



Paul's letter to the
PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 6

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

Finding Ways To Love Our Neighbor Right Now

I've really enjoyed seeing pictures and hearing stories of how people in our own church family are finding creative finds to love others right now—and I pray we keep that going! By now I'm sure you've seen numerous articles suggesting ways that we can love our neighbors during this time, even at a distance. If you're in need of some ideas, the simple suggestions below are a great place to start:

1. Do a regular prayer walk in your neighborhood, praying for each household.
2. Pray in general for those infected, those at risk, and for decision makers.
3. Chalk encouraging messages on the sidewalk or driveway.
4. Talk to your neighbors as you walk (or at the very least smile and say hello!)
5. Make an extra effort to remember friends who celebrate a birthday during this time and do something to make their day extra special.
6. Leave an encouraging note for your mail carrier or delivery person.
7. If you're a musician, hold a sidewalk or driveway concert.
8. Offer to do the shopping (including the pharmacy) for your elderly neighbors.
9. Intentionally support small local businesses.
10. Make a list of all the people you've wanted to catch up with and haven't, and then call or message them to check in on how they're doing. Being in isolation is especially hard for those who live alone and might feel cut off.



Philippians 3:12–16 (NIV)

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers and sisters, 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.

15 All of us, then, 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. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Philippians 3:12-16



Keep Going!

Once someone becomes a Christian, what are they supposed to do with the rest of their life? This question reveals one of the ironies of Western Christianity. By strongly emphasizing both our initial faith and our ultimate destiny, we often underemphasize what's supposed to happen in between.

1. So what does Paul think about this time between our baptism and our death?

For Paul this interval was absolute crucial. It wasn't an accident that God had left a space of time between when someone comes to know Christ and when they, as he puts it in Philippians 1, depart to be with Jesus and are later raised from the dead. There's something very special going on here because it appears that this interval between *coming to be in Christ and finishing one's life journey* is the time when, broadly speaking, one's character is formed by the work of the Spirit. **Again we go back to 1:6, where Paul says that “the one who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”** In other words, something is happening within us during this time. The key then is learning how to live in the time in between – in between Jesus' resurrection and the final reckoning of all things; in between our own coming to faith and the day of our own death; in between the beginning and the end of God's purposes.

2. Who are we to be during this time? And what are we to do?

In this week's passage, Paul wants to dispel the belief that once you become a Christian you have “arrived” – in the sense that there is no more traveling to do. Paul is quite clear that he has not arrived; nor has anyone else. He also speaks positively about what he is doing in light of the incompleteness of his journey. As we will see, for Paul to reach the goal of knowing Christ, his sufferings, and his resurrection power, it will require action, practice, and training. It is not simply a matter of being in a certain state or condition.

In the ancient philosophical world (which Paul knew well having grown up in Tarsus, one of the great centers of philosophy in his day), the idea of *virtue* was popular. A *virtue* is a skill, habit, or disposition that is inseparable from a *telos* (a Greek word, meaning “an ultimate end, goal, or aim”). The cultivation and practice of virtues leads one to achieve one's ultimate goal. For example, Aristotle believed that the human *telos* is to exercise that which makes us distinctive: our ability to think, reason, contemplate, which leads to “happiness” (that is, *eudaemonia*, which means something like “fulfillment” – a deep settled contentment of a truly human existence).

We don't get to our goal (*telos*) all in one step, of course. So there are habits and character strengths (virtues) which we can practice in the present that equip and form us to become the people that we believe we ought to be. It's like learning a musical instrument or learning to play a sport. It's no good just to have one lesson and hope it will work out. You have to practice! And the same goes for developing one's character: there are certain strengths which are to be practiced in order to become the person you're meant to be. But here's the difference between Aristotle and Paul: for Aristotle, virtue is always a solo sport; for Paul (and Jesus), virtue is always a team sport. The virtues of the Christian tradition are visible and embodied in the community's practices. Among the central Christian virtues we find love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity—things which by their very nature you can't do by yourself. They're designed for a community!

And in Paul's view, this interval between Jesus' resurrection and his second coming—and between our own coming to faith and the day of our death—is the time to be practicing these virtues and character strengths in community, and **to do so with a specific goal in mind.**

Philippians 3:12-16



3. What goal does Paul have in mind?

For Paul, the goal is what he calls “maturity” or becoming “fully complete” in Christ. His life purpose is to become like Jesus, and he presses on “to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” In 3:12-13 Paul says he hasn’t arrived there yet—that is, he is not yet fully complete or mature. But this is his one aim: to forget everything that is behind and to strain forward to what’s ahead, racing toward the finish line. He is training himself to see and embrace the surpassing value of knowing Jesus.

Living in one ancient Greek city after another, Paul would be used to seeing the athletic games that were popular in those days. In those games there would be a finishing post where spectators would watch to see runners straining forward to get there first. The one who won the race would then be summoned up to receive the prize. Paul develops this image to make a point. This is the one thing he does! He is straining forward to the finish line, where he says the prize waiting for him is the upward call of God in Jesus. That’s Paul’s one aim. Paul is a man of one Lord, one aim, and one purpose.

4. What advice would Paul give to the Philippians and to us today as we run this race together?

The questions that Paul implicitly asks his readers are (1) **Where are we now?** and (2) **What are we aiming at?** Drawing from his own metaphor, Paul is saying: “Keep growing. Don’t get stuck in the past. And don’t think you’ve arrived.”

Even Paul admits he hasn’t arrived. He also says he has to forget what lies behind him. There have been successes and failures in our lives too, and we have to forget them. If you’re running a race, you don’t continue to look back and say, “Oh I really slipped there” or “I messed up there” or “I can’t believe I tripped over that hole.” Paul says that if you’re on your feet, you keep moving forward, pressing toward the finish line.

5. What would Paul say to those who think they’ve already done enough training to win the race—those who think they’ve already arrived at the finish line?

In 3:15a, Paul says, perhaps with a sense of irony, “Those of us who are mature should think like this.” Paradoxically, “mature thinking” means recognizing that we’re not yet mature! In other words, Paul is saying that true Christian maturity consists in knowing that you haven’t quite arrived at full maturity yet.

Paul is being deliberately ironic, perhaps because there may have been some in the church who believed that, as a result of being baptized and coming to faith, they had already arrived at full maturity and there was nothing more they needed to do to develop and grow in Christ. Perhaps some believed they had already attained this picture of completeness. We see a hint of that in 1 Corinthians as well (and certainly throughout the history of the church), where some people didn’t bother with having a serious commitment to developing the character of Christ and cultivating the fruits of the Spirit because they thought they had already arrived.

Paul says it’s not that easy! We’re not yet fully mature or complete, and if we think we are, we’re deceiving ourselves. Rather, we are always in the midst of the race, carried forward from the past to the future in union with Christ. There is this strange interval between baptism and death in which we have work to do. The work is mental work and moral work, and the two go together. ***There is a relationship between transformed thinking and transformed action. You have to think into what it means to be a new creation and then act on it.*** We have to take part in that process ourselves, partnering with God who transforms us by his Spirit into the image of Christ.

Philippians 3:12-16



And so Paul says in 3:15b, “If at some point you think differently about any of this, God will reveal this to you as well.” Perhaps there is irony here too. In Paul’s world, both the Jewish and non-Jewish people believed in special revelations. In the pagan world, for example, you might visit the Oracle and hope for a divine revelation to tell you some secret about who you are or what would happen in the world. And especially in the Jewish world, with the traditions going back to the prophets and with books like Ezekiel and Daniel being much read and studied, there was a sense that perhaps some people would receive a special revelation, and once they had that revelation, it would give them a super spirituality. And so Paul says, “Just in case someone is going down that road and supposes they have arrived, God will give them a special revelation and let them know they haven’t.”

“Only let us live up to what we have already attained,” Paul writes in Philippians 3:16. In other words, he’s saying: “This is where we are. Let’s not pretend we’re somewhere else. But also remember how we got to this point. We’re not at the starting line. We’re not at the finish line. Let’s recognize where we now are and go forward from there.” In the interval between our baptism and the day we depart to be with Jesus and are later raised, Paul says to press on and strain forward for what lies ahead, not bothering with what lies behind.

“One Lord. One goal. One thing I do.” That’s Paul’s motto for living in accordance with the gospel.

Reflections

1

Pursuing the Prize: Knowing Christ at the End

In this section Paul's story takes a new turn, simultaneously looking back to 3:4-8 (forgetting the past), embracing the present (he is not yet fully conformed to Christ, nor has he arrived at the goal 3:10-11), and emphasizing his present pursuit of the final goal. Knowing Christ now and attaining the resurrection combine to give purpose to Paul's life—his “running,” to use his current metaphor. He has seen the future and it is ours—full of the single reality that marks the present: Christ Jesus my Lord. And everything in Paul's life is drawn to a future in which Christ is finally and fully known. (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, 152).

2

Keep Moving Forward

Paul's image of the Christian life as a race reminds us that we can never rest on our accolades, and this particular race is not a competition in which only one person can succeed! It is possible for everyone who takes part to win and for everyone to receive the prize. The end is assured, not because of what we are able to do (though we must give effort!), but by virtue of the fact that it rests ultimately on the hold that Christ has on us: He has made us his own, and we belong to him (v. 13). The tension between what we already are and what we are called to be is expressed in Paul stating that he is not yet complete or mature (v. 12) and his appeal to those who believe they are already at that point (v. 15). It has been well said that the mark of true maturity is to know that one is *not* yet complete, that there is still room to grow and mature. In this life, the goal always remains beyond us, demanding our continual participation, calling us forward.

3

Remembering and Sharing Our Hope

Part of being human is that by nature we are oriented to the future. In a day when many people feel as though they have no real future to look forward to, here Paul's words create a strikingly powerful Christian moment. The challenge lies in the fact that we are probably the most death-denying culture in history, and the absence of genuine hope leads people to search for all kinds of ways to make the present eternal.

In midst of such hopelessness, those who place their trust in Christ, who recognize Christ as the beginning and end of all things meaningful, need to be reminded again. We must think in terms of how we can share this hope with the world—that God's purposes for his creation are not finished until he has brought our salvation to its completion. Paul finds life meaningful precisely because he sees the future with great clarity, and the future has to do with beginnings—the redeemed realization of God's creative purposes through Christ the Lord. There is no other prize; hence nothing else in life counts for much except *knowing Christ*, both now and with clear and certain hope for the future. (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, 156-57).

Discussion

1. Share about the story of your baptism. What does it mean for your ongoing walk with Jesus? If you were baptized at a young age, how does that story carry through to your adult life?
2. Based on what you've read in Philippians, how would you describe the goal of Paul's life? What motivates him to keep pressing on toward the goal?
3. Describe Paul's understanding of the "work" or "training" Christians are to be doing in the interval between their baptism and the end of their life?
4. In this passage and throughout Philippians, what is the relationship between transformed thinking and transformed action? What is an example from your own life when transformed thinking led to transformed action?
5. What are some things you personally need to "forget" as you strain toward what is ahead? What are some things that we can do as a family and community to help one another attain the goal of Christlikeness?