

~ Joy In the Christian Race ~

Text: Phil 3:12–21

Theme: Christians must focus on their own race and run with purpose a patience in confident expectation of eternal glory.

Intro:

1. Last week, we looked at the first half of Philippians chapter 3 and considered the Christians Joy in Knowing Christ.
2. Today, we are looking at verses 12-21 of the chapter and Paul's exhortation to run the Christian race in a manner that pleases Christ.

Main:

I. The Godly Runners in the Race (Vs 12-16)

A. Paul's Focus in the Race (Vs 12-16)

1. Paul saw himself as an imperfect runner (Vs 12 -13a)
 - a. Paul wasn't trying to put himself on a pedestal as an example of perfection.
 - i. Paul has just had to explain his heritage as a Hebrew, his holy living as a Pharisee, as touching the righteousness in the law being blameless, and after hearing all that, people might be inclined to think he was presenting himself as having reached the pinnacle of Christian living.
 - Paul puts any such thoughts to rest immediately by declaring that he himself is still pursuing a greater life of holiness which will reach its culmination at the resurrection of the dead.
 - To Paraphrase the verse: "I don't speak as someone who has already reached the goal of conformity to Christ, nor do I present myself as one who is perfect. But I pursue a life of conformity to the image of Christ because I expect, one day, to reach that goal to which I have been called by Christ."
 - ii. **1 John 3:2** *"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."*
 - To be finally made like the Saviour at the resurrection is the goal Paul is striving for and yet he sees it as necessary for him to allow the work of conformity to

the image of Christ to begin right now, in order for him to run an effective race.

- **Hebrews 12:1-2** *"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."*

- b. Paul was pursuing a life of holiness because that is what Christ had called him to.
 - i. "I follow after" in verse 12 comes from the Greek *diōkō* (διώκω) and is the same word translated "I press" in verse 14. It means, "to pursue, follow, press toward, or persecute."
 - For example, a police officer would *diōkō*, or pursue a criminal on foot.
 - Paul was chasing down the goal of being made like his Saviour.
 - ii. "The meaning here is, I do not pretend to have attained to what I wish or hope to be. He had indeed been converted; he had been raised up from the death of sin; he had been imbued with spiritual life and peace; but there was a glorious object before him which he had not yet received. There was to be a kind of resurrection which he had not arrived at."¹
- c. Paul further confirms this in verse 13 when he says, "I count not myself to have apprehended."
 - i. Although every one who is saved and in Christ will one day attain to the resurrection of the dead, this has been guaranteed to us through our identification with Christ which Paul has just spoken of, the fact is that none of us can be said to have reached that goal, but we ought to be striving toward it on a daily basis.
 - ii. In explanation of this verse Albert Barnes says, "That is, to have obtained that for which I have been called into the service of the Redeemer. There is something which I strive after which I have not yet gained. This statement is

¹ Albert Barnes

- a confirmation of the opinion that in the previous verse, where he says that he was not “already perfect,””²
- d. For the Christian, conformity to the image of Christ is supposed to be our daily goal, it is supposed to be something we strive for.
 - i. As the song says, “More like the Master I would ever be, more of his meekness, more humility, more zeal to labour, more courage to be true, more consecration for the work he bids me do.”
 - ii. A famous sculptor was once asked how he made his sculptures. He said, “I take the chisel and the hammer, and I knock off anything that doesn’t look like the image I am trying to create.
 - For the Christian, we need to allow the loving hand of God to chisel away from our lives anything that doesn’t resemble the image of Christ.
2. Paul sought to improve himself in the race (Vs 13b – 14)
- a. Paul wasn’t looking back at where he had come from but was looking forward to the goal he was seeking to attain.
 - i. The lead runner in a race knows that backwards glancing could be his downfall. A quick glance over the shoulder at the runner behind him and he could trip over and end up losing the race.
 - ii. Paul wasn’t looking back on the things he had left behind or given up to follow Christ.
 - How many Christians become disillusioned in the Christian race because their focus isn’t on what they have gained in Christ but on what they have given up in the world. Eventually, they will give up on following Christ because they are like Demas, “Having loved this present world” (2 Tim 4:10)
 - iii. Paul wasn’t looking back on the others who were running the race.
 - He wasn’t comparing his progress with the progress of others, he was simply running in order to reach the goal and obtain the prize.
 - **Heb 12:1-2** “*Let us run with patience the race that is set before us. Looking unto Jesus...*”
 - Don’t look at what you’ve left behind, don’t compare your progress with others, simply run the race set before you and keep your eyes fixed in Christ.

² Albert Barnes, [*Notes on the New Testament: Ephesians, Philippians & Colossians*](#), ed. Robert Frew (London: Blackie & Son, 1884–1885), 200.

- b. Paul was pressing toward the finish line and would not allow anything to distract him from it.
 - i. As Christians it should be our desire to finish well. Many Christians have started out well in the race but after a while they have allowed themselves to be distracted from running.
 - ii. Paul mentions that our calling in Christ is a high calling. This means it is a noble and worthy cause for which we are running this race, and the prize is a prize worth obtaining.
 - With that in mind, we must press on. We must finish well. Let us run with patience the race set before us.
- B. Paul's Mindset in the Race (Vs 15-16)
 - 1. Paul wanted others to be successful in the race (Vs 15)
 - a. Paul addresses those who are perfect.
 - i. This cannot be a reference to true sinless perfection as Paul has just stated that he has not attained to perfection himself. So, this must be a reference to positional perfection, not sinless perfection.
 - ii. Paul is effectively saying that everyone who has been made perfect positionally in Christ ought to have the mindset he has just described.
 - Paul's desire was that every Christian would look diligently to their own race, laying aside every weight and sin that would hinder them in running their race, and by fixing their eyes on Christ they would finish their course successfully.
 - iii. Paul's desire was that every Christian, reaching the end of their own race, would be able to give the same assessment of their race that Paul gave of his.
 - 2 Timothy 4:6-8 *"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."*
 - b. If anyone fell short of this mindset Paul was confident that God would reveal it to them so that they could deal with such hinderances to their running the race.
 - 2. Paul wanted others to maintain their pace in the race (Vs 16)
 - a. There are differences in the level of attainment for each individual, but we are still commanded to work together.

- i. While we are all called to run the Christian race, we each have a different race to run.
 - Some of us started in the race when we were very young and have been running the race for many years.
 - Others started the race as an adult, or maybe as a senior citizen, but you can still be successful in your race because your race is not my race and you can still run your race to the best of your God given ability.
- ii. We see this in the parable of the vineyard workers. (Mathew 20:1-16)
 - In the parable, the Lord of the vineyard hires workers at 6am and guarantees to pay them a day's wage, or one denarius. He continues to hire more workers at 9am, 12pm, 3pm, and 5pm.
 - At the end of the day, the Lord paid each worker the same amount because they had faithfully worked for the time he had hired them for.
 - In a similar way, your race isn't the same as mine. It didn't start at the same time, it doesn't have the same obstacles as mine, it potentially won't finish at the same time as mine (unless we're all raptured), but you can still win the prize by running your race exactly as the Lord has commanded you to.
- iii. Although our race is an individual race, there are portions of the race when the Lord will allow you to run alongside other runners.
 - For just a short time the Lord allowed us to run alongside brother Matt McLean, but when Matt's race ended our continued. We praise God for the people that he allows us to run alongside for some of the race, but our race is an individual one, and it will end one day, and others will have to keep running.
- b. Whatever pace you have managed to attain in the race and whatever progress you have managed to make, don't slow down, keep going.

II. The Worldly Runners in the Race (Vs 17-21)

A. Paul's Example for the Race (Vs 17)

- 1. Paul was setting the pace for others in the race
 - a. Paul wasn't setting himself forward as the perfect example, but he sought to be a good example for others to follow.

- i. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians Christians was that they should follow his example. As Paul was a disciple of Christ, he sought to make others into disciples of Christ also.
 - ii. Paul was effectively saying, "Follow me as I follow Christ."
 - **1 Corinthians 11:1** *"Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."*
 - b. Paul also wanted them to look up to others who were followers of Christ in the same way that he was.
 - i. While Christ is our primary example in all things, there isn't anything wrong with finding a Christian who is a godly example of what it means to follow Christ and then seeking to emulate their life.
 - ii. This doesn't have to be a person in leadership. The Apostle Paul simply says, mark those who are following Christ in the same way I do and then follow them.
- B. Paul's Warning to the Racers (Vs 18-21)
1. Paul warned of corrupt runners in the race (Vs 18-19)
 - a. There are many who are not following Christ in the race.
 - i. This is the tragedy of professing Christendom, that many who profess to be followers of Christ are actually followers of their own fleshly appetites.
 - Paul didn't rejoice in the downfall of these ungodly people, after all he knew their end was destruction, but he wept over them because they hindered the work of the cross.
 - The work of the cross begins at salvation but it goes on through sanctification, which is the very work Paul has just described in forsaking everything that would hinder him in his race.
 - ii. There are plenty of false teachers today who will tell you that you can indulge in the pleasures of the flesh and still be a good Christian.
 - Paul says, "I weep over those people because they are enemies of the cross, and they hinder you from running your race."
 - This vile world is not a friend to grace to help you on to God. It is an enemy of the cross and those who encourage you to indulge your flesh with the things of this world are keeping you from pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

2. Paul encouraged heavenly vision in the race (Vs 20-21)
 - a. In contrast to these enemies of the cross, Paul encourages us as Christians not to be occupied with the world but to remember that we belong to heaven.
 - i. Our conversation (Greek - politeuma), that is our community or our citizenship, is a heavenly one.
 - The false teachers, the opponents of the cross, they are occupied with their own fleshly appetites, but we are to be occupied with the things of heaven, because those are the things that belong to us, and the realm to which we belong.
 - **1 Peter 2:11** *"Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;"*
 - ii. Once again, we have reference to the need to be looking for the Saviour.
 - We are to be diligent in running the race set before us because we know that soon the Lord will return to reward his servants and when he comes, we want to be found faithful.
 - b. Paul concludes with a word of encouragement regarding the final victory for the Christian.
 - i. There is coming a day, when our race is over, that the Lord Jesus will complete that work which he has begun in us, the work of transforming us into his image.
 - He shall change this sin corrupted body into a glorious body made like his resurrected body, and "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)
 - ii. This is the resurrection that Paul said he had not yet attained to but that he was striving toward that goal, seeking to be more and more like the Saviour right now with the expectation that this work would be finally completed at the resurrection of the dead.
 - iii. So, Paul ends this section on a victory note, saying, "I'm not perfect yet, but one day I will be, because I'll be like Jesus."

Conclusion:

1. Run a good race, lay aside the weights and sins, and finish the race well. Victory is already ours in Christ but that should not produce slackness in us, instead it should encourage us to run a race that is pleasing to Christ.