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Sermon Brief
Text: Phil. 3:12-16
Title: Higher Ground
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Seeking to faithfully
proclaim
the whole council
of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

What kind of a Christian are you? Your first instinct probably was to answer, “a good one.” Hopefully this is a correct answer, but it’s not the one I’m looking for today. The New Testament uses quite a large number of pictures to portray the meaning and nature of the Christian life. A Christian is a disciple, a follower of Jesus; he / she is saved, redeemed, converted, born again, sanctified, the people of God. These are but a few of the images of who Christians are, which are found in the New Testament.

In Philippians 3:12-16, the apostle Paul uses an athletic image to characterize his life as a Christian. Turn with me in your Bibles to this passage.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.¹

12 Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι, διώκω δὲ εἰ καὶ καταλάβω, ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ. 13 ἀδελφοί, ἐγὼ ἑμαυτὸν οὐ λογίζομαι κατειληφέναι· ἐν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος, 14 κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. 15 ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, τοῦτο φρονῶμεν· καὶ εἴ τι ἐτέρως φρονεῖτε, καὶ τοῦτο ὁ θεὸς ὑμῖν ἀποκαλύψει· 16 πλὴν εἰς ὃ ἐφθάσαμεν, τῷ αὐτῷ στοιχεῖν.²

Some background to the text is helpful. When Paul wrote this letter in about 61 AD, he was either in Caesarea Philippi or in Rome under arrest by the Roman authorities, probably the later location of Rome. The location of his imprisonment is not clearly spelled out in the letter, and both ancient and modern traditions are divided over its location. But what is clear is that his future lay in the hand of the Roman authorities and thus it was very uncertain. Epaphroditus had arrived at where Paul was with a love offering from the church at Philippi in support of the apostle during his imprisonment.³ Thus the letter in large part is a thank you note from the apostle in appreciation of the church’s support of his ministry, both in finances and in prayers.

What is of particular importance for our text is the situation of Paul when this letter was composed. He found Christ on the Damascus road around 33 AD.⁴ Now after almost three decades of Christian ministry, he was rapidly coming to the close of his ministry. As far as we can tell, Paul was born around the time that Christ was born. And thus he was in his 60s when this letter was composed. Given the life expectancy of males in that of extending only to their mid to late 40s in the ancient world, Paul was indeed an old man -- a senior citizen, if you please.

Thus our text is his personal testimony coming toward the end of a long, fruitful career of serving the Lord. This provides additional richness to his words in chapter three. Faced with great uncertainty over how much longer he would live, and also with limited ability to serve as a prisoner of Rome, the apostle has some inspiring words that we need to hear -- especially those of us who qualify as ‘seniors’ as well.

In two of the three sentences in the text, the core verb is διώκω, which is translated “I press on.” And the third sentence admonishes readers to follow Paul’s example of pressing on. The Greek verb itself defines intensive action in pursuit of an objective. Mostly in the New Testament, this is negative with the meaning of “I persecute.”⁵ Here Paul uses it positively, in contrast to the earlier part of his testimony in chapter three that

¹Phil. 3:12-16, NRSV.

²Phil. 3:12-16, SBL-GNT

³Phil. 4:10, 14-18 (NRSV): “10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.... 14 In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. 15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. 16 For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 18 I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”

⁴Acts 9:1-20.

⁵In 28 of the 45 NT uses it has the sense of persecute. The remaining 17 uses refer to some type of pursuit of an objective in a positive manner.

described his persecution of believers before coming to Christ: “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church” (3:6a: κατὰ ζήλος διώκων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). Before he met Christ as Savior, he passionately went after the church, considering them to be heretics who needed to be exterminated. But now for nearly thirty years afterwards he was pursuing something else, much more positive as a follower of this same Jesus.

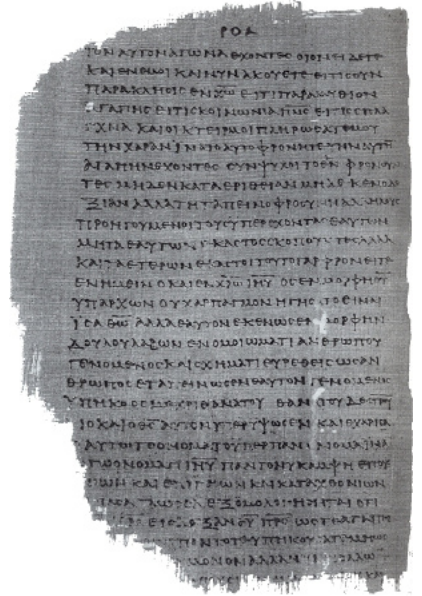
Here is the inspiration of this man. In his 60s, nearing the end of his life, after three decades of faithful service, the dominate aspect of his life was to still be passionately going after Jesus Christ. He did not feel that he understood everything to know about his relationship of Christ. He yearned deeply to see that relationship deepen further and for Jesus to become even more real to him.

There was no slacking off after all those years of service. Now a prisoner of Rome facing possible execution, he would not back down from this passionate pursuit of Jesus. Even more challenging was the severe opposition to him in the Roman church that he mentions in 1:15-18:

15 Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 16 These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; 17 the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. 18 What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

Some in the Christian community so despised Paul that they engaged in street witnessing hoping to create problems for the imprisoned Paul and possibly to get him executed. Yet, Paul refused to be discouraged by such bitter hatred of him even from fellow Christians.

Now this is an example for us to follow! My prayer today is that by the end of this sermon everyone present will decide to become a ‘pressing on’ Christian just like the apostle Paul. What was the secret of his determination? I want to underscore three aspects of a ‘pressing on’ Christian from our text.



BODY

I. Pressing on while recognizing imperfection, vv. 12-13.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

12 Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι, διώκω δὲ εἰ καὶ καταλάβω, ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ. 13 ἀδελφοί, ἐγὼ ἑμαυτὸν οὐ λογίζομαι κατεληφέναι· ἐν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἔπεκτεινόμενος,...

“I haven’t yet arrived” are the words of the greatest Christian to have ever lived, and they come at the end of his life, rather than at the beginning of his spiritual walk with Jesus. Here was a man who exemplified more of the qualities of Christian living and service than anyone, and yet after nearly 30 years he did not feel that he was anywhere near as mature in his religious life as he needed to be.

Paul’s beginnings spiritually were not marked by such recognition, as he alludes to in 3:4-6:

⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

He gives his pre-Christian pedigree as a Pharisee. The list of religious accomplishments in ancient Judaism is impressive. He was properly circumcised.⁶ He belonged to the chosen people of God, the Jews.⁷ He came

⁶“Circumcision stands at the head of the list: it was a sign that Paul belonged to the covenant people of God with all the privileges that this included. περιτομή (see on v. 3), a noun with a passive force, is here used in the dative case²¹ and qualified by ὀκταήμερος, a hapax meaning ‘an eighth day one’.²² This brief verbless expression of two words indicates that Paul had been circumcised according to the terms of God’s covenant with Abraham and in strict conformity with the law (Gn. 17:12; Lv. 12:3; cf. Lk. 1:59; 2:21). He was not like Ishmael or his descendants—circumcised in his thirteenth year (Gn. 17:25; cf. Josephus, Ant. 1.12.2)—nor like a proselyte from paganism who would have been circumcised when he was converted. But as one brought up in a family that was careful in fulfilling all the requirements of the law Paul was circumcised by his parents seven days after his birth (on Jewish reckoning ‘the eighth day’).” [Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 369-70.]

⁷ἐκ γένους Ἰσραήλ. ‘I am an Israelite by birth’. Against the possibility that he was the child of proselytes Paul mentions his direct Israelite descent.²³ γένος, translated ‘race, stock,’ can denote ‘descendants’ (Acts 17:28–29; Rev. 22:16), ‘family, relatives’

from the tribe of Benjamin, which was highly esteemed by ancient Jews.⁸ He claimed to be a Hebrew of the Hebrews.⁹ Most likely, this was his way of stressing complete orthodoxy as a Jew even though he grew up in Diaspora Judaism in Tarsus. Regarding the Torah of God, Paul was a Pharisee prior to becoming a Christian. Inside Phariseism, he was a persecutor of Christians considered to be heretics. So far as Torah obedience was concerned, he considered himself blameless. For a first century Jew, these were impressive credentials! Here was a young devout Jew who was rapidly climbing the ranks of Phariseism to become a leader and influential person.¹⁰

But meeting Jesus on the Damascus road changed everything in his life! Paul describes this in 3:7-9,

7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.¹¹

(Acts 7:13), ‘nation, people’ (Acts 7:19; Gal. 1:14; 1 Pet. 2:9), or ‘class, kind’ (Mt. 13:47; 17:21; Mk. 9:27; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28).²⁴ The RSV and NIV rendering ‘the people of Israel’ is imprecise, since proselytes belonged to the people (λαός) but not to the γένος, which Paul uses here to denote racial descent.²⁵ Ἰσραήλ is an appositional genitive and designates the name of the race (cf. Gal. 1:14; 2 Cor. 11:26). There is no specific reference to the patriarch in person, although he was, of course, the basis of the expression γένος Ἰσραήλ. At the time Paul wrote, ‘Israel’ and ‘Israelite’ were terms of special significance for his compatriots. By contrast, the name ‘Jew’ was uttered by Gentiles in a rather derogatory manner. ‘Israel’ and ‘Israelite’ were designations that drew attention to the privileges of God’s people, including their high religious claims, and so were employed by Hellenistic Jews in their missionary endeavours.²⁶ Having been born into the chosen race of Israelite parents and subsequently circumcised, Paul inherited all the privileges of the covenant community, privileges he enumerates in relation to Israel, even after his conversion, at Rom. 9:4–5: ‘Theirs is the adoption as sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!’ (NIV).” [Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 370.]

⁸“φυλῆς Βενιαμίμ. ‘Of the tribe of Benjamin’. Paul seems to have attached some importance to his membership in the tribe of Benjamin since he mentions it also at Rom. 11:1. Benjamin, the son of Jacob’s favourite wife Rachel, was the only son born in the land of promise (Gn. 35:16–18). The tribe of Benjamin gave Israel its first king (1 Sa. 9:1–2) and remained loyal to the house of David after the disruption of the monarchy (1 Ki. 12:21). Together with the tribe of Judah it formed the core of the new fellowship of people (cf. Ez. 4:1). There were resettlements in Jerusalem and the surrounding territory of members of the tribe of Benjamin (Ne. 11:7–9, 31–36), and F. F. Bruce has suggested that from ‘some of these Paul’s family may have traced its descent’.²⁷ The tribe of Benjamin stood high in Jewish estimation²⁸—it had within its borders the city of Jerusalem and with it the temple (Jdg. 1:21)—and so it was regarded as a special privilege to belong to it. His parents may have given him the name Saul (cf. Acts 7:58; 13:9) after Israel’s first king, ‘the most illustrious member of the tribe of Benjamin in Hebrew history’.²⁹ To assert that he was ‘of the tribe of Benjamin’ shows, significantly, that Paul was able to trace his descent,³⁰ and it was from this highly regarded tribe in Israel that he sprang.³¹” [Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 370–71.]

⁹“Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων. ‘A Hebrew son of Hebrew parents’ (Lit. ‘a Hebrew from Hebrews’). This fourth expression means something more than ‘an Israelite by birth’ just as it does at 2 Cor. 11:22, where in dispute with his opponents Paul says: ‘Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I’. In Acts 6:1 Ἑβραῖοι probably refers to Jews who normally spoke Aramaic with one another (while knowing some Greek) and who probably attended synagogues where the service was said in Hebrew. The ‘Hellenists’, by contrast, spoke only Greek. According to M. Hengel, Ἑβραῖος, which denoted a Jew who spoke Aramaic (or Hebrew) as his mother tongue, was employed in inscriptions with reference to Jews who came from Palestine or who had special connections with it.³² Paul’s claim to be Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων (cf. 2 Cor. 11:22) fits the latter, Hengel states.³³ According to Luke (Acts 26:14), Paul on the Damascus road is said to have heard the heavenly voice in Hebrew (τῇ Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ), while at 21:40 and 22:2 the same expression is used of Paul himself as he addresses a hostile Jerusalem crowd. ‘Hebrew’ is probably being used in a wider sense to include Aramaic.

“In claiming to be Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων Paul may yet be adding a further dimension, namely that his parents, who had brought him up to speak Hebrew and Aramaic, also avoided as far as possible any assimilation to Gentile customs and culture in their Tarsus environment. The important researches of M. Hengel and I. H. Marshall³⁴ have shown that it is inappropriate to drive a wedge between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. One ought not, therefore, to think in terms of two watertight compartments. There was considerably more interpenetration between the Jewish and pagan elements than scholars previously thought. The Judaism of Palestine was not wholly pure and uncorrupted, while Diaspora Judaism was not thoroughly paganized. Yet Paul was a Jew of the Dispersion, for he had been born outside the Holy Land in Tarsus and from some points of view he might have been regarded a Hellenist. He insists that he is a ‘Hebrew’, that his parents were Hebrews before him, and that his ‘family was strictly observant of the Jewish way of life and maintained its links with the home country’.³⁵” [Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 371–72.]

¹⁰See another personal recounting by Paul in Gal. 1:13–14: “13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”

¹¹Luke’s more detailed account of Paul’s conversion is found in Acts 9:1–19a. Later on Luke will describe Paul giving his testimony before various groups in Acts 22:1–16 and 26:1–18.

For Paul, all these impressive gains in the Pharisaical branch of ancient Judaism counted for nothing. Literally, Paul declares that they only added up to manure (3:8c): καὶ ἡγοῦμαι **σκύβαλα**.¹² A life time of vigorous religious effort to make oneself pleasing to God proved to be utterly worthless, and a stinch to God.

With this declaration in vv. 7-8, Paul destroys all religious do-goodism for all time! None of it, no matter how vigorous and sustained, has any value in God's eyes and gains the individual zero credit before Almighty God. My friends, if you are trying to lift yourself up before God in order to gain His approval, hear Paul's words! You're absolutely wasting your time. In reality, you are on a path to spiritual suicide! There's absolutely nothing you can do for yourself to make yourself okay with God. You desperately need to abandon those futile efforts today, and get on the right path laid out in the Gospel.

What is that? In his testimony Paul describes it this way in vv. 8c-11:

in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

The great apostle discovered that Christ has accomplished for us what we can never do. He has provided the way to salvation before God by His redeeming death on the cross and by His resurrection on Easter Sunday. And only in spiritual union with this Christ can one become acceptable to God.

Paul's conversion on the Damascus road launched a life long pursuit of Christ by the apostle. The stack pole around which his life was constructed from then on was his relationship with Christ. In Christ came the essential righteousness before God. Paul only had to commit himself to Christ in faith; not earn righteousness through Torah obedience. Paul began a personal relationship with Christ that day outside the Syrian capital. He would spend the remainder of his life developing that relationship. To his amazement, out of that union with the risen Christ came spiritual power to live life the way God desires it to be lived. The Law of Moses only created frustration at his inability to live righteously. But the risen Christ gave him what was needed. And the more Paul experienced the more he craved to experience. This is his testimony here.

What he recognized was that this relationship with Christ needs to be nurtured continuously throughout one's life. Human sinfulness is always present and imperfections are ever plaguing us. No matter how far along we progress in our Christian life, we always need to go further in our relationship with Christ. When he pinned these words in our text he had already experienced thirty years of developing relationship with Christ. Yet he keenly recognized that he was far from being all that God wanted him to be. He had much more to learn about Christ. His relationship with the Lord needed still to go deeper and deeper.

His sensitivity to spiritual imperfection all through his years of service stand as a huge challenge to most Christians today. We quickly forget our limitations. We often ignore our imperfections. Complacency sets in and we become content with mediocrity. The temptation toward a 'lukewarm' Christianity like that in Laodicea is always present with us.¹³ Paul's words to the Philippians challenge us to reject those temptations. Perfection is never achieved this side of Heaven. We never ever get beyond needing to grow spiritually.

II. Pressing on while forgetting the past, v. 13b.

but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,
ἐν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος

The apostle, in developing the athletic image of the Olympian track runner in this passage as the basis for his words, underscores a second point: you don't move forward in spiritual growth by focusing on the past.

When the apostle says, "forgetting what lies be-



¹²“σκύβαλον, ου, τό useless or undesirable material th manure, garbage, kitchen scraps”: Plut. et al.; PSI 184, 7; PRyl 149, 22; PFay 119, 7; Sir 27:4; Philo, Sacr. Abel. 109; 139; Jos., Bell. 5, 571; SibOr 7, 58.—τὰ σκύβαλα specif. of human excrement: Artem. 1, 67 p. 61, 23; 2, 14 p. 108, 21; Jos., Bell. 5, 571 [cp. Epict., Fgm. Stob. 19 ἀποσκυβαλίζω].—MDibelius, Hdb. on **Phil 3:8**) πάντα ἡγεῖσθαι σκύβαλα consider everything garbage/crud **Phil 3:8** (cp. AcPl Ha 2, 23; Spicq. s.v. “to convey the crudity of the Greek ... : ‘It’s all crap’.”).—DELG. TW.” [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 932.]

¹³**Rev. 3:14-17** NRSV: 14 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: 15 “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because **you are lukewarm**, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ...

hind,” he signals something critically important for believers. He does not mean that he never recalls his own ‘history’ and certainly not the history of his people the Jews. His recalling of that past in 3:4-6 in Philippians along with Gal. 1:13-14,¹⁴ Acts 22:3-5,¹⁵ and Acts 26:4-5¹⁶ underscores the importance of remembering the past. History plays an important role in helping us not repeat previous mistakes that we have made -- and those that others also have made. Ignorance of history dooms us to make those same mistakes over and over.

What then does Paul mean here in Philippians when he says that he has forgotten the past? Obviously Paul is not ignorant of his past, or afraid to mention it to others. His expression τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθάνομενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος is playing off the ancient Greek runner and reflects a ‘rule’ of track still valid in sports today. When the runner begins the race to the finish line, his exclusive focus must be on getting to the finish line as fast as his legs can carry him there. He dare not look back to see where his competitors are. Otherwise he risks breaking stride and slowing down or stumbling.

Paul recognized that past religious accomplishments -- no matter how great -- will not propel one to spiritual growth in the present. In fact, when we relish the past, our focus shifts from Christ to what we have done for Christ. And this is the huge enemy of spiritual maturity and growth. Our relationship with Christ must be built around deepening that relationship day by day. And this is not accomplished by focusing on doing things for Christ. Rather, it has to be centered on deepening submission to His lordship over our life that allows Him the freedom to work in and through us in ministry. As Paul put it (3:10): “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings.”

The ego-centric orientation of much of contemporary Christianity is its plague. Many Christians can’t see past the tip of their noses! Everything spiritual has to revolve around them and their religious experiences. Such is not biblical Christianity! It is ancient phariseeism falsely disguised as Christianity. Remember Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee who prayed in the temple (Lk. 18:10-12)?

10 Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

His focus was solely on **his** personal accomplishments. Spiritual pride and elitism had taken control, and he became blind to what God really demanded. It was the lowly, despised tax-collector who got it right before God with his plea:

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

He clearly understood that everything depended upon God and God’s mercy. Nothing he himself could do would make things right with God.

Jesus’ assessment of the two men becomes the thundering condemnation of ego-centric religion!

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The essence of biblical Christianity is focusing on God and on other people, not on oneself! Paul put it very eloquently to the Galatian Christians in 2:19-20:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This was the principle he lived by all those years of Christian service. And this he reflects to the Philippian believers with his declaration “forgetting what lies behind.”

From my observations over fifty years of Gospel ministry, I have seen two primary ways Christians fail to follow Paul’s example of a Christ centered commitment.

First, some Christians take their eyes off Jesus and make the mistake of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable. I will always remember the couple in the small ranching community of west Texas where I first pastored a church. When I was visiting with them in the middle 1960s urging them to attend church and to serve Christ, their response was that they were okay with God because George W. Truett, the legendary pastor of the First

¹⁴Gal. 1:13-14 NRSV: 13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

¹⁵Acts 22:3-5 NRSV: 3 I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4 I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

¹⁶Acts 26:4-5 NRSV: 4 All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. 5 They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee.

Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, had baptized them in the 1930s when they were first married. Never mind that absolutely no indications of serving Christ had been given by them in decades! They had been baptized by one of the most famous and highly respected pastors in Texas Baptist history! Such deception is dangerous, and potentially committing spiritual suicide!

My dear people, don't ever make such a terrible mistake. You can't ever accomplish enough to be acceptable to Jesus. My dear senior citizen friends, don't make this mistake either. In the 'sunset' years of our lives the temptation is to rest on the 'good ole days' of past service to Christ. "In that little church back home, I was a Sunday School teacher; I served as a deacon..." I can't tell you how many times over the years that people have said this to me. Forget the past! Focus on today! Get your attention on Jesus! Not on what you have done for Him!

The second mistake that I have observed that Christians sometimes make about the past is that they can't turn loose of it. Some huge sin or rebellion against God took place back down the way. And even though they have sought forgiveness from God, they still wear that sin around their neck like an Albatross. You remember the albatross. The seabird in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge that was hung around the neck of the mariner as punishment for his having killed it. The stinking dead bird around his neck was a constant reminder of his evil deed that he could not get rid of. I have counseled more than one individual over the years as a pastor who could not turn loose of their past and the evil things they had done. Even after seeking God's forgiveness, somehow in their emotions they could not let go of that past. Consequently Satan used it to rob them of the joy of forgiveness and of the spiritual freedom to serve God in humility. My friends, if this is you today, then I plead with you, "Let go of your past! Put it behind you. Accept God's forgiveness so that you can serve Him today in joy and freedom."

We all need to say with the apostle, "Forgetting the past and stretching forth to the goal in front of us."

III. Pressing on toward the goal, vv. 14-16

14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

14 κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. 15 ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, τοῦτο φρονῶμεν· καὶ εἴ τι ἐτέρως φρονεῖτε, καὶ τοῦτο ὁ θεὸς ὑμῖν ἀποκαλύψει· 16 πλὴν εἰς ὃ ἐφθάσαμεν, τῷ αὐτῷ στοιχεῖν.

In verses the last three verses of our text Paul gets to his primary point: "I'm pressing on toward the prize." Paul continues using the metaphor of the ancient Olympic track race to make his point.¹⁷ Even though the crown on the pole at the finish line was only a perishable garland wreath, it symbolized a prize that was life-changing and life-transforming. The Olympic runner who won the race would typically have a comfortable life of ease the rest of his days.

Paul saw in this an analogy of a different kind of life for the believer at the end of the race. Indeed it was also a βραβεῖον, a highly desired prize that was the σκοπὸν, the goal of the race. But what was it? Heaven? Not primarily! Paul defines the prize with the words τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, "the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus." The different kind of prize that is life changing is the calling of God to become more and more like Jesus! It is but another way of saying what he had just said in verse 10, "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death."

The prize is Christ and knowing Him in increasingly deeper ways in this life. Out of this deeper relationship with Christ comes the resurrection power of Christ to enable us to cope with life's challenges. How does this happen? It comes through sharing in Christ's sufferings through becoming like Christ in His death. That is, by becoming utterly submissive to the Father's will in dying to self and self desire, just as Christ did in His death on the cross. The Lord's prayer, "not my will but yours be done,"¹⁸ in the Garden must become our prayer!

What we discover in such commitment is what Paul discovered on the Damascus road. Spiritual life in union with the risen Christ is a quality of life that is matchless and can't be compared to anything in this world. And wonderfully this union with Christ is only enhanced by death, not interrupted by it.

¹⁷“Contrary to the spirit of gentlemanly amateurism that prevailed when the modern Olympic Games began, ancient Olympians prized victory highly. Olympic champions expected, and often received, great rewards from their home cities. Indeed, winners often lived the rest of their lives at public expense. As the Greek poet Pindar wrote, ‘For the rest of his life the victor enjoys a honey-sweet calm.’” (“Olympic Games History” at About.com: <http://trackandfield.about.com/od/olympics/a/olympichistory.htm>)

¹⁸Luke 22:42, NRSV: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”



What we will discover is what Paul told the Philippians at the beginning of this letter (1:21-24):

21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

Is this the kind of life that you are experiencing now? Do you understand what Paul is talking about? I pray so. If not, then Paul's final statements are relevant:

15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

May we each have enough spiritual insight to recognize the preciousness of what Paul experienced. And may we seek God's continued revelation to us of this treasure made available to each of us in Christ.

CONCLUSION

So I return to the original question: what kind of Christian are you? God help each of us to be "pressing on" believers seeking the same thing the apostle Paul sought all through his spiritual journey! The old hymn "Higher Ground" captures Paul's idea beautifully:

1. I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I onward bound,
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."
2. My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where these abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.
3. I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground.
4. I want to scale the utmost height
And catch a gleam of glory bright;
But still I'll pray till rest I've found,
"Lord, lead me on to higher ground."

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand
By faith on Canaan's tableland;
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.