

Sermon 19: Philippians 3:12-16: Striving for Perfection

OUTLINE

I am not perfect
I strive to be perfect

INTRODUCTION

Whenever we deal with the gospel of free grace there are always two errors orbiting around it seeking to challenge it. Think about it, the gospel teaches us that we cannot be good; therefore we cannot depend on anything we can do to save ourselves. This means we have to rely on God's mercy and what He provides to save us. God has provided for someone else to be righteous for us; for someone else to pay for our sin debt. And the only way we can get the benefits of what Jesus has done for us is not by works but by receiving it as a gift by faith. The gospel cuts across all our misinformed instincts and we react with two predictable errors. The first is antinomianism. Those who reject that we are not saved by works but by receiving salvation for free by faith; they have a deep concern for holiness and God's commands and they predictably accuse the gospel of creating people who won't work, who won't strive for holiness, who will live in sin. To their minds if you don't have to work for your salvation in some way, either to get it or to keep it, this will create antinomianism. This fear drives them to put works into the gospel in some way, either to get saved or to stay saved. A second error lies close at hand, the error of perfectionism. You see if you think that you can be good enough, or if works play some part in your salvation, either to get it or to keep it; then you will have a high view of your ability to be good and keep God's law. Paul addresses both these errors in the portion before us.

Paul you will remember is dealing with false teachers. They are teaching that salvation by grace alone; through faith alone; in Christ alone is not enough; you need Jesus plus certain Mosaic laws to be righteous and become the people of God. Paul has affirmed these non-Jewish Christians as the people of God through faith in Christ. Last week we looked at Paul's testimony, where he was the poster boy for law righteousness, and how he counts it all as loss for the sake of the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ. But now Paul is aware of certain misunderstandings willing to twist his words. Paul recognises that making statements about experiencing the resurrection power of Christ and the desire to be exactly like Him could send the wrong message that we can be perfect in this life affirming the perfectionistic tendencies of the legalist. But he is also aware that the legalist wants to accuse those who believe in a gospel of free grace of antinomianism, of abandoning a life of holiness and becoming content and willing to indulge license. Paul continues then in v12-16 to speak about his own experience. In v4-11 he spoke about his conversion, now Paul speaks about his ongoing attitude in the Christian life modelling how every Christian should think.

Paul shows how a sinner saved by grace continues to have indwelling sin; however, with his eyes set on the prize he strives for holiness, with the knowledge that one day he will be made perfect in the resurrection. There are two main ideas put forward, firstly, even though I am justified and have the righteousness of Christ I am not perfect. Paul puts to bed any notion of perfectionism. However, I do strive towards perfection, or full conformity to

Christ. Here Paul puts to bed any notion of resting on our laurels and lowering the requirements of God's commands.

I am not perfect

V12, '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.' Paul has made some big statements about participating in the power of Christ's resurrection; as well as committing himself to a path of willing suffering and martyrdom. Any legalist hearing this might think that Paul is bragging about how good he is, how zealous he is; giving the impression that he has merely exchanged one path of perfectionism and self-righteousness for another. Paul here offers some important clarifications reminding us about the Christian's ongoing relationship with sin. Paul tells us that he has not obtained perfection, either the perfection of Christlikeness nor some glorified or resurrected state. Paul we know thinks of himself as justified, even broken free from the once controlling power of sin, and filled with the Spirit. However, he also sees himself as the chief of sinners, 1 Tim. 1:15; that he has a sinful nature he calls a body of death, Rom. 7:24; and who characterizes the Christian life as one filled with struggle where the sin in his flesh wars against the influence of the indwelling Spirit, Gal. 5:17. For this reason he calls upon us to cultivate the spiritual life within us by walking the Spirit and not in the ways of the flesh, Gal. 5:16. For even though we are filled with the Spirit we still need to make the effort of walking in the Spirit; putting off the old and putting on the new. In fact Paul teaches that he is still awaiting the redemption of his body which will only then bring about full conformity to Christ, Rom. 8:23. Contrary to any perfectionistic teaching Paul is saying he is not perfect.

Have you been afflicted with a false view of perfectionism? There are many iterations of it. John Wesley taught freedom from the love of sin through a second blessing. Others teach an obtaining of perfection by faith. Others talk about letting go and letting God. Some encourage an absolute surrender as a way of obtaining the unobtainable. The path of perfectionism is always a path of a lack of assurance of salvation, and many who try it either give up and indulge sin, or redefine sin making excuses for their sins. Tragically many who teach sinless perfection are often embroiled in scandal. Paul has been a Christian for 30 years and has no illusions about his own perfection. He is a sinner saved by grace on a path of sanctification.

As Christians we can fall into a danger of thinking that we are OK, that we are doing well, that we aren't really that bad. Maybe you have experienced a moment of dissonance where you know you are sinner but right now you just aren't feeling it. It happened to me really when I was talking to an unbeliever about the gospel. The conversation was going around the matter of our sinfulness. Does sin really deserve hell? Is sin so bad? Do we really need a Savior from sin were some of the questions being raised? And I had to remind myself of why sin is as serious as it is. I picked up Is. 6, the vision where Isaiah is being called into the ministry. He sees a vision of God in the temple, the Seraphim are there modelling how we ought to react in the presence of God. They have to cover their eyes as they call out to each other, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.' Isaiah who is a good man, a righteous man who is being set apart to be a prophet sees this vision of the holiness of God. And his whole reaction to see his sinfulness. He talks about

himself being of unclean lips and living among a people of unclean lips. Here is the most religious and moral nation in the world who alone have the tabernacle and the right way to worship God, using the words of the psalms written under inspiration. But Isaiah now sees that he underestimated the holiness of God and feels himself to be a sinner, Israel to be a nation of sinners. 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts!' The question I want us all to ask ourselves is, are we feeling our sinfulness? If we forget the glorious holiness of God we will feel our sins to be small, that we are ok; in fact there is not much we have to work on in our sanctification at all. Paul like Isaiah knows himself to be a 'wretched man'. Yes he is justified, Yes He has the Spirit, Yes he has died and resurrected with Christ, but the remaining sin in him is such that he is not at rest, but committed to a path of strenuous sanctification.

I strive to be perfect

V13, '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.' Paul has put to bed any ideas that he thinks he is perfect or some sort of super Christian; now he puts to bed the idea that those who believe in the gospel of free grace will be antinomians, lazy, be presumptuous and indulge sin not pursue holiness. This is another of those tensions we live in as Christians. We are *simil iustus et peccator*, we are both justified and sinful. This works itself out in the Christian life as those who are forgiven continuing to strive against the sin that dwells in them. Despite our judgement day verdict being brought forward and our sin not being able to separate us from God; there is still a war that we wage against indwelling sin striving for the perfection we cannot ultimately provide for ourselves.

Several things stand out about this path of sanctification. Firstly, it is built on God's work in us. Look back at v12 you will see it says there, 'but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' Because God's grace found and saved me first, I now strive for the holiness of likeness to Christ. The work of being holy begins with God's work in us. It is because we are saved that we work for holiness not in order to be saved. Unlike Paul's striving to be righteous according to the law before he met Christ, Paul is no longer trying to earn his way into heaven by doing the will of God; now he does the will of God because he is going to heaven. We no longer approach our holiness as if our lives depend on it, but out of gratitude for the life we have been given.

Secondly, notice Paul's language of effort. In v12 and 14 we see the language of pressing on. This word in the Greek literally means to lay hold of someone or something. It is the same word used when someone is persecuting someone else, they are pressing on them. It is the language of strenuous effort but particularly pertinent because where Paul was once laying hold of Christians; now he is laying hold of Christlikeness. Here is a man who once gave his all in persecuting the church and now gives his all for the life of the Church. The challenge is often raised: do we serve Christ with greater zeal than we served our sins? Although the Christian is marked by peace and assurance because of the salvation that is theirs they are not to be marked by laziness or apathy. As Paul says in Titus 2:14, Christ 'gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.'

Thirdly, notice that there is a negative and a positive aspect to the way in which we run. In order to run well we must forget what is behind. For Paul this means forgetting all the good things that he used to rely on for righteousness. For us it may be the false ways of salvation we used to cling to, but it can also be sins that hamper us which we need to put away so that we can run freely. Is there something in your past which is clinging to you? Maybe there is a false theology which is holding you back; maybe there is a besetting sin that is holding you back; or maybe it is some trauma or pain that is producing fear or bitterness that is constantly redirecting you from pursuing holiness and is holding your heart so that you are not hungry and thirsty for righteousness but for revenge, or justice.

Positively, we are to strain forward to what lies ahead. There is something that you have to keep before your mind's eye. Paul uses the language of a running race to talk about the finish line and the prize of finishing, v14, 'I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.' You have probably heard of the phrase 'too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good' here Paul shows that idea to be mistaken. It is by being fixed on the new creation that we are able to keep our focus, keep our effectiveness, keep our perseverance up until the end. Paul has in his mind the day of Christ's return. When Jesus returns the dead in Christ shall rise first, and those who are still alive at His coming will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. And then all resurrected saints will rise to meet Christ in the air. This is the upward call that Paul is fixed upon. Now we must keep in mind that Paul's running does not make it so, God is the one who has called, justified, sanctified and will glorify all those whom He has predestined, but this does not keep Paul from striving. Just because he is certain of how the story ends does not stop him from giving his all. But what is it about that day that he thinks about?

Paul's greatest treasure is to know Christ. He wants to know Christ in every possible way. He delights to be reconciled to Him; to be wrapped in His righteousness; to be conformed to His likeness in sanctification; to imitate His sacrificial service of the church; he is even willing to die for the faith of others if needed; he is looking forward to the day he will be resurrected in full conformity to His likeness. But the great prize on that great day is not only will we be like Him, we will see Him face to face, we will be with Him. Rev. 21:1-4, 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Paul is stretching out his hands, he is straining, like an athlete extending themselves when crossing the finish line everything in Paul is bent on that day. If he has to suffer; if he has to sacrifice, he does not care, he is fixed upon that goal. Rom. 8:18, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.' 2 Cor. 4:16-18, 'So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.'

V15-16, '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.' Paul's closing words reveal that this is the way that all mature Christians ought to think. Are you mature? Do you think of the Christian life like Paul? Test yourself!

The mature believer recognizes their own remaining sinfulness despite being justified. This means that the mature will be humble; they will be diligent in fighting sin; they will on a constant guard against sin; confession of sin and the mortification of sin will be a daily part of their walk before God.

Because the mature believer knows this sin in themselves they will also know this sinfulness in others. This means that the mature will be patient with other Christians, gentle with their failings. The legalist and self-righteous, because they believe they can be perfect are impatient and harsh with sin in others. This is seen in parents who are overly harsh in chastising their children for sins they need the Spirit to overcome, and indulging overly harsh measures to try and drive the sin out. This can be sin in the lack of forgiveness extended to others; or a harsh critical spirit; or gloating over others who fall into sin.

The mature Christian recognizes the impossibility of perfection this side of eternity. They have cast aside those false teachings that hold out a false hope of perfection apart from our resurrection on the last day. They do not have consciences in the grip of false expectations constantly beating themselves up for failure. They clear their consciences in confessing their sins and hating them not in pretending they can be perfect. This means that the mature will also have a true definition of sin; those who indulge perfectionistic teaching often have to redefine sin to accommodate their failings.

The mature Christian recognizes that they have to strive for perfection even though they will not reach it. They recognize that God's standards are not accommodated to our abilities. The goal of Christlikeness is still the goal. The mature live in a tension of knowing themselves forgiven, and resting in Christ; yet not resting in their war against sin. They have a high view of human responsibility and do not neglect prayer, bible reading, church attendance, confessing their sins to other Christians, fellowshiping with the saints, and the other things that cultivate our walk in the Spirit.

The mature have left their past behind, no matter how good or painful. Not only that they have their minds fixed on that day when Jesus comes again. They are able to endure suffering; they are able to make any sacrifice because they have a guaranteed inheritance which far outweighs the pains of this life.

The mature are patient with those who differ knowing that the path of sanctification can be one of slow growth. Paul says, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.' Paul is confident that God is at work in His children. The legalist is anxious to control everyone else's sanctification and force it by constant bullying of their consciences. The mature recognize that the Spirit and the Word do the work. All Paul has to do is sow the truth and God will open the minds of His children.

The mature hold to the pure doctrine of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This was the gospel that was first preached to the

Philippians and the gospel that they are to hold true to and not give in to the pressure of persecution and false teaching.

This is the life of those who are saved through a gospel of free grace. Despite the fact that our opponents accuse us of antinomianism, or seek to snare us in their perfectionism. We believe that we are justified and righteous in Christ; even though we are still sinful in ourselves, and are not passive in waging war against sin and striving for Christlikeness.