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Sermon Notes

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Pressing On to Perfection

Philippians 3:12-16

Philippians Sets Before Us:

Two journeys of progress:

Internal journey of progress, until we are as perfect as Christ is perfect

External journey of progress, until the church is perfect around the world, the Gospel is preached to every tribe, language, people, and nation

Both journeys take incredible perseverance... this is a MARATHON, not a sprint

Illus. Emil Zatopek's Amazing Perseverance...

1952 Olympics, Helsinki: Won the gold medal in 5000, 10000, Marathon, setting Olympic records in each event

As he walked up to the starting line, he said to his competitors, "Men, today we die a little."

He also said, "If you just want to win something, run the 100 meters. But if you really want to experience something, run the marathon!"

In the same way, the Apostle Paul challenges us that the Christian life is like a race... not a 100 meter sprint, but a marathon:

A race of internal progress in holiness as we follow Christ

1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

A race of external progress of the gospel ministry, advancing the Kingdom of Christ:

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

The goal is ABSOLUTE PERFECTION... nothing less

Psalm 119:96 To all perfection I see a limit

Fascinating: 1) Psalmist is looking for perfection 2) Psalmist never finds it on earth!!!

Ecclesiastes 3:11 [God] has ... set eternity in the hearts of men

I believe Psalm 119 implies God has set a yearning for perfection in the hearts of men too!

- The diamond expert is constantly searching for the perfect diamond: perfect in color, clarity, cut, and carat... but he never finds it
- The coffee connoisseur is searching for the perfect cup of coffee, and never attains it
- The expert chef is searching for the perfect dining experience, and never finds it
- The skilled composer has heard countless pieces of music, and is still searching for the perfect sound
- The Nobel-prize winning poet is constantly seeking a perfect combination of words, the perfect poem, and has yet to find it

Psalm 119:96 To all perfection I see a limit

The perfection we seek the most desperately is our own... we rail against our sinfulness, our transgressions, our mistakes and habits

Of that we might be perfect someday!!! And oh that the world might be perfect someday too

So the gospel of Christ is the only answer to these two quests

Our perfection in Christ

The worldwide perfection of the Kingdom of Christ in every nation

I. Our Perfect God, Our Perfect Salvation

A. God is Absolutely Perfect

1. God's Person is Perfect

God is UNCHANGING: God cannot be improved, neither will He ever become worse

God is OMNIPOTENT: He cannot possibly have more power than He does

God is OMNISCIENT: He cannot possibly know more than He does

God is HOLY: He cannot possibly be more perfect morally, for there is
ABSOLUTELY NO EVIL IN HIM!!!

God is JUST: He cannot love justice and righteousness more than He does

God is LOVING: He cannot love His enemies or His children with a more perfect love

God is Perfect in every way

2. God's Salvation Plan is Perfect

- a. God's plan is PERFECT... nothing could possibly have been worked out that would have brought Him more glory and us more joy
- b. God thought of everything before even one single star was created, before He spoke the earth and its mountains and oceans into existence
- c. before anything came to pass, God had crafted a perfect salvation plan
 - to create a perfect universe
 - to allow human history to unfold with evil having a role to play
 - to make a covenant with Abraham and his seed to bless the entire world
 - to send Moses and bring Israel out of bondage with ten miraculous plagues, through the Red Sea
 - to give Israel a perfect Law through Moses... perfect in its function: to expose men's sin
 - to give Israel animal sacrifice as an amazing picture of Christ's perfect sacrifice later
 - to allow Israel to rebel against Him again and again by breaking His commandments
 - to bring Israel into the Promised Land with a mighty hand
 - to allow Israel an entire history of rebellion in the Promised Land, proving forever that no one can be saved by obeying the Law
 - to send them one righteous king, David, and to promise that David would have a descendent who would rule the world forever

- to have many prophets who would predict the coming of the Messiah, the Promised Redeemer
- and in the fullness of time to bring His only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, born of a virgin
- to have Him live a sinless life, perfectly resisting every temptation
- to give Christ miraculous powers: healing the sick, controlling the wind and waves, feeding huge crowds, raising the dead
- to give Christ perfect teachings through which we can learn His ways
- to have Christ betrayed by His own people, crucified by the Gentiles, pouring out His blood at the exact moment when the Passover Lamb was to be killed
- to have Christ die in our place on the cross in fulfillment of hundreds of prophecies
- to raise Christ from the dead on the third day
- to command Christ's apostles to take this simple message of forgiveness of sins in Christ's name all over the world
- to send the Holy Spirit to give them the power they would need
- to allow history to unfold for two thousand years, controlled by the sovereign hand of God to bring the gospel to ALMOST every tribe, language, people, nation

Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

3. God's Written Word is Perfect

Psalm 12:6 And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.

If we didn't have a perfect Bible, we wouldn't know that God is perfect

If we didn't have a perfect Bible, we wouldn't know that God's salvation plan is perfect

4. THEREFORE, God Allows No Imperfection Around Him

God will not allow any sin in His presence

One sin evicted Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden

Habakkuk 1:13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

God cannot even look at evil... so how could He live with it???

B. God Commands Perfection

1. Perfect obedience to His Law
2. Not a single sin permitted

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

Illus. HOLE IN THE DIKE... “no big deal???”

Why? Because sin is like a disease... it spreads until it consumes everything! The hole in the dike will not stay the same size... under the relentless pounding of the sea, soon the hole will get larger and larger until the dike entirely crumbles

3. So Christ commanded His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

4. God Will Not Share His Perfect Heaven With Sinful People
5. BUT Sin Has Already Corrupted Us... Apart from Christ, We Are Helpless

Romans 7:21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.... 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

C. Fleshly Efforts at Perfection are Worthless

1. Many Human Efforts at Perfect Society
 - a. in 1516, Thomas More wrote “Utopia”... a book about a perfect place; aptly it was called “Utopia” which means “Noplace”... there is noplace in the world that is perfect
 - b. many people have thought they could set up a perfect human society
 - c. the French Revolution was an idealistic attempt to set up perfect human society: liberty, brotherhood, and equality... it resulted in brutal measures, guillotines, and Napoleon’s dictatorship and military conquests

- d. communism was a human attempt at a perfect society apart from God... and it was a brutal, evil failure
- e. every attempt at human perfection in societies has failed because of one unchangeable factor: human sin

2. Many Human Efforts at Self-improvement

- a. human religions involve efforts at self-improvement

more prayer

more fasting

more decision and stronger will

“I will try harder... I will do better”

- b. non-religious efforts at self-improvement

Illus. “New Year’s Resolutions”... usually made on January 1st and broken by January 2nd

People says: “I will lose weight... I will stop smoking... I will be nicer to my husband... I will, I will, I will

Self-help books proliferate by the thousands in bookstores across America

- c. Paul has already clearly rejected this whole approach
 - a. this was the focus of our last two sermons
 - b. the religion of self-effort is worthless... it cannot produce perfection
 - c. Romans 7 answers why...

Romans 7: 21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

D. God’s Gift of Guaranteed Perfection in Christ

1. Already and Not Yet

- a. Christianity is the religion of the “Already and Not-Yet”
- b. best example is the Kingdom of Heaven
 - i) already

Matthew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

ii) not yet

Matthew 6:10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

So it is with every aspect of the Gospel...

Some of its blessings we already have, some NOT YET

c. already perfect, not yet perfect

2. Instantaneous Positional Perfection through Faith

a. justification brings a perfect righteousness the moment we believe in Christ

b. at the moment of faith, we are PERFECTLY RIGHTEOUS in God's sight

vs. 8-9 that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Hebrews 10:14 because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Romans 4:3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

This perfect righteousness comes immediately, like a billion dollars credited to your account

From the moment of faith in Christ on, God sees you in Christ, perfect in Christ's righteousness

You cannot improve it, it cannot get any worse... it is Christ's perfect righteousness, yours as a free gift

If you are a Christian today, God sees you as PERFECT already

You are PERFECT in your POSITION in Christ...

3. Present Imperfection

BUT, you know you are not perfect in your CHARACTER, HEART, PERFORMANCE, or PHYSICAL BODY

There is still work to be done in you

You know it because you sin every day

In some ways, you may feel even more sinful now than you did before

Paul feels his own imperfection:

Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

4. Future Actual Perfection in Christ

BUT someday total perfection will be yours in Christ

Perfect in your spirit

Perfect in your character

Perfect in your behavior

Perfect in your body

E. Spirit-Led Pressing to Perfection Essential to Salvation

1. By Your Own Striving and Pressing, You're Not Saved

2. Without this Striving, Pressing, You're Not Saved

3. True Justifying Faith Always Results in Striving, Pressing, Hungering, Yearning, Growing

4. Our Hard Work is Led and Empowered by the Spirit

II. Paul's Pattern of Pressing Described

1. Not Already His: Perfection Impossible on Earth

vs. 12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

1. I have NOT obtained my goal yet...

a. vital to understand this

b. gospel is "already" and "not yet"

c. Paul is already perfect in Christ POSITIONALLY... He is justified by faith alone, apart from works

d. BUT he is not finished being saved yet

e. there is still a journey to travel

f. I am not yet perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect... morally, mentally, spiritually perfect

g. NEITHER have I obtained the resurrection from the dead in full glory... that will come later

2. So, Paul keeps this thought constantly in mind: I am not finished yet!!

a. I do not “consider myself” perfect

b. Paul doesn’t look at himself as perfect or as a finished man

c. Greek word is “logizomai” from which we get “logic” but it has more to do with attitude or accounting... I think of it this way

2. Involves Great Effort on Paul’s Part

vs. 13 *But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

1. “Pressing”: I PRESS ON

2. “Straining”: I STRAIN TOWARD WHAT IS AHEAD

Illus. Image is of one running with great opposition and resistance: resistance from ahead, resistance from behind

Perhaps like a man running in the ocean surf dragging a large parachute behind him... straining with every fiber in his body to make the shore

3. Success Absolutely Guaranteed: Christ Took Hold of Me for It

vs. 12 *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*

1. Logical order: Christ Jesus took hold of Paul first

2. Nothing can ever shake Christ’s grip from Paul... Christ will NEVER let go of Paul

3. The absolute security of your salvation is the solid ground on which you run your race

4. Note Paul’s language:

“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...”

Illus. Holding my kids and letting them slip

Illus. FREE SOLOIST in Yosemite...Not that we are like rock climbers, and Christ is a rock that will not move... that STILL makes us nervous, because we might slip and lose our grip and fall to our deaths

Rather, Christ Jesus took hold of us with His omnipotence and His sovereign control of the universe and He WILL NOT LET US GO until He has accomplished the purpose for which He took hold of us

5. What is that purpose? Why did He take hold of us?

I press on to take hold of THAT FOR WHICH Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Answer: Christ Jesus took hold of Paul to save Him completely... to save Him from sin in every possible way... from sin's penalty = eternal death in hell; sin's power and practice, from sin's very presence in His heart and life

Christ Jesus took hold of Him for PERFECTION, and He will NOT let go of Paul until Paul is perfect in heaven

John 10:27-30 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

Do you believe this today? That Christ Jesus took hold of you and will never let you go until you ARE perfect?

That Christ will keep working in you until He finishes His purpose of perfection for you? That...

1:6 He who began a good work in you will carry it on to PERFECTION until the day of Christ Jesus?

NOTE: Paul's total confidence in his final salvation... and still he presses on, works hard, strives every day to be perfect in Christ!!

This knowledge does not make Paul lazy, but diligent and hard working in his Christian life

4. The Total Focus of Paul's Life

Vs. 13 "one thing I do..."

1. Paul doesn't have forty life purposes, forty hobbies, or forty desires
2. Paul focuses on this ONE THING...
3. Total dedication to the task of pressing on in his Christian life

Illus. Olympic athletes must be totally dedicated in their lives... nothing but training every day Read article about Olympic archer, shoots arrows for ten hours a day, while also training other parts of his body to be ready

ONE THING I DO

5. Doesn't Live in the Past, But Focuses on the Future

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

1. What does this mean... forgetting what lies behind?

2. Definitely NOT:

NOT forgetting Christ's death and resurrection

NOT forgetting the truths of the gospel

NOT forgetting the truths of the Bible as a whole... Scripture's truths

NOT forgetting God's faithfulness in bringing Him this far

NOT forgetting past successes in growth (he commends them for their past obedience in 2:12)

NOT forgetting past sins and God's disciplines for those sins... how else could we be warned

3. What then?

a. forgetting his past life in Judaism as though he were missing his former treasures

Luke 9:62 Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Luke 17:32 Remember Lot's wife!

b. forgetting his past failures if they depressed him and held him back

c. forgetting his past successes as if the race were over and he had run far enough

Illus. The race isn't over yet!!! Imagine the Olympic 10,000 meter race, 25 laps around a 400 meter track... imagine the leader after the 23rd lap begin to celebrate, to put his arms in the air!!

The race isn't over yet, and you can't survive today on yesterday's faithfulness

Hebrews 3:8 "If TODAY you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts..."

Every day you're alive, you must continue to **PRESS ON, PRESS FORWARD TOWARD THE FINISH LINE**

The prize is won by those who cross the finish line, not those who were leading halfway through the race

True Christianity: 1) Absolute certainty that Christ has taken hold of you to make you perfect, and He will not let you go... so therefore YOU WILL BE PERFECT in the end 2)PRESSING ON HARD after perfection day after day, month after month, year after year... always pressing on to what lies ahead

6. Paul's Striving Follows God's Constant Upward Call in Christ

1. Every day, Paul follows an upward call from God in Christ
2. The indwelling Spirit gives him this message:

"This is the way, walk in it!!"

3. This "UPWARD CALL" is written in Scripture, but also spoken into the heart in the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit

Philippians 2:14 Do everything without complaining or arguing

Ephesians 4:2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

These simple commands stand above us and beckon us on to perfection... but we will NEVER attain them in this world

Illus. HIKING, yearning for the SUMMIT... MANY FALSE SUMMITS

RSV Philippians 3:14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

7. Paul's Striving Will Be Rewarded in Heaven

1. There is a prize, far superior to an Olympic gold medal
2. Olympic gold medals will all be destroyed someday
3. Our prize will last forever

1 Corinthians 9:24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

What is that crown? What is that prize?

In our context it is absolute perfection in Christ

In other contexts it is praise from God

1 Corinthians 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Matthew 25:21 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant!'

Illus. When an Olympic athlete wins the gold medal, he is set for a lifetime of praise from other people... this is the glory that most of them crave the most

A Christian receives the praise that matters more than any other... praise from God Himself

8. Everyone (Even the Most “Perfect”) Must Think This Way

vs. 15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

1. This constant striving for perfection is the pattern of life Paul is commanding
2. Striving for perfection while constantly aware that Christ has already taken hold of us and will never let us go
3. This is the pattern of “perfection” in this world... a play on words, since Paul uses the same Greek word

Literally, “All of us who are ‘perfect’ should think like this... ‘I am NOT perfect, but I must press on until I am perfect in heaven.’” This is the most mature or perfect you can be in this world!!!

And if you don’t think so, someday God will make that clear to you!!

4. Note Paul’s confidence: “If you disagree, fine... but I’m not wrong, and someday you’ll agree with me

9. Living Up to What You Have Already Attained

vs. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained

1. Even if you don’t fully understand this striving after perfection, live up to what you DO understand
2. ALSO perhaps: live up to what you already ARE in Christ

III. Applications

- A. Think “This Way” About Your Salvation

[NASB] *Philippians 3:15 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;*

1. Consider that perfection is NOT already yours
2. Be willing to make extreme efforts in your salvation
 - if you struggle with lust, be willing to cut off every avenue of lustful stimulation... even if it means
3. Be absolutely confident in future perfection, and make that confidence the basis of great efforts in holiness...CHRIST WILL NOT LET YOU GO TILL HE'S FINISHED WITH YOU
4. Make seeking after perfection in Christ the total focus of your life... "One thing I do...!!"
5. Don't live in the past: when you fail, confess it, learn from it, and move on; when you succeed, give God glory, be joyful at what God has done, and move on...YOU WON'T DIE FOR PAST SINS, AND YOU CAN'T LIVE ON PAST OBEDIENCES
6. Set before you Christ's constantly upward call in Christ... never settle into a complacent pattern of laziness in the Christian life
7. Set your hope fully on what Christ will do in you and how He will reward you in heaven
8. Live up to what you have already attained: build on your present doctrinal convictions

COME TO CHRIST!!!!

ABSOLUTE PERFECTION AWAITS US ALL, ALL WHO HAVE TRUSTED IN CHRIST

Perfect relationship with God... all sins forgiven, adopted into God's family

Perfect character before God... absolutely pure thoughts, pure hearts as perfect as Christ

Perfect bodies from God... absolute physical perfection, more beautiful than the most perfect athlete or model, healthier than any newborn baby

PERFECT AT LAST!!!

HOME AT LAST!!!