

Pressing on Toward the Goal
 Philippians 3:12-14
 Newton Bible Church – 12/31/17

Today is New Year's Eve. For many, this is a time of reflection, to reflect upon the past year's anticipations and disappointments; and to look forward to the coming year. Many have or will make New Year's resolutions. I came across one comedic example of such resolutions entitled "Twas the Month After Christmas."

'Twas The Month After Christmas

'Twas the month after Christmas, and all through the house,
 Nothing would fit me, not even a blouse.

The cookies I'd nibbled, the eggnog I'd taste,
 At the holiday parties had gone to my waist.

When I got on the scales there arose such a number!
 When I walked to the store (less a walk than a lumber).

I'd remember the marvelous meals I'd prepared,
 The gravies and sauces and beef nicely rared.

As I dressed myself in my husband's old shirt,
 And prepared once again to do battle with dirt.

I said to myself, as I only can,
 "You can't spend winter disguised as a man!"

So - - away with the last of the sour cream dip,
 Get rid of the fruit cake, every cracker and chip.

Every last bit of food that I like must be banished,
 'Till all the additional ounces have vanished.

I won't have a cookie – not even a lick,
 I'll want only to chew on a long celery stick.

I won't have hot biscuits, or corn bread, or pie,
 I'll munch on a carrot and quietly cry.

Unable to giggle, no longer a riot,
 Happy New Year to all and to all a good diet!

As important as is our physical health, pursuit of spiritual health is of far greater importance! Let's pause to ask the Lord to open our hearts and minds to what His Word has to say about this critical matter:

Prayer

To direct our thoughts, we turn to Philippians 3:12-14:

Philippians 3:12-14 (ESV)

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. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But 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 upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

You may have noticed that twice in this brief passage Paul used the phrase "press on." The goal that Paul is striving so diligently to reach is "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." This is the only goal that will satisfy our souls and should be the primary pursuit in our lives. As we unpack the text we will discover what is necessary to press on toward the goal.

The first necessity in this pursuit is an accurate assessment of your true spiritual condition. This is revealed in the strong language Paul used in verse 12.

- * Not that (**ouch hoti**) is a phrase that warns against misconception. The Greek word for "**not**" signifies absolute negation. Paul wants to make certain that he is not misunderstood. Paul's willingness to acknowledge that he had not yet "arrived" at the zenith spiritually, indicates he is still in need of progress. As Wiersbe explains it... "A divine dissatisfaction is essential for spiritual progress. "(Be Joyful)
- Become perfect (**teleioo**) related to **teleios** from **telos** = an end, a purpose, an aim, a goal, consummate soundness, idea of being whole). means to accomplish or bring to an end or to reach the intended goal (**telos**). It means to be or become complete, mature, fully developed, fully grown, brought to the end (goal), wanting nothing necessary for completeness.
- In the present verse Paul uses **telioo** not to signify sinless or flawless, but to picture his goal and his desire for all saints - of spiritually maturity.
- John Walvoord explains that... "One of the by-products of Judaizing legalism was the thought of the possibility of attaining perfection through human works. This, however, Paul definitely disclaims. Even though he is perfectly satisfied in Christ, he recognizes there is much yet to attain in Christian experience. . . In spite of all God's wonderful provision, no one reaches the stage of sinless perfection. No possibility is recognized in the Scripture of eradicating sin or of reaching the point in spiritual maturity where it is impossible to sin any more. There are always more goals to be reached."

Paul apparently was dealing with believers who had become satisfied in their spiritual condition and recognized that they needed a strong reminder that no one this side of heaven has attained the goal of complete spiritual maturity; that we are all a work in progress in need of improvement. To provide this

reminder Paul utilized the shock treatment of stating emphatically that he (the one they most admired) was not there yet, nor would he be until taken home to glory. In other words, Paul was telling them that they needed an accurate assessment of their true spiritual condition – that it was not as good (or perhaps as bad) as they thought it to be. We need the same shock treatment!

- * Today, there are some who have adopted the mind set sometimes identified as “fire insurance salvation” – the idea that they have stamped their ticket to heaven by going forward at an invitation or by being baptized or joining a church. Consequently, they have little or no desire to grow spiritually or to be involved in serving the Lord and His body, the church.
- * This is a dangerous mind set – it may actually be that they are trusting something they have done, rather than trusting in Christ alone, and are actually in need of salvation!
- * There are others who have genuinely trusted Christ alone to save them, but have become satisfied with where they are in their spiritual journey, thinking that their knowledge of Scripture and doctrine is evidence of sufficient spiritual maturity. If the apostle Paul declared that he had not attained this, we may safely conclude that no one else has either (including us!). In fact, satisfaction with where we are spiritually should be a blinking warning light that we are not as spiritually healthy as we think we are!
- * Still others find themselves locked in despair that they are not further along in their journey to spiritual maturity. Their dissatisfaction with where they are paralyzes them from rather than motivates them toward pursuit of spiritual maturity. Billy Graham’s daughter Gigi spoke of this struggle: “For years, I never felt I measured up to all I thought the Lord wanted me to be, or all I thought I should be. Satan convinced me that since I wasn't "perfect," I had no right to minister to others. Then one day, my children brought me a bouquet of flowers they had picked. I hugged each child with joy. As I tried to arrange the flowers in a vase, I discovered my children had picked no stems, just blossoms. I laughed—I had been blessed with their gift of love, however imperfect. It was then I realized we don't have to be perfect to be a blessing. We are asked only to be real, trusting in Christ's perfection to cover our imperfection.”

Whether we realize it or not, we are all on a battle field in which the Holy Spirit is working hard to foster that “divine dissatisfaction” Wiersbe spoke of and Paul commends in our text; while the enemy is also working hard to discourage us from pursuing spiritual maturity - either by tempting us to be satisfied with where we are, or by suggesting that the dissatisfaction is proof that we will never get there and might as well stop trying. Our temptation is to either think that we are further along than we are or that we are hopelessly worse than we actually are!

- The truth is that we are all a work in progress, just as Paul was.
- The remainder of this text points out that it is the trajectory of our spiritual life that is most important: there will be some peaks and some valleys but the trajectory should be basically upward!
- Do you have a craving for a deeper spiritual life? If so, you are in good company! If not, you need an accurate assessment of your spiritual condition. Either complacency or despair means that you are stuck!

The first necessity in the pursuit of the upward call is an accurate assessment of your true spiritual condition. The second necessity is a willingness to work hard on improvement of your spiritual condition.

- When Paul wrote these words, he was nearing the end of an illustrious career as the greatest church planter of all time. Yet, not only did he state emphatically that he had not arrived, he spoke of his unceasing diligent pursuit of greater spiritual maturity. The specific term he used was “press on.”
- Press on (**dioko** from **dío** = pursue, prosecute, persecute) means to follow or press hard after, literally to pursue as one does a fleeing enemy. It means to chase, harass, vex and pressure, and was used for chasing down criminals. **Dioko** speaks of an intensity of effort leading to diligent pursuit in order to obtain. It gives the picture of going on the track of something like hounds on the hunt pursuing the fox, implying a continuing effort to overtake, reach, or attain the goal.
- The metaphor that Paul employs in this passage (and in several others) is that of a runner. In 1 Corinthians, Paul compared the discipline the runner exercises in training to the effort we need to exert in our pursuit of spiritual growth:

1 Corinthians 9:24-26 (ESV)

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.

- We marvel at the discipline and effort expended by world class athletes as they train for competition (the picture Paul had in mind). What is true of athletes is true of people pursuing excellence in any field.
- When I was in college, I spent a lot of time in the practice rooms in the music building. It seemed that regardless of when I went to practice voice or trumpet, there was always one or more pianists practicing scales. Over and over, they would play different scales, starting slowly and gradually building up speed. It was only after I had taken a course in composition that I understood why they spent so many hours practicing scales – melodies are most often comprised of pieces of scales – if they wished to play anything well, they needed to master scales, so they worked hard on that mastery.
- If you desire to pursue the upward call, you must be willing to work hard at improving your spiritual condition.
- It is not enough to come to an accurate assessment of your true spiritual condition; you must be willing to work hard at improving it as well!

Pursuing the upward call requires an accurate assessment of your true spiritual condition; and a willingness to work hard on improvement of that condition; The third necessity is single minded concentration upon improvement of your spiritual condition. Verse 13 informs us that this single-minded devotion (one thing I do) has a negative component (forgetting what lies behind), and a positive component (straining forward to what lies ahead). Paul knew that hanging on to the past, whether good or bad, keeps one from pursuing the upward call. By his own testimony, he had both

regrets and triumphs that had to be left behind. In this same chapter, Paul related how he had zealously pursued all the wrong things:

Philippians 3:3-7 (ESV)

³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

- Like Martin Luther, Paul had worked hard to try to gain God's favor. We can only imagine the regret he felt for all the years that he had wasted pursuing all the wrong things in an effort to be made right with God. It was those misguided efforts that led him to perhaps his greatest regret.
- Right near the end of this list, Paul admitted that his zeal had led him to become a persecutor of the church. Interestingly, the word he used to describe his misguided persecution of the church is the same base word he used twice in our original text to say he presses on. We can only imagine how much pain Paul felt when memories surfaced such as watching Stephen being stoned to death, or hearing the pitiful cries of wives as their husbands were taken, or listening to the wails of children as their parents were dragged away never to be seen again. Memories of opposing Christ and His church were extremely painful; painful enough to lock him in regret!
- Paul experienced the depths of realizing he had actively opposed His Lord and Savior, but also experienced heights of fellowship with that same Savior that are beyond our imagination:

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (ESV)

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

We know that this man was Paul himself, because a few verses later he stated:

2 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV)

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

- Paul experienced spiritual ecstasy that few if any have been privy to before or since.
- Besides that, Paul had the remarkable experience of founding churches across the length of the Roman empire, being recognized as an apostle and the writer of Scripture.

- In the verses preceding our original text, Paul explained his mind set towards all of these past experiences, whether painful regrets or joyful triumphs:

Philippians 3:7-11 (ESV)

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

- Paul knew that the only way to pursue the upward call was to be freed from the shackles of the past, whether good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.
- Looking back will cause all kinds of problems. That was illustrated in one of the most famous mile races of all times.
- On August 7, 1954, during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada, one of the greatest mile-run matchups ever took place. It was touted as the “MIRACLE MILE” because Britisher Roger Bannister and Australian John Landy were the only two sub-four-minute milers in the world. Bannister had been the first man ever to run a four-minute mile. Both runners were in peak condition. Roger Bannister, M.D., who became Sir Roger Bannister and master of an Oxford college, strategized that he would relax during the third lap and save everything for his finishing drive. But as they began that third lap, the Australian poured it on, stretching his already substantial lead. Immediately Bannister adjusted his strategy, increasing his pace and gaining on Landy.
- The lead was quickly cut in half, and at the bell for the final lap they were even. Landy began running even faster, and Bannister followed suit. Both men were flying. Bannister felt he was going to lose if Landy did not slow down. Then came the famous moment (replayed thousands of times in print and flickering black-and-white celluloid) as at the last stride before the homestretch the crowds roared. Landy could not hear Bannister’s footfall and looked back, a fatal lapse of concentration. Bannister launched his attack and won the Empire Games that day by five yards. John Landy’s lapse was as old as antiquity. The sports-knowledgeable Apostle Paul would have seen Landy’s mistake in a flash because he knew that to be successful a runner must not look back over his shoulder—he must “forget what lies behind”—because when a runner turns even slightly to glance back, there is a momentary loss of focus and rhythm, incurring the critical loss of a fraction of a second or even seconds.
- This is why Paul emphasized forgetting the past.
- Forgetting (**epilanthanomai** from **epí** = in or upon - intensifies meaning of following verb + **lantháno** = lie hidden or concealed) conveys 2 basic nuances in the NT, to forget or to neglect.

- The **epi-** preposition intensifies the meaning as noted and thus the idea is not just forgetting but "completely forgetting." The present tense indicates that this is to be the believer's continual exercise - forget and forget completely!
- Paul made a conscious (Spirit empowered) choice to not recall information concerning things in his past that would only encumber his running with endurance.
- Forgetting is in the **present tense** indicating that he was continually forgetting. This was his pattern. Not perfection but direction is the idea! Forgetting is also in the **middle voice** which means that the "runner" initiates & participates in benefits thereof. Paul is saying in essence that to keep one's focus "Don't look back."

That's the negative component of this single-minded pursuit. The positive component is straining forward.

- Reaching forward (epekteino from **epi** = into, upon + **ekteino** = to extend, stretch out **ek** = out + **teino** = to stretch) means literally to overextend oneself. **Epekteino**, found only here in all of Scripture means to stretch one's muscles to their limit, attempting energetically to attain a state or condition. This verb was used to describe a runner who stretches out his neck."
- The present tense describes this "overextending" as Paul's habitual practice. The apostle is in a race and he is sparing nothing. Every fiber of his body, every bit of strength that he can draw from a breath of air is being put into the pursuit of a goal.

Dwight Pentecost told the following story illustrating the picture Paul is painting for us...

- "When I was in London, I found my way to several of the art museums and galleries of that city. I wanted to see some of the famous paintings I had become familiar with through books of art. I was particularly struck with one painting. Two chariots were racing at breakneck speed. Their wheels were just a blur of motion. The charioteers, with whip in hand, were lashing their horses to the expenditure of every ounce of energy they had. Intensity was written in their eyes, in their faces, in the set of their bodies. The horses were straining themselves, it seemed, to the point of collapse. Their eyes wild, their nostrils distended, they gulped great breaths of air as they pressed toward the goal. With the goal before them, they were giving themselves unreservedly to the race. Those who had not so extended themselves had been left behind and were an insignificant part of the background of the painting. The attention of the viewer was focused upon the two charioteers who strained toward the goal."
- It is not enough to merely let go of that which would keep us tethered to the past. We must keep moving. The Christian life is a little like trying to go up the down escalator – if you stop moving ahead, you won't just stand still, you will go backwards! In other words, taking a break from spiritual progress is not only to invite but to assure spiritual regress!
- This is why Paul is so insistent that we must have single-minded concentration upon pursuit of the call. And how does that look in real time? Among other things:
- It means single-minded devotion to Christ. Do you remember the story about Jesus and Mary and Martha? Martha was perturbed because Mary was sitting at Jesus'

feet drinking in what He was teaching when any Jewish woman knew she should have been in the kitchen helping Martha prepare the meal for the hungry disciples. Jesus' response to Martha's complaint is found in Luke 10:

Luke 10:41-42 (ESV)

⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

- Mary's choice was single-minded devotion to Jesus!
- It also means single-minded conviction – remember Paul's words earlier in chapter three that he counted everything he had tried to do to please God as "rubbish"? Paul was absolutely convinced that everything of worth is found in knowing Christ. We must be convinced that everything we need is found in Christ!
- It also means single-minded devotion to serving as we follow the lead of Him in whom we have placed all our hope. He came "not to be served but to serve." His faithful service while on earth was a key component of His fellowship with the Father. If we wish to pursue the upward call, we must not avoid service – rather we must seek and grasp opportunities to serve as an expression of our love and gratitude to Him who gave Himself on our behalf!

So far, we have seen that pursuing the upward call requires an accurate assessment of your true spiritual condition; a willingness to work hard on improvement of that condition; and single-minded concentration upon improvement of your spiritual condition. The final identified necessity is motivation to continue pursuing improvement of your spiritual condition. This is what Paul means when he mentions the "goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul is trying to point out that the motivation to press on, to forget what lies behind and strain forward, is found in embracing the upward call.

- John MacArthur identifies that prize as "To be made like Christ... What's going to happen when that upward call comes? You're going to be like... Christ. The goal is the **prize**, the **prize** is the goal. The goal is to be like Christ, perfection in Christ. The **prize** is to be like Christ, perfection in Christ. Someday we'll be like Him for we shall see Him as He is."
- Do you realize that there is nothing that God allows into your life that He does not intend to use to help you become more like His Son? That is your call, if you are His! Embracing that call makes a world of difference.
- Ardent baseball fans will remember Kirby Puckett, who died suddenly in 2006. He had led the Minnesota Twins to championship victories in 1987 and 1991. Even though he was offered larger contracts by other teams, he stayed with the Twins for his entire career. When Puckett was diagnosed with glaucoma in 1996, his career ended abruptly. During Puckett's induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2001, he recalled the difficulties he had faced when growing up. His passion to become a professional baseball player was subject to temptation many times. Drug dealers and gang members repeatedly invited him to join in their destructive lifestyle. But

whenever temptation enticed him, Kirby remembered that he had a higher calling—baseball.

- Our upward call is far greater than a call to any field of endeavor in this world – it is a call to consistently become more like our Savior, knowing that this process will never be complete until we are called home and begin to enjoy unhindered fellowship with Him for all of eternity.

This New Year's Eve, I would like to invite you to commit yourself to the only pursuit that will satisfy your heart's craving – the pursuit of the upward call in Christ Jesus. Paul has identified four necessities for successful pursuit. There is another that I must mention as we bring this time to a close. There is a prerequisite - you are only able to allow God's Spirit to aid you in this pursuit if you have accepted God's offer of salvation and placed your trust in Christ alone. If you have never done this, and God is stirring in your heart this morning, I plead with you to accept the gift of salvation today. You do not know if you will be given other opportunities – do not delay, accept the gift today.

If you have accepted that gift, I need to ask you a very personal question: In your pursuit of the upward call, do you find yourself stuck today? Either complacency (a lack of desire for a deeper spiritual life), or being shackled to the past, whether good or bad, will keep you stuck. This means that you are actually not only stuck, you are moving backwards! If that is where you find yourself today, I implore you to seek forgiveness and allow the Holy Spirit to renew the craving for a deeper walk with God. He is delighted to help!

And if you find today that you are not satisfied with where you are spiritually, and you long for a deeper walk with God, rejoice! That means that these necessities for the pursuit are in place, and God is ready and able to help you strain toward the goal. God stands ready to give both the desire and the ability to pursue the upward call. Accept His help today!