

The two points of Heidelberg Catechism 114-115 are expressed clearly in Philippians 3:12-14.

- 1) Not that I am already perfect,
- 2) but I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus.

The key to the Christian life is to recognize that these two things must go together.

Sometimes I think we are so concerned to reject perfectionism
that we neglect the call to *press on*.

We make excuses for sin:

Oh well, no one is perfect!

But this is where our two catechism answers tonight remind us that reformed theology
is insistent upon the *necessity* of our growth in grace.

114. Q. But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.

In this life there is a *beginning* of a life of obedience to all the commandments of God.

It is a small beginning – but it is a real beginning.

The church has always wrestled to maintain a proper balance between these two points.

Around the year 400

“It was said of Abbas Sisoës that when he was at the point of death,
while the Fathers were sitting beside him, his face shone like the sun.

He said to them,

‘Look! Abba Antony is coming.’

A little while later he said,

‘Look, the choir of prophets is coming.’

Again, his countenance shone with brightness and he said,

‘Look, the choir of apostles is coming.’

Then the old men asked him,

‘With whom are you speaking, Father?’

He said,

‘Look, the angels are coming to fetch me,
and I am begging them to let me do a little penance.’

The old men said to him,

‘You have no need to do penance, Father.’

But the old man said to them,

‘Truly, I do not think I have even made a beginning yet.’

Now they all knew that he was perfect.”

Right there you see clearly this juxtaposition of these two points in Philippians 3,

which is also reflected in the catechism.

His friends saw in him a holy man,
but he saw in himself one who had not “even made a beginning yet.”

It is interesting that many of the fathers seem to have thought that others could attain perfection,
but no one ever claimed it for himself!
And indeed, those who had achieved the most holiness in the eyes of others
usually thought rather poorly of their own achievements.

Why is this?

Because the more you grow in grace,
the more holiness and humility truly work in you,
the more deeply you see how far you fall short of what God requires!
Sometimes we think, “if only I could deal with this one area of sin,
then I would be really holy!”
But then perhaps God gives us the grace to overcome –
and we discover a whole raftload of other sins
that had been hiding behind the “big one.”

But if perfection is impossible in this life,
then question 115 naturally follows:

115. Q. If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?

A. First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.

Notice how Paul puts this in verses 3ff.

Warning the church in Philippi against the Judaizers,
Paul says,
*We are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus
and put no confidence in the flesh.*

You will never grow in true holiness so long as you put your confidence in the flesh.

Calvin comments on the importance of being conformed to Christ's death:

"For, overturning that good opinion which we falsely entertain concerning our own strength,
and unmasking our hypocrisy, which affords us delight,
the cross strikes at our perilous confidence in the flesh.
It teaches us, thus humbled, to rest upon God alone,

with the result that we do not faint or yield.
Hope, moreover, follows victory in so far as the Lord,
by performing what he has promised, establishes his truth for the time to come...
And it is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self
that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity;
to feel your own incapacity that you may learn to distrust yourself;
to distrust yourself that you may transfer your trust to God;
to rest with trustful heart in God that, relying upon his help,
you may persevere unconquered to the end;
to take your stand in his grace that you may comprehend the truth of his promises;
to have unquestioned certainty of his promises
that your hope may thereby be strengthened." (2.8.3)

This is why Paul says that all that he once counted as gain –
everything he once thought of as his ticket to heaven –
he now counted as loss.

He was circumcised on the 8th day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church,
as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

What does Paul mean by this?

Does he really mean that he was blameless before God?

No.

From the context, he plainly means that he was blameless
under the Pharisaic interpretation of the law.

Of course, the Pharisaic interpretation of the law was probably the best option in his day.
But the problem with the Pharisaic interpretation was that it resulted
in a righteousness that was my own that comes from the law.
And as Paul has explained in Romans and Galatians,
such righteousness is not able to stand before God.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed I count everything as loss

because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish,

in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,

but that which comes through faith in Christ,

the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (7-9)

One of the useful things that the law can do

is remind us that the only righteousness that can stand before God

is a righteousness that is *not* based on the law!

The only righteousness that can stand before God is the righteousness that comes through faith –
the righteousness that *depends* on faith.

And of course, one reason why the Law reminds us of our inability
is because of the whole history of the Law!

The whole history of the people of God under the law
shows us that no one has ever been able to establish a law-based righteousness.

Immediately after the law was given,
Israel rebelled in the wilderness.

While Moses was still on Mt. Sinai –
less than six weeks after God had appeared to Israel on the mountain –
Aaron crafted the golden calf and Israel rebelled.

And ten times in the year after they left the mountain they grumbled against the Lord.

The next generation did pretty well –
in fact, Joshua's generation is the only generation in all Israel's history
that could claim to have been truly faithful!

But the next generation blew it,
and throughout the period of the judges
Israel began to adopt the practices of the Canaanites.

Samuel called them back to the Lord,
but by then it was too late –
Israel had failed.
And so God raised up a king – Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin –
and called him to succeed where Israel had failed.
But Saul failed!
And so God raised up David and established his covenant with David,
calling David and his sons to succeed where Israel had failed
in worshiping the LORD and serving him only.

But the sons of David failed,
and Israel and Judah were carried off into exile.

Why do we keep preaching the law?
Why do we keep holding forth the Ten Commandments,
when it is obvious that humanity – even the chosen people of God –
cannot attain to righteousness through the law?

Why?

Because we need to cling to Christ.
It is far too easy to start thinking “I’m doing pretty well!”
We start comparing ourselves to the horrid things we see others do,
and we start thinking that we are quite decent specimens of humanity!

I want you to hear again what Paul says of himself:
As to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Saul of Tarsus was as good as it gets – humanly speaking.
He says that compared to the rest of humanity –
indeed, even compared to the rest of the people of God – the Jews –
he was blameless.

And yet Paul says that all that he had attained as a faithful Jew
“I count as rubbish (as dung) in order that I may gain Christ.”

It will not do to compare yourself against others.
It will not do even to compare yourself against the law.

Compare yourself to Jesus!
Only then do you see yourself in the proper light!
Only then do you become aware of your sinful nature in all its misshapeness.

But as you trust in Christ alone –
as you are found in him,
not having a righteousness of your own,
but a righteousness which comes through faith in Christ,
the righteousness from God that depends on faith –
then your life is set in the proper trajectory:

*that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,
and may share his sufferings,
becoming like him in his death,
that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

That I may know Christ.

Do you want to know Christ?
Do you want to know the power of his resurrection?

I don’t think you do!
If knowing Christ was simply a matter of study, you might want to.
If knowing the power of his resurrection was a matter of intellectual inquiry
you would be experts by now!

But knowing Christ is not a matter of intellect alone.

The knowledge that Paul speaks of is a knowledge of experience.

That I may share in his sufferings.

Do you want to know Christ?

It will require suffering.

That suffering may or may not include physical torment.

But it will require the crucifixion of your flesh.

It requires the death of all that you hold dear –

of all that once defined you.

For Paul it meant the death of his career as a Pharisee.

It meant breaking ties of friendship and family.

It meant leaving all to follow Jesus.

Knowing Christ,

knowing the power of his resurrection

means a fellowship – a communion – in his suffering,

it means that you become like Christ in his death,

that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (v11).

There is no other way to glory, but the way of the cross.

I know.

I keep saying that.

Maybe one day I'll believe it.

But that's the point Paul makes in verse 12:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect,

but I press on to make it my own,

because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Because I belong to Jesus, I press on to become what he has already made me.

You see, in the Christian life, we are not pretending to be something we are not.

Rather, we are striving to become something that we are.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.

Even Paul could say,

“I have not yet ‘arrived’”

But one thing I do.

One thing.

Purity of heart is to will one thing.

Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Remember Lot's wife.

She looked back.

She could not forget what lies behind.

And longing for Sodom she looked back.

Why do you long for Sodom?

Why do you linger in Babylon?

There is nothing here for you.

Turn away!

Flee!

Forget what lies behind!

It wasn't worth it!

Turn your eyes to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith!

Turn your eyes to the finish line.

Press on.

Keep running.

Do not stop!

As we went through the Ten Commandments we saw how they consistently pointed us to Christ.

Not only did Jesus fulfill them as he obeyed them –

but he also fulfilled them as they were perpetrated upon him.

The Ten Commandments point us to the one who fulfilled all the law and the prophets,

and they show us how we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after the image of our Savior.

So let me ask you:

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