

Pressing on to Receive the Prize!

Phil 3:12-4:1 (text)

1 March 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

One specific day, some thirty years ago when I was Hebrew lecturer at a university in South Africa, a colleague of mine and I had a debate in our staff tea room. He was a New-Testament Greek lecturer who had just returned from three years of overseas study and, so it seems, had gotten under the influence of some liberal teachers.

Well, here's what we were arguing about...

He said that, once you have come to faith in Jesus Christ, then you can relax your spiritual effort. But I said, "No!" "The true Christian is the one who daily turns to Jesus in humility, and who strives to obey God's commandments!"

But my colleague insisted: "No, Pieter, my overseas New-Testament professor said, 'Once you have come to faith in Christ, then you're saved – and then you can just carry on with your life!'"

Well, sadly, that which my colleague said is also a real and constant danger in Reformed churches!

You see, my brother & sister, the danger is that we can so focus on the beautiful doctrine of *salvation by grace through faith*, that we forget about *sanctification* (holy living). In fact, I have experienced this in some circles within the RCNZ that, as soon as you start preaching on the *perseverance* of the saints, and on the Christian's effort towards *holy living*, some people will say to you, "I don't like your preaching!" "I want to hear you preach the comforting message that I am saved through faith in Jesus Christ."

Of course, in & of themselves, there's nothing wrong with the words, "Saved by grace through faith in Christ." After all! They *are* biblical!

But here's where the danger comes in: it seems some people only *ever* want to hear that their sins have been forgiven. But when it comes to putting in an effort towards living holy lives – well, they don't like that teaching!¹

My brother & sister, why have I shared this with you?

Well, because the view expressed by my former colleague and those like him – well, that goes sharply against the message of our text!

¹ I like the way Thielman has put it: "Holiness groups should not lay such emphasis on a past experience of God's second work of grace that they forget to work out their salvation with fear and trembling in the present, and *Reformed groups should not so emphasize the manifestation of God's grace in justification that they neglect the manifestation of his grace in sanctification*. To adherents of both positions, Paul would advise not looking back to the past but forward to the future and to strain every spiritual muscle in the effort to be faithful to God's gracious call to salvation" (Thielman, F. (1995). *Philippians* (pp. 193–214). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) (Italics mine).

You see, here's the main message of our text: Christian, have you really been *taken hold of (grabbed)*² by Christ? Well, then *press on* (yes, *actively pursue*)³ living a life worthy of your *calling!*⁴

Well, our text allows for us the following three points...

- Pressing On
- Role Models
- That Day

Pressing On (v.12-16)

In the previous passage, Paul said he wanted to know three things!

What were they?

- Well, he wanted to know *Christ* (better)
- He wanted to know (experience) the *power of Christ's resurrection* in his own life;
- He wanted to know (experience) *suffering with Christ* – yes, even if he had to, just like his Lord, die a self-sacrificial death.

So, in a nutshell, what are these three desires of Paul saying?

Well, that, already in this life, he wanted to excel in becoming Christ-like.

Why?

Well, because Paul was not content to have merely been *saved* by our Lord Jesus! No, he also wanted to give his best to living the life God had called him to live (v.14), i.e. to in Christ-likeness preach & live the Gospel to the Gentiles!

You & I?

Is it perhaps so that we have become so content with being saved that we don't care about growing in Christ-like living?

After all, is it just the Apostle Paul who received a calling from God?

Has not every Christian received a calling, too?

You ask what that calling is?

Well, is it not to, at least, live Christ-like lives...

- to your husband/wife...?
- to your mum and dad...?
- to your brothers & sisters and friends?
- and to win others through our words & lives?

How will we do this? Well, by adorning ourselves with good works for Christ.

² Cf. how in v.12 Paul uses the following Greek word on himself: *katelēmphthēn* (κατελήμφθην), an Aorist Indicative Passive 1st Person Singular of *katalambanō* (καταλαμβάνω), "...to acquire, with the implication of significant effort—'to acquire, to attain, to obtain, to take.' οὕτως τρέχετε ἵνα καταλάβητε 'run, then, in such a way as to take (the prize)' 1 Cor 9:24" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 563). New York: United Bible Societies).

³ Cf. v.12 & 14 for how Paul uses the following Greek word on himself *diōkō* (διώκω), "...to move quickly and energetically toward some objective—'to hasten, to run, to press forward, to press on.' κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον 'so I run straight toward the goal in order to win the prize' Php 3:14. In Php 3:14 διώκω is to be understood in a literal sense, though the entire context is figurative. For interpreting the expression κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω as an idiom, see 89.56" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 208). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁴ Cf. v.14 for how Paul uses on himself the phrase "*upward/heavenward calling of God in Jesus Christ.*"

Perhaps someone says, “But did Paul then by his good works want to make himself right with God? Did Paul, by pressing on (hard effort) want to try & earn his own salvation?”

No! Not at all!

After all, Paul has just (in the previous passage) explained how he once, before he was a Christ-follower, *thought* he could make himself right with God – and how he worked zealously to achieve that – but, once the Risen Lord Jesus grabbed him on that road to Damascus, he instantly knew that all his previous efforts in seeking self-righteousness were rubbish!

And so, when Paul now says in our text that he is pressing on toward the goal for the prize, he’s not at all saying that he’s putting in an effort to make himself right with God. All he is saying is that he’s pressing on to become more Christ-like, and, in becoming more Christ-like, he will live more in sync with what God in Christ has called him for!

So, would Paul be happy with what my former colleague has said? Would Paul be happy with the person who says, “Don’t worry about daily turning back to Christ – don’t worry about making a special effort to keeping God’s law now that you have been saved by Christ!”?

No! Not at all! Paul would be shocked and in holy anger about such an attitude!

You see, if you say to some Reformed people, “Persevere in your Christian walk; yes, decorate your life with good works – yes with obedience to God’s law,” then they think you’re telling them to *work for* their salvation! But you’re not telling them to work *for* their salvation! No, to use the apostle Paul’s words, you’re actually telling them to work *out* their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12)!⁵

In other words, the command comes to all who have already been saved by Christ not to work *for*, but to work *out* their already-given salvation!

To say it in another way: “Do not just call Christ, ‘Lord, Lord!’⁶ No, bear fruit that fit your repentance!”⁷

Question: In whose strength do you & I work out our salvation – yes, in whose strength do you & I press on towards that end-goal of getting the prize? In our own strength?

No!

That’s why Paul says, “*I press on... because⁸ I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus*” (v.12), and I have this “*upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (v.14)!

In other words, Paul is pressing on not in his own strength, but because *God* is working in Paul’s heart! *God* is moving Paul to press on!

⁵ Phil 2:12 *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...*

⁶ Cf. Mt 7:21, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*”

⁷ Cf. Mt 3:8, “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*”

⁸ The ESV is one of a very few English translations that have rendered *eph’ hōi* (ἐφ’ ᾧ) correctly as, “because.” See Thielman (ibid) who says about this Greek prepositional phrase, “So the goal Paul pursues probably remains all that he has described in verses 8–11, and the second part of verse 12 should be rendered, “because Christ Jesus took hold of me.” That is to say, Paul vigorously pursues the knowledge of Christ, his sufferings, his resurrection power, and union with him at the final day because on the road to Damascus, Christ took hold of him (Acts 9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:9–18).”

Also on the fact that *eph’ hōi* (ἐφ’ ᾧ) means “because,” cf. Blass, F. & Debrunner, A. 1974. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (translation by Funk, R.W.) Chicago, IL : The University of Chicago Press. p. 123 par.235 ἐφ’ ᾧ “for the reason that, because” (in Rm 5:12?, 2 Cor 5:4, Phil 3:12; 4:10).

Look is that not why (in chapter 2) Paul did not just tell the Philippians (and you & me) to "...work out our salvation with fear & trembling"⁹ but why he also told them, "...for it is *God who works in you to will and to work for His good pleasure*"?¹⁰ See?

See why the heartfelt Christian cannot rest on his/her laurels – as if they have already been given the crown of victory?

No, they have to press on living lives worthy of their calling (of the Gospel) – living Christ-like lives!

And because they don't do this solely by self-effort, but are prompted and guided all along by God, Paul says already in Phil 1 (verse 6), "**I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.**"¹¹

Look, Paul once said the same thing also to the Thessalonians (in 1 Thess 5:24), "...*the One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it!*"¹²

And so, Paul exhorts the Philippians – and also you & me – to not just be happy to have our sins forgiven, but to make an effort in living Christ-like lives!

And no one should ever think that, in this life, he/she has already arrived¹³ in this regard?

No, that's why even Paul says (in v.12) that he has not yet arrived at perfection!

Then he says in v.14, that those who are mature¹⁴ in their faith will say the same: "I have not yet arrived at perfection!"

After all, my brother & sister, if you/I should ever think we have "arrived," that's the exact moment that we will show that we have not yet arrived!¹⁵

"And," says Paul in v.15, "if in anything (on any minor point)¹⁶ you make the mistake thinking that you have reached perfection, well, then God will reveal that to you!"

"But," says he, "whatever the case, let's not slip backwards in our progress in Christ-like living!"

Strive for perfection, even though you & I know we will not achieve it in this life.¹⁷

⁹ Cf. Phil 2:12 "**Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...**"

¹⁰ Cf. Phil 2:13 "...for it is *God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*"

¹¹ [*New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*](#). (1995). (Php 1:6). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹² 1 Thess 5:23, **May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** ²⁴ **The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.**

¹³ That's in effect what "obtained" (NASB, ESV, NIV84, NIV, NRSV) here means (I agree with Thielman [ibid]).

¹⁴ So, in v.15. Significantly, this is the same word as the one Paul has just used (in v.12) to say that he is not yet "perfect."

¹⁵ "He knows a distinction between believers who are mature and those who are not (Phil. 3:15), but the mature believers appear to realize how far they have to go before they finally lay hold of victory, while the immature apparently claimed victory too early" (Thielman, ibid).

¹⁶ Cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of Philippians (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.176-177)

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. Gal 5:17 "**For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.**"

Rom 7:15, "**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.**"

Also cf. Thielman (ibid) for, "Wesley and Calvin were of different minds about how close the believer could come to the ideal of undivided devotion to God in this life, but the emphasis of both lay on the ideal itself and on the necessity of striving for it, not on whether or not one could reach it."

Role Models (v.17-19)

In v.17 Paul exhorts the Philippians to follow his example!

Is this right?

I mean, how could any ordinary human being tell others to follow his example when it comes to matters of faith!?

My brother & sister, firstly: we should remember that the Philippians (like the rest of the early church) did not yet have all the books of the New Testament – let alone having them all in one volume.

Yes, by 62AD (when Paul had just finished writing this letter), the Philippians would have had just this letter – the letter to the Philippians and whatever other individual New-Testament letters that had already been circulated to them, e.g. Colossians, Ephesians, etc.

So, they did not have the privilege you & I have – all four Gospels, all Paul’s letters, that of Peter, John, James, Jude, and Hebrews!

In other words, the Philippians needed to see in someone else what real Christ-like living was!

That’s why the Apostle Paul exhorted them here in verse 17 to follow his example. He also told them in chapter 4:9, “**Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.**”¹⁸

And Paul did not just tell the *Philippians* to follow his example. No, he also told the *Corinthians* and the *Thessalonians*.¹⁹

Thus, it was to help the early church at a stage when, as yet, they hardly had any written books of the New Testament, that Paul told them to look at his example.

My brother & sister, this is much like the master of a trade – let’s say a baker – would say to his apprentice, “Look at how I am mixing & kneading my dough, and watch me in all things baking!”

So, was Paul arrogant in telling the churches to follow his example?

Not at all!

Besides, he also told them to not just follow *him* but also *other mature believers* (v.17): “...**join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.**”

But there’s one more thing!

You see, when Paul says “Follow my example,” he always says it in the context of, “...**as I am following Christ!**”²⁰

And so, the example (or pattern) which Paul exhorts them/us to follow is larger than Paul himself – it is as large as our Lord Jesus!

Perhaps someone wants to ask, “But, pastor, tell us what exactly it was that Paul wanted them to see in his life and in Christ’s life.”

¹⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 4:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁹ Cf. 1 Cor 4:16-17 **Therefore I urge you to imitate me.** ¹⁷ **For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church** (NIV).

Also 1 Thess 1:6, “**You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.**”

²⁰ Cf. e.g. 1 Cor 11:1, **Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ** (NIV).

Well, first of all, he did not want the Philippians (and you & me) to follow those whom some of the Corinthians seem to admire! You see, some Corinthians admired preachers who came in worldly power. Then, by contrast, they seemed to have looked at the suffering, status-less, financially poor Paul who brought a message of a crucified Saviour and of self-sacrifice and service; of holy living and purity – and at least some of them despised him and rejected his message.²¹

And if they could reject Paul, well, then they have no worries, for then they could (as v. 19 says) continue feeding their own appetites (literally *stomach*)²² – appetites like physical indulgence in food, extravagant lifestyles, and shameful sexual conduct.²³

But here's the irony: they just could not see it, but the things they were boasting/glorying in, were actually to their shame (and would even be more to their shame on the day of Christ)!

So, these people are examples *not* to follow, because they have their minds on earthly things!

What does it mean to have your mind on earthly things?

Well, *earthly things* do not mean the practical affairs/chores of everyday life. They do not mean: going to work, earning a living, feeding your family, etc.

No, with *earthly things* Paul means a worldly life in opposition to God, e.g. “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires ... greed ... anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language” (Col. 3:1–11). Such people ***are enemies of the cross of Christ*** (v.18) – i.e. they stumble over the *shameful death* of Christ! Their ***end is destruction*** (v.19)!

So?

What then were the good things Paul wanted the Philippians to see in his own life?

Well, things that he has been mentioning right through this letter:

- suffering for Christ (as Paul did, and as the Philippians were bound to do);²⁴
- putting others interests ahead of your own (as also Christ has done);²⁵
- rejecting confidence in one's own righteousness;²⁶
- striving for the final goal – i.e. becoming Christ-like (full identity with Christ).²⁷

My brother & sister, you & I do have Paul example – in his letters; yes, not just in one of his letters, but in all his letters.

So, how much more privileged than the Philippians are we! They had precious little New Testament in writing! We have all the Gospels and all the letters to show us the example of Christ!

So, are we striving (pressing on) to become more Christ-like!?

My brother & sister, how wonderful if, without your knowing (for this is best) you do not only follow Christ's example, but *you* yourself have, in turn, become a living

²¹ This to be inferred from passages like: 1 Cor. 1:18–25; 2:1–5; 4:8–13; 2 Cor. 4:7–12; 13:4

²² Greek *koilia* (κοιλία)

²³ Cf. e.g. 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 6:12–20; 2 Cor. 12:21

²⁴ Cf. Phil 1:12-26 & 29-30

²⁵ Cf. Phil 2:4 & 2:5-8.

Also Paul's willingness to send Epaphroditus back with his commendation (2:25, 20-30)

²⁶ Cf. Phil 3:1-11

²⁷ Cf. Phil 3:15

letter (as Paul told some of the Corinthians) – a living letter in which others can read Christ!²⁸

Well, what will move you & me to press on to the goal of becoming more & more Christ-like?

Well, that brings us to our last point...

That Day

My brother & sister, you & I have dual citizenship: citizenship of lovely New Zealand; and citizenship of heaven!

The same with the Christians in Philippi!

As far as meets the eye, they were citizens of Philippi, a city that boasted in the fact that, although they were in *Macedonia*, they were actually a *Roman* city that had the special protection of the Caesar.

And what did they call Caesar?

Well, quite strikingly, they called him “Saviour” and “Lord!”

So, they were citizens of Philippi!

But then, the Christians in Philippi were also citizens of heaven!

What’s so significant of that?

Well, that from heaven they were eagerly awaiting Him whom you & I are also awaiting – Jesus Christ!

What do we call Him?

Well, we call Him what He is – what Caesar could only be in miniature – “Saviour and Lord!”

Why are we awaiting our Heavenly Saviour and Lord *with great eagerness*?

Well, because, as v.21 says, He who has all power, will come transform even our bodies (which are now so susceptible to sin, sickness and death) and will make them like His glorified body!

Wow! Talking of becoming Christ-like! My brother & sister, what a blessing it will be to every Christian who, in this life, has so longed to become more & more Christ-like! Yes, what joy when, on that day, Christ will make them Christ-like in an instant – and not just spiritually, but also bodily!

So, what does this knowledge do to you & me now?

Well, does it not move you to live this day in the light of that day!?

Look, is this not why Paul starts the next verse (4:1) with, “Therefore...”? *Therefore (yes, in light of that day), my beloved brothers & sisters, come let us press on in Christ-like living!*

And so, let us *not* follow the advice of my former colleague to just “carry on” with our lives, now that we’ve been saved! No, let us pursue Christ-likeness!

AMEN (2671 words excluding footnotes)

²⁸ Cf. 2 Cor 3:3 ***And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts***