

Sermon Summary #16

Holy Dissatisfaction and Relentless Pursuit: Overcoming the Threat of Spiritual Stagnation Philippians 3:12-16

My title for today is a long one – *Holy Dissatisfaction and Relentless Pursuit: Overcoming the Threat of Spiritual Stagnation*. Now what in the world do I mean by that?

My concern, based on Paul's concern here in Philippians 3, is that some Christians, for a variety of reasons, have become *spiritually stagnant*. They aren't regressing but there is a sense in which they are *stuck in neutral*. Or perhaps they're actually moving forward, but only because they've *set their souls on cruise control*. They don't pay much attention to the speed and progress of their Christian life, but are attentive only to the degree that it is necessary to keep from swerving off the road of following Christ. *They don't think it's necessary to accelerate*. They are content with where they are on the pathway to eternal life. They've *settled for the status quo*. "Things as they are" is just fine with them. No need to rock the boat or increase the pace at which they pursue Christ in all his fullness. Again, they are spiritually stagnant.

I'm not suggesting they aren't genuinely born again and saved. But there is little or no growth. Their passion for Jesus Christ is lukewarm, at best. Their study of God's Word is sporadic, at best. Their prayer lives are largely restricted to listening to others intercede with God on a Sunday morning. They've embraced the truth that by faith alone they stand righteous in God's sight and have concluded from this that they need do no more. There is a sense in which they've fully and finally arrived.

Some might even think that whatever Christ died to obtain for them is already theirs in total perfection. It's now just a matter of resting in what is already true. The idea of pressing forward and relentlessly pursuing the knowledge and enjoyment of Christ strikes them as inconsistent with God's grace. It feels as if they are introducing works into their relationship with Jesus. So, the result is that they *coast*. They may even drift aimlessly through the Christian life.

Nothing could be more contrary to biblical Christianity than that perspective on Christian living. Listen again to Paul's description of his life: vv. 12-14 . . .

Although justified by faith in Christ, although forgiven of all his sins, although living in the knowledge of Christ and in a relationship of love and fellowship with him, Paul refuses to stagnate. *He is careful to cultivate and sustain in his heart what can only be called "holy dissatisfaction" combined with a "relentless pursuit" of that ultimate prize and goal for which Jesus Christ laid hold of him.*

So what I aim to do for all of us this morning is to issue a call for *a renewed commitment to re-engage with Christ and to re-enter the race we've been called to run*. My aim is to take the Word of God in this passage and use it to bring spiritual heat to bear on your heart and unthaw your soul so that you will relentlessly pursue that for which you have already been taken captive.

The "Already" and "Not Yet"

One reason why some believers fall into this malaise in Christian living is their failure to understand the distinction in Scripture between what is referred to as "the already" and "the not yet." Let me explain what I mean.

A good example can be found in what John said in his first epistle: "Beloved, we are God's children **now**, and what we will be has **not yet** appeared; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Here John gives expression to a tension, of sorts, between what is already true of us as God's children and what is not true of us, but will be. Our status as God's children is a present and permanent reality. Nothing can change that. On the other hand, we are not yet all that we shall be. There is yet to come the consummation of our experience as God's children when Christ returns. We are truly the children of God but there is an experiential dimension of that relationship that will come to fruition only when Christ returns.

We see this in a lot of other ways as well. The kingdom of God is already here (Col. 1:13), but it is not yet consummated in its fullness (1 Cor. 6:9). We are already reigning with Christ (Eph. 2:4-6), but in the age to come it will take on an entirely new and complete dimension (Rev. 5:9-10). We have eternal life now, but we have not yet entered into the full experience of all that entails. The new creation is already here (2 Cor. 5:17) but it has not yet come in the form of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22). We already have the fullness of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, but Paul also speaks of this experience as merely the firstfruits or down payment or pledge of what is yet to come. The same principle applies when it comes to our righteousness, our glorification, and our heavenly citizenship.

Paul refers to yet another instance of the already and not yet in the passage we looked at last week. In Philippians 3:10 he spoke of experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection, but in 3:11 he refers to the final resurrection as something yet to come.

Evidently, some in Philippi had failed to recognize this tension. In their zeal and excitement and joy over knowing all that God had already done for them in Christ, they concluded that they had already arrived; they had already experienced or achieved in its fullness what God has reserved for the not yet.

This seems clear from what Paul says in vv. 12-14. Yes, we are righteous through faith in Christ, as 3:9 indicates. But our experience has not yet reached the level of our status. Yes, we know Christ as being of surpassing and superior excellence, as vv. 8, 10 make clear, but our knowledge has not yet reached the depths and heights of what will happen when we finally stand in Christ's presence in the age to come.

The problem is that some had put their Christian progress on cruise control or were merely drifting or had in some cases arrogantly assumed that what they now already have is all there will ever be. Paul is very quick to point out that this is misguided and even dangerous.

Paul's Denial (v. 12a)

Paul responds to this distorted thinking with an immediate *disclaimer*. He does not want us to think that his suffering the loss of all things to gain Christ means that he has fully arrived, that he has already achieved or obtained everything that God has in store for Christians.

So, to what does the word "this" in v. 12 refer? Or again, in v. 13, to what does the word "it" refer? Paul denies having obtained "this" and having made "it" his own. What's he talking about?

There are several possibilities, all of which may be true! He may have in mind the "resurrection from the dead" (v. 11). There were some in the early church (see 2 Tim. 2:16-18) who argued that our spiritual resurrection or coming to life through faith in Christ is the only resurrection that will ever occur. Or he may also have in mind the claim of some to have achieved sinless perfection in this life. In other words, Paul said in v. 9 that he is trusting in the righteousness that God gives to us through faith. Some may have argued that this righteousness is now here in its fullness. Whereas it is true that we stand perfectly righteous in the sight of God because he has imputed or reckoned the righteousness of Christ to us through faith, that doesn't mean our experiential righteousness is complete. We still sin. Or maybe he is talking about the "knowledge" and "experience" of Christ he mentioned in vv. 8-10. All there is to know about Christ, all there is to experience in fellowship with him, so some said, has already come and is ours now in complete perfection.

No! Of course, it is true we do possess the righteousness of Christ and we have gained Christ and we do know him and can even now experience the power of his risen life. But this does not mean there is nothing yet to come. This does not mean we can coast.

Paul's words run directly counter to the idea which says that if Christ has found us, we don't need to seek him. If he has made us his own (v. 12b), we need not press on to lay hold of him. "Paul reasons exactly opposite to this: I press on in order to gain Christ, because Christ has already gained me. *Paul's conversion was not a cage to hold him back but a catapult into the pursuit of holiness. The irresistible grace of Christ overcoming Paul's rebellion and saving him from sin did not make Paul passive; it made him powerful*" (Piper)!

A lot of people have very little self awareness. They don't understand much of who they are or the impact they have on others. Not Paul. "I haven't already obtained it. I'm far from perfect." Paul takes a long look in the mirror of truth and says: "I'm nowhere near where I ought to be or where I want to be."

That is why I included in my title the words, "*holy dissatisfaction.*" Paul's "*relentless pursuit*" of Christ is the fruit of a profound dissatisfaction with where he is. The first step in *relentlessly pursuing* the holy God, then, is to develop a *holy dissatisfaction* with your spiritual life. Take a long look in the mirror of the Word and recognize that you have not yet arrived. The humble recognition of our spiritual shortcomings is the starting point for the pursuit of God.

But there's another dimension to holy dissatisfaction. It's *the dissatisfaction that arises from having tasted the goodness of God and then wanting more!* This isn't a nail-biting nervous apprehension that leads to an angry dissatisfaction. This is what comes from having eaten the first course of a gourmet meal and longing to get to course two and then course three and finally to the dessert!

Paul's Determination (v. 12b)

But notice carefully what happens. Often times when people finally get real and acknowledge how far they have yet to go in Christian maturity, they get discouraged and quit. Not Paul. And I hope not you either. Instead of easing off the gas pedal of Christian living and drifting along as if nothing more were at stake, Paul expresses his determination or resolve in two important statements.

(1) "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v. 12b).

This word translated "press on" belongs to the world of the hunter. It doesn't merely mean run but pursue, chase, hunt down! Far from our salvation being a reason to relax, Paul sees it as a motive to press on. There are obviously *deeper dimensions* of what God has done for us in Christ that Paul wants to experience. *New vistas of beauty to behold, fresh revelation of the majesty God's character, deeper experiences of intimacy with Christ, greater joy in the Holy Spirit, more power for life and ministry,* and the list could go on endlessly. Paul wants it all! And so should we!

But note especially what it is that drives him. I want to make it my own, says Paul, "because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v. 12b)! The word ought to be more literally rendered, "Christ Jesus seized me" or has "grasped" me and made me his own. His point is that he's pursuing these realities of spiritual experience because that's the very reason why Jesus *took hold of him* on the Damascus Road and made him his possession.

Think of your conversion. How do you envision what actually happened? Yes, you came to faith. You put your trust in Jesus. You received the Holy Spirit. You were declared righteous by God. You became an adopted child of the Most High. All this is true. But Paul tells us that what has actually happened when a man or woman comes to life spiritually and sees and savors Jesus as Lord is that *Christ has himself first "apprehended" or "graciously grasped" them. Jesus has "lovingly seized" or "taken hold" of them. He has "arrested" them* and turned them from their former pathway and set them on a new course.

And Jesus did this so that we might enter ever more deeply into the glorious experience of knowing him and being found in him and being energized by his resurrection life and finding ever greater and more glorious satisfaction in him. *Does that sound like what's happening in your life right now?* If someone were to ask you, "Hey, what's going on with you and God?", would you respond by saying: "Man, I'm in hot pursuit of the Lord. I refuse to let anything distract me. My eyes are fixed on him alone."

If you cannot honestly answer in that way, why not? What are you doing with your time, your energy, your money? What are you looking at? What are you listening to? Are you consumed with the silly, banal, soul-numbing nonsense that comes on TV or is found in mindless, time-consuming video games? Is Facebook really more satisfying than growing deeper in love with Jesus Christ? Do you actually believe that you can find in a bar or nightclub or in the bed of some stranger the joy and satisfaction that God promises you in Christ?

Yes, Paul's language here is a rebuke to us all. But how will we respond to it?

(2) "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" (vv. 13b-14).

As if to reinforce the importance of this truth, Paul repeats his point here again in vv. 13-14. "I haven't yet entered into the fullness of all there is to know and experience of Jesus. But that's my goal!" He does not set himself up as some sort of super-saint who has already arrived. If he is to be imitated he wants us to follow him in his relentless pursuit of Christ. And here's how he does it.

His strategy is two-fold: he is committed to *forgetting what lies behind* and will *strain forward to lay hold of what lies ahead*.

Paul does not mean by this that we should obliterate or erase from our minds all memory of the past. He's not recommending that we forget the mercy of God shown to us in Jesus. He's not saying that we shouldn't reflect on all the wonderful things God has done for us or that we should ignore the progress we've made, as if it would be wrong to remember the victories and learn from our mistakes.

Rather, he has in mind ***those things of the past that tend to hinder our forward progress***. Some of you can't breathe without ***feasting on your victimization***. Someone hurt you, badly. Someone betrayed you, badly. Someone lied about you or stole from you or broke a confidence or failed to show up when they promised they'd be there. ***Or it may be less about what others have done to you and more what you did or failed to do:*** some sin you committed, some promise you broke, some word you spoke that harmed someone else. Or it may even be your on-going recollection of the way you trusted the earthly or fleshly accomplishments, the sort Paul mentioned in vv. 4-6.

Forget it! Leave it behind! Turn from it and *look to the future* and all that God has in store for you in Jesus! ***Refuse to live in bondage to past failures. Renew your commitment to live in joyful expectation of future blessings.***

Again, I don't want to be misunderstood. Some victories in the present are won by remembering former mercies.

"I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds" (Psalm 77:11-12).

"Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered" (Psalm 105:5).

"Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh . . . remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:11-12).

In just a moment we are going to focus all our attention on *remembering the work of Christ on the cross*. That is one of the primary goals in the celebration of the Lord's Table:

"Do this, as often as you [eat and] drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:25).

And let's never forget that the purpose of Hebrews 11 is to help us look back and remember the example of faith we see in the saints of old.

So, Paul's point isn't: don't ever look back. Rather, his point is: only look back for the sake of pressing forward. The value in remembering yesterday is the degree to which it energizes us for what we face tomorrow. "Never substitute nostalgia for hope. Memories of successes can make you smug and self-satisfied [and convince you that nothing more is required]. Memories of failure can make you hopeless and paralyzed in your pursuit of God" (Piper). Praise God for whatever success you've achieved. Thank God for his faithfulness in days gone by. Confess your failures and mistakes and sins. ***And then turn to the future and go hard after God!***

"But Sam, I just can't do it. My past haunts me. My former way of life is ever present in my mind. Try as I may, and just when I think I've broken free from it all, it comes rushing back and I'm slammed with guilt and shame and regrets. I'm tormented by the past."

What can be done?

(1) First thing: preach the gospel of grace to yourself. Don't wait to hear it from me: preach it to yourself. Remind yourself daily that nothing in the past is greater, more powerful, or beyond the reach of God's forgiving grace. People who find it almost impossible to forget those things in the past have actually failed to properly remember the past. They have failed to remember and reflect upon what God has fully and finally done for them in Christ at the cross and the empty tomb.

(2) The next step is to determine whether or not such memories are due to the fact that you have failed to repent of those former failures and have failed to seek reconciliation with those against whom you've sinned. Go to them and make it right.

(3) If the lingering memory is due to their sin against you, forgive them. Tell them, either in person or in print, that you refuse to be held hostage to their sin against you and that you forgive them: that you will never use their sin against them or bring it up or hold it over their head, or seek vengeance in any way.

(4) Cry out to God that he would provide you with a fresh infusion of the Holy Spirit so that every time those memories rise up in your heart you would have strength to push "delete" in your soul.

(5) Finally, and most important of all, cry out to God that he would supply you with strength, through his Spirit, to fix your thoughts on Jesus and all that he has promised to be for you not only today but every day hereafter into eternity: his beauty, his grace, his power. Devote your mental, emotional, and physical energy to immersing yourself in the knowledge of Christ. Study him. Seek him. Pray to him. Sing to him.

This final step is precisely what Paul has in mind when he says that instead of living in the muck and mire and guilt and shame of past failures, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." In other words, ***the key to forgetting the past is to set your mind on seizing the future!***

I love taking time to meditate on the force of particular words in Scripture, and I hope you do too. There is so much to learn from them. Here in v. 13 Paul describes himself as "straining forward" to what lies ahead. This verb pictures a runner, approaching the finish line, leaning forward ever so intently, his hand outstretched, his eyes fixed on the tape, without so much as a glance to the left at what the world is offering him or to the right where Satan sits with his seductive promises. Paul has in mind whole-hearted concentration combined with intense desire to gain the prize.

In v. 14 Paul provides a bit more information on precisely what he's striving to obtain: it is the "goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The language is a bit thick, but the point Paul is making is that ***the prize is Christ!*** He is our exceeding great reward! To use the language of vv. 7-11, it is the surpassing worth of knowing **Christ** ever more intimately and of gaining **Christ** ever more fully and of being found in **Christ** ever more securely and of being empowered by the risen **Christ** ever more completely.

Indeed, the full and final prize of this call is the joy of everlasting fellowship with Christ in a glorified body on a glorified earth.

The Little Olympics . . .

Conclusion

There were people in the church in Philippi in the first century, even as there are undoubtedly today, who just didn't get it. They don't understand why, if salvation is full and final and free and is all of grace, we need to "press on" and "strain forward" and aim to lay hold of the "prize" which is the experiential fullness of knowing and loving and enjoying Jesus Christ.

I understand how that might be difficult for some of you. Others of you just don't like what Paul has said. You like coasting. You prefer to drift. You're spiritually lazy and you'd like to think you have biblical justification for it.

I will simply say to you what Paul said to like-minded folk in Philippi: "if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained" (vv. 151-16).

His point is simply this: regardless of where you are on your journey, don't let go or abandon what you have already found in Christ and what you already know of Christ. Hold true to what you've attained by God's saving mercy. What Paul and they had attained, what you and I have attained, is not merely an understanding of the gospel but the very life of Christ within us that comes through the gospel.

There's an old hymn that has these words:

"Then we shall be where we would be;
Then we shall be what we should be;
Things that are not now, nor could be,
Soon shall be our own."

And in the meantime, we press on!

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