

VI. Philippians: *Rejoicing in the Advancement of the Gospel*  
“Press On”

Philippians 3:12–21

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This study will be a continuation of the last study on Philippians 3:1-11 and in the first part Paul says “Not that I've already obtained all this...” so what is this that he's speaking of? I want to read the whole chapter, just to put it in context. Philippians 3:1-21 says [1] *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.*

[2] *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.* [3] *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—* [4] *though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:* [5] *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;* [6] *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.* [7] *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* [8] *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ* [9] *and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—* [10] *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* [11] *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

[12] *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* [13] *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* [14] *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* [15] *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* [16] *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

[17] *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* [18] *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.* [19] *Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* [20] *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* [21] *who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*

Paul begins with ‘Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.’ Why does he make this declaration that he has not already obtained this or that he has already been made perfect? He just made a super spiritual statement that he does not have a righteousness that is of his own. Paul just finished declaring that there is nothing in him and that is righteous at all. He is absolutely incapable of developing a righteousness at all. If on any point of the law we violate the law, then we are not righteous people. So he has no righteousness that comes by his own acts and by his own works. However, he does have the righteousness of Christ. We embrace that unbelievable verse from II Corinthians 5:21 which says [21] *For our sake he made him to be*

*sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* So we have His righteousness

Right now, if you are a believer, you've completely put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then you have the righteousness of Christ. Paul says, 'I have the righteousness of Christ.' If I were to die right now, then the Lord would welcome me into heaven because He would not see me as the sinner that I am for Jesus took that sin upon Himself and gave me His righteousness, but that righteousness is not manifested into my life right now in that I am holy. So, I have the righteousness of Christ. I'm justified by that righteousness of Christ but when we still live on this earth, the problem that's before us is we have a weak flesh and we live in a sinful world. The thing that happens right after someone becomes a Christian, has been forgiven of all their sins, past, present and future, is they sin again. You don't need to be justified again. You can't be justified again for in Romans we see we are justified once and for all. You can never be more justified. You can never be the less justified. You either are justified by the righteousness of Christ or you are not justified by the righteousness of Christ. Having been justified, you can still sin, and therefore you are not holy. You're not holy on this earth.

So what Paul is now saying to them is I haven't already obtained this meaning he has the righteousness of Christ upon his life, but he is still a sinner. Now there's something else that has to take place. Justification is a work. It's a monergistic work. It's a work that God does in our life. There's much confusion about that. On one hand, man would love to take an ounce of credit for his justification. On the other hand, he has eternally grateful that it depends not an ounce upon him, because he absolutely would fail at that point, even if it were just that that one ounce that it would take.

Justification is a monergistic work, but sanctification now comes into play. Sanctification is the process by which we are made holy. That's where by the work of the Holy Spirit, God sends the Holy Spirit into our life to make us holy. Why? It is because we sin again and again so God gives us His Holy Spirit to bring about this work of sanctification in our lives. Paul here is saying, 'I'm not there yet. I haven't arrived.' Christ died for our sins and He has justified us and we have the righteousness of Christ so here he is dealing with this false teaching. Every time there's a declaration, they're going to distort it going as far as they can to the right and as far as they can to the left. They say things like 'if you're therefore then justified and you have the righteousness of Christ in your life and it covers all your sins, then go on sinning, then it doesn't matter if you sin.' Of course, that's not what Scripture teaches. This is not what Romans 6 teaches us. The response to that is 'What shall we say then, shall we go on sin? By no means.' That would be absolutely ridiculous and, in a moment, we'll see just why that is a ridiculous notion.

We are God's workmanship, we're His *poiema*. You hear the word poem in that word – we're His work of art, we're His Holiness project. God is displaying His power and ability in us by making us a holy project. He has saved us from our sins and He's given us his Holy Spirit, which, by the way, this is free. Holy is not the Spirit's first name. Think of it this way, when God gave us the Holy Spirit, He placed His Holiness in us. That's what He's saying. So there's not anything that we have to ask God to do in order for Him to put holiness inside of us because He's already done it. If God has placed His Holiness in us, then why aren't we more holy? It's not the Holy Spirit's fault. We certainly don't believe the false teaching that would say that you need more of the Holy Spirit, right? We're logical – we know the Holy Spirit is a Person and we know you can't get more of a person. We know that when God places the Holy Spirit inside of us, we have the whole Holy Spirit so it can't be that we need more Holy Spirit. That's not possible.

What must be happening? Scripture tells us that we are grieving the Holy Spirit. We are squelching, hindering and quenching the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. In other words, we're inhibiting His work in our life by not dealing with the sin that is in our life. That's what the Holy Spirit is working for us to do. That work of sanctification that He promises, Paul states in Philippians 1:6, *[6] And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* What's completion? It's holiness. We're confident, it's guaranteed it's going to happen. It's going to happen at the day of Christ Jesus and the day of Christ Jesus is one of two things. It's either the day that you get called home to meet with the Lord or the day that the Lord comes to meet with us. This means He's going to finish out that work of holiness. Until then, we engage with the Holy Spirit in this synergistic process of sanctification – being made holy.

What does Paul say that he does? I'm not made perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Paul knows he has the righteousness of Christ spread upon him and he's still a sinner. Therefore, what do I do? I press on but notice how Paul says it because he keeps the reader away from bad theology when he says 'I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own.' What happens when you tell the people to press on? Had there been American Christians when Paul wrote this, I know how we would tend to interpret that. If you tell us to press on, we then say 'This is our part, for the harder I press, the more I get.' All of a sudden, we start taking the American dream and Biblical theology and we try to put them together where we start to take credit for the pressing on. We want something in return for our pressing on. We've been indoctrinated with that way of thinking so Paul tells them we press on because of what Christ has done not to get Christ to do it. It's in response to what Christ has done that I press on not to try to cause God to have more favor.

So, Paul's action of pressing on isn't to cause God to love him more or to find the favor of Christ in his life. He is responding to this unbelievable act of love, an act of sacrifice that Christ has done in his life and that Christ has made him His own so now he is to live for Christ. He wants to engage in being like Christ. This goes along with what was concluded in the last study when Paul says in Philippians 3:10-11, *[10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* Paul wants to be like Christ in every way possible, even the worst of ways, even the best of ways, in every way possible. He knows that he can't fully be like Christ if he doesn't share in His suffering or if he's not persecuted. He can't fully be like Christ unless he experiences the things that Christ experiences so he welcomes those things because of only one reason – they are being used by God to make him more like Christ and that is his ultimate goal and desire – to know and be like Christ.

Paul says in Philippians 3:13, *[13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...* This reminds me of being at a men's Bible study one time with Pastor Harry Reeder. Harry said "Gentlemen, this one thing I do..." I served as the executive pastor for Harry Reeder for 22 years. There was not one thing he did. There were a billion things that he did and I thought, 'What's he about to say? What's this one thing that he does?' I got to believe that Timothy would have looked at Paul and said the same thing, 'This one thing that you do? Paul, do you know how many commandments you have given, even your epistles? Do you know how many instructions you have given to people in your epistles?' Paul is saying is that everything he does and has communicated to you is centered on this one thing. He does this one thing in a hundred different ways.

This one thing Paul does in many different ways is ‘forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 3:13-14). Paul was singularly focused on the goal of the prize of the upward call of Christ Jesus. I wonder how many times he prayed, ‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus.’ I wonder how many times he prayed, ‘Make me more like You today.’ How many times did he wrestle with the Lord on the issues that were before him that he wanted to be more and more like Jesus? His formula was forgetting what lies behind.

Take a minute and think about what ‘lied behind’ for Paul. He referenced it just a few verses earlier – persecuting Christians, for one thing. Another thing was his life as a of hypocritical Pharisaical know it all. He thought he was absolutely right, and yet he even persecuted those who engaged in the cause of Christ. Paul is able to forget what lies behind – I have been delivered from what lies behind. What lies behind us is the things of the world. What lies behind us is the failures. What lies behind us are all these schemes that Satan would want to use to skew whatever it is that you're trying to do for the Lord. Satan is going to bring up all these things that “lie behind” to remind you of your failures, your insecurities, your past sins or whatever the case may be.

Paul says, ‘I forget those things that lie behind and I strain towards what lies ahead.’ What lies ahead? That's the heavenly calling, the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. Every once in a while, as I'm studying Scripture, when I read the words, I have a tendency to want to do one thing but know I need to do another thing. The thing I want to do is keep reading even though there was a word that caught my attention, but if I stop there, I will be convicted again. Well, I stop so am I straining toward what lies ahead? I'm certainly looking forward to it. I would choose it over any other option. I'm in favor of it. Am I straining to be holy? Am I struggling? Am I pressing through the temptation not to be holy, as if the temptation were something unbelievably insurmountable to any human being? Which, by the way, is not, to my knowledge. I don't remember anyone ever persecuting me for a pursuit of holiness. I've been mocked before. I deserve to be mocked. I've been teased before. I've been ridiculed. I'm a big boy. I'll be okay, but have I been persecuted for this battle, this wrestle? No, not like Christians around the world have.

Then I ask myself these questions, Bruce, are you engaged in a straining towards the goal of the upward call, towards the pursuit of holiness? Or are you just kind of floundering around? Are you just kind of wandering around and every once in a while, you get it right? Sometimes I don't get it right, but that's no big deal. Every once in a while, I kind of do the right thing or get an opportunity to help somebody in some unique way, or get an opportunity to make a decision or something that's a good Christian man ought to make. So, I get an opportunity to do that but am I really uncovering new soil? Am I really wrestling with the issues of life and really trying to seek out whether or not I'm having a holy response to those issues? Am I being made holy in my relationship with my wife? Am I being made holy in my relationship with your children or being made holy in my interactions with other people and the decisions that I'm making? Am I straining towards that?

Paul chooses that word ‘straining’ carefully. He is straining and I believe because of other things that Paul has said that the focus of his straining was with himself. In other words, it's not I'm straining against this evil world out there that's trying to keep me from being holy. They are but I don't think that was his straining. Paul says in Romans 7 about this struggle, the very things I want to do, I find myself not doing and the things I don't want to do, I find too easy for

me to do. He didn't say that because of external pressure. He said it due to his own weakness, his own weak flesh. So, Paul is engaged in this true struggle with sin.

Years ago, I was asked to engage with a group of guys in a small group of about ten, and one of them asked a question about their struggle with the sins of impurity. I said to him, 'define the struggle for me.' He said, "Bruce, you know the bad stuff out there?" I said, 'I didn't say define the bad stuff. I said define the struggle.' "What do you mean?" I said 'You said you were struggling with it. Define the struggle.' "I don't know what you're talking about." I said, "Are you struggling with impure thoughts or impure images or impure things? What specifically are you struggling with concerning the sins of impurity? Or are you just saying it's out there and sometimes I do it and sometimes I don't." That's not a struggle. That's not a strain. A strain is to determine not to do it and to make choices not to do it. I think Paul is saying 'I am straining. I am intentionally wrestling through and trying to take every area of my life into shape and to mold it to be like Christ.' This one thing that he does is to be like Christ – that's the purpose of his life and until Christ returns, he wants to continually be shaped and molded into being like Christ.

Don't let Satan tell you that Christ is too holy for you to try to emulate Him. Don't let Satan tell you that you're too sinful to try to be like Christ. God called us to be like Christ, and by the way, He knows both of those realities. The same God who said I will breathe life eternal life into you, says, 'you're My holiness project. I am going to complete the work in you. I'm not calling you to do it in and of yourself. I've given you My Holy Spirit that My Holy Spirit would work in you to bring about holiness in your life.' So, are we abiding in the Holy Spirit? Are we keeping in step with the Holy Spirit? Paul prioritized this one thing. This is primary – to know Christ, to be like Christ.

Paul continues in Philippians 3:15, [15] *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* Remember, he's dealing with these false teachers and he's trying to give some counsel and advice here. I think he's trying to say to them, that the things you're willing to just draw the swords and go to battle on are about that one thing – Jesus Christ. If they are primary issues of the Gospel, then we have to win those, we have to agree upon those, we have to settle those but if they're secondary issues and if on some other point you think otherwise, God's going to reveal that to you also.

A very good friend of mine, somebody I've enjoyed serving the Lord alongside for just 22 years now is Benny Parks. Several years ago, he and I got into a debate. It wasn't just our debate. There were other people that were debating it. I had someone tell me, "Well, Benny says..." and Benny had someone tell him, "Well, Bruce says..." as if either one of us cared what the other person said and so we began to talk about this particular topic and we began to debate it. We were going on a trip and so he and I went up together to wait on the rest of the group to come and to meet us. I think we spent maybe 4 hours together one day debating in the harbor of Baltimore and he didn't move me an inch. I didn't move him. We had a great conversation about it and we got to know each other even better and deeper but we still disagreed about what that particular issue was. The funny thing was when Pastor Reeder joined us, after telling him about our conversation, he disagreed with both of us. I'm holding on to this verse in Philippians 3:15 that God will reveal that also to you. I still think I'm right. The difference in my mind between Benny and Harry is that Harry actually knows now that I'm right (because he's in heaven now), and Benny does not yet know that I'm right about this particular issue. But, it's okay to disagree, as long as it's not about that one thing.

If it's about that one thing, we have to get the Gospel right. We cannot let or allow any teaching that in any way, shape or form waters down the Gospel for that's the keys to the Kingdom. That's the message upon which you embrace the good news of the Gospel. That's why Pastor Reeder was so careful to talk to us about being on mission and being on message. If you change that mission, you're changing that message. That was the crux right there. You can have a lot of different missions, but you cannot change that message. That Message is the primary thing. That's that one thing.

Paul says in Philippians 3:16, *[16] Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* In other words, that which the Lord has revealed to you, you better be living it out. You have to know what this particular issue is, that I'm right about and Benny is wrong about, but on that particular issue, I should be living in light of what I believe and he should be living in light of his and so we live up to what we have attained as I wait on the Lord to make it clear to Benny that he is wrong. Those who don't know me well enough, I really think Benny is probably right, but I'm not going to give in until Jesus comes back.

Then Paul says in Philippians 3:17-19, *[17] Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. [18] For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. [19] Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* Here Paul shifts. This is interesting how he starts off verse 17 because he's already made this declaration that he doesn't have any righteousness by his own works and he talked about his spiritual resumé that he could have had that we saw in the last study. And now he appears maybe to be making a pretty prideful or arrogant statement. He says, 'Brothers join in imitating me.' You would have expected him to say 'join in imitating Christ' but he doesn't.

The idea Paul brings out in verses 17 through 19 is the same concept found in Hebrews 13:7 which says 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke the Word of God to you, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.' Paul says to them to join in imitating me. I don't think that is a prideful statement of Paul's. I think Paul was trying to say to them that if God can change my life, He can change us too. Paul is telling them he is a sinner, saved by the grace of God and this is what you're going to hear, see and learn from me. That's what I'm going to point you back to – always the Gospel. That's that one thing that focus upon being like Christ. Therefore, he can say, 'Join in imitating me' and then he gives an instruction which basically says, 'Be very careful who you imitate.'

This context that Paul has given is in the church – be very careful who you imitate, keeping your eyes on those who walk according the example you have in us, whose one thing is to be like Christ because there are many who are enemies of the cross of Christ, and he describes them. Their end is destruction. They left us because they were not of us. So, they came in as wolves in sheep's clothing into the church. Their God is their belly. In other words, their end is their own satisfaction. They glory in their shame with minds set on earthly things. We have to always be careful to view all of life through a Biblical filter. We don't have our minds set on the earthly things and we don't do church the world's way. We always have to be reminded that we do church the way God calls us to do church. We follow and obey the Scriptures. We don't add the reasoning of the world. Paul's statement is that he wanted to be a mentor to the Philippian church. Paul wanted to see other people follow him as he declared elsewhere, by following him, they would become followers of Christ as well.

Very recently I had the opportunity to work with our staff team and we were doing a couple of different things and we embraced a little exercise for All Saints Day. For All Saints

Day we simply thought through all the Saints the Lord had used in our life and put them in three categories. In one category were the saints that the Lord has used that lived before us, so obviously they have gone on to heaven, but they might be a Bible character, they might be a missionary, they might be a pastor, whatever it may be. We've read about them, we've heard about them, we've learned from them and the Lord used them in a mighty way in our life.

Another category was those that are at home with God in heaven but they were alive during our lifetime and they had an impact on us. They may have led us to the Lord or disciplined us or God used them in our lives to think about them, or even those that now are still alive, that the Lord is using in our life and to thank the Lord for them and then to pause and to ask yourself a question, to try to process who are you being a mentor to? Who would you be able to say imitate me as I imitate Christ? Maybe you ought to think about this before you go to bed tonight. Can you look at your son, and say imitate me to be more like Christ? You're supposed to be able to do that. Same goes for Mom to say to her kids. Now remember, Paul wasn't saying "I'm perfect." Don't do the 'I'm no Paul.' Paul wasn't perfect. He just acknowledged that he wasn't perfect. He's a work in progress. We're all a work in progress. We ought to also be able to say to our neighbor, a younger brother, younger sister, a young couple that we're trying to disciple and mentor – imitate me as I imitate Christ. The Holy Spirit has used that in my life to cause me to live a more intentional life because others are watching. We've invited them in, you can watch, you can ask questions, it's good that eyes are on you. That's important.

Luke 4:24 says that a prophet's not welcome in his home town. I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. I went to Vestavia High School and went to Stamford University, grew up in Shades Mountain Baptist Church, worked at Covenant Presbyterian church, worked at Briarwood now for 22 years. A lot of people know me here. You know why I'm not a very faithful person. God said, 'I need to put you in a place where you can't go to the gas station without somebody knowing who you are.' Thank you, Lord. Thank you for being that committed that you need eyes on your life. You need people in your world. At whatever level you resist or makes you uncomfortable be worried about that. Invite those people in. Allow them to be there. You're a work in progress. Allow God to use you being a work in progress in the lives of other people as a work in progress.

As we look at how Paul ends this chapter you had to see this coming, because he was pressing on towards the goal of the upward call of the prize in Christ Jesus. Paul ends with Philippians 3:20-21 which says [20] *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.* He is saying we don't belong here. This is not our home. We're not supposed to feel comfortable here. We're not supposed to acclimate here We are sojourners. Our citizenship is in heaven. I loved Rob's illustration this morning in his sermon about being at the embassy and being in the wrong line. That's a powerful illustration, not realizing that he was American, he could have gotten in the American line. He didn't understand what line he was supposed to be in.

As I was preparing for this study I thought, 'wow, that's a perspective we have.' We can forget what line we're supposed to be in. We can forget where our citizenship is. The mirrors are a blessing and a curse. You need them. Some people should use them more, but you need them but they're also a curse because they are an accurate reflection. You don't always like what you see and you need mirrors in your life. We need mirrors in our life so that when things get turned upside down, it might reveal to us where we are living and our citizenship is not here. Our citizenship is not in America. Our citizenship is in heaven and we're to live like our citizenship is

in heaven and from heaven we await our Savior, the return of Jesus Christ to come and deliver us.

Let's try to put ourselves in Paul's shoes as we wrap this up. Paul says, 'I have the righteousness of Christ, but I'm not perfect. I'm still a sinner. I wish I didn't sin, but I do sin. I haven't obtained this, but I'm trying to make it my own. I'm wrestling with my sin before the Lord. I'm trying to engage with the Holy Spirit but I long to be in heaven because when Christ returns, He's going to fix everything that gives us angst right now.' He will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself. Anything and everything that you might hold on to right now, anything and everything that seems like it's a burden, anything and everything that seems like it's holding you back and keeping you from pressing on towards being like Christ, He has subjected unto Himself. He has the power to destroy that in your life. He has the power to overcome that in your life, to forgive you of that and to make you new.

Take a moment to spend in personal prayer and ask the Lord, what is it? Is there anything in my life that you can articulate? Maybe the Holy Spirit has brought something to your mind that says 'this is that next pressing on issue, this is that straining that I need to deal with and lift that up before the Lord and claim His power that He mentions right here at the end of Philippians 3.' Take a moment and pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could spend in Your Word learning what it means to press on toward the goal of the upward call of Christ. Help us through Your Spirit to be that visible work in progress so others can see You in our life. Show me what I need to work on. Thank You for your grace and mercy and may we be a light in this world as we look to our Savior, in Jesus' Name, Amen.