

Sync Up!

The Road to Heaven Part 7 Philippians 3:15-16 8-28-2016

Summary: One mark of maturity is adopting Paul’s attitude (that you haven’t arrived and therefore must run all the harder). We need to all agree on that, and if on some other points we disagree with each other, if we adopt the attitude of the mature (humility) God will reveal more truth to us, as long as we sync up our behavior with the doctrines that are clear to us already.

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Philippians 3:15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Introduction

One of the amazing things about modern technology is how all our various devices sync up with each other. You’ve got programs or settings or preferences on your phone, and you can put that down and pick up your tablet two seconds later and there they are, and it’s the same on your computer - everything is all synchronized. At least that’s how it’s supposed to work. Sometimes things get out of sync. For some reason, the internal clock in my computer can’t seem to stay in sync with the real world. I get up in the morning and it still shows the time from last night when I went to bed, or sometimes it will show some date months in the future. And so all of my calendar reminders go off because my computer thinks the future has arrived. So every morning when I get up, I have to reset the time and date on that thing. Synchronization is a beautiful thing when it works.

We have been studying verse by verse through the book of Philippians, and we come this morning to 3:15-16, where Paul tells us to sync up.

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

That word translated **live up to** (your Bible might say **hold true to**) means *to fall in line* or *to conform to a pattern or a standard*. In Galatians 5:25 that word is translated **keep in step with**. So Paul is calling us to line up with or be consistent with or sync up to something. To what? To **what we have already attained**. You have attained some level of understanding of God’s Word, and Paul is going to

show us how to synchronize the way you live with what you know from the Bible so that they match. So this is a passage that is of great interest to anyone who wants to live an authentic, consistent Christian life and not be a hypocrite.

Review

Just to refresh your memory a bit, he started out the chapter warning us about legalism – trying to make yourself a good person in God’s eyes by following a list of rules. Don’t ever fall into that error because the only way that you can be a good person in God’s eyes is for Jesus’ righteousness to be credited to your account through faith. The Bible calls that justification, and it is effortless on your part.

And someday Jesus will return and you will be raised from the dead and will be made perfect by Christ. That’s glorification, and that too is effortless on your part. Being justified and being glorified are both effortless. But in between is what the Bible calls the process of sanctification, and that is not effortless. Paul says it’s like fighting in a war, it’s like a wrestling match, it’s like running a race in the Olympics – it requires the most extreme kind of effort. And so Paul says, “I haven’t attained the goal yet, so I’m running like there’s no tomorrow.” He was never content with his level of spiritual progress - he always had his eyes on the prize.

The Immaturity of the Mature

The Concept of Spiritual Maturity

So all of that takes you through verse 14. Then in verse 15 Paul says this:

15 All of us who are mature...

So he wants to take a moment to address mature believers. When you are first converted, you start out as a baby Christian, and then you grow and make progress. And over time, you become mature. You get to where you have a deep understanding of Scripture. You have made a lot of progress in fighting against sin in your life. If someone insults you, you respond in a godly way. You have a lot of wisdom. You are equipped to help others along spiritually.

Once in a while you hear about a person with a development problem that keeps him from maturing at the normal rate, so he might be in his 30s and has the intellect and maturity level of an eight-year-old. Whenever we see that, it’s so heartbreaking. But it’s even more heartbreaking when it happens in the spiritual realm - Christians who don’t grow and mature spiritually. They just stay the same year after year.

Hebrews 5:11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

So all that just to say that there are people in the church who are spiritual babies, and there are people who are more mature spiritually. And Paul wants to talk to that second group now – the mature.

Attitude

15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.

Your Bible might say **all of us who are mature should think this way**. That phrase, **think**, or **take such a view** - that’s a Greek word that refers to more than just thinking. I think the best translation is *attitude*. It’s the same word he used back in 1:7 when he said **it is right for me to have this attitude about all of you**. And it’s the word he used twice in 2:2 when he said, literally, ... **then make my joy**

complete by having the same attitude, having the same love, being one in spirit and attitude. And then again in verse 5: **your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.** He uses the word again here, and then he will use it four more times before the book is over. Paul is very concerned about their attitudes.

And so he says, **all of us who are mature should have this attitude.** What attitude? The attitude Paul just described in verses 12-14, where he kept emphasizing that he had not arrived.¹ So he gives us a whole paragraph about how he has not reached the goal yet, he has not been made perfect, he has not arrived, he still needs to run the race; and then he says, “All of us who are mature in the faith should have that attitude.”

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is realizing how immature you still are.

You know you have made a lot of spiritual progress when you start to gain more and more insight into how much more progress you need to make. And that motivates you to run harder.

We Aren't As Humble as We Think

Now, this is one of those points that is really hard to get across in a sermon because most people think they are doing just fine in this area. If I stand up here and say, “It’s important to realize that you are still sinful and are not perfect,” most people hear that and say, “Well, no problem there. Of course I’m not perfect – I know that. I’m a sinner saved by grace.” We say that, but do we really believe it? One way you can find out if you really believe your own rhetoric about your imperfection is by how you respond if someone else agrees with you.

“Man, I’m really a sinful man.”

“That’s for sure.”

“WHAT??!!? What is *that* supposed to mean??!!?”

We sing the song *Amazing Grace* about how amazing it is that God would save a wretch like me. But then someone accuses me of being a wretch and I get all defensive. I start justifying myself, or making excuses, or I turn on them. “I’ve seen you do things that are far worse than what I did!” (As if that were somehow relevant. Think about how irrelevant that is. If someone points out a sin in my life, I don’t care if it’s Hitler who’s pointing it out, if what they are saying is true then I need to deal with it.) A spiritually mature person hears somebody accuse them of being a bad person in some way, and they think “You don’t know the half of it.”

You think of that stereotypical image of a guru sitting on top of a mountain waiting for someone to climb up and ask him the meaning of life. If he really knew the meaning of life, he wouldn’t be spending his life sitting around on top of a mountain. If you are any kind of guru at all, if you have any maturity at all, you know you’re not at the top of the mountain and you need to keep climbing. If you want advice from someone, and you find someone sitting cross-legged doling out pearls of wisdom, skip past him and find someone who is still climbing and is a little bit ahead of you so he can show you the route.

Increased Maturity Increases Awareness of Sin

One of the most significant marks of maturity is an increasing awareness of your own sinfulness. That’s why a lot of times people get discouraged as they make spiritual progress, because as they grow spiritually they become so much more aware of their sin that it feels like they are actually regressing. You used to be covered in mud, and Jesus sprays you off – now you’re clean. But then you move closer to the light and you see some splatches of mud still on you. So you rinse those off. Then it gets a little brighter,

¹ The language is somewhat ironic because Paul uses the same word for perfection in verse 12 and maturity in verse 15. The Greek word can mean either, and we know that Paul is using it in the sense of perfection the first time and maturity the second time because the first time he is emphatic that he has not reached it (perfection), and in verse 15 he includes himself among those who have reached it (maturity).

and you can see stains on your shirt, so you scrub those off. Then it gets it's brighter, and you see more stains. So it seems to you like you're just getting dirtier and dirtier as you see more and more stains. But really you're getting cleaner and cleaner. The more you grow spiritually the more your conscience becomes sensitized, and the uglier your sin starts to look because you see it for what it really is. So your life is getting cleaner, but it can feel like you're getting worse. So spiritually mature people have a very strong sense of their sinfulness and it makes them humble.

Not Self-Condensation

Now, be careful not to misunderstand that. This is not the same thing as self-condensation. Humility and godly sorrow over your own sinfulness is a very different thing than self-condensation. Self-condensation is worldly sorrow that leads to death. The godly sorrow that comes from spiritual maturity leads to repentance and life. Both are similar in that both of them are a kind of sorrow. You feel bad. You feel sad about your sin. But you know it's self-condensation when it discourages you, rather than motivating you to run harder. Paul talks about how he has not yet arrived, and he has not yet attained his goal, he falls short, he isn't what he longs to be yet, and what effect does all that have on him? Does he say, "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have attained all this. Even after 30 years of walking with the Lord, serving as an apostle, planting churches, leading people to Christ, being tortured and persecuted for Christ, mistreated by the church, I wrote the Bible, I've run flat out as hard as I can for three decades, and after all that I'm still a sinful man, so what's the use? I'm done"? Did he get discouraged about it? No. He said, "I've not yet attained my goal, so I'm going to run harder." Self-condensation discourages you; godly sorrow motivates you. Learn to discern the difference between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the Accuser - Satan. When you fall short in some area, the Spirit says, "There is so much more grace to be had! Keep striving!" It's like a climber ascending some great peak, and when he looks up and realizes he hasn't summited yet, the voice of the Spirit says, "There are such greater and more breathtaking vistas to be seen - keep climbing higher!" Satan says, "You're a failure - give it up. Stop climbing; it's getting you nowhere."

The Confusion of the Mature

So in the first half of verse 15 Paul says, "All of us who are mature should share this same attitude that I just laid out about understanding our own imperfection and running all the harder." Mature people run the hardest because they understand their own immaturity. That's the first half of the verse, but look what he says in the second half of the verse 15.

15 ... And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

What does that mean? Some people have interpreted verse 15 to mean, "You should all agree with what I'm saying, but if you don't, God will get you straightened out." Is that what he's saying? Is this the one place in all of Scripture where Paul suddenly goes soft on those who would reject his apostolic authority? No, I don't believe that's what he's saying. He is not talking about them disagreeing with what he has said so far in the chapter. He just said that everyone who is mature must adopt the attitude he just laid out. And all Christians are to strive for maturity. So they don't have the option of disagreeing on that. Nothing Paul has said in the book so far is negotiable. There is no wiggle room to disagree with Paul on anything that he has written in Holy Scripture, because if you disagree with what's written in Scripture, you are disagreeing with God, and that's not an option for someone who trusts God more than he trusts himself, which is the definition of faith.

When Paul says **if on some point you think differently**, he is not talking about any points he has made clear so far in the book. He is talking about if you think differently on some *other* point. Something he *hasn't* clarified.

And the reason I know that is because of the word **too** or **also**.

15 ... And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

God will reveal that also. In addition to what he has already revealed through Paul in this chapter about the attitude of understanding your own imperfection and all the rest, on top of that, in addition to that, God will also reveal to you the truth about any other point where you might think differently.

Think differently from who? From Paul? I doubt it. I think he's talking about points where they differ from one another in the Philippian congregation. Remember, one of the main purposes of the book of Philippians was to address the problem of disunity in that church. And so Paul is saying, "Look, I just clarified these issues of legalism, quietism, perfectionism, understanding your own weakness, running hard after the prize, so everyone should be right on the same page with all of that stuff. And if there is some other issue that I haven't clarified where you guys are disagreeing with each other, God will clarify that too."

God Will Reveal

So I think that's what Paul is saying, but there is a problem. If this verse is true, then why are there still differences in the church? He says God will reveal the truth about the points where we differ, and yet here we are 2000 years later and we have just as many doctrinal disagreements as ever, if not more. And churches routinely split over them, and they never do get resolved. So how can Paul be so confident that God will clarify their points of disagreement?

Here's the thing we need to understand: God will reveal the truth, but just because God reveals something doesn't mean everyone gets it. Just look at the Bible. God reveals all kinds of things in there that people don't get. Spiritually immature people especially. They get confused on a whole host of doctrines for a variety of reasons. Maybe they aren't really seeking very hard after the truth. Or maybe they have sin in their lives that clouds their understanding so they can't receive the truth. There are plenty of things that can keep us from understanding something God has revealed. Especially when we are immature.

But remember, Paul is specifically speaking here to the mature. He started this sentence by saying **All of us who are mature...** And if you are spiritually mature, you will adopt Paul's attitude about your own imperfection, which will make you humble. And if you are striving for godliness, and you are deeply humble, that makes you very teachable, and God will open your eyes to truth when you seek it from him. And if the other guy that you're disagreeing with is also running hard after godliness, and he is also deeply humble, God will open his eyes too. And you will find in situations like that, that over time, you come to more and more harmony and agreement and unity on doctrine. That's the promise.

I remember when I first met Andrew, I think it might have been the very same day I met him that we got into a major debate about Romans 11 and Revelation 20 and the Millennium. Normally I don't apply that level of doctrinal scrutiny on someone the same day I meet them, but in this case he was wanting to marry my sister, so the standards were a lot higher. I couldn't allow someone to marry my sister who was potentially going to lead her into a wrong understanding of the Millennium.

Well, even after the several debates we had, by the time they got married, Andrew and I still disagreed on the points we had discussed. So the debates continued. But Andrew is a very humble, very spiritually mature man. And his responses to me were very different from what I had encountered in college and seminary when I got into theological debates. And his humble responses had an effect on me. It's hard to respond arrogantly to someone when they are being humble.

Fast forward 10 years. Now, as far as labels go, I still think of myself as being a premillennialist, and he's still in the post-mill camp, but on several of the important passages of Scripture in that debate – I have seen myself move in his direction. And I think he's moved in my direction on some points. As we have both tried to seek out the truth from God, listening to each other with a humble, teachable attitude, we have moved closer and closer to each other doctrinally so that our differences have never caused any friction at all in our friendship, and our unity keeps increasing. I think that's what Paul is talking about here. The more we adopt the attitude Paul has laid out in this chapter about our own imperfection, the more we will find that God will give us greater and greater clarity on points where we differ.

We shouldn't look at verse 15 and interpret it to mean, "Oh, if you disagree on doctrine, don't worry about that. God will straighten that out sooner or later, so you don't need to give any attention to it." Paul is not taking a nonchalant attitude about doctrinal error. If you and I disagree on some doctrine, either I'm wrong or you're wrong, or both of us are wrong, and so that needs to get straightened out. If the truth that is revealed in God's Word is our source of spiritual life, then wrong interpretations of Scripture are a big deal because a wrongly interpreted passage of Scripture is not Scripture. If you take a verse from the Bible and interpret that verse incorrectly, then what you have is not Bible. It is not God's Word, which means it's not going to give you spiritual life. It is not going to nourish you or sustain you or strengthen you spiritually. It is not going to give light to your eyes and restore your soul and make you like a tree planted by the streams of water. Scripture misinterpreted is not Scripture and therefore it has no power. That's why I spend as much time as I do studying for these sermons. I wish I could spend more time with people, more time doing other important things, but I can't cut back on study time because if I'm studying a passage and I get it wrong, I might come up with a really interesting sermon, but it's not going to bring about spiritual life and growth in the congregation. It would be like feeding your children plastic fruit. It looks like the real thing, but you can't survive on it.

And so getting our doctrine right is not a matter of indifference. And if we have disagreements, we need to do what we can to rectify that.

1 Corinthians 11:19 ... there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.

If we disagree on something we need to discuss that and debate it until we figure out who's right so that we can both adopt the right view. So the point here isn't that doctrine doesn't matter. The point here is that while we were in the process of working out our differences, instead of getting upset at each other, let's trust God to reveal his truth to his people.

Trust God to Reveal

Paul tells us **15 ... that too God will make clear**. Paul has confidence that God is actually capable of teaching people. That sounds basic, but how often do we lose sight of that? We think that if someone doesn't get something right now, then they are hopeless. Some people think they need to break fellowship over every doctrinal difference.

"Oh, the pastor believes that? I'm leaving the church. I can't worship God in the same room with someone who believes differently than me on that point."

People like that end up going from church to church to church, and they never last anywhere because they get so distressed over every doctrinal difference. And many times it's because they don't realize every saint is a work in progress, and they don't trust God to reveal truth to people. They think, "If you don't accept it after I've explained it to you, then you'll never get it." So Paul is showing those people by example how to be patient with one another. He knows they struggle with disunity, and so he's showing them – this is how you handle points of difference among mature believers. Trust God to reveal his truth.

Running for Unity

So one big step we can take in the direction of unity would be for us to adopt Paul's attitude about our own imperfection so we have humility. But that's not all. Another big step toward unity will come when we also adopt Paul's attitude about running the race. When Paul saw that he hadn't arrived, it made him want to run harder. And when we imitate that, that will also help our unity, because disunity comes when we start criticizing each other and picking at the way other people are failing in their race. But we won't be as prone to do that when we are also running the race.

It's easy to criticize an athlete from an armchair. It happens every Sunday afternoon during football season. Today is August 28, which means we are only two weeks away from the start of the regular armchair quarterback season. Every Sunday, millions of overweight, lazy sluggards sit in their easy chairs

and go on about what an inept, incompetent bum some world-class athlete is. That's so easy to do from the couch in your living room. But if you get out there on the field with them, and you're subject to the same opposition they are experiencing, you'd probably cut them a lot more slack.

Congregations start biting and devouring each other when people stop serving and start critiquing other people's service. There are some people who don't do anything, and they seem to think it's their calling to just sit back and criticize the people who are doing the work. But when you get down there in the trenches with the people who are serving, you realize it's harder than it looks. And so the harder each of us runs, and we experience the difficulty of it, the less inclined we'll be to criticize other runners in the race. So not only does our awareness of our immaturity help our unity, and our trust in God to reveal his truth, but also our own involvement in running the race.

The Authenticity of the Mature

So Paul tells us, "If you're mature, you should adopt the attitude I've just laid out. And when you find you have disagreements on other issues, look to God in humility and he will reveal the truth to you. And in the meantime..."

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

So while we are working on straightening out our differences, let's remember that there are lots of things that we don't differ on. There are lots of things that are crystal clear, and we all agree. And so while we work on points of disagreement, let's make sure we live in conformity to those truths we have already attained.

This is where he calls us to sync up our lives. Live in sync with what you have already attained. Whenever a church loses its unity, and people start going after each other, it is usually a situation where each side in the controversy is more concerned about arguing for their view than they are about actually living up to their view. Whenever you see a guy who is going around correcting everyone's theology, all too often you find that all this amazing theological knowledge he has is worthless because he isn't living it. He's a PhD when it comes to information about the Bible, but he's still a kindergartener when it comes to putting it into practice. And so Paul says, "Instead of fighting and quarreling and arguing, or looking down your nose at people with inferior theology, if your doctrine is so great, how about you just focus on actually living out that wonderful doctrine that you supposedly understand so clearly?"

Examine your own heart for a moment. Is there someone in the church you are at odds with, or you look down on? Maybe it's the leadership. Everything we do, you just think, "They aren't doing it right. They shouldn't do it that way. If they had any wisdom at all they would do it this way." If you have insight into how things could be done better, that's great – we're all ears, but in the meantime, each time you feel that sense of distress because of how things are being handled, take a moment to reflect on this question, "Am I living up to what I've attained?" I have all these insights – does my life and my character and attitudes and words and actions – are they consistent with my high level of insight?

Imagine a country where they have a king, but that king is nothing but a figurehead. He has no real power, he doesn't make any decisions, he doesn't govern or make laws or any of that. He just dresses up in his royal robes and appears at public events as the face of the kingdom. All the power is in the hands of a group of men nobody knows – they don't have any title or official authority, but behind the scenes they are the ones running the country. The king might talk about various policies and laws that he believes in, but none of that has any impact at all on how the country is actually governed. That is the way some Christians are with their professions of faith. If you ask, "What do you believe?" they will tell you all kinds of wonderful doctrines from Scripture. Jesus died on the cross to pay for my sins in the supreme act of love, and I am to love my neighbor as I have been loved by Christ. I am to forgive as I've been forgiven. I am to love God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Jesus Christ is the great treasure and the source of life and all joy, and nearness to him is better than anything in this world..." and so on. But all those "beliefs" are really just like a figurehead king. They appear front and center as if they were the ruling authority of his life, but in practice they have no real influence on how he lives. When he makes

decisions, those doctrines aren't the deciding factor. When he chooses one thing over another, those things don't even come into play. The real power brokers behind the scenes are his fleshly impulses, his human reasoning, his natural desires, selfishness, and pride. Those things are calling the shots and running the country of his life, and his doctrinal positions are just empty, powerless figureheads that are there to be seen and that's it.

What I just described is a hypocrite, and all of us tend to slip in that direction. And so Paul tells us, "Look, if you want to strive toward maturity, your goal needs to be to live up to what you know to be true." The mature Christian is someone who is fighting as hard as he can against inconsistency between his beliefs and his practices. Beliefs and practices need to be synced up. The good part of you has attained something – arrived at a certain place in understanding God's Word. Now the other parts of you need to be synced up with that. And so the mature Christian declares war on his own hypocrisy and strives for greater and greater authenticity. Authenticity is the opposite of hypocrisy. It is when what is presented on the outside is in sync with the reality on the inside. It is when your doctrine - that majestic, regal figure robed in the glorious truths of Scripture is more than a figurehead, but really is the ruling authority in your life.

Does that mean you'll be perfect and never have any hypocrisy? No (remember, the first mark of the mature person is that he knows he's not perfect). It doesn't mean you are perfect, but it does mean that when your flesh tries to become the behind-the-scenes power broker in your life, you deal decisively with that. If a king really is the one in charge, then when someone else tries to take control of the country, what does that king do? He deals very harshly with that rebel. And it's the same with a spiritually mature Christian. When your fleshly desires try to take over, you show them no mercy. And the way to show them no mercy is with thorough repentance. You see an area of hypocrisy in your life, where you claim to believe one thing, and there are some clear steps you could be taking to move in that direction, but you're not taking those steps. You claim to believe that sexual purity is important, you know that full honesty and accountability with someone about your failures would help, but you just won't pull the trigger on that. You know you need to deal with your anger problem, and you know it would probably help to get some counseling, or go through a book like *Uprooting Anger*, but you never seem to get around to it. Our flesh gets out of sync with the part of us that understands and believes God's Word. And so Paul calls the mature to sync up.

More Light to the Faithful

Syncing up will help you run the next leg of your race. When he says **God will reveal that to you also, only let us live up to what we have already attained....**, the implication is that if you want God to reveal more, you have to obey what he has already revealed.

Mark 4:24 "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. 25 Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

If you **consider carefully** the revelation you already have, then you will be given more. Otherwise even what you have will be taken away. Some people are perpetually confused by certain parts of Scripture, not because they don't have the intellectual ability to grasp them, but because they don't obey what they already know, and so God doesn't open their eyes further.

Conclusion

Last week we put up that banner that describes the three biggest strengths of this church, summarized by the slogan: Look up, Go deep, and Reach out. We look up and focus on the attributes of God so we can love him more. We reach out in fellowship in the one-another groups. And that second one – Go deep. A lot of you are here because of that – you want to go deeper than you have before in your study of God's Word. But there is a danger in that. The danger is that we start thinking we are growing spiritually just

because we are learning more information. You have to learn more to grow more, which is why we have that emphasis on in-depth teaching, but just learning, if it's not synced up with doing, is worthless. Many of you are very mature in the faith. So let's give special attention to these verses. Let's adopt Paul's attitude of humility, and let's strive to make sure that we are making every effort to live out what we have attained, that we might take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us.

Benediction: James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ... 25 the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Do the failures in your life tend to lead more to self-condemnation (discouraging) than to humility (motivating)? Describe a time when it worked the other way, and you were motivated rather than discouraged.
- 2) Describe an area in your life that used to be out of sync with your beliefs, but by God's grace it is now much more in sync.
- 3) What area of your life do you think of as urgently in need of being synced up? Why did you choose that area?
- 4) Describe a time when getting "in the trenches" and working helped you become more understanding toward those you were prone to criticize.