

## Philippians 3:12-16 — Running To Win

**July 19, 2020**

Good morning CrossWinds! Before we get into our study, I want to remind you that next week is Pastor Chris' going away party. Since we are under COVID precautions, we need to do things a little different. We cannot meet in the building, so the only way people can meet together and say good-bye to Chris is outdoors. That means we will have next week's service outdoors in the parking lot. Since we are in July, it is too hot to have a service outside at 11 a.m. The sun is too hot. Everyone will fry. For only next week, we are having one service outside. It will be 9 a.m. in the parking lot. That will allow elders to pray for Pastor Chris. It will allow everyone to say good bye to Pastor Chris in a socially-distanced way. For next week's parking lot service, you don't need to stay in your car. You can bring your lawn chairs and sit outside of the car during the service.

The next question is, "What about the live stream?" Two-thirds of people are watching online. We cannot livestream a service outside. It is too difficult. I will prerecord the message and the music will be prerecorded during the week for livestream. We will broadcast the prerecorded service at the usual times of 8:15 and 11 a.m. Unfortunately, in the prerecorded service we won't have Pastor Chris. So livestream is like usual for next week without Pastor Chris involved, but the physical service is in the parking lot at 9 a.m. with Pastor Chris so we can say a special good-bye to him. He will be missed. I hope many of us can make the parking lot service.

Today we are studying Philippians 3:12-16. Turn in your Bible to those verses. While you are turning, it is worth noting that, like many of us, the Apostle

Paul was a sports fan. I say that because he constantly used athletic images and analogies to illustrate spiritual truth. One of his favorites illustrations is a runner pouring out his guts to win the prize at the finish line. Paul said that is a good picture of what it is like for a Christian to live the Christian life. We run for Jesus. We run hard. We are not jogging. We run to win.

Let's read the text and we will see Paul's athletic analogy and why the Christian life is to be lived like an athlete running to win.

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. 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, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Philippians 3:12–16 (ESV)

The heart of these verses is verse 14.

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

The theme of these verses is we are to live our Christian lives with all the energy, focus, and determination of a runner heading for the finish line in order to win the prize. The Christian life is not about floating down the lazy river like we are relaxing in an inner tube watching life pass us by. We are to approach our Christian life like Usain Bolt and give all of our effort toward maturing in Christ and focusing on the day we will be with Christ.

This means we should expect the Christian life, and growing to be more like Christ, will take hard work and effort. Spiritual growth doesn't just happen. Spiritual maturity doesn't take place by osmosis. People don't just wake up and automatically find themselves spiritually mature.

It reminds me of going to a library. Have you ever been to a library surrounded by thousands of books and felt incredibly smart just because you were around so many books? The problem is being in a library doesn't make you smart. You have to do the hard work of actually taking the books off the shelf and reading them to harvest their wisdom. The same is true for spiritual maturity. It doesn't just happen by being around a Bible or being around Christians. You have to do the hard work of opening the Bible and reading it. You have to pursue knowing Christ, not just be around Christians.

When Paul wrote that spiritual maturity takes work, like an athlete straining to win the prize, this is an especially important point for him to make, especially in this part of his letter to the Philippians.

Last week, we looked at Paul's personal testimony. He was a man that started with an impressive resume that he planned to show God on the day of judgment because he wanted to earn his way into heaven. Paul came to realize his resume was rubbish in God's eyes because God demanded perfection and Paul wasn't even close. Paul burned his old resume and had a new resume with only one thing on it. That was the name of Jesus. Jesus was the only one that could make him right before God. Jesus lived the perfect life Paul did not live. Jesus died in Paul's place the death Paul deserved to die. The good news of the gospel is that by simply placing our faith and trust in Jesus to pay for our sin, and asking Jesus to be in charge of our lives, we are born again. All of our sin is taken away from us and put on Jesus. All of Jesus' righteousness and perfection is put on us. We are guaranteed forgiveness of our sin because of Jesus. We are

guaranteed an eternity with God because of Jesus. We are born again and made into new creations because of Jesus. There is nothing we do to earn any of this. We just receive it by faith.

We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith, by the finished work of Jesus alone. There is nothing we do. We just receive it by faith as a gift. The problem is that can easily be misunderstood. It is easy to think this means there is no work and no effort in the Christian life. It is easy to think that once we have placed our faith in Jesus, we just float on the lazy river waiting for eternity. It is easy to begin to think that since all we do to be saved is place our faith in Jesus, that means there is no work and effort needed for us to seek spiritual maturity in Jesus. It is easy to think we don't need to do the hard work of fighting sin. It is easy to think that as long as we can remember coming forward to give our lives to Jesus at summer camp when we were children, there is nothing more to the Christian life. We are done.

That is absolutely not true. While we are saved by faith, there is still hard work in the Christian life when it comes to pursuing spiritual maturity. These verses straighten out what could become a misunderstanding of the first 11 verses in this chapter. While we are saved by faith in Jesus alone without our work, spiritual maturity in Christ Jesus will take work. That is one of the main purposes of these verses. They address the often misunderstood relationship between salvation by God's grace through faith and spiritual maturity in Christ, which will take work.

These verses also address an important issue. They address the erroneous line of thinking that has cropped up a number of times in church history called perfectionism.

Perfectionism is the silly belief that we can become so spiritually mature in this life that we can become perfect before heaven. According to the doctrine of perfectionism, when we achieve the perfect state, we no longer need to pursue Christ because we have become sinless and perfect like Christ. In these verses, Paul destroys the doctrine of perfectionism.

Some of you may be familiar with the false teaching of perfectionism. Others of you have never heard of it. If you came from a Methodist background or a Wesleyan background or a Nazarene background, you might remember them teaching perfectionism. Sometimes they call it total sanctification or complete sanctification. It means that the believer in this life, before death, can reach a place of moral and spiritual perfection and sinlessness so no more spiritual maturity is necessary.<sup>1</sup> They do not teach this is something that happens by people pursuing spiritual maturity through the hard work of renouncing sin, and seeking Jesus through God's Word. Instead they teach there is a second moment of instant grace from God that is secondary from our salvation moment when the Christian becomes momentarily, temporarily, or permanently sinless. Some even go so far as to say the sinful nature is even taken away.<sup>2</sup> That is perfectionism. It has its roots in Pelagius in the early church and John Wesley in the recent church. We do not find it taught in the Bible. It is a dangerous doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theopedia.com/wesleyan-perfectionism>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/brandondsmith/2015/03/john-wesleys-christian-perfection-myths-realities-and-critique/>

that says there is a second conversion experience later in life that can make you sinless in this life. It simply is not in the Bible. While it is true that some Christians go through large steps of spiritual growth in this life, the Bible is clear that nobody becomes perfect and sinless in this life.

When John Wesley taught perfectionism, many people strongly disagreed with him. The only way John Wesley was able to maintain this teaching was by claiming there was a difference between committing sin and making mistakes. Every time he did something wrong, he said it was a mistake, not a sin. To me, that is trying to play a trick with language that does not work. This is not biblical, and in these verses, Paul completely disagreed with it.

How do these verses destroy the false doctrine of perfectionism? At least three times in these verses, Paul said that he was not perfect. He was still a work in progress. Paul was one of the most spiritually mature people to walk the planet. At this point, Paul was a Christian for 30 years. He had seen the risen Jesus. He was an apostle. He has been transported to heaven, whether in the body or out of the body, he did not know.<sup>3</sup> He was the most spiritually mature person out there. In these verses Paul was adamant that though he was completely and totally saved by faith in Jesus alone and he was spiritually mature, he was not perfect and he wouldn't be perfect until he got to heaven. Paul was still working hard to know Jesus better and love him more. If the Apostle Paul was adamant that he was not perfect, I don't think John Wesley had room to claim he was perfect. That destroys the doctrine of perfectionism for me.

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

So we are made right with God completely, fully, and only by placing our faith in Jesus. We will be perfect when we get to heaven and are with Jesus. Right now we are not perfect and must still work hard to mature spiritually and become more like Jesus.

This brings up what seems to be a good question in many people's minds.

### **Why work on spiritual maturity?**

If I am going to heaven simply by my faith in Christ, and I will be perfect when I get there, why should I work so hard now to renounce sin and do the hard work of knowing Christ and becoming mature in Christ? Why rush it? Why do all the hard work of fighting sin now, if I will automatically be like Jesus then?

While this initially sounds like a reasonable question, the more we think about it, we realize it is a goofy question. If someone is a Christian and the Holy Spirit has come into his life when he placed his faith in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit has made him into a new creation, he will want to grow. He will have an insatiable hunger to grow. Everything that is alive wants to grow. You can't be spiritually alive in Christ and not have a hunger to grow in Christ!

Friends of mine have a newborn child. That child does not wonder if she should do all the hard work of eating and growing. By virtue of being alive, that baby has an insatiable appetite and a desire to grow. That child gets Mom up in the middle of the night for extra feedings because she wants to grow. When something is alive, it will have a burning desire to grow. The only things that aren't interested in growing are dead things, not living things. Spiritually dead

people will not want to grow in Christ. Spiritually alive people will always want to grow in Christ. It doesn't matter if it is hard work.

So Paul said that by virtue of placing our faith in Christ, we are born again. Not only are we positionally made right with God by what Jesus has done for us but the Holy Spirit has come into our lives and made us into new creations. The new spiritual life in us will have an insatiable appetite to grow, like a newborn child. Paul told us we must lean into that. We must pursue growing in Christ with all the intensity of a runner heading for the finish line, a runner that is running to win.

In these verses, Paul gave us seven principles of spiritual maturity.

### **1. Spiritual maturity begins when I realize I need to mature.**

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. Philippians 3:12 (ESV)

I love the way Paul said he had not already obtained Christ or become perfect in Christ. This is the first of three times Paul claimed he was not perfect. Paul knew his position with God was fixed because of his faith in Jesus but he also knew the condition of his relationship was not fixed. It was something he needed to keep working on. He needed to improve it.

As I was thinking of a way to illustrate this for you, what came to mind is marriage. Our position in marriage is fixed. People are married for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and health until death do them part. While our position in marriage does not change, the condition of our relationship with our spouses does change. A marriage has great days, and it has tough days. A married couple needs to constantly work on improving its marriage to produce



more great days and less tough days. Paul said this is the way it works in our relationship with Jesus. While our position with Christ is fixed by our faith, the condition of our relationship with Jesus is not fixed. We need to pursue knowing Jesus more so the experience of that relationship constantly improves.

Incidentally, those who subscribe to the doctrine of perfectionism don't see the need to constantly improve their relationship with Jesus. Anyone who thinks he or she is already spiritually perfect will not pursue improving what he or she thinks doesn't need to be improved. They think they arrived. Worse yet, instead of spending their lives pursuing a better spiritual condition, perfectionists spend their energy defending their claim to being spiritually perfect. The fallacy of this becomes apparent when you think of this in parallel to the marriage relationship.

There is never a time when the condition of our marriages are perfect. There is never a time when the condition of our marriages are so good, they cannot be improved. That is silly. The only way to great marriages is to know we always need to work on our marriages. We need to continually pursue better marriages. We never arrive at perfect marriages. It is no different in our relationship with Christ. It is never perfect. It can always be improved.

That is why Paul said these important words — “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.” Paul wanted everyone to know he was still working on his spiritual maturity. He was not everything he should have been in Christ, even though he had been following Jesus for 30 years. Even the Apostle Paul had much to learn about Jesus. Can anybody echo that feeling? I can. I am

not spiritually perfect or morally perfect. I can easily slip into sin. I am still a work in progress. I am still learning more about Jesus and learning to trust Jesus.

The first step to spiritual maturity is realizing we need to pursue improving our relationship with Jesus. People who don't think their relationship with Jesus needs to improve are spiritually immature people. Even if we don't consciously subscribe to the doctrine of perfectionism, it is easy to subconsciously subscribe to it by thinking our relationship with Christ is good enough and doesn't need to improve.

Thinking our relationship with Jesus is good enough is like saying, "I don't want to become a better husband because I am good enough," or "I don't want to become a better mother because I am good enough." That kind of thinking is foolishness.

Living things want to grow. Only dead things are content to stay the same.

## **2. Spiritual maturity takes effort and hard work.**

**...but I press on to make it my own... Philippians 3:12 (ESV)**

Paul said he pressed on to become more spiritually mature in his life. The word "press on" in the Greek means to run after something, to pursue something, to chase it. It was used to describe a dog chasing a rabbit. It was used to describe a sprinter going after the finish. It is aggressive. It is energetic. Paul said he was pursuing spiritual maturity with all the effort and focus of a runner going after the tape at the finish line.

Paul's point was pursuing spiritual maturity is not like jogging. I have gone back to jogging a few days a weeks. It is a casual thing. It is an easy thing. I take baby steps. It is more of a gentle shuffle. There is not much sweating involved.

There is a big difference between jogging around the block and sprinting around the block, where the sound of feet hitting the pavement leaves people thinking a race horse is approaching them from behind.

The problem is most of us are pursuing maturity in Christ like we are joggers, not sprinters, and racers. We are pursuing spiritual maturity as a casual thing. We are not focusing on it and giving it serious effort. We don't think spiritual maturity requires hard work and focus. That just isn't true.

We need to have a plan. We need to read our Bible on a daily basis or multiple times a week. I know that doesn't easily fit in our schedule. That is expected. If spiritual maturity is a casual thing, we won't have time. If spiritual maturity is something we focus on, we will make time. If spiritual maturity is important, we will get up early to make time to pray and read our Bible. If Bible memory is important, we will take the time to write down a memory verse on a card and keep it in front of us during the week. Spiritual maturity doesn't just happen by going with the flow. It takes hard work, sacrifice, and focus. Look how the Christian life is described in other parts of the Scripture.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 (ESV)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1–2 (ESV)

The point is that spiritually maturity is not something we pursue casually in our free time. It must be something we prioritize and make time for. The vast majority of the church pursues spiritual maturity like we are jogging. Few people strain to know Christ. Few people actually put in hard work to pursue Christ. We need to dispel from our thinking the idea that spiritual maturity happens by osmosis.

Let me give you an illustration that may get me in trouble. Hopefully, I will say it in such a way that is helpful and gets my point across. When I was growing up, I was told to always read the Daily Bread for my quiet time in the morning. The Daily Bread is one verse of Scripture with two or three small paragraphs of devotional thought that go with the verse. The Daily Bread is not a bad thing, but I came to dislike it because it is a minimal thing. It is like eating one Ritz cracker with a touch of Cheese Whiz on it for breakfast. That is better than nothing but you will not grow healthy on that kind of diet. While the Daily Bread is better than nothing, nobody will grow spiritually mature in Christ if that is all he or she reads from the Bible on a daily basis. Minimal effort will give minimal results.

What should you do instead of the Daily Bread? Take a small book of the Bible, such as one of Paul's letters, then read and reread it. You don't have to read the whole letter in one sitting. Maybe read two or three chapters a day. When you are done reading the letter once, read it again. Read it a dozen times. Each time you read it, you will start to see more in it that you missed the last time you read it. Read it slow. Think about the words. Don't just fly through the words. As you read, highlight what is important to you. As you read, write notes about

what you read in the margin or in a notebook. Keep reading that Bible book until you find yourself quoting portions of it in your head out of habit because you know it so well. Keep reading it until you unexpectedly find yourself quoting portions of that book in helpful and applicable ways to others in your conversations with them. At that point, the Word of God is flowing like blood through your veins. At that point, the Word of God is changing you and steering you, because it has become part of you.

That takes hard work. Maximal effort in knowing the Word of God produces the greatest results in spiritual maturity. Minimal effort in the Word of God produces minimal results. That is the way spiritual maturity works.

Since Paul loved athletic analogies, following in Paul's footsteps, let me give an athletic analogy of my own. To be in the best physical shape, we need to have a disciplined workout plan. When we step into the YMCA, we need to have a plan and follow our plan. If we step into the YMCA and just do what we feel like, we won't do much work and see much physical improvement. In a similar way, we need to have a plan when it comes to reading our Bible, when it comes to prayer, when it comes to being with other Christians, and when it comes to reading good Christian books. If we just do what we feel like at the moment, we will not become spiritually strong. That is true with our physical fitness and our spiritual fitness. In addition, when we execute our workout plan, we need to push ourselves and not go easy or we will not get physically stronger. The same is true spiritually. If we are going to be spiritually mature, we will need to push ourselves.

We will need to spiritually sweat. If we always do just what feels good at the moment, we won't get very far.

Let me extend this illustration farther. When we go to the YMCA, many of us like to get involved in workout classes. Classes are great because they push us to work harder than we would push ourselves. That is why we need to work out around other people. The same is true for us spiritually. That is one of the reasons why we come to study the Word of God together. That is one of the reasons I teach. That is one of the reasons we have CrossWinds University classes. They push us to greater levels of spiritual maturity than we would ever achieve if we were just reading the Bible on our own.

Spiritual maturity takes effort and hard work. There is no substitute.

### **3. We pursue spiritual maturity when our hearts are filled with gratitude to Jesus.**

...but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.  
Philippians 3:12 (ESV)

This is fascinating. The reason Paul pushed and worked so hard to become more like Jesus was because Jesus worked so hard to save him. Paul wanted to work hard to make Jesus his own because Jesus worked hard to make Paul his own. Jesus humbled himself by coming from heaven to Earth and taking on a human body. Jesus then died a horrid death to save us from our sin. Jesus then pursued Paul when he was on the Damascus Road. Paul was a persecutor of the church. Paul was on a one-way trip to hell when Jesus pursued him and knocked him on his butt and saved him. Jesus took Paul from justly deserving an eternity in hell to unjustly receiving an eternity in heaven. God is so good. Since

God was so good to Paul by pursuing him, out of gratitude to Jesus, Paul wanted to pursue Christ to know him better.

A heart filled with gratitude to Jesus will desire to do the hard work of pursuing Jesus out of gratitude because he did the hard work of pursuing us.

Jesus pursued Paul on the road to Damascus and saved him there. Don't many of us have our Damascus Road experiences? Don't we remember when God took us from the dead-end life we were living and opened our eyes to Jesus? Out of gratitude for Jesus pursuing us, we must respond by pursuing him.

The most important thing that can happen to anyone one of us in this life is that Christ has pursued us and called us to himself. The most important thing we can do with our lives is pursue Jesus and know him.

Not only is pursuing knowing Jesus the most important thing we can do with our lives but it is also the most satisfying thing we can do with our lives. There is nothing more satisfying in life than becoming more like Jesus. Lest you think spiritual maturity is a boring thing, you need to know that spiritual maturity is a thrilling thing. Nobody ever regrets becoming a more godly mother. Nobody ever regrets becoming a more humble, Christ-like father. You will never regret becoming a more godly teenager when the rest of your friends pursue sin. You will never regret Christian maturity. Out of gratitude for all Jesus has done for us, we cannot help but want to pursue becoming more like him.

#### **4. Spiritual maturity requires learning to focus on one thing.**

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... Philippians 3:13 (ESV)

Notice Paul said for the second time that he was *not* spiritually mature. He was still pursuing spiritual maturity. “I do not consider myself to have made it my own.”

Here Paul taught us how to pursue maturity and greatness in anything. Paul said, “one-thing I do.” Paul learned *the secret of progress in anything is learning to not be distracted by everything*. Let’s return to athletics. Every runner knows that when they run to win, the only thing they can focus on is the finish line. They cannot turn their heads to look at the crowd and wave to their mothers. They cannot turn their heads to look behind them to see how close the next runners are to them. They need to stay focused on one thing — the finish line. That is the secret of making progress in anything in life. It is learning to shut out the distractions of everything else in life to focus on only one thing in life. We live in a world filled with distractions. Most of them come from the cell phones in our pockets or the computers on our desks. We need to temporarily turn off our e-mail, phone notifications, Snap Chat, text messages, and Instagram. It doesn’t mean we can never look at those things, but for periods of time, if we are ever going to make progress, if we are every going to become great at anything, we must learn to concentrate on only one thing.

Growing up, I remember learning to do this. I was easily distracted when it came to homework. I needed to set a timer. I would study for 20 minutes, then do something else for five minutes. I did that back and forth schedule of study time mixed with free time until I hard learned to study for a long time. I needed to learn to build my concentration on only one thing.



The world is full of people who are mediocre at many things, but the world is in short supply of people that are great at one thing. The reason so few people are great at one thing is because too many people are constantly distracted everything. Be a great person. Learn how to shut out the distractions. Learn how to focus, especially when it comes to spiritual maturity.

This means when it comes to Bible reading, we need to fight to find an undistracted time so we can focus. This means when it comes to memorizing a Bible verse, do not try to memorize a Bible verse while watching TV. It doesn't work. When it comes to prayer, do not try to do it in a crowd of your friends. It is too easy to be distracted. When we try to read a helpful Christian book, do not do it with headphones over your ears and music blaring in your head. You will not be able to focus on one thing and make progress.

Next Paul tells us that when it comes to making progress in something, we need to forget the past and focus on the future.

**I need to forget the achievements and the failures of my past.**

Think about this from the perspective of a runner. There is no reason for a runner to look backward. There is nothing behind him or her that can be changed. That is history. All that matters is what is in front of him or her and running the best for the finish line. What should we forget about our past? Everything! Forget both the good things and the bad things.

We need to forget about our achievements and accomplishments in the past. It is silly to have a runner at the starting blocks talking to the other runners about races he won in the past. Past races don't matter. All that matters is that

race on that day. You may have been good runner in the past but if you are not a good runner now, it won't matter. Good athletes learn to forget the accomplishments of their past and focus all their energy on the race they have in front of them. If they don't, they won't and can't perform at their best. They will be distracted by history.

We see the same thing in the church. I once served in a church that had a number of older people. They were great folks. I loved them dearly. The problem is they always talked about the good old days of the church whenever it came to a current problem. In the good old days the potlucks tasted better. In the good old days the music was better. They also told me that in the good old days the preaching was better.

In one sense, I was very sympathetic to them. As older people, the good old days when they were in their prime was something nice for them to remember. The problem was constantly talking about the good old days of the past was irrelevant to the problems we were facing in the present. Who cares about how good things were in the past? We have a couple on the edge of divorce right now. We have children that need to learn more about Jesus right now. We have people who need to hear about Jesus right now. Today is what matters. Today is the only thing we can change. While I am thankful for the good things that happened in the past, we need to forget that and focus on today. That is the only thing we can change.

It is also important to not just forget the successes of the past, but it is also important to forget the failures of the past. When it came to Thomas Edison

inventing the light bulb, it is said he had more than 1,000 unsuccessful attempts. Thankfully, he learned to forget the failures of his past and press on to a brighter future (pun intended). Too often Christians let their lives become controlled by the failures of their pasts so they don't run well in the present. That is a ploy of Satan. People will say, "I cannot do much in the church. I am divorced. I am a failure." People will say, "I can't do much for Jesus. I came from a terrible background. I was so far from God. I am just thankful to sit in the pew. I can't and won't expect to do more for Jesus." That is a lie from Satan. Forget the failures of the past.

If you want some encouragement, look to the Apostle Paul. He came from a terrible background. He was a terrorist who arrested and murdered Christians. Look what God did with his life in spite of his messy past. If God can take Paul the persecutor of the church and make him one of the most influential men for Christ in all of history, he can take your life with your messy past and use you in ways you can't imagine for his kingdom.

Other times, people in the church hold on to grudges of the past, bitterness of the past, and people refuse to work with one another in the church because they are paralyzed by the past. Paul said, "Forget what is behind." It will not help you in the present. Let it go. Fix your eyes on the prize of being like Christ.

**I need to put all of my effort into being more like Jesus in the future.**

This goes back to our runner reaching for the finish line. The word straining in the Greek refers to stretching a muscle to its limits. It means extreme

effort. It is giving every last ounce of energy that we have as we reach for the prize. We are to give that kind of concentration and effort toward spiritual maturity. We are to give all of our effort, to strain and work hard to be like Jesus. We are to fight sin by confessing it to Jesus and others. We are to read the Word. You are to pray with your spouse, if God has given you a spouse. We are to stay regular in church and Christian friendships, giving it our all.

#### **5. Spiritual maturity in this life comes with great reward in the next life.**

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

Paul said we need to realize that pursuing spiritual maturity in this life will come with great reward for that in the next life. Isn't it great to know God will reward us for our pursuit of knowing him and becoming more like him?

Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. Revelation 22:12 (NIV)

When we see Jesus we will be rewarded by Jesus based on how we lived for him and matured in him.

Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 2 John 8 (NIV)

God desires to reward us when we see him.

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)

The writer of Hebrews promised that we will be rewarded in the next life for pursuing spiritual maturity in this life. Pursuing being like Jesus is hard work, but God loves to reward us for that work. A spiritually mature life is the most rewarding life.

## **6. There is no other path to spiritual maturity besides the one Paul gave.**

Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Philippians 3:15 (ESV)

I can imagine the reaction of the Philippians to hearing these words from Paul. “Hard work to know Jesus better... Yuck! Isn’t there an easier way?” At that time, some groups said there were shortcuts to spiritual maturity. The Judaizers told people the shortcut to spiritual maturity was to be circumcised. The gnostics told people the short cut to spiritual maturity was through secret knowledge. Paul said, “Absolutely not!” There is no short cut to spiritual maturity.

The only path to spiritual maturity is the one Paul gave. It will take hard work. There is no other way.

Paul said also, “if in anything you think otherwise,” if you disagree with him on this, “God will reveal that to you.” What did Paul mean by these words? Paul said, “If you think I am wrong about any of this, I can’t help you. Really I can’t. Nobody else can help you if you think pursuing spiritual maturity comes by a shortcut instead of hard work. If you don’t believe me, I will just leave you in God’s hands and let God take care of convincing you I am right.”

How does God take care of this? How does God teach people that spiritual maturity comes through hard work and is worth pursuing? Usually it is by allowing suffering in our lives. It is by allowing trials in our lives. When our lives fall apart, where do we go? We get on our knees. We pull out our Bibles. We cry out to God for help. We cry out to God asking for wisdom and guidance in our times of need. We do the hard work of pursuing Jesus, and as we do, Jesus

draws us close. We find ourselves maturing in Jesus through the hard work of pursuing him in our times of desperation.

### **7. As we gain spiritual maturity, don't become complacent and lose spiritual maturity.**

**Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Philippians 3:16 (ESV)**

Paul tells us it takes effort to hold ground, not just to take ground. It takes effort to hold the spiritual maturity we have, not just to gain the spiritual maturity we do not have.

It is like an athlete. Take a professional pitcher in baseball. They work hard and long hours to be able to pitch a baseball at almost 100 miles per hour with great accuracy. They are mature in their sport. What happens if they walk away from their sport and stop pitching for two years? It won't take long for them to lose ground. They may always be better than an average pitcher but they will have lost the skills of being a great pitcher.

It is no different when it comes to spiritual maturity. It is something we must continually pursue throughout our lives, and we never get to a point where we have read the Bible enough so we don't need to read it anymore. We never get to the point where we have prayed enough so we don't need to pray anymore. We never get to the point where we have been to church enough, so we don't need to be part of the family of God anymore. As soon as we get that attitude, we will lose the ground we have gained. We will lose our maturity.

If our relationship with Jesus is not growing, it is dying. If it is not maturing, it is weakening.

## Conclusion

We need to ask ourselves, how is our walk with Christ? Are we pursuing spiritual maturity? Are we forgetting what is behind us and straining with all our efforts like a runner to grow in Christ?

While none of us has formally adopted the false theology of perfectionism where we think we are so spiritually mature in Christ that we cannot improve in Christ, the danger is some of us may have adopted practical perfectionism in our hearts. We are content with our relationship with Jesus. We are no longer striving to improve our relationship with Christ. Is that you? Are you content where you are? Are you no longer putting in self-discipline, effort, and hard work to know Jesus better?

My friends, there is a scary truth that goes thinking the Christian life is nothing more than floating down the lazy river. The only things that don't grow are dead things. Living things always growing. Are you dead in Christ or alive in Christ? Will you decide to pursue growing in Christ this week by making a plan and following it. Do you have a plan to read your Bible? Do you have a plan to memorize a verse a week? Do you have a plan to pray with your spouse? Do you have a plan to give the same kind of effort, dedication, and discipline you give in the YMCA to Jesus? The only way to grow in Christ is to run. Run to win.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, and time with his family. Feel free to contact him at [www.Christ2RCulture.com](http://www.Christ2RCulture.com) ([www.c2rc.com](http://www.c2rc.com))

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