

March 23, 2014 by Steve Brandon



Pursuing the Prize

Philippians 3:11-16

1. The Pursuit (verses 11-14)

2. Is This Your Attitude? (verses 15-16)

This past January, my wife and I went away for a week to edit a book I wrote entitled, "Passing By the Field." It's a book filled with 101 lessons on life. Each lesson has a picture and then a story of something that I have observed in life, and an application to spiritual truths. It's an easy book to read. It's a fun book. I envision this book on your coffee tables. I envision that your kids will read it and benefit from it. I look forward to putting one in your hand.

After four days of editing this past January, Yvonne made a comment about my lessons. She said that many of them put forth the freeness of the gospel without any mention of what the gospel requires of us. In other words, I seemed to put forth the blessings of the gospel, without much mention of the implications of the gospel. She feared (and rightly so) that my stress was too much on the freeness of the gospel without mention of the importance of obedience, or following the Lord in our life. All the attention was placed on what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross.

As we looked at these lessons, I agreed with her. There are quite a few lessons that put forth the freeness of the gospel. But, I also pointed out to her that there were other lessons that put forth our efforts in obeying the Lord. And so, to see this, we labeled those lessons that put forth the freeness of the gospel. We also labeled those lessons that taught of the importance of our obedience. And, as best as I can recall, they came out about even.

But, this is a challenge that all of us face in seeking to explain the gospel -- to rightly balance these two sides. On the one hand, the gospel is totally free. We don't pay for eternal life in any way. We don't earn the blessings of the gospel. It's all a gift of God! There is nothing that we can do to gain it. And yet, when you come to really believe the gospel, you will obey the Lord! And so, obedience to the Lord is important. But, this is a delicate balance that we need to hold. Such a balance comes throughout the Bible.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we have the glories of the free gospel. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). There it is. We are saved solely by the grace of God through faith in Him. And none of this came from us. It was not from our works. We can trace it all back to His grace. But, the very next verse puts forth the balance. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). When God saves someone from their sin, he also lines up some works for him to perform. And we should walk in those works. And there we see both sides of this issue. We are saved by grace. God gives us works to do.

Another example comes in Romans 6:14, which says, "... You are not under law but under grace." You take this clause by itself, and you can easily think that it doesn't matter how we live. After all, the law no longer governs us. Rather, our lives are covered by grace. But, the first part of the verse brings clarity. "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." In other words, our lives shouldn't be dominated by sin precisely because we are no longer under law, but under grace. Grace motivates us to obedience.

But, there are many who don't think this way. Instead, they believe that since we are covered by grace, it doesn't matter how we live. The apostle Paul felt this accusation. In Romans, chapter 5, Paul put forth a clear and glorious presentation of the gospel. "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). That is, through Adam, we were made sinners. And through Jesus, we were made righteous.

Then, Paul discusses the law. "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21). In other words, one of the consequences of the law was that sin would increase, as people would rebel against the full knowledge of God's will. But, so glorious is the gospel that when sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

This led some to say, "If grace increases when sin abounds, then let sin abound!" (i.e. Romans 6:1). To this Paul says, "May it never be!" (Romans 6:2). To say that we should continue in sin because it magnifies grace is to come to the wrong conclusion. I remember hearing one man call it, "The devil's logic."

See, when the Lord saves someone from their sin, he is transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son (Colossians 1:13). He is given new life (John 3:3). He is changed (2 Corinthians 5:17). Where once we were dead in our sins, God has made us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-6). Where once we were slaves to sin, God has rescued us to be slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:21-22). Where once we were blind to God and to His ways, now we can see Him clearly. And all of this has an effect upon our lives.

That's where we can rest in bringing forth the fullness of what God has done for us in Christ. Because, for those who genuinely embrace this message, there will be change. There will be a longing for holiness. There will be a drive to live righteously. 1 Peter 2:24 says, "And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

God died for us, that we might live for Him.

This is Paul's argument in Philippians, chapter 3. Our text this morning covers Philippians chapter 3, verses 11-16. The context goes clear back to verse 3, where Paul writes, "We are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3).

In verses 7, 8, and 9, Paul puts forth the glories of Christ Jesus. Paul says that all of our religious deeds are not to be compared with gaining Christ. In fact, nothing can compare with knowing Christ. Through faith in Jesus, we receive our righteousness. And then, Paul lays out his heart to seek and follow after the Lord. That's what we looked at last week: Philippians 3:10, "... that I may know Him."

In verse 11 and following, we see the end goal for which Paul is longing for.

Philippians 3:10-16

that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Now, the key to understanding and applying these verses come at the end, in verses 15 and 16. In verse 15, Paul calls the Philippians to follow his attitude. What's his attitude? Christ Jesus has done everything for him in giving him a righteousness that he could never earn (verses 7-9), try as he might through his religious efforts. And now, Paul diligently pursues Him. In verse 11, He greatly desires to attain to the resurrection from the dead. In verse 12, He longs to lay hold of Christ for himself. In verses 13 and 14, He pursue the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

That's the attitude of Paul. Is that your attitude? Are you relentlessly pursuing Christ?

Let's look at Paul's attitude by looking at my first point, ...

1. The Pursuit (verses 11-14)

In verses 11 through 14, you see three waves of Paul's expression to reach for and lay hold of Christ and the resurrection. The fact that Paul was found in Christ, complete and righteous didn't mean that Paul sat back and did nothing. No, it compelled him to press forward.

(1) Let's look at the **first wave**, found in verse 11.

Philippians 3:11

in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The New American Standard hides the doubt in this verse. It is there in the footnote, "if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." The ESV does a good job of expressing the doubt: "that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

Strictly according to the grammar of this verse, Paul puts some doubt into whether or not he would obtain to the resurrection from the dead. But remember, this is the one who wrote in chapter 1, verse 21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." This is the one who wrote in chapter 1, verse 20, "I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

Why the doubt in verse 11? Did Paul lose his confidence somewhere between chapter 1 and chapter 3? Maybe someplace in chapter 2? No, Paul never lost his confidence that he would be with Christ eternally. Most commentators say that the doubt expressed here in verse 11 is a reflection of his humility, because the resurrection is indeed in the future. It hasn't happened yet. So, the doubt comes because of Paul's earnest pursuit of the resurrection, which he hasn't yet experienced.

But, the point is this: Paul earnestly wants to know Jesus. He wants to know Him deeply. He wants to know His power. He wants to share in His sufferings, so that he might attain to the resurrection from the dead. That's his goal in life. His goal is knowing Christ so as to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul had a true, long-term perspective of his life. Paul knew that it wasn't this life that counted. Rather, it was the life to come. This life is to prepare us for that life. Thus, this life should be used for that life.

He told the Ephesian elders, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

It wasn't this life that was dear to the apostle Paul. It was the life to come. His heart's passion was to experience the resurrection from the dead, with all those who trusted in Christ.

Is this your attitude? Is your pursuit of Christ like this?

Remember, this is the point of the text. Verse 15 says, "Let us therefore, ... have this attitude." Let us have this attitude of digging deep into Christ. Let us have this attitude of seeking for the future resurrection in Christ. In other words, don't ever think that you have arrived in your Christian faith. Sadly, people get here. They go to church. They know how to act. They keep away from the "big" sins, and they think that they are all right. But, Paul says, "No." When it comes to knowing and pursuing Jesus, we have never arrived.

(2) He shows this in verse 12, the **second wave** of pursuit.

Philippians 3:12

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

At the beginning of this verse, Paul is again reminding the Philippians that he hasn't obtained the resurrection yet. Nor has he obtained perfection. But rather, he presses on to lay hold of Christ. Because, in fact, Christ had laid hold of him

In verse 12, Paul recalls his conversion; I trust that you remember what took place. He was a devoted Pharisee (3:5). He was zealous in his devotion (3:6). He was a persecutor of the church (3:6). This is what he said in chapter 3, verses 5-6: "As to the law, a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (3:5b-6a). He witnessed the stoning of Stephen, giving his "heartly agreement" to what took place (Acts 8:1). He was "ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3).

Then, the day came when Jesus laid hold of him. He had obtained some letters from the high priest to arrest any who claimed the name of Christ in Damascus. He was on that road, "... approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" (Acts 9:3-4). Of course, "Saul" was his name before changing it to his Christian name, "Paul." "And he said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.'" (Acts 9:5-6).

He was struck blind and led into the city (Acts 9:8). For three days, he neither ate nor drank anything (Acts 9:9). Then, a man named Ananias came and laid his hands on him and told him how he was a chosen instrument of Jesus (Acts 9:15), and he was to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15). That was Jesus laying hold of Paul.

From that day on, Paul was never the same. His life took a complete 180 turn. He began "preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:23). From that day on, Paul began to lay hold of Jesus as well. Paul was going to grab Jesus and never let Him go.

I'm reminded of the day that Jacob wrestled with God. They went at it all night long. When the day was breaking, the LORD said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking" (Genesis 32:26). But, Jacob refused to let him go, saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). And Jacob was blessed.

This is similar to what Paul was doing. With all his heart, he sought to lay hold of Christ, the very one who lay hold of him. Only, Paul wasn't merely looking for a blessing. He was holding on to Jesus throughout his whole life.

This is the faith of Christians. We hold on to God. I have heard it described as "monkey faith." Baby monkeys get around by holding tight onto the backs of their mothers. The mothers walk around and their babies are holding tight. With cats it's different. Baby cats get around when their mothers bite the back of their necks. They walk around with their kitten dangling helplessly from their mouths.

When it comes to followers of Christ, both of these examples are true. Jesus grabs hold of us. We grab hold of Him.

Paul had already mentioned this in Philippians 2:12-13,

Philippians 2:12-13

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

We work out our salvation, because God is working in us. So likewise when it comes to our faith. Jesus grabs hold of us; we grab hold of Him.

Perhaps the best picture isn't the picture of a monkey or a cat, but of a mother and child. A mother holds onto a child. A child holds onto a mother. And at the end of the day, the mother's grasp matters most. Richard Sibbes said it well, "When the child doesn't fall, it is from the mother's holding the child, and not from the child's holding the mother. So it is God's holding of us, knowing of us, embracing of us, and justifying of us that makes the state firm, and not ours." [\[1\]](#)

(3) In verses 13 and 14 come the **third wave** of our pursuing God.

Philippians 3:13-14

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Again, we see Paul stressing the fact that he hasn't yet arrived. Yes, he's holding on to Christ. Yes, he's longing to know Him. But, no, he's not there yet. Instead, he's still striving. He's still working. He's still clinging. He's still pursuing.

The picture he uses here in verses 13 and 14 is that of a foot race. He is running. He is pressing forward. He is driving for the goal. And as with any race, his heart is to win. His heart is to win the prize.

I have here in my hands a funny looking thing. I'm not quite sure what you would call it. I call it "to brabeion." I made this almost 25 years ago, when I was in seminary in Los Angeles. From time to time, we would take a break from our studies by going out to the local Frisbee golf course and "run the course." We would tee off one after another. And once all of the Frisbees were out on the course, we would run after them and finish the hole on our own time. After each hole, we would record our scores (usually in our head).

To add a little challenge (and interest) to our exercise, I thought that it would be good to have a travelling trophy, which would be awarded to whoever had the best score for the round. And so, I took a small 2x4 piece of wood that was lying around our apartment and wrapped it with white paper. I poked a hole in the top so that it could hold a golf-tee, and I attached a Styrofoam "Union 76" ball that was in our apartment as well.

On the one side, I put a giant logo of the Master's Seminary. And on the other side, I had this message.

To Brabeion

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY
and
UNION 76
are proud to present
The Current Frisbee Golf Champion

Along the side, we wrote the various scores of the winners of each round. Over the course of the year, I see that we played about 20 rounds of Frisbee golf.

It was simply a fun thing to do, with a little Greek lesson. "To brabeion" is the Greek word that is translated here in verse 14, "the prize." That's what we got when we had the low score on a round. We got our name written on the side of "to brabeion."

Now, of course, the prize to which Paul is referring is of much more value than the prize that we played for. The prize that Paul is reaching and straining for is nothing less than glory in heaven with Christ. In verses 20 and 21, Paul puts forth his heavenly perspective.

Philippians 3:20-21

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

The prize is being with Jesus. The prize is being like Jesus. 1 John 3:2 says, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is." Paul put forth all of his effort to be like Christ. He's not looking behind him. He's not looking around him. No, his face is dead-set on the finish line.

Isn't this what runners do? They don't run a race by looking behind them. They run a race by looking forward.

For instance, take those who run the mile (four times around the track) are constantly thinking about what lies ahead. After the first lap, they are thinking, "OK, I got the first lap down. I ran a good time. I'm here in the hunt. Three to go. C'mon, you can do it." After the second lap, they are thinking, "Half-way. I'm on pace. I just need to keep it up during the heart of the race. I can do it." After the third lap, they are thinking, "OK, final lap. I've got to pick it up here during the back-stretch. I hope that I have enough in my tank for a good kick at the end." And along the back-stretch, they are thinking, "Keep going. I've got a chance. I can do this." During the final moments of the race, they may not be thinking about much, because they are straining so hard for the goal as they are in full-out sprint for the finish line!

That's how runners run. Isn't it? Everything is forward-looking. They don't run the first lap and say to themselves, "Wow, I ran a pretty good time. I'm doing really well!" Nor after the second lap do they say, "Half-way. Look at all that I have done! Hey, I've done a great job up until this point." And after the third lap, they don't say, "I'm almost finished. The first three laps should count for something! Did you see how well I ran that second lap? I should get the prize based upon that lap alone." Running down the final stretch for the finish line, they don't say, "Wow! I've almost ran a mile without stopping! Did you see how far I have run? Did you see how I took that final turn?" They don't cross the finish line with their head looking backwards.

Jesus said, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). Sadly, there are many who do this in life. Rather than looking forward to finish the race, they look back at their religious accomplishments like trophies upon a wall. "Wow, look at me. I've attended church my whole life. I served in the AWANA program with my kids for 10 years. I was Sunday School superintendent. I was chairman of the missions committee. I taught Sunday School. I even served a Thanksgiving meal down at the mission one year."

Subtly, the message can creep into our minds that we are saved by our works, that we've done a good job in serving the Lord. But, such

wasn't the attitude of Paul. Like a good runner, Paul forgot the things that were behind him. Verse 7 says that he wasn't looking to all of his Jewish credentials. Verse 8 says that he wasn't looking to all of his Christian credentials as well. Like a good runner, Paul kept his gaze forward.

And here's the big question for this morning.

2. Is This Your Attitude? (verses 15-16)

In verses 11-14, Paul details his own Pursuit (verses 11-14). And now, in verse 15, he says, "Is This Your Attitude?" (verses 15-16)

Paul writes, ...

Philippians 3:15-16

Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

The command comes right there at the beginning of verse 15. "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude" Again, we come across one of those phrases that seem strange and odd.

In verse 12, Paul already declared that he wasn't perfect.

Philippians 3:12

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect.

And yet, here in verse 15, he's calling for those who are perfect to have this attitude. It's not really so difficult. It's merely the same word used in different ways.

In verse 12, the idea is that Paul hasn't arrived in his full sanctification. And in verse 15, the idea is that Paul is talking about those who are perfect in Christ, perfect in standing because of faith. Or, as the ESV says it, "Let those of us who are mature think this way." The immature won't have this attitude. The immature won't be in a full pursuit of Christ.

At any rate, this is the attitude that we need to have. Do you have it? Are you pursuing the prize? (verses 13-14). Are you like a runner, not looking back? Looking to the finish line? Straining for the end? Working hard in your run? Are you seeking to lay hold of Christ? (verse 12). Has He laid hold of you? Are you laying hold of him?

Is your longing for attaining to the resurrection? (verse 11). Of anything in life, is this your pre-eminent goal -- to be with Jesus in His resurrection? Are you striving to know Him? (verse 10). Has the freeness of the gospel so gripped you, that your heart's desire is to know Jesus? (verses 8-10). Do you have a one-track mind, like in verse 13, "But one thing I do..."?

J. C. Ryle tells of Fletcher of Madely. Throughout his entire 25 year ministry at Madely, Fletcher, "was always doing one and the same thing - always preaching, always teaching, always trying to awaken sinners, always trying to build up saints; but always one and the same man, giving himself up wholly to his Master's business (Phil 3:13)." [\[2\]](#)

Robert Moorhead tells the story of a young man from Rwanda who was forced by his tribe in 1980 to renounce Christ of face death. He refused to renounce Christ, and he was murdered on the spot. The night before he had written the following commitment which was found in his room: "My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, delayed. I will not flinch in compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of ponder at the pool of popularity, the enemy, or meander in a maze of mediocrity. I up, paid up, stored up, and won't give up, shut up, let up, or slow up till I've preached stayed up for Christ."

It is said that the cheetah signals out one animal to be dinner. Many others the cheetah comes close to, but nothing can detract or turn the cheetah from his one fixed purpose -- the catching of the unfortunate victim he had singled out. Are you like the cheetah? Pursuing your dinner?

It's right here that I can really trust the Lord.

Philippians 3:15

... if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;

I'm just going to trust in the Lord right now to reveal this to any who need it. Perhaps you are here this morning without Christ. Perhaps you don't have a saving faith in Him. Perhaps you are seeking your own righteousness.

I'm trusting that God will reveal that to you. I'm trusting that God will reveal the reality that you can't stand before God on your own righteousness. But, that you can stand on the righteousness of Jesus by faith (verse 9).

Perhaps you are here this morning and believe in Jesus, but you really aren't pursuing Him. I don't see you at home. I don't see you when you are alone. I can't see into your heart. God sees. I'm trusting that God will reveal that to you. I'm trusting that God will reveal the reality

that really need to pursue Jesus with your life. I'm trusting that God will reveal the way to do this. It's not by trying harder. It's not by your own efforts and motivation. It's by reflecting upon Christ and all He has done. It's by convincing yourself that "all things are loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (verse 8).

See, there is a standard of living that we ought to keep. This is verse 16, ...

Philippians 3:16

however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Paul isn't speaking here about legalistic rules and regulations of external righteousness. Rather, he's talking about the fruit of repentance. When the Philippians came to Christ, they turned away from their previous life, and began to seek the Lord. And he's simply saying this, "As you have begun to pursue Christ, don't turn back to your old, sinful habits. Seek the Lord."

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 16, 2014 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Richard Sibbes, Complete Works, Volume 6 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), p. 439.

[2] J.C. Ryle. Christian Leaders of the 18th Century, p. 408.