

In high school, I saw a cross country athlete wear a shirt that said, "My sport is your sport's punishment." I never thought about it that way, but it's true. If you've ever played sports, you know that when you mess up or don't perform well, you have to run. Running is a punishment. But in Cross Country, it's the sport itself. Why would anyone put themselves through this? Running a race is hard, painful, and taxing. Why do it? For the prize!

In Philippians 3, Paul compares the Christian life to a race, and he calls all Christians to "Press on"- to run, to endure, to push through toward the prize. And from Paul we are going to see why you must press on, and how you can press on.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the "Judaizers" who were false teachers infiltrating early Christianity and saying that, "Yes, Jesus died for your sins, but if you really want to be a Christian, you have to get circumcised, eat a certain way," and so on. In the verses before our section Paul dismantles that idea with his own personal testimony- if anyone could have earned God's favor through Jewish law-keeping, it would have been him. Before he was a Christian, he was a highly ambitious, zealous pharisee who was profoundly respected among the Jewish pharisaical community- and Paul says that all the prestige, all the honor, all the righteousness that he had as a pharisee is rubbish compared to the status, glory, perfection, and righteousness that he has through faith in Christ. Paul has been justified, declared perfect, righteous, good, sinless, not by his own merits, but because of Jesus' death in his place, and because of this, he knows that eternal life is his, and that he will be raised from the dead like Christ and will reign in Heaven with him.

And then he says, in verse 12, "but not yet! It's mine, but I don't have it yet! I have to press on and obtain it. I have to stretch out and grab it. I have to forget what is behind me and capture it!" What's he saying? First of all, notice the language that he's using- the word for "press on" is a word that could also be translated "hunt," or "aggressively pursue," and the word for "obtain," has the idea of "capturing that which you are chasing. When Paul says "straining forward," the word literally means to "stretch out," and it has the idea of, when you're in the last stretch of a race, and your body is begging you to stop, but you want the prize desperately that you stretch your legs to get the most out of every stride. This is aggressive, ambitious language. What's Paul saying? Paul is taking hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of him. Paul is pressing on, running for the prize that God has called him. Paul is striving, Paul's pressing on, but he's not earning a single thing. Christ is the one who has captured him, Christ is the one who has called him, Christ is the one who has done it all and has earned the prize, therefore, Paul runs with all of his might.

This is where we see the relationship between justification and sanctification. Justification- the act of God declaring Paul and every sinner who believes to be absolutely perfect, sins forgiven, in his eyes through Christ's shed blood. That is a one time thing. It's done. It's not a process. Once you are forgiven, you are forgiven. It is finished- you see that in Paul's language- the prize has been earned, he has been captured, he has been called. It's done. And now, sanctification, the growth, the maturation, the formation of a Christian to be more like Christ, the good works

that a Christian does- that's a process that lasts until you receive the prize in Heaven. What's going on here? Because Paul has been saved and the prize of eternal life, he wants to strive, he wants to do good works, he wants to grow in the faith, he wants to grow and be more and more like Christ, he wants to fight against his temptations. Justification produces sanctification. Being saved produces good works. The guarantee of the prize produces in the Christian the will to run with vigor. Good works are a necessary part of the Christian life, but not because they earn you anything from God. Your good works are a natural result of being saved. You must press on, not because that's what you do to earn the prize, but the natural result of having a prize given to you.

That's the biggest reason why you must, but Paul lists other, smaller, but important ones. Pressing on, sanctification, is a sign of Christian maturity. Consider what Paul says in verse 15. If sanctification isn't something that's important to you, it doesn't necessarily mean that you aren't a believer: weak faith is still faith, but it is immature, and it needs to be addressed. And again, if you really are saved, and you really understand what Christ has done for you, wouldn't you want to grow? Wouldn't you want to learn to be more like him? Pressing on is important because it's a sign of Christian maturity. This is deeply helpful when talking to our brothers and sisters that are either caught in sin, or spiritual apathy, or not showing that they are dedicated to their Christian growth. We, along with Paul, don't say "Hey, you need to do better in order to be saved." We say, "You've been saved, the prize is won, and if you believe that, then you'll want to run. You'll want to grow. You'll want to fight this temptation. You'll want to strive for the prize." We aren't saying they're not a Christian, but encouraging them: "since you are a Christian, don't you want to do this?"

It's obvious- pressing on isn't an option for Christians- it's a must. It's mandatory. It is the natural result of being saved and the biggest sign of Christian maturity. But how can we do that? What are some practical ways that we can grow in our sanctification and become more like Christ? Paul gives us ways! Verse 17: follow examples. Paul doesn't simply point to himself, but to the people in Philippi as examples for Christians to follow. Part of the way you grow in your Christian faith is seeing the grace of God work out in the lives of those who have gone before you- not so we see how great people have made themselves worthy of God's grace, but we see how God's grace has played out in their lives, so we can learn from their mistakes, and be encouraged to follow their example and learn from them.

We also have to recognize the enemies of the Cross, and here, Paul describes them in 18 and 19. The question that many have about these few verses is, "who exactly was Paul talking about?" Is he talking about the self-righteous Judaizers putting conditions on God's grace, or is he talking about the Greek philosophers that were infiltrating Christian churches at the time? What exactly is Paul saying here? Wherever there are Christians saved by grace, there Satan is trying to pull you away from that grace in whatever way he can, and he does it through lies told by false teachers. It could be pastors or religious leaders, maybe family members or friends, it could be anyone. And the two major lies that serve as a toxin to you are these: "You are saved at least a little bit by what you do." And, "you're saved, so it doesn't matter what you do." The

first lie is the lie of the Pharisee, the lie of self-righteous religiosity-driven holier-than-thou person who is convinced, even if Jesus died for their sins, that in reality, God loves them because of them. The second lie is the lie of the self indulgent pleasure seeker who uses Jesus' free salvation as a license to sin. Paul is obvious about the second lie- their end is destruction- if you reject God's grace and continue in your sin, the end is Hell. It's that simple. Their god is their stomach. Instead of asking, "What does God want, they ask, what do I want?" They give in to their hedonistic, selfish pleasures and say, "I don't care what God says, I'm going to do what I want." Their concerns are earthly, not heavenly- they are so obsessed with what they want now that they don't understand the glory and beauty that could be theirs in Heaven, and reject it for something lesser.

Here's the thing, the things Paul says kind of match pretty well with the self-indulgent enemy of the Cross, but contextually, the people he's responding to are the Judaizers, the legalistic, the religiosity driven moralistic people saying, "Yes, Jesus died for you, but you still have to earn a little bit," and what Paul says applies to them as well, but for different reasons. They are destined for destruction- not because their sins are so obviously bad, but because they are too good for God's grace and don't want it, and don't receive it. Their god is their stomach- maybe outwardly they look self-controlled and proper, but spiritually, they are indulging the cravings of their sinful pride by claiming the ability to earn God's favor, and their minds are on earthly things, not heavenly. They seem spiritual and religious, but their hearts aren't really in line with God's- their earthly because they are making their own, earthly religious way to God. Moralistic, pharisaical self righteousness and hedonistic self-indulgence are two sides of the same coin. And you have to be able to recognize them. If you are hearing something, either from a friend, your culture, yourself, or even me, that is making it seem like you are able to earn or merit Jesus' love, it's from Satan. If you're hearing something that makes it seem that your good works don't really matter, or that God is lax about his Law, and that it doesn't really matter what you do, it's from Satan.

The final way to press on: Remember the prize. The race is hard. Good works are hard! Denying our temptations is hard. Growing to be more like Jesus requires self denial, self sacrifice, repentance, and honesty about your flaws. But when you realize what you have in store, it's possible. It is possible to deny the cravings of your sinful nature, your temptations, your impulses, when you remember what is waiting for you: the Resurrection. Do you know what God has in store for you? Freedom from your sinful nature, you'll never have to deny yourself again because your will, your desires, your heart will be completely in line with Jesus. You'll never be sick, hungry, sad, angry, or lonely again. You will be transformed into someone so beautiful, so glorious, so breathtaking, that the sight of you would blind you if you saw it today. And finally, you will be in the presence of your God forever. You will have your prize in full. The prize that was earned by Christ, and given to you as a free gift, and chased after by you for so many years.

One application is this: we've studied a number of Christian examples in the last few months: Peter, Jonah, Elijah, Paul, Moses. They were all saved believers in God, but what did their sanctification look like? Was it pretty? Did it go straight, or was it more of a rollercoaster? So,

what do you think yours will look like? My friends, you have to struggle, you have to grow, you have to press on. It's not a suggestion. But remember that your effort, your growth, your good works are not the reason you're saved. Remember that the prize is already yours. So let's run. Amen