carry those kinds of concerns in his heart. Over in Galatians 4:11, you don't need to turn there, and I find great comfort in ministry by some of the things the Apostle Paul says. I understand why John MacArthur says that apart from Christ, Paul is his greatest hero in Scripture. Paul writing to the Galatians who were adopting a legalistic approach to salvation, he says to them in Galatians 4, "I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain." Paul says, "The teaching that you have embraced and the way that you are living and your reliance on legal righteousness makes me think that maybe it never got through to you really at all, and so I am afraid that perhaps my work amongst you has not actually produced the spiritual fruit that it first seemed to produce."

Now let me just back up, remind you that I'm not targeting anybody in this message with anything that I'm saying. We're taking in principle, not about people or individuals, not about individuals here. And so, you know, I want you to understand that but it's important but at the same time it is very important for all of us to come to grips with the reality that true salvation produces a spiritual pursuit, and if that spiritual pursuit is not present in a life, then we have to wonder, the person should be asking himself, "Have I been fooling myself all of this time?" Because self-deception is a real thing. It is a real thing and there are far too many voices in our lives that are just quick to affirm us in whatever profession we make and not hold us to account in spiritual accountability for what the reality is. Paul says, "I'm afraid I labored over you in vain."

Now you add to that, you add to that and I do want you to turn here in Matthew 7, this is a text that I think is important for us to keep in mind. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus Christ himself said, "'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small

and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Oh, dear people, dear friends, brothers and sisters in Christ and those who are outside of him, if we simply took what the Lord said seriously, at this point it would do a lot of transformation in our thinking and in our approach and our interactions; we would take the things of Scripture, we would take the things of spiritual life far more seriously than we do. People are so casual about their salvation and the state of their soul, make assumptions that they're fine when there is no really, you know, there's no really pulsating life that Paul describes in Philippians 3. There is no pursuit of Christ in their life. They're not pressing on for, you know, the ultimate outcome of salvation, and yet they're comfortable thinking, "I'm saved."

Well, you know, what if Jesus meant what he said, that there are actually few people who are saved, you know, comparatively speaking, and that there is a real danger of being deceived and that we've got to look for the gate and the road that leads to life because it's just immediately obvious, it's not broad and easy as all of these moralistic therapeutic deism churches tell people it is. It's not true. Salvation is not, comparatively speaking, it's not often found. What would happen if we took that seriously, being mindful of the fact that Paul says, "This pursuit in my life is the inevitable outgrowth of true salvation"? What would happen if we took that seriously? And of course, we've said many times, I almost apologize for calling out that the Lord himself said in verse 21 of Matthew 7, you know, he said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'" In Your name. In Your name. In Your name. Didn't we do all this stuff? It's as if the Lord shrugs and says, "I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness."

Over in Luke 6:46, our blessed Lord says, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great." A profession that is not matched by some kind of spiritual pursuit, I'm not even trying to quantify it, I'm just saying some kind of spiritual pursuit is a profession and this is a picture of what final judgment is going to be like. You know, people show up with an empty profession before the God of the universe, professing to have known Christ but having had no pursuit or sanctification that followed in their lives, the result of that for them is going to be like a great storm coming upon them that causes their whole house to collapse. The storm is God's judgment and the house is their soul being sent off into destruction because they were not grounded on the rock, there was no real union with Christ at all. Now look, these things are serious. These things are sober. And you know, and Scripture is just filled with things like this. 1 John 2 says, "If we say that we've come to know Him and do not do what He commands, we deceive ourselves, we're a liar and the truth is not in us," 1 John 2:3-4.

And so all of that to say this, my beloved friends, setting aside who is saved and who is not saved, just setting all of that stuff aside, isn't the Lord worthy of men who open his word of taking what he says seriously and acting like it matters, and that Christ was not bluffing in what he said, that he meant what he said? Isn't he at least worthy of that? Even if we're not going to respond to it, shouldn't we at least give the honor to the word of God that takes seriously what it says and not try to redefine Christianity to what makes us comfortable? Either it makes us personally comfortable or, and look, this is what parents and grandparents do with their adult children all the time and I'm sure that it takes place within the walls of this room, that genuine Christians who truly are born again still are inconsistent on this point when it comes to their loved ones, their children or their grandchildren, and there's no sign of spiritual life in them but they make excuses, they rationalize it away and they say, "Well, I know they're a Christian because little Johnny prayed at my knee when he was six. And I know he's working on his 14th marriage now, and I know that he's never been to church in the past 30 years, but I'm still confident that he's in Christ." Well, that makes a mockery, that makes a mockery of the word of God. It makes an utter mockery of Christ for Christ to say these things that we've been looking at in his word here this evening and to hear those things and they're so clear and obvious, and that this is the mark of a true Christian, and that many people dwell in self-deception and yet somehow our minds twist it when it's flesh and blood and we redefine the word of God in order to give a false covering to a loved one who is obviously not in Christ at all by any objective measure.

Now it is a misplaced sympathy, it is misplaced love to do that. I understand why people do this, it's because no one wants to face up to what the reality of what this means, and that it means that my loved one is in danger of eternal perdition, it means that what I thought to be true when they were a child has proven not to be true after all. And that's painful. I just wish as a pastor that it was more painful to us to deny the word of God and to misapply it than to have a human consideration make us twist what God's words say about what a true Christian is. I wish that was more painful to us than human considerations because Scripture says the one who has been born again, there's a way to recognize them. You'll know them by their fruit, Jesus said. A bad tree does not produce good fruit, and a good tree does not produce bad fruit, and he says do not let yourself be deceived on this point.

Now what kind of pastor would I be if knowing these things from God's word I didn't at some point and from time to time make an issue of them from my pulpit? What kind of pastor would I be to avoid making people that I love uncomfortable with the truth of God's word? I would be no better than the parent who makes excuses for, you know, for the kid on their 14th marriage. I'm really exaggerating it there just so that no one takes it personally when we're talking about principle and not people. But there comes a point, doesn't there, for some of you to be honest when you're looking at the mirror and forget family and forget other people in the church, there comes a point where you need to look in the mirror and ask yourself whether this pursuit, these affections are what's alive in your heart and what define your existence or not. You don't have to go to seminary like some men do in order to be a godly man, to have godly pursuits. You don't have to be in

church leadership or recognized by a church body for these things to be true of you. That's not the point at all. The point is do you want to know Christ? Do you want to be like him? Because that is what is reproduced in, that is what God produces in the heart of those that he saves. It's a supernatural work and if you find yourself as we're talking about these things on the outside looking in, if you find yourself with your nose pressed on the glass looking into the candy shop and saying, "All of those spiritual sweets are not in my possession," then the thing to do is not make excuses for yourself or to run and to self-justify yourself and, you know, as inevitably will happen, people says, "You were preaching that at me, weren't you?" When I wasn't. To set aside all of that self-justification and defensiveness and just come humbly before God in his word and say, "God, I am greatly disturbed by placing my life under the searching light of Your word and realizing that these things of which Your word speaks are foreign to my existence." It would be far better to do that than to in self-righteousness protest and say, "You don't know my circumstances. You don't know this or that." It doesn't matter what I know. God, as Mitchell so graciously read for us at the beginning of the service, Psalm 139:1, you know, he searched us and he knows us. You know, this is utter foolishness to play games with this. We are open and laid bare before the one with whom we have to do, and it's not like he's been hiding these things from us, it's all right here in his word, open and available for anyone who would read and take heed. And so you see why Spurgeon would step us saying, "I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit." To preach these realities is to realize that you must depend on the work of the omnipotent Spirit of God because, you know, I can't make a blind man see. I can just lay out the word of God and point you to Christ and that's what we do here today.

So what is Paul describing in this text that we're looking at here tonight? Well, we'll just talk about it in two quick terms. First of all, he talks about an aspiration to know Christ, a desire to know Christ, you might say. Remember, I'll say it this one last time as we kind of wave in the rearview mirror to the verses that we've already considered, justification, sanctification, glorification, what is the impact of all of that in the true Christian life? Paul's life, he says beginning in verse 12, he says, "My life is now defined by this ongoing pursuit." Now you might think that an apostle personally appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ had reached the pinnacle, he had reached the top, that he had accomplished what needed to be done in spiritual life, but Paul says the exact opposite. He speaks with remarkable humility and he confesses that he himself has not arrived.

Look at what he says in verses 12 and 13. He says, "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on," this is my present pursuit as I'm penning this letter, he says. This is what's in my heart right now. I press on, I pursue this, "that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." Now think about it. We said that Paul in his legal righteousness exceeded everything that any of us could have attained and he fell short and he rejected it all. Well, think about it from this perspective also, those of us that are complacent and self-satisfied in our Christian life, what Paul had done since his conversion was far beyond anything that any of us have done either, and he had had experiences that were totally beyond our experience. What can we say about Paul? Well, let's just limit it to a couple of things. Paul had visibly seen the resurrected Christ. Paul had gone to a third heaven where great things

were revealed to him. Paul with his apostolic authority had established churches throughout the known world at that time, and Paul was personally appointed by Christ to this ministry. That is privilege. That is accomplishment in a real way.

That's what Paul had done in his life as a believer and this is the man who says that he wants still more? This is the man who says that he has not arrived? Stunning. If Paul hasn't arrived when he wrote this, what does it say about you and me except that we haven't arrived either and that therefore we need this pursuit like Paul did. If Paul needed the pursuit, we need it even more. Here's what we find in Christian maturity. Here's what we see an aspect of biblical sanctification being. Here is an aspect of true Christianity. A mature Christian does not rest on his past laurels. He is not satisfied with any experience or things that he had done in the past. He wants more. He wants to continue on. He wants to progress and not just sit down and remember the good old days.

Sometimes I'm concerned, this is utterly, I have no idea why this thought popped into my head but it's worth saying. Once in a while you'll run into churches that have named themselves by their founding pastor or one of their prominent pastors or something like that, you know, like I drive by a church in southern Indiana, Dabney Baptist Church. I don't have anything to do with that church. I don't know anything about the church, I'm just illustrating a point. I don't know if it's named after the great theologian Dabney who lived in the 19th century, but I think it's unhealthy for a church to identify itself in association with a man from the past that had a ministry there. Just by the name, you're telling people to look back at the glory days. You know, let's remember Pastor Smith, Smith Memorial Church, or whatever it might be, and you're looking to the past to define what who you are. Well, I don't know. I'm probably making a mountain out of a molehill on that and it's not something that I would break fellowship with anyone over, I just don't think that's wise. I don't want a church named Something Memorial Church because that's remembering the past rather than focusing on the future and what lies ahead.

Now by similar token and perhaps more directly helpful for the true Christians in our audience here this evening, in the same way that a maturing Christian doesn't look to the past and find satisfaction in what happened in the past, at the same time, this is very liberating, this should be encouraging for many of you, is that to truly be in Christ is to be released from your regrets over what happened in the past. The way that you've sinned in the past or the way that people have sinned against you in the past, you're released from all of that because the focus is forward, the focus is future. Paul says, "I am pressing on." Verse 13, "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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Mature Christians do not rest on their laurels nor do they live in the realm of regrets over the past. Watch this, this simplifies everything, this defines life for us. What a mature Christian does is he simply wants to grow in grace. "Here's where I'm at today. I want to grow still more. I still have areas of my life that need to be sanctified. I want more of the fruit of the Spirit to be manifested. I want to be more useful in ministry than I was last time." You know, it's a forward focus and Paul says this is his single-minded goal despite

the setbacks and despite the failures. He says, "I'm forgetting what lies behind. I'm reaching forward to what lies ahead." What happened in the past now in terms of his life in this moment, for us today, for you today, my friend, this is blessedly liberating, what has happened in the past does not define what the future is.

You know what happens when a runner looks back? You know, a runner going for the finish line, going for the tape, and he looks back? If he's looking back, he's going to stumble or at the very best, he's going to lose his focus and lose his rhythm and cost him critical time and just a simple glance back can cost a runner a race. Google sometime the video for the 1954 Miracle Mile that was run in Vancouver, and it's a famous footrace between the two greatest runners of the mile race of that time. There's a statue commemorating the moment when these two great competitors were headed around the corner for the finish line and he looked over his shoulder to see where Roger Bannister was at while Bannister was passing him on the other side, and that moment of weakness in a great competitive runner, that moment of weakness at the height of the moment had a significant impact on him losing the race to Bannister because he looked back for just a moment.

Beloved, in our Christian life we're not supposed to be looking back. You hear people talk about their great evangelistic success in the past or, you know, what they did as a young man in Christ and all of that, and what about the present? What about growing today? And whether you're looking back at a past success or looking back at past stumbles and living in the regret of that, you're looking over your shoulder in a way that's costing you the race now. You're not supposed to be looking back anymore than John Landy was supposed to be looking back when he was rounding the corner heading for the tape. You're supposed to be looking forward, focused on the line, focused on what lies ahead.

So Paul is saying that, "My focus is on this present pursuit." He willfully forgets the past in order to avoid self-satisfaction. This counted his pre-conversion life, he said, "That's just dung. Why would I look back at that?" He said, "There's things to do. There's areas to grow now and that's my focus." And that's what God wants from us, not this constant morbid introspection about, "Why would I do this or that?" Constantly overthinking things and remembering things that you've done wrong in the past, there is nothing productive about that and that is not what the Christian life is supposed to be about. Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures and he was buried and he was raised on the third day. He conquered sin, he paid for sin. My friend, if you are in Christ, you share in his victory over sin, you share in his conquest, and God himself has said, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." Well, if God is not remembering it in the sense of bringing it up and holding it against you, then it is your Christian obligation and duty to adopt the mindset of God toward the sins of your past. They are buried in Christ. Your sins were buried in the grave with Christ and he came out resurrected and he didn't bring them with him. So we're not, as Christians we're not meant to look back at that stuff, we're meant to reach forward.

Look at it there, verse 13, "reaching forward to what lies ahead." And the word, the verb itself pictures that runner bent forward, hand outstretched, eyes fastened on the goal. It's not, my friend, it's not that Paul literally cannot remember his past even if he wanted to. That's not what he's talking about here. After all, in the first six verses he had just given a very long explanation about what his prior life was about. So it's not that he was in the early stages of dementia as he wrote this and I just can't remember what it was like. That's not it. He's saying, "My intentional focus in my heart is on what lies ahead in developing my Christian life and my Christian character." He's saying, "I will not become complacent based on the past. I will not be satisfied based on what I've done in the past." And in the context of what he's saying here, beloved, he's saying this is what new life produces in everyone.

Look at verse 15. He's not simply talking about himself, he's calling every Christian to join in a like-minded pursuit. In verse 15 he says, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect," in other words, as many as are maturing in Christ, "have this attitude." He tells his readers, he says, "Let's all think this way. We're Christians here, let's all adopt this attitude that I've been describing about myself." And his goal was a complete knowledge of Christ and he's focused ahead.

Look at it there in verse 14, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." He says, "What I want is glory and I want my life to be aimed in its every pursuit to that great end." So Paul directs his full hope, his full attention, his full energy to it.

Now let me just say this, knowing that some of you need to hear this: that goal of glorification and to be in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit and to be loved by God with an everlasting love led by grace, that love to know. Beloved, if you understand Christianity, if you understand biblical salvation, you understand that those spiritual realities are far better than anything on earth. To know Christ is far better than anything on earth. Better to be a pauper in the kingdom of God than to be a prince in the kingdom of this world. And the fact that God promises to fulfill this for us means that our pursuit is not in vain, and people that Christ has saved and the people that give themselves to this life aspiration and life pursuit are the only people on earth, the only people in the history of mankind who have not wasted their lives because everything else is going to pass away. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away but My words will not pass away." Kings and kingdoms will all pass away.

Now it's interesting when you think about it, is to notice in verse 12 there are two laying holds, there are two graspings that are taking place that Paul describes. He says, "I press on so that I may lay hold of that." He's pursuing that and yet he goes on and says, "I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus for this very purpose." And the thought is this, there is this divine and human element that is mutually at play here. God initiates salvation, Christ saves us by his mighty power and he lays hold of us by name, and he lays hold of us at the moment of our conversion and his purpose is this ultimate outcome, that we'll be in heaven at the end. And Paul says, "I've been laid hold of Christ for that purpose." The evidence of a saving response to Christ having done that is the fact that this is what you

are seeking after also. You're wanting to lay hold of that which God laid hold of you for first. The purpose of God, to glorify you, becomes your own purpose in life to the ultimate exclusion of all else. That's what matters, in other words.

Now look, we, you know, we've got to live our lives, we've got to earn our livings, we've got to raise our families and put the kids to bed and blah, blah, blah. I get all of that, but even in those things we're doing all of these things with an eye on the glory of God. Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, do all to the glory of God. All of life becomes enraptured in this transcendent goal, *Soli Deo Gloria*, to the glory of God alone. And when we're thinking rightly about these things and the Spirit of God is working in our hearts as we apply ourselves to his word, the things of the world grow strangely dim. They diminish in importance and we're not captivated and we're not upset by what happens in the world because we've been captivated by a greater transcendent purpose that surpasses anything on earth. And you know, and look, each one of us just needs to ask ourselves: is that true of me or not?

So Paul's aspiration to know Christ. Secondly, we don't have much time for this. I've been talking about this second point all along anyway. If you're taking notes, you can title your second point here: an application to grow in Christ. In other words, we apply ourselves, we pursue this, we apply ourselves to grow in Christ, and as I said earlier, Paul invites all believers to join him in this noble pursuit.

Look at verse 15, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you." And so Paul holds up this ideal of the pursuit of Christian character. He has admitted that he has not, he himself has not arrived, he's not attained it just yet, he's still seeking it earnestly. And in these last two verses, he is calling on all believers to imitate his example, to be like he is here. You see it stated in verse 17, we'll look at that next time. He says, "Brethren, join in following my example." He says, "What you see in my life and what I tell you about my heart pursuit, this is what Christianity is all about. Be like me in this way. Be like me in this pursuit. Adopt my pursuit as your own."

When in the NASB it says, "as many as are perfect, have this attitude," it's not talking about sinless perfection there, it's just talking about the stability of sustained spiritual growth. Maturity. Mature believers should join with Paul in this attitude. Paul says, "My past success, what Christ has done through me does not excuse me from the need of this striving, and even if it did, I would still want to strive after it anyway."

Now Paul states, recognizes that not everyone in the church has this disposition on things. There are many people who don't fully get it. They see it in shadows. They have some impulses toward it but it hasn't come to define their purpose in life going forward. Paul says at the end of verse 15, he addresses that, he says, adopt this attitude, "and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you." Those that God saves, he'll make known to them where they're falling short in this pursuit. And you think biblically, you can see that this is true. In Hebrews 12, the writer of Hebrews talks about how God disciplines us for the pursuit of holiness. If you're not pressing on, God is going

to make it clear to you, it would be the joy of my heart to know that he used this message in part to bring that home to a few anyway. God works this out in different ways. He may work through the word like tonight, like I trust by the Holy Spirit he's doing tonight and invigorating your mind to realize, "Do you know what? My life has been off track and, Lord, I repent and I want to pursue this and I will." For others not responsive to the word, God may bring discipline in the form of trials to humble you, to make you dependent, to bring you back, that the Lord is intent on, the Lord is intent on producing a people who pursue him like this, and when that is not happening, God is not frustrated in his purpose. He'll use his word, he'll bring adversity, he'll bring whatever is to bear in order to make us holy. One way or another, the Spirit of God will reproduce Christ in those who are truly born again.

Look at verse 16, he says, having said God will reveal that to you also, God will do this, and now in verse 16 he says whatever we say about this divine accomplishment of his purpose, in verse 16, let us do this, "let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." In other words, let's build on our past progress. Maybe you've wasted a lot of time in your Christian life but you've come a little ways. Okay, good, good. Let's build on that. We're not going to worry about the years that the locusts have eaten. We're not going to worry about the time that we spent wasting in bad churches or wasting in sin and all that. We're not going to worry about that anymore. We're at the point now where we see the priority and we set our heart to pursue it and let's build on that. Let's not regress. Now let's go forward now that it's been made clear to us.

The principles that led them to this point will carry them further and speaking gently, hopefully encouragingly to those of you that are in Christ here today, God has worked in your heart up to this point. None of us are what we should be but for those of us in Christ, praise God, we're not what we used to be. We've been saved. We've been delivered and, yeah, we've got to grow. Paul needed to grow so it's no surprise that we do, and the God that saved us and brought us this far intends to sanctify us more, and your past failures are not a preclusion for you to experience growth and to be a vibrant Christian going forward. That's the grace of God. That's the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the purpose of Christ and that's a wonderful thing for our weary ears to hear.

Let me just give you three things quickly to help cultivate this spiritual growth in you. Just some things that I think we find in the passage for you to take as a step to pursue going forward. First of all, some self-examination will do you good. Self-examination to avoid complacency. Paul was not finished. There was more for Paul to do, then there's more for us to do as well. You know, I obsess too much with the fact that I'm getting older. For some of you, you're older than me and you understand even more than I do. But here's the way that we need to think about it, those of us that are older or struggling in life, you know, in our later adult years, is to understand that we're still breathing and if we're still breathing that tells us that God has something left for us to do. There is something left for God to accomplish in our lives so that we're not utterly overwhelmed by the passing of time or by the weakness of our flesh. But we look at our lives and with Paul we say, "I don't regard myself as having obtained it. I've got some growing to do." That's okay.

Secondly, there's this concentration, there's this focus to avoid distractions. Paul says, "There's one thing I do." Paul made spiritual growth, Paul made sanctification the supreme priority in life. That's what he really wanted.

And thirdly, there is this anticipation of what lies ahead in Christ to encourage us and to keep us from falling into pride. Paul says, "I'm forgetting what lies behind." He was not content with his notable past life. He anticipated further growth now. He anticipated seeing Christ face to face in the end, and that motivated and sustained him. That encouraged him in the darkness of that Roman prison that he found himself in, attached by a chain to a Roman soldier. His heart was continually refreshed by the contemplation that one day he would be with Christ in glory. And if you and I just looked up, if you and I just looked ahead to what the purpose is for Christ having laid hold of us, if we saw that clearly, if God granted us a deeper broader understanding of these things, then there would only be one response in your life, "There's this one thing that I do, it's to pursue Christ and to know Him with all that I am." Is that the one thing in your life?

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for Your word and we pray that You would cultivate these things in each one of us, from the youngest, newest believer, to the oldest, most mature saint. Sanctify us in the truth and help us to bring forth this fruit of which we have heard this evening.

Father, for Christians that are preoccupied with all sorts of earthly things and earthly frustrations and earthly anger and all of that sinful stuff, Father, I pray that Your Spirit would provoke us to repentance, that we would humble our hearts before You, that we would repent of our worldly-mindedness, our fascination with the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. Help us to repent of all of that for the sake of this one thing.

And for those here, Father, bless their souls, those that are outside of Christ, perhaps knowing that that is their condition, perhaps self-deceived as I was for so many many years, O God, and You graciously opened my eyes, my unworthy, sinful, dark, Satan-stained eyes. You opened mine, Father, why not open theirs as well? We would have the mercy that You've shown to our souls extended to many others and we ask You to do that because we can't do it on our own. The new birth is beyond human power. It's beyond human will. We must be born of God and therefore, God, we ask You to do that begetting work in our souls that each one under the sound of my voice would come to Christ under the influence of Your Holy Spirit and one day would be with Christ in heaven with a resurrected body to glorify Him in perfection and wonderful bliss forever and ever. Amen.

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