THE CHRISTIAN GROWTH PROCESS

Philippians 3:12-16

By

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For many years I have jogged, but I've never won a race. There are at least three reasons I've never won: (1) I've only entered one race so far in my life. You don't win races if you don't enter them. (2) I don't have the attitude it takes to win. Winners are a determined bunch. I don't have that kind of mind-set. (3) I don't put into my running the kind of determined effort required to win. Winners don't just jog for exercise; they're into it all the way. They read magazines about running; they set goals for themselves; they train and push themselves toward those goals. But I don't work at it as they do.

Several times in the New Testament the Christian life is pictured as a race (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 12:1). In our text the apostle Paul uses that analogy to describe his own spiritual experience. In so doing, he gives us some basic principles for spiritual growth or, to use the athletic analogy, how to get into shape spiritually so that we can run to win the race set before us.

Last week we saw the goal of the Christian life (3:10-11): To know Jesus Christ and to be like Him. Christianity is a developing personal relationship with the living Lord Jesus. In 3:12-16 Paul shows us how to reach this goal through the process of Christian growth:

**To grow as a Christian you've got to be in the race, have the proper attitude, and give it the proper effort.**

1. **To grow as a Christian you've got to be in the race.**

   This may sound perfectly obvious, but in reality there are a lot of people trying to run in a race they've never entered. They're trying to grow as Christians by living a good life and doing what Christians are supposed to do, but they've never truly become Christians in the first place. As we saw in 3:4-6, Paul himself thought that he was doing everything he needed to do in order to be pleasing unto God. He was sincere; he was dedicated; he was...
zealous and energetic. But there was one major problem: he was not genuinely converted to Jesus Christ.

Because it's such an important principle and because so many people think that being sincere and trying hard is the way to be right with God, Paul repeats it again in verse 12. He is speaking here of his effort in the Christian race, but he clarifies again that behind his effort is the foundational fact that he was first apprehended by Jesus Christ: “I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.”

The word “lay hold” is an intensified word that means to apprehend or seize something after a pursuit. It is used of a demon seizing a boy and throwing him to the ground (Mark 9:18). If a policeman chased a robber and apprehended him, he would have a firm grip on the man, so as not to let him get away. Paul says that the reason he runs in this race is because Christ Jesus chased him down, seized him, and put him in the race. On his part, Paul was headed for Damascus to persecute Christians. But the Lord seized Paul and turned him around so that he began serving Jesus.

The same idea is reflected in verse 14, “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” God’s call almost always refers to His effectual calling of His elect unto salvation (Rom. 9:11; 1 Cor. 1:24, 26). We’re saved because God called us to salvation. To use the sports analogy, it’s as if a coach calls a player to himself and says, “I want you to go into the game.” The player is in the game because the coach has called him into the game. He gives it his best effort to please the coach who called him to play.

If you have not been laid hold of by Christ, you’re not in the race. The Christian life begins not with the weakness of a human decision to follow God, but with God’s powerful, effectual calling you and laying hold of your life. This means that no Christian is his own person; you belong to Jesus Christ who bought you. The reason you’re in the race is because Christ grabbed you and said, “I want you to run for Me.” Because He laid hold of you, you give it all you’ve got. It’s the same balance we saw in 2:12-13, that because our salvation comes from God who both wills and works in us, therefore we must work it out.
Thus Christian growth is a process that stems from the definite awareness of being apprehended by Christ Jesus. To grow as a Christian, you've got to be in the race because Christ laid hold of your life. This is foundational to all else.

2. To grow as a Christian, you've got to have the proper attitude.

Any athlete will tell you that attitude is often the difference between victory and defeat. A team that lacks in raw talent can sometimes defeat a team with much more ability because they have the right attitude going into the game. Attitude is crucial in the spiritual life as well. The Greek word translated “to think” or “be minded” (in 3:15, “have this attitude”) is used 10 times in Philippians out of 26 New Testament uses. Since the theme of Philippians is joy, there is a definite correlation between attitude and joy. Two strands of Paul’s attitude come through in these verses: He views Christian growth as a lifelong process, so he has a long-haul attitude; and, he views Christian growth as the kind of thing where you never can say, “I’ve arrived,” so you have to keep moving ahead.

A. The long-haul attitude: Christian growth is a lifelong process.

Paul had been converted for at least 25 years when he wrote Philippians. There is no question that he is one of the outstanding believers of all times. Yet over and over he reveals his mind-set, that he was still in the process: “Not that I have already obtained it” (3:12), meaning, “I have not yet come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings and conformity to His death in a complete and total way.” “I do not regard myself as having laid hold if it yet” (3:13). Twice he says, “I press on” (3:12, 14); the word literally means to pursue, and by way of extension, to persecute (Paul uses it of himself in this way in 3:6). He’s still “reaching forward” (3:13) as a runner stretches toward the finish line. He’s been at it for 25 years, but he doesn’t view himself as having arrived!

The Christian life isn’t a 100 yard dash; it’s a lifelong marathon. You need the mentality of a long-distance runner if you’re going to make it. You may have been a Christian for 40 or 50 years, but you can’t start thinking, “I don’t need to grow any more” and
stop running. Long distance runners have to complete the entire course; they can’t decide after many miles that they’ve run far enough.

This attitude of viewing Christian growth as a lifelong process is crucial for at least two reasons. First, we all have the human tendency to want quick fixes and easy answers to difficult problems. I believe that many get into the charismatic movement because it appeals to this desire for easy answers: “Do you have major problems? What you need is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray over you in tongues, you’ll have an emotional experience and speak in tongues yourself, and you’ll be delivered once and for all from all these tough problems you’re struggling with.” They emphasize instant, miraculous deliverance from any problem. I wish it was that easy!

Another form of this teaching is that you need to just “let go and let God.” If you struggle against sin or wrestle with stubborn emotional problems, you’re told that it’s because you’re in the flesh. The implication is that life in the Spirit is effortless and easy once you’ve discovered the secret of “the exchanged life.”

But both of these views go against the clear teaching of Scripture, that the spiritual life is a continual battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are instructed to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), which also is an athletic metaphor. There is no quick, easy, instantaneous way to get in top physical conditioning. You have to work at it every day, and the day you stop is the day you start going downhill. Olympic champions who retire do not stay in shape the rest of their lives because of their former training. They have to keep working out all their lives. It is the same spiritually.

The second reason it’s important to maintain this attitude, that Christian growth is a lifelong process, is that it enables us to be gracious and patient with one another. If you view Christian growth as an instant experience where you’re delivered once and for all from all problems, then if you’ve got problems, obviously it’s because you haven’t had this experience. So, get with it! Stop having your problems! This view makes us impatient and intolerant toward people who are struggling.
But if we remember that growth is lifelong and that even Paul admits that he hasn’t arrived after 25 years, we can bear with one another and be gracious to those who are still struggling with problems even after many years of being Christians. The analogy of how we grow as humans is helpful and applicable to us as children of God. It takes years for children to grow to maturity. You don’t expect more of them than they’re capable of at their stage in life. You expect babies to dirty their diapers and to burp in your face and to cry in the middle of the night. If your teenager is still dirtying his diapers and burping in your face and waking you up with his crying in the night, you’ve got a problem! If a brother or sister is growing, we need to be patient and gracious, realizing that it is a lifelong process. We need this long-haul attitude. Spiritually, the important thing to ask yourself is, “Am I actively involved in the growth process?”


If anyone could think he had arrived, it would have been Paul. But he always kept in mind that he wasn’t there yet. He didn’t want to rest on his laurels or to start coasting. Remember, this is a man who had had numerous visions of the Lord. He had been caught up into heaven and had seen things that no other living person had seen. He had written some of the most profound theology ever penned. But his attitude was, “I need to keep moving ahead.” You see this even in his final days, when he was in the dungeon in Rome, and he wrote to Timothy asking him to bring his coat, and then he adds, “and the books, especially the parchments” (2 Tim. 4:13). He was facing execution, but he wanted his books so he could keep growing!

In verse 13, notice that “I do” is in italics, meaning that it is not in the original. The brevity of Paul’s phrase in Greek makes it more emphatic: “But one thing!” Paul’s single attitude of always moving ahead has three ramifications: Forgetting the past, reaching forward to the future, and pressing on in the present.

(1) An attitude of moving ahead from the past: Leave it there! “Forgetting what lies behind.” Again, the picture is of a runner who does not make the mistake of looking over his shoulder. His eyes are fixed on the goal. If he made mistakes earlier in the race, he
doesn’t kick himself by replaying them in his mind. If he did well, he doesn’t gloat about it. He leaves the past behind and keeps moving on toward the finish line.

Many Christians today are being told that to experience healing from their difficult pasts, they need to delve into their pasts and relive the hurtful things that happened to them. This approach has come into the church from the world, not from the Word. It would be wrong to say that verse 13 is all that the Bible says about the past. Even earlier in the chapter, Paul has mentioned his own past life in Judaism. It can be helpful to reflect on what happened to us in the past in order to understand where we’re at in the present and where we need to grow. There is a biblical case for self-examination, which means evaluating things that have happened in the past, both good and bad, as a means of growing now.

But our text shows that there needs to be a balance. Paul means here that we should not be controlled by the past. Someone has used the analogy of a car’s rear view mirror. You don’t drive by looking in the mirror. You drive by looking ahead out of the windshield. But it’s helpful to take occasional glances in your mirror and use the information to make decisions about how to drive safely in the present and future. But if you spend too much time looking in your mirror, you’ll probably crash because you’re not paying attention to the present. In the same way, we need to take periodic glances backward, but we also need to put the past (good and bad) behind us, accept God’s grace and enabling for the present, and move on with what He is calling us to do now.

(2) A n attitude of moving ahead toward the future: Aim for the goal! “Reaching forward to what lies ahead” (3:13). Paul uses a term describing a runner who stretches and strains every muscle as he runs toward the finish line. “The upward call of God” is His call to salvation which culminates when we stand before Him to give an account and receive rewards for how we’ve run the race. Will our work stand the test and receive His “Well done” because we did it out of love for Him and for His glory? Or, will it be burned up and we be saved, but as through fire (1 Cor. 3:14-15)? Everything we do--how we conduct ourselves in our families and in public; how we spend our time and money; how we serve the Lord--should all
be done with the mind-set, "I’m going to stand before the Lord and give an account someday; I want to be pleasing unto Him."

(3) A n attitude of moving ahead in the present: Keep moving! “I press on toward the goal” (3:13-14). Paul had a holy dissatisfaction with where he was at, so he kept pressing on. Yesterday’s blessings or experiences wouldn’t do for today. He walked daily with the Lord, always wanting more, always learning, always growing, never treading water or coasting.

In 3:12 Paul says that he is not perfect, but in 3:15 he implies that he and some of his readers are perfect. He isn’t contradicting himself within four verses. In 3:12, he means that absolute perfection is not attainable in this life. In 3:15, he uses the word in relative terms to mean “mature.” We can become mature, and the mature Christian will share Paul’s view that he is setting forth here, that we haven’t arrived, but that we can and must keep growing.

But Paul recognizes that some will not share his attitude because they are not mature. To those who disagree with him, Paul says, “Stay teachable and God will show you where you need to grow” (see 3:15). He adds verse 16 so that no one will mistake him to mean that you can just kick back and not work at growing. He means that wherever you’re at, you need to keep living in obedience to the light God has shown you and keep seeking Him for more. If God has dealt with some sin in your life, don’t slip back into it again. If He has cleaned out a dirty closet of your life, don’t start throwing junk in there again.

If you want to grow in the Lord, it’s essential that you maintain a teachable heart. A teachable heart is humble, because it admits, “I may be wrong or lacking in understanding; I may need to repent and change.” A teachable heart is submissive, ready to respond to new light God gives from His Word. A person with a teachable heart is not a know-it-all, refusing to learn from other Christians. With that kind of teachable heart, keep moving in the present.

3. To grow as a Christian, you’ve got to give it the proper effort.

We need the balance of God’s Word here. Some say, “God is sovereign and we don’t need to do anything.” Others say, “It’s all
up to us.” Scripture says, “God is at work in you, so you work!” It’s both and, not either or. Some say that any effort on your part shows that you’re in the flesh. If that’s so, Paul was fleshly, because it’s clear here that he was pressing on, he was reaching forward to the goal as a runner giving it his all. The Christian life is an active cooperation with the sovereign God.

Paul’s “one thing” (3:13) implies focused concentration and effort, that he sets aside distractions and works at keeping his mind on the goal of knowing Christ and becoming more like Him. A runner in a race can’t afford to admire the scenery or look at the people on the sidelines. An Olympic champion is not a person of many interests, who dabbles at his sport when it’s convenient. Every day he gets up and puts his mind on the goal, to win the gold. Everything else--his social life, his schedule, his diet--takes subservience to that overarching goal.

The question each of us needs to answer is, “Do I devote myself to knowing Christ and being like Him in the same way an athlete devotes himself to winning his event? Does knowing Christ and growing in Him consume me, or do I just dabble at it when it’s convenient?” If you want to grow, you’ve got to put your full effort into it--not just occasionally, but all the time.

Conclusion

Dr. Howard Hendricks, in the video series we just watched on Sunday evenings, tells about an elderly Christian woman he knew who would come into a social gathering, where everyone was chit-chatting about nothing significant, and say, “Tell me, Howie, what are the five best books you’ve read this past year?” Even though she was up in years, she was still actively growing in the Lord. When she died in her nineties, her daughter discovered on her desk that the night before she died in her sleep, she had written out her personal goals for the next five years! Like Paul in prison, right up to the end she wanted to be growing! I heard about a mountain climber whose epitaph was, “He died climbing.” That ought to be true of every Christian.

If you want to grow as a Christian, make sure you’re in the race--that Christ has laid hold of your life and saved you from sin. Make sure you have the right attitude--that you haven’t arrived, but you’re
in the lifelong process of moving ahead. And, give it the proper effort--focusing on the goal of being like Christ, and doing everything in light of that high calling.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How can a person know that Christ has laid hold of him? What are some signs of true conversion?

2. How can a Christian know how much (if any) to delve into the past? Do we need to work through “repressed” memories, etc.? Support your answer biblically.

3. Should every Christian have clearly defined written goals? Do you suppose Paul did? How can goals help? Can they hinder?

4. How can we determine what is God’s part and what is our part in the Christian life?

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