

“Reaching for the Prize”  
Philippians 3:12-14  
(Preached at Trinity, April 2, 2017)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In these verses of **Chapter 3** Paul has carried us to sublime heights. He had carried us from mere religion to the glories of knowing Christ.
  - A. All of this is in the context of a dangerous heresy plaguing the Philippian church. Judaizers were insisting that conforming to Judaism was essential in order for Gentiles to be saved. They were teaching that salvation was a combination of Christ plus the law, particularly circumcision.
  - B. Paul's own life was a life steeped in all of the tenants of Judaism. He referred to himself as a "Hebrew of Hebrews." If anyone could boast of their Jewish heritage it was Paul. But when Paul found the greatest treasure, all of these other things became as nothing.  
**Philippians 3:8 NAU** - "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,"
2. Paul knew that the true righteousness that makes us acceptable in the sight of God is not *our* righteousness but the righteousness of Christ that we must receive by faith.  
**Philippians 3:9 NAU** - "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"
3. In **Verse 10** Paul speaks of the "power of the resurrection."
  - A. On one hand the resurrection of Christ demonstrates the validity of the Gospel. It vindicates Christ and validates His perfect work. It testifies that it was acceptable in the sight of God. And it assures us of our own future resurrection. Paul rested in the power of Christ's resurrection.
  - B. On the other hand, Paul was living by resurrection power. It is the power that enables us to live the Christian life. We have been raised with Christ to walk in the power of the resurrection.
  - C. Resurrection power is the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit who seals us and keeps us until the end.  
**Philippians 3:11 NAU** - "in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."
5. God is presently at work in the lives of His people. It is a work He will continue.  
**Philippians 1:6 NAU** - "*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."  
**Philippians 2:13 NAU** - "for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure."

6. In **Verse 12** Paul describes the dual nature of God's sanctifying grace. There is God's sovereign work and our response to that work. We saw this in the previous chapter.
- On one hand we labor with all our might  
"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"
  - On the other hand, it is God working in us  
"for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure."
7. This is not the case regarding God's work in saving the sinner. In terms of our pardon and reconciliation, in terms of our justification it is all God's work. God's work of justifying the sinner is monergistic – It is God's work alone.  
But in terms of our sanctification the believer has great responsibility to press on.
8. The work of sanctification is progressive and ongoing. Paul states it well.  
**Phil. 3:12** - "Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect"  
**Philippians 3:13** - "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet"
9. There is always great danger in losing this theological balance  
We can over-emphasize the human dimension and salvation becomes a work of human effort and the human will.  
Or we can over-emphasize the work of God's sovereign grace and all human responsibility is removed. The idea of "Let go and let God" gained popularity some years ago. The idea that we just coast with some sort of spiritual inertia trusting God to do the work of sanctifying us.
10. The Bible describes the Christian life as an intense spiritual battle that we wage with great energy. Striving and struggling are our daily duties. Paul describes this struggle in this passage.  
**Philippians 3:12 NAU** - "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."  
**Philippians 3:13 NAU** - "forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead,"  
**Philippians 3:14 NAU** - "I press on toward the goal for the prize"
11. I title this sermon, "Reaching for the Prize."  
We need to understand the imagery Paul is using.
- A. Paul is setting before us the image of an athlete seeking the prize.
- a. Perhaps Paul was thinking of the foot races in the Greek stadium. Spectators watched eagerly as the contestants lined up at one end near the entrance. The total race was usually about 607 feet by our measuring. The contestants stood, feet firmly set, and body arched forward waiting the signal to begin. At the signal they leaped into the sprint towards the goal. Who would reach the goal first and win the prize?
  - b. Perhaps he was thinking of the Isthmian Games held every two years in honor of the Greek god, Poseidon. There were various events and the contestants trained vigorously in order to take home the prize.
- B. The Christian athlete has begun the race but we haven't yet reached the finish line.  
**Philippians 3:12 NAU** - "Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on"  
**Philippians 3:13-14 NAU** - "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, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize"

- C. We also read about the race elsewhere:  
**1 Corinthians 9:24 NAU** - "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."  
**Hebrews 12:1 NAU** - "let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,"
12. There are several things I want to point out from this passage.
- I. First of all, as Christians we must discipline ourselves vigorously
- A. The athletes in the Isthmian games were highly disciplined
1. Their training was vigorous. They were single-minded in their daily lives; their minds never far from their goal.
  2. All competing athletes had to provide proof of at least 10 months of intensive training. The last month of training was held at Corinth and was carefully supervised. Only the best were allowed to compete.
  3. The athletes were required to take an oath pledging to abide by the rules of the games. If they broke the oath they were disqualified.  
**2 Timothy 2:5 NAU** - "Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules."
- B. The Christian must understand the importance of a disciplined life
1. God's sovereignty in our salvation does not take away our human responsibility. Our life must be characterized by vigorous discipline. William Hendriksen – "Paul was a firm believer in the doctrine of election . . . but not in election apart from human responsibility, in salvation apart from human effort, or in assurance without constant recourse to the promises."<sup>1</sup>
  2. Our flesh is always crying out for dominance. The lusts of the flesh are always present.
    - a. Our greatest enemy is inward. We must wage warfare against our own flesh.  
**1 Peter 2:11 NAU** - "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul."
    - b. Our lives must be characterized by vigilance. We must guard our hearts from those things that distract us from our goal.
  3. Carelessness is dangerous. Overconfidence is dangerous. In the Parable of the Tortoise and the Hare the hare arrogantly took a nap confident in his ability. The tortoise steadily plodded along and reached the goal while the hare did not.
  4. The Christian must steadily and patiently endure to the end. We haven't completed the race until we reach the finish line.  
**Philippians 3:13-14 NAU** - "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,<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

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<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 5:171.

5. In **1 Cor 9** Paul described the discipline of the Christian life using the vigorous life of the athlete.  
**1 Corinthians 9:27 NAU** - "but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."
  6. The word in **Verse 13** "Reaching forward" implies a strenuous stretching
- C. Christianity demands faithfulness. Faithfulness demands a singleness of purpose.
1. Those who are unfaithful or undependable always have divided loyalties. The reason so few professing Christians can be seen giving themselves to the work of the kingdom is because they are still loyal to the kingdom of this world.
  2. The things of this world can easily draw us aside. Paul warned Timothy  
**1 Timothy 6:9-12 NAU** - "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. <sup>11</sup> But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance *and* gentleness. <sup>12</sup> Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."
  3. As Christians we must establish high standards for our lives  
James Montgomery Boice – "The goals of discipleship are not unattainable ideals, and the Bible does not allow us to escape the demands of Christian discipleship by the excuse that the standards of that calling are too high."<sup>2</sup>
- II. Second, although we run with all our might it is actually the work of Christ in us.  
**Philippians 3:12 NAU** - "I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."
- A. Paul says he was laying hold upon that for which he was laid hold of
1. In other words, his life is a vigilant pursuit of holiness because Christ has laid hold upon him. It all begins with Christ. Our strenuous efforts are our response to having been apprehended by Christ.
  2. It was not our laying hold of Christ first but His laying hold upon us.  
**John 15:16 NAU** - "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain"
  3. We love Him because He first love us  
**1 John 4:19 NAU** - "We love, because He first loved us."

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<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians: An Expository Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 190.

4. Our diligence in our Christian walk is the result of Him working in us. It is the result of our union with Him.

**Galatians 2:20 KJV** - "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

5. Our perseverance is not ultimately the result of us holding on to Christ but Him holding on to us.

**John 10:27-30 KJV** - "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: <sup>28</sup> And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup> My Father, which gave *them* me, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand. <sup>30</sup> I and *my* Father are one."

B. We saw this in **Chapter 2**

**Philippians 2:12-13 NAU** - "work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure."

1. The Christian has been freed from the power of sin but always fears the foolishness that we are still capable of.  
"work out your salvation with fear and trembling;"
  - a. The Christian is at war with his own flesh. Knowing the relentless appetites of the flesh we remain vigilant.
  - b. In addition, Satan is continually at war with us seeking to draw us from Christ.  
**1 Peter 5:8 NAU** - "Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."
2. But the power in this war is not our own – It is God working in us.
  - a. God has kindled our affections towards Him.
  - b. The Christian has a distinct hunger. He has Christian appetites  
**Matthew 5:6 NAU** - "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."
3. The Holy Spirit is the source of these appetites. The Christian life of obedience can only come through the Holy Spirit in us—God working in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure. The Holy Spirit is the life of God in us. He alone is the power of holiness.
4. But although it is Christ working in us we strenuously reach after the goal. We are responsible to make good use of the grace God gives to us.

III. We are running in pursuit of the prize

**Philippians 3:14 NAU** - "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

- A. In the ancient games the contestant kept his eye on the prize
1. He endured whatever difficulty. He denied himself of anything that hindered him from reaching his goal and winning the prize
  2. It's been said, "You do not win the silver medal, you lose the gold!" In the Greek games there were no silver or bronze medals, no second place. It was winner take all. The athlete trained for the prize.
  3. The prize in the Isthmian Games was a wooden wreath. But it was a prestigious prize and highly coveted.
- B. The athlete competes for a temporal prize. We have our eyes fixed upon the eternal.
- 1 Corinthians 9:25 NAU** - "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable."
1. Heaven is our prize and we stretch towards it. We must never remove our eyes from Christ our treasure. Paul's heart was captivated by Christ. Honoring Him was his delight. Those with heaven as their prize make holiness as their aim.
  2. This is God's purpose in saving us – to make us holy.  
**Ephesians 1:4 NAU** - "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him."  
**Romans 8:28-29 NAU** - "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son"
  3. The end or purpose of subduing our flesh is Godliness - holiness  
It must be out of our love for Christ - for His glory  
**1 Timothy 4:7-8 NAU** - "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; <sup>8</sup> for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to come."
- C. As Christians we must also keep our eyes upon heaven. We must always have our eyes fixed upon eternity
1. Keeping our eyes upon the goal is essential—no looking back.  
**Philippians 3:13 NAU** - "but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead"  
**Philippians 3:20 NAU** - "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"
  2. This duty is pressed upon us continually  
**Luke 9:62 NAU** - "But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."  
**Colossians 3:1-2 NAU** - "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth."

Conclusion:

1. What a wonderful life God has given us. He redeemed us from the pit of sin and set our feet upon solid ground.  
**Psalm 40:2 KJV** - "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, *and* established my goings."
2. Our life is now lived above this world as we gaze into eternity. May God protect us from becoming mired once again in this world. May we continue to reach for the prize, the high calling of holiness.