

LSB Philippians 3:12 - 21

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. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, think this way; and if in anything you think differently, God will reveal that also to you. 16 However, let us keep walking in step with the same standard to which we have attained.

Paul has an interesting conundrum. He's just spent a chapter and a half or so telling us, don't you dare work for your salvation or Christ is of no value to you. Salvation is by faith alone, apart from works of self righteousness. And in Ephesians he tells us even the faith by which we were saved is a gift of God, we didn't produce the faith alone which did save us. God gave that gift to us.

We talked about this a bit at Josh's friday night fellowship / study. Total depravity is the doctrine that states that in your fallen sinful separation from your Creator, you can't in yourself understand and grasp onto faith any more than a dead man can grasp onto a lifesaver float thrown to him in the water.

We were dead in our transgressions and sins. Eph. 2. God quickens us from the dead and supplies the gift of faith to believe. Salvation is totally a God thing, and Paul works hard to make it crystal clear that we do nothing to attain our salvation from spiritual death to spiritual life. Neither circumcision and jewishness nor sacraments in a sacerdotal system do anything to achieve regeneration from death to life and a personal walk with the God of creation.

So Paul's been knocking all of that down like a bowling ball hitting pins. But he has this conundrum. He has to come on strong against people working their way to heaven in self generated meritorious religions that God rejects.

Don't you dare go back to the religion of human achievement. That's a perilous danger. But then somehow he has to switch gears and say, don't you dare think you've arrived and just do nothing.

Do you see his predicament. Working for your own salvation is worthless. But don't stand around doing nothing, get to work! It's a bit of a tightrope. Because on the one hand, working for your own salvation doing meritorious works is one dangerous error that is a dead end road.

But so called christians who then bear no fruit in their salvation are a different dangerous error. Paul just told us a chapter ago that *it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.* Ppn 2:13

You didn't get saved by your own self effort, but if God has saved you, He also has put within you His Holy Spirit who compels you to do righteous works in Him and through Him for His good pleasure.

I confess freely that when I meet some christian who signed a card at a Billy Graham crusade in 1975 and hasn't moved an inch towards anything since then, my eyebrows are raised in doubt.

To me that's about the equivalent of saying I was born in 1975 but I'm still a helpless baby waiting for my first bottle. We all know that's idiotic. Babies either thrive or die. There's no middle ground.

So Paul is actually fighting two wars on two fronts that are independent from each other, even though the language can be frustratingly similar. Let me clear it all up for you. Don't you dare work for your salvation, but if God has saved you, don't you dare stand around and not work.

So Paul has finished the discussion of the uselessness of trying to convert to some kind of jewishness in order to be more pleasing to God, or worse, in order that God will save you. Become a jew so Jesus can save you. Paul has decimated that nonsense.

He tells them; I was 1000 times more jewish than you could ever hope to be and I left that behind in order to have Jesus. Man made man achieved religion is dung. Waste. Garbage for the dung heap. Mutually exclusive with having Christ, and I walked away from all of it to have Him. That's settled.

But then Paul shifts gears and talks about life together with Jesus and this new motivation he has, which is to have as much of Jesus as it's humanly possible to have, now. IN this life.

Real christianity is a relationship of a regenerated spirit together with God's Holy Spirit in a walk that is never static. It's always moving.

Our culture is having a lot of fun these days talking endlessly about real this and fake that. Real news, or fake news. And with AI we're standing on the cliff looking into the abyss of all lines between real and fake being so hopelessly obliterated we'll stop asking the question.

Nothing new under the sun. Jesus gave us the parable of the tares. The sower plants good grain. Wheat. But the evil one sows tares in the same field at the same time. So the real wheat and the fake wheat grow up next to each other in the field.

And the tares look so much like the wheat, it's very hard to discover which one is which, until the harvest comes. The wheat produces valuable fruit. The tares produce nothing.

We've got fake news, and we've got fake christians. And Jesus says, you'll know the tree by it's fruit. Or sometimes, no fruit at all.

We can push the parable beyond its intent and say, if I'm a weed in a vineyard, no amount of effort on my part is ever going to make me produce grapes. Weeds never make grapes. Grapevine branches with a life connection to the common stalk rooted in the ground, produce grapes.

In our section this morning, Paul has finished dismissing the fake christians and warning the real christians to steer clear of those dangers, and he moves right into the Don't you dare stand still if you're a real christian, and not a fake one. There are zero static non moving, non growing true regenerated Holy Spirit indwelt christians.

Christians, real ones, are babies who are hungry and howl if they aren't fed. And like babies, they grow continuously until they are adults. And then they produce fruit in their maturity for a long season. And then ultimately, we will all, one way or another, hear the Saviour call us home. Come Up Here; it says in Revelation chapter 4.

With that background, let's look at what Paul tells the Philippian christians.

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.

What is Paul talking about here. We need to go back and regain the context so we know what the pronouns; *it*, and *that* refer to here. What haven't you already obtained Paul? And what is it that you were laid hold of by Christ, for?

In verses 10 and 11 in order to be as brief as possible and not recreate the entire argument, Paul is talking about the christian life that he chose in exclusion of his total previous life.

He gave up judaism in which he was a rising star. He walked away from being a jewish rock star in order to walk with Jesus instead.

10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

So Paul's pronouns in verse 12 refer back to him arriving at the resurrection from the dead. But that is more than it sounds like. The resurrection is the moment in time for all christians which is the demarcation between this life and the next one.

For most of us that will be death here. But for some it will be the rapture. It's the moment when Jesus calls all christians living and sleeping or dead to Himself, in the sky, in eternity, with Him.

We work here, for His glory, motivated by our love for Him. We want to please Him. And then a moment comes when we hear His voice. And we see Him in eternity.

Paul is one of those people who was never going to be static, no matter which system he was involved in.

Paul must have been a sports fan. Because Paul uses the analogy of winning an athletic event often. You run to WIN. You punch to WIN. Whatever it is you're doing, you go totally all in, so that you can win the prize.

Paul was winning in the jewish religion. If Jesus hadn't stopped him dead in his tracks, literally, on the road to Damascus, Paul would have eventually become the Chief Priest in the Sanhedrin. No doubt. He was on his way to being the equivalent of a jewish Pope. Top man.

But Jesus laid hold of Paul. Knocked him to the ground. Temporarily blinded him. Asked him why he was persecuting Him, and set him on a new path. You're working for me now Paul. You're not going to be killing christians, you're going to be spreading christianity like a rampant disease that infects everything it touches. Bad analogy. Like yeast spreads through

an unleavened loaf and infects every single cell and makes air pockets.

Talk about a conversion that set someone going in the diametrically opposite direction. Paul gets taken to Damascus, still blind, and God sends a christian named Ananias to go find Paul and miraculously restore his sight. And Ananias says, You've got to be kidding. Saul! The christian killer? You want me to pray over him and restore his sight? Why would I do that? But he is obedient, and Saul becomes Paul. Laid hold of by Jesus.

And in the verses I just read, Paul talks about the continuously expansive depths of walking with Jesus. First the honeymoon period of just knowing Him. Then the resurrection power of what Jesus called him to accomplish. And finally the suffering which will ultimately conclude in Paul's death.

But in every step, Paul is moving towards an ultimate final goal.

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.

Where is Paul going in this never static, never stalled, continuous non stop moving closer and closer to Jesus? Paul will tell us in very straightforward language in the letter to the Romans.

Here is Paul's road map to where he's constantly moving forward to and not just Paul's, this is true of every redeemed person;

Romans 8:28 *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are (the) called according to His purpose. 29 Because those whom He foreknew, **He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son**, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers; 30 and those whom He predestined, He also called; and those whom He called, He also justified; and those whom He justified, He also glorified.*

I'm old enough to remember the big Union Ice machines that you would

encounter on your vacation. We stayed at a lodge that had an ancient wooden ice box. You put a block of ice which was a half a cubic foot of frozen water inside the icebox and it kept your food cold, until the ice melted and you had to buy another one.

But the machinery was interesting. You put in 3 quarters, which my grandmother would stomp around and complain was highway robbery, you put your quarters in and pushed the thing that dropped the money inside the giant refrigerated box and machinery inside began to work.

Your half a cubic foot of ice, would be released into a chute inside the machine and you could hear that thing coming, sliding down the ramp until 27 pounds of ice would fly through a rubber door at the bottom and be stopped in a tray where you picked it up and carried it to your car.

The point of my story is once that block got released and was coming your direction at a high rate of speed, it was going to get where it was going. There was no stopping it.

Christians, real ones, are like that ice. Once God saves them at the beginning, they're in the chute somewhere, moving towards a destination; unstopably. ***He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son*** These words of Pauls to the Romans are a huge argument for the doctrine of the preservation of the saints.

We're like ice blocks that get kicked into a chute and gravity takes care of the rest. The destination ***will*** be reached. God starts it and God finishes it.

Paul tells the phillipians, I'm in for the finish. I'm running like this is a race I want to win, and the goal is heaven. Eternity, in heaven, with Jesus. That's where I'm running to. One way or another, that's the goal. For all of us. We are somewhere in the process of becoming conformed to the image of Jesus.

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.

We were laid hold of by Jesus for a perfection that we will never realize until the moment we hear His voice say Come Up Here, and we meet with Him, in the air, and we begin eternity with Him, in His presence.

In that moment we will all be changed. Our mortal bodies, will be changed to an immortal eternal one. We've talked about this often. We are body, soul, and spirit.

When Jesus regenerated us from death to life, our Spirits came to a living relationship with Him. Quickened from death to life. There is a love relationship connection. My quickened to life spirit together with the Holy Spirit of God who dwells in me and with me.

My body didn't change, on that day of quickening to spiritual life. That was almost 55 years ago. And my body, in those 55 years is advancing rapidly towards death. Not life. I'm waiting for my new perfect body when I hear His voice and see His face. But meanwhile, this one is on it's way out. Rapidly.

Nice to be a christian and understand these truths. I'm not in any panic about my aging body. It's inconvenient, and it's a nuisance to have aches and pains and not be able to do what I once could. I'm getting a new one. Shortly. Sooner today than yesterday. This one is shot and getting shotter. Is that a word?

That takes care of spirit and body. But my soul is in a long transition. Beginning on the day that Jesus quickened me to spiritual life, my soul has been in a life long transformation. It's incrementally and painfully slowly being conformed into the image of Jesus.

Paul calls it the renewing of your mind in Romans 12:1,2
Therefore I exhort you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your

*bodies as a sacrifice—living, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you may approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

In our passage this morning, Paul is speaking about the part of him and by extension, surely, that part of me, my soul, which is being renewed day by day as I walk with God.

And just in case you come from a heritage that believes in some kind of second blessing that makes you perfect in this world, I just gotta say, if Paul wasn't, I'm kinda thinking no one is, in this life.

We're all messes in different stages of aisle clean up. If Paul was that, I'm in good company. But Paul never stops moving towards that goal. That prize of winning this race. He's constantly moving closer to being like Christ.

I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

Jesus laid hold of me with the intention of making me perfect. Those wedding clothes are stored up for me in heaven. Waiting my arrival. But meanwhile true christians are never satisfied with status quo.

We often talk about the realities of positional truth versus practical truth. Positionally I am complete in Christ. My inheritance in heaven is waiting for me to arrive. Those wedding garments, white and clean are already there, waiting for the day. Positionally, I'm perfect because I'm *in* someone who is perfect. \

But practically, I'm like Paul. Still a long ways to go. I struggle every day with this flesh that wants to drag me back into this old world.

Paul is simply saying, that may be so, but you don't get discouraged and

quit. You don't go on extended spiritual vacation. Call me in 6 months Jesus. Meanwhile I'm going on spiritual sabbatical. No.

There's no sabbaticals. You're in a war zone. If you lay down your weapons and wave the white flag, Satan doesn't take any prisoners. He kills them.

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

This is Paul's life analogy. You're in a race. You fix your eyes on something way out there ahead of you. You don't look at your feet. You don't look behind. Your focus is single minded. The finish line, way out there ahead of you.

Or if you're climbing the Alps. You don't look down, don't look back where you came from. You look up for your next hand hold. You look at the top of the mountain where you're going to.

I'm in my 14th year teaching you folks. But . . . I'm also going to be 73 in a few short weeks. *So what were you doing the rest of the time?* Guess you could say I wandered in the desert for 40 years. Like Israel. Valuable time, wasted. Mostly.

No point in worrying about that! I can't unscramble that egg. What I need to do is keep focused on the privilege God has graciously allowed me to enjoy with you folks here. Now. We end up in some gnarly wrecks along the way. Most of us do, anyways. I've been blessed. Somehow I got this far down this road and I'm still standing.

When you find yourself in a crumpled mess at the bottom of a cliff you fell over, you check for broken bones, catch your breath, and start moving back up again. Some of us are more hard headed than others. God uses those

wrecks to teach us valuable life lessons. But then you move on again, towards the goal.

What does Paul mean when he calls our goal; the *upward call of God in Christ Jesus*.

I take that quite literally. In Revelation chapter 4 and verse 1, John writes;

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, Rev. 4:1a

I believe those words literally define the rapture of the church. At a moment in time, God is going to swing open the door of heaven and say, Come Up Here. You called out saints, both living and dead, come up here. And there's going to be a new sensation of weightlessness for me. This old tired worn out body is going to be changed. In the twinkling of an eye, a nano second, it's all going to be changed.

I think that's the upward call Paul is speaking of. And he's going to mention it again in a few verses, so we'll get to look heavenward again, next week, if the Lord tarries.

Or we could hear that call before next Sunday. That possibility is on many minds these days as we ponder where this world is going at an alarming new speed. We definitely see God's sovereign hand moving in all that's happening right now. Maybe that's your "teaser" for next Friday night fellowship and study.

15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, think this way; and if in anything you think differently, God will reveal that also to you.

Paul uses the same word, almost, as he did in verse 12 when he tells us he hasn't attained perfection. But here it means, mature.

None of us, in this life, are ever going to complete the transformation into a perfect likeness of Jesus. That perfection is waiting for us in heaven. Waiting for the day we will see His face and hear His voice.

But there is a sense in which christians become adults, in their faith. Paul speaks of this transformative stages. In 1 Cor. 13 Paul writes;
9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man, I did away with childish things.

That's the analogy we've been speaking about this morning. We begin this deal as baby christians. No use to anyone, but precious just the same. But hopefully you have a good appetite for God's Word and you begin to grow.

Some of you are christian teenagers who think they know everything and think the older generation of christians who have been around for decades are hopelessly outdated. The analogy holds true in spiritual terms.

But when you've gazed at Jesus, in His book, for decades, and been through some scrapes and battles with Him, you enter into a christian adulthood. And that's who Paul is referring to in verse 15. Here, the word translated perfect, means mature. A christian who is adulting. Spiritually.

15 Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, think this way; and if in anything you think differently, God will reveal that also to you.

Paul actually has the audacity to tell christians that when they are adults, they should all think the same way. Mature christians all think the same way. Mostly.

One book. It isn't rocket science. It isn't lawyer speak. God wrote these things for ordinary folks to comprehend and understand. So, in theory, we all have the same resident truth teacher. The indwelling Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. One book, one teacher, some pretty hard heads, mine in

particular, but sooner or later we should all land on the same page. Think the same thoughts. Like Paul.

I like to think if I landed in the same room on the same day as Paul we would have a lot of fun talking to each other because we'd have this book in common. We'd both be thinking the same. One book, one teacher living in my heart. How do we end up on different pages of thought?

You might be rolling your eyes back in your head and thinking to yourselves, have you been on line . . . lately?? It's more like a christian slug fest than a large group of christian mature adults who think the same way.

I ignore about 99.7% of everything that is so called christian on the internet. On our web pages, some time ago, I have put up links to places where there are mature christian thinkers who have gazed at this book for decades and who are in agreement about all of the 1st tier doctrines of this book.

People who have Jesus living inside them, and who have also studied this book for decades, with Him as their guide, are directed into the same mold that Paul was formed in and they all think the same way.

Now the second part of verse 15 is interesting for those of us who long to be discerning. It is a promise that for the most part, real christians will indeed, over time, largely land on the same page. This book, and it's author, who lives inside us, and who is our resident helper and teacher, conforms us to His image.

The more mature we become in that walk and the knowledge of God's inspired book, the more we agree on almost everything.

Notice there are some qualifiers. We all have Jesus living in our hearts. He is the resident truth teacher. We all partake of the same Holy God breathed book. For the tiny percentage of people who live within those simple

qualifiers, it's astounding how after some time, we all think the same way.

Nothing is more fun than to meet another christian from a different background, a different part of the world, a different set of life influences than where we grew up, who has gotten into this book in depth, and you discover you think the same way.

MacArthur has stories about being in Ukraine and Russia after the iron curtain fell, in the 1980's, doing long biblical teaching sessions and those folks wanted to find out his eschatology. What do you believe about the rapture and end times scenarios?

So he spent hours working through that with them, and these folks on the other side of the world, who never had the influences of higher learning, told him, that's exactly how we understood it. Same book, same teacher.

We're all in some growth stage, somewhere in this deal. Don't be alarmed when you find us arguing about some fine point about this or that. It's a method God uses and allows for us to get to the same page. It's healthy to have lively discussions with each other.

Proverbs 27:17 *Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.*

I love how patient Paul is, in this verse, with this ongoing process. We're all growing more like Christ, together. We're all at some stage on the same road. We talk about things. Paul says, ever so patiently, if you dis-agree with him, sort of like a teenager dis-agreeing with his dad, you'll find out soon enough, dad probably knew what he was talking about. Been on the same road much longer than you have. But Paul is patient with folks who have little disagreements.

Big disagreements, like works righteousness and false teachers. Paul will vaporize you. But little stuff, we enjoy the lively discussions. It's a sign of a healthy church.

16 However, let us keep walking in step with the same standard to which we have attained.

Paul's final word about the christian walk for today. Don't go backwards. Don't stop going forward. We keep moving forward, and we do that by constantly gazing into God's book. Deeply. Meditatively.

Some of us are audible learners. That's fine. I recommend something like Grace To You where you can go and listen to 30 minutes of excellent teaching every day, every day, every day.

Partner up with someone and both listen to the same teaching every day, and then perhaps talk with each other about that days teaching. I've done that with my kids and my grand kids from time to time.

Stagnant christians are like stagnant water. They begin to stink.