

Logan Smith
Bread of Life Baptist Church
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Philippians 3:12-21

The Race of the Christian Life

Intro

I love to run - in theory. When I actually start to run, and my lungs hurt, and my legs get sore, that can sometimes be a different story; especially if it's freezing cold outside. When I'm in the middle of a run, and I start to feel that discomfort come, I find it helpful to stay **motivated** to keep on running by *looking forward to my destination: the place I'm running to*. When I lived in Brooklyn, I lived just a few blocks from water. So when I go for my morning jog, I would run along a hill overlooking the water, just visible through the trees. And there would come a point in my run where I started going uphill: the moment when my body *really* wanted to stop running. But I would think to myself: *keep going; almost there*. I would keep running until I reached my half-way point, which was truly a beautiful site: I would run across a bridge and at the very end stood looking out over the Verrazano narrows: a big bridge on my left, Staten Island in front of me, covered in trees; the water, filled with cargo ships and small boats right below me; and directly to my right: *the Statue of Liberty*. It was worth the run, every morning; and everytime, when I started to feel tired, I would keep running, until I could see the Statue of Liberty and the beautiful scene. And then, I would turn around and keep telling myself: *just keep running, because you're heading **home**, where you can rest*.

Here in this passage, in Philippians 3:12-21, Paul paints a picture of the Christian life **as a race - a marathon**. From the moment we become believers, we are all called God to *run this race, striving toward our goal, the finish line: Christ Himself, being raised to eternal life with him!* It's a life of *living out true repentance and faith*, following after Christ, growing in Him and becoming like Him - the **race** is the process of our **sanctification: our growing in Christ by His grace, becoming like Him more as we know Him more!** He frames this life *as a race*. We are runners striving after the prize - *Christ Himself and eternal life with Him*. And just like in a normal race, we must run by fixing our eyes on the goal, keeping the end in sight. We must firmly know *why we run* so that we might run *in the right direction, getting to our goal: the finish line; for us: eternal life with Christ*. That's what he's doing here; he's reminding us that

the Christians life is a marathon of persevering in *true repentance and saving faith in Christ, to the very end*. And he motivates us by **pointing us to our goal and prize that awaits us!**

And as he does so, he's also *clarifying how our sanctification fits in with what we just saw in the previous passage: we are justified and saved not by our works, but by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone*. If what we saw last week, in Phil. 3:1-11 is true - that there is no confidence in our works of obedience; if there's *nothing we can do* to contribute to our salvation, but if it is all of grace, and we receive it *simply by trusting in Jesus* - if this is true, **then what is the point of growing in Christ? What is the point of learning more, coming to church and being a church member, fighting sin, growing in obedience and love? Why strive to grow and persevere?**

Paul here addresses this question, clarifying the relationship between our **justification** - being *declared righteous by faith in Christ alone* - and our **sanctification** - being *made righteous holy in Christ, which is also by grace and faith in Him!* He lays this out, while addressing some objections and misunderstandings, then points us to our **end goal** as our motivation to persevere.

I. The Race We Run - Not Perfectionism, But Striving for Christ by Resting in Grace (vv. 12-16)

In the previous verses, 3:10-11, Paul said that by knowing Christ we also "*know the power of his resurrection... becoming like Him in His death... attaining the resurrection from the dead.*" Now, in these next few verses, Paul clarifies what he means there.

Someone could take that and say, "Ok, so does that mean that once we become Christians, we are made perfectly righteous, becoming perfect and sinless like Him? After all, if we experience the power of his resurrection, then can we, too, expect to become perfect and sinless in this life?"

Paul starts, right off the bat, by putting away any such thoughts: **no, we do not become perfectly sinless as believers! And no, we do not become perfect and sinless at any point in this life, before we reach Heaven!** This is what Paul is telling us in verses 12-14: "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

No, we do not reach the full resurrection of a glorified body in this life, but only when we are fully raised in Christ (see v.21); we cannot become “perfected” or sinless; Paul wasn’t, and we won’t either - this happens in the full resurrection.

And yet, we do participate in the power of the resurrection now. This doesn’t mean we should give up, but rather, we *strive after Christ, running to win the goal, the prize - the end of our salvation, glorified bodies and eternal life with Christ!* This is true of *all Christians*: 1. On the one hand: **no, we’re not sinless; we’re all still sinners in this life; and yet, *on the other hand*, 2. *For all of us who are Christians, we all have the upward call in Christ: to run and pursue Him, growing up in Him more and more, becoming more like Him, by his grace, as we know Him more.* He himself is the prize; our faith, our trusting in His love and grace towards us, believing firmly in the promises of the gospel - this is what drives our running and striving, this is what motivates our obedience.**

This **race** is a call we *all have in Christ* to grow in him by knowing Him all the more; to *truly believe in the Gospel; to truly believe in His Word; to strive to persevere in the faith, and obey Him by His grace, putting sin to death and walking in obedience, striving to be like Christ in all that we do! Striving to love God and love other people in all things!*

As we see in verse 15, this is a **matter of spiritual maturity**. Paul is *convinced* that if anyone has reservations against this, *God will reveal this to them by His Spirit, because this is the call he gives to every Christian!*

[App.] There have been many people, throughout history, and even now, that have claimed to be “perfected” or become sinless in this life; some today claim that if we truly have the Spirit then we will never sin. As we see here, this is not a biblical view!

Yet even we, who know profess clearly that we are all still sinners in this life, **sometimes live as if we think we shouldn’t be. We can still get stuck in the rat race of legalism**; we can try to justify our sin away, or hide it, so that no one thinks we’re “*really sinful*,” only confessing the more “acceptable sins.” Instead, let us “forget what lies behind and strive forward to what lies ahead”! We run by truly believing that we are *completely forgiven and righteousness in Christ!* Our past has been reconciled with God in the blood of Christ; this is still true *everytime we sin*. True repentance: confessing, turning to the truth of the gospel, then “forgetting what lies behind” - truly believing we are completely forgiven! - and *then* striving in obedience to Christ! Not because we want to earn our salvation, but because this is part of

experiencing salvation as Christ bears the fruit of his grace in our lives, calling us up towards himself and the future resurrection - glorious, sinless, eternal life - that awaits us in Him!

II. The Warning - Those Who Run with Us and Those Who Run the Wrong Way (vv. 17-19)

Next, Paul underscores just how essential it is that everyone who truly believes also perseveres in the faith throughout this lifelong race, demonstrating true repentance and faith. **He does this by answering a second objection, or misunderstanding:**

We may ask: *“But wait,* how does this fit in with what we just saw last week: the *gospel of Christ*, the **good news** that we are **saved, forgiven, and declared righteous** *not by works, or the Law*, but **by faith in Christ alone!** Is Paul contradicting himself here?

No, not at all. Our righteousness and salvation *is not based on our works or what we do; it’s not based on our growth and obedience; it’s not based on our sanctification.* **Rather, our growth and obedience in Christ are the *outworking* of our faith! They are the vindicating evidence, the visible fruits, of our faith in Christ!** All who truly believe in Jesus are **called by Jesus** upward to Himself, becoming more like Him day by day. WHY? ***Because we are in Christ, by grace through faith, and His Spirit is at work within all true believers!*** So no, this isn’t something different, but is simply what it looks like to live out a life of faith in the gospel of Christ!

Paul underscores this truth by issuing a sobering warning to us: the warning of the negative example we see in the lives of some that profess faith in Christ.

The *Warning* - There are those who profess faith in Christ but continue to live in unrepentant sin, with no signs or fruits of grace in their life (living out their faith in the gospel through repenting of their sins, demonstrating faith in confession, obedience, loving worship and devotion, discipleship among other believers in the context of the local church, etc.) are not truly believers. They don’t truly believe; their hearts are set on sin, the desires of the flesh, and this world - not Christ.

That is the type of person described in vv.18-19 - professing Christ (noted by Paul’s tears), and yet are not believers but *“enemies of the Cross of Christ.”* Their God is “their belly” - their own sinful desires, seeking their comfort, pleasure, and gain, over all things; this is what they worship, not the Lord; they don’t “glory in Christ Jesus” (3:2) but place their glory, hope,

value, and delight in things that are sinful; what they find their “glory” in will turn out only for their “shame”; their minds are set “on earthly things” not heavenly, spiritual things - they are setting their hopes, affections, priorities, dreams, desires, and values on the things of this world, of the flesh, of sin, and of Satan, **not on Christ, the gospel, and the Kingdom of God.** *Though they claim to be believers, their end is not eternal life, but destruction.* Let me clear here: Paul is **not saying** that they lose their salvation by sinning; as we’ve just seen, *all of us continue to sin!* And our *salvation is not based on our own righteousness!* No, what Paul is showing here is that **true Christians persevere to the end; no true believer loses their salvation because no true believer falls away; God calls the believer to Himself, and He assures us that He will not let us go; His love will not let us go! He holds us fast and draws us to Himself, even by giving us faith and strengthening our faith, sanctifying us and transforming us so that we persevere to the end!**

Therefore, that means that when we people that *claim faith* but *live a life that bears absolutely no fruit of faith, but is instead a life running away from Christ*, then we cannot have assurance that they are believers. We don’t know their hearts, but all we can do is look at their fruit. If someone’s life doesn’t continue to grow in Christ, but instead runs further away from him, justifying their sinful lifestyles and refusing to repent from sin, then we should not give them false hope or assurance; if they don’t repent, but have their hearts set firmly on sin and this world instead of Christ, then it will be revealed at the end of time that they are *enemies of Christ, not destined for glory, but for shame and destruction.*

This is a heartbreaking, sobering reality and reminder, isn’t it? But Paul addresses the negative examples we see, making it clear that *running the opposite direction is not an option for us as believers.* INstead, he holds up *the positive examples of true Christian faith we see in each others’ lives!* This is what he calls us to do in verse 17, looking at the example of other Christians around us. THis is exactly what we’ve seen him do in other places through this book.

Application:

Those who profess faith in Christ but their lives don’t reflect faith - THis becomes emotionally painful when those we know and love profess faith in Christ, but gradually turn around and begin running the opposite direction. THEY claim to still be in the race; they claim to be Christians. And yet, their lives look nothing like Christ! THEir lives do not reflect faith, but

reflect a love for this world, a love for sin, a love for shameful things. Even though they once professed faith and were baptized, now they are running away from Christ toward destruction. Like Paul, *this causes us to weep for these people that we love but whose souls are in grave peril!* We're tempted to just smile and act like they're ok; after all, we don't want them to think that we're "judging them" or think we're better than they are. But there is a danger here; **one of the most unloving things we could do** is to give someone false hope and assurance of their salvation when there doesn't seem to be any fruit of faith in Christ in their life. When this happens, one of the most **loving things** we can do is to lovingly gently, and yet firmly, rebuke them, calling them to turn away from their love for sin and a sinful lifestyle, and instead to **turn to Christ in faith! TO truly trust in the grace of CHrist in the gospel!** We're not judging them and after moral perfection; we don't have that ourselves! But we **are after true repentance, for this is what true faith looks like!**

This passage is a reminder that **we are not called to run this race alone**; GOd gives us one another, as fellow believers and fellow church members, to help each other and spur one another on so that *we all reach the finish line together*. We see **positive examples** of fellow Christians running the race, persevering in faith in Christ and continuing to grow in Him! But we also see **sobering, heart-crushing examples of those who profess Christ but are running in the wrong direction**. Paul tells us here to open our eyes look carefully at each others' race, to look carefully at the example we see in each other's Christian life. Yes, we learn from these positive and negative examples. But we also *actively help each other keep running toward Christ!*

This is one of the reasons why **church membership is so important for us as we persevere in the faith!** When we become church members, we are *committing to spur one another on*. If we see someone start to turn and run the other way, we grab them by the shoulder, and lovingly point them back **towards Christ; and we need them to do the same for us at times as well!**

So let us encourage each other to press on and *firmly set our eyes on the goal and prize before us:*

III. The Finish Line - We Run in Light of the End (vv. 20-21; 13b)

In verses 20-21, Paul reminds us of who we are in Christ by pointing to us to the **finish line: the goal and prize of our race!** And what is the finish line we're running towards? **The**

goal of “glorification” - resurrected, perfect, glorified bodies; we receive perfected, resurrected bodies in Christ, becoming like him by being raised to eternal life **in him**. We don’t become God, but we will become perfected, sinless human beings. When we are raised from the dead, we will inherit “glorified bodies” that no longer sin and no longer suffer the consequences of sin: sickness, sorrow, decay, faulty minds, faulty bodies, and faulty hearts; not even death itself! We will be raised to **live with Christ, in the Kingdom of God, in the New Heavens and the New Earth, forever!**

This is the goal we run towards, and the prize is Christ Jesus Himself!

This goal is not some pipe dream, but it is certain and secure; and the certainty of what we run towards *motivates us to persevere and keep running!* - We strive and run towards Christ, striving to know him and be more like Him, **because of the glorious hope we have in Him!** Our future destiny, our goal of eternal life and the fullness of salvation, is not based on our running or how well we do in the race; it is based purely on what Christ has done for us in the gospel- the fact that He lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and was **raised from the dead, defeating death!** We trust in Him and firmly believe that, if we’re in Christ through this trusting faith, then his perfect righteousness counts as our own; his death was a substitutionary sacrifice in our place, so that His blood has washed away all our sins; that just as He was raised for us, so we *will be raised to live forever with Him!* The **past** - the finished work of Christ - **has secured and guaranteed our future!** That is what our hope is resting in!

Paul reminds us that this future goal and prize is **securely ours** by reminding us of **our heavenly citizenship** - we are *already citizens of Heaven!* Even though we’re not yet there, the Kingdom of God has already begun and we are *already citizens!* Therefore, we are called to act like it! We are called to carry on our lives as truly gospel citizens, as true believers in Christ! **We are called to remember who we already are in Christ - citizens of Heaven, raised to newness of life by grace through faith in Jesus!** As we run toward Christ and know Him more, then the life that is ours but yet to come becomes more visible in our lives now.

No, we have not yet reached the goal in full; no we have yet attained the resurrection from the dead, the completed end of our salvation, and have not yet received sinless, perfected bodies. **But we have already obtained this in part, because we are already *in Christ now!*** ***BEcause He has already grabbed hold of us now!*** We know we *will be raised* because we

experience the power of Christ's resurrection in our lives in the *here and now*; we get a glimpse, a foretaste, of what is to come *even now*. If you are in Christ, then you have *already been raised to walk in newness of life*. This the power of Christ in us! THIS is why we can all run the race! And we run the race *by fixing our eyes firmly on the **finish line, on the goal of eternal life, that is already ours in Christ Jesus! We run the race by resting in His grace!***

[**Application**]: So then, what does a practical application of this principle look like? How can we **run by resting**? By striving to *grow in Christ* by **looking behind** to what He has done, **looking forward** to what He has promised to do, and remembering that **who we are now** is shaped most fundamentally by *those realities: our identity is not rooted in what we do; it's rooted in who we are in Christ. "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead"* that's what we're called to do every day! That's how we run the race! By preaching the gospel to ourselves (and each other!) and resting in it by faith!

So yes, keep striving to put sin to death, to persevere in the faith, and to grow in Christ and become like Him. Here the call to grow and obey! But *when you sin and fall* - and you will, just as we see here - *when you sin*, come before the Lord in prayer; yes, confess your sin, and then **repent: turn away from your sin and turn to Christ!** How do we do this? "**Forget what lies behind.**" Truly believe the gospel, that in Christ you are *completely forgiven of your sins!* *Your identity is not tied to all the baggage you bring to the table! Forget the old lies you used to listen to! Forget the rat race of legalism and trying to clean yourself! Forget your attempts at trying to make yourself good enough!*

And instead? **Believe the gospel: the blood of Christ has taken away all your sins! If your resting in Christ, you are completely forgiven and righteous in Him!** Therefore, *look to Christ! Look to the goal and end of our lives: eternal, singless, perfected, glorious resurrected life with Christ forever!* Remember: you are *already a citizen of heaven!* You are *already* in Christ! So then, strive and strain for that day by *persevering in faith*, demonstrating your faith by *resting in the gospel and clinging to Christ!* Turn to obey **not in order to be saved, but because you have already been saved by grace!**

And finally, one final plea to anyone here not a Christian: Currently, you are running the wrong way; turn around, believe in the gospel of Christ, fix your eyes on Him, and run towards salvation! AND you run not by cleaning up your act; not by being good enough; the goal is not

perfection or even being a decent person; the goal is *repentance and faith; turning away from your love for sin, this world, and a life apart from Christ, and **turning to Him by believing and trusting in His perfect life, death, and resurrection as perfectly sufficient to save you!***