



# Philippians

RBS  
Philippians 3:12-21

## Lesson 6: Those in Christ's Grip Reach for More

***“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”***  
(Philippians 3:13-14).

***Doctrinal Focus:*** *The mark of Christian maturity is the eager pursuit of the fullness of salvation that Jesus has won for believers. Because Christ has made us his own and granted us his righteousness, we long to be transformed completely into his image and to respond to God's upward call when our Savior returns from heaven, the site of our true citizenship.*

Read Philippians 3:12-21.

Paul closed his case against the Judaizers with an expression of his own longing to attain the resurrection of the dead, the climax of the renewing power that he was already experiencing through the Spirit of Christ (Philippians 3:10-11). By faith alone he (and the Philippian believers) had *already* received the gift of Jesus' perfect righteousness, a treasure infinitely more valuable than the righteousness that Paul had managed to muster by trying to keep God's commandments.

Yet Paul, still speaking from his own experience as a model to be imitated (Philippians 3:17), emphasized that this great gift did not allow him to think that he had completely “arrived” at the destiny for which Christ had laid hold of him. Rather, playing on the various meanings of the Greek word *teleios*, Paul insisted that he had not already been “perfected” (Philippians 3:12) and that his self-assessment should be the norm for all who are “mature” (Philippians 3:15). Anyone who imagined that he had already achieved total perfection was *far* from perfect, in any sense!

Paul saw dangerous influences from two sides threatening the healthy balance in Christian living between *resting* and *striving*—resting in Christ's grace and righteousness, while still striving to grow in holiness. On one side, were the Judaizers who

undermined confidence in Christ's gift of righteous standing in order to enslave Gentile Christians to law-keeping. These Judaizers projected the image of having arrived because of their outwardly successful compliance with God's commands.

On the other side, were those who claimed that God's call to obedience did not apply to them because their doctrine was correct, or because they had undergone a moving experience that (they supposed) lifted them to a higher sphere of spirituality. First John describes people who claimed to know God and be without sin (1 John 1:8, 10), yet who violated God's commands and showed no love for people (Philippians 2:4, 9; 4:20-21). Likewise in our text, Paul wrote with tears of “many” whose behavior showed that they were enemies of Christ's cross (Philippians 3:18) because they served their appetites and boasted about practices that should have made them feel ashamed (Philippians 3:19).

In contrast to those who claimed to have arrived through self-disciplined commandment-keeping, on the one hand, and those who claimed to have reached a spiritual plateau that made obedience irrelevant, on the other, Paul presented the model of his own mindset and that of his co-workers. They are those who “*walk according to the*

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*example you have in us*" (Philippians 3:17). Their mature mindset combined confidence in grace already received with a relentless quest for greater grace to come. Paul's confidence was expressed in his assurance that "*Christ Jesus has made me his own*" (Philippians 3:12). With respect to the Philippians, Paul was equally confident that God had begun his good work in them and would carry it to completion (Philippians 1:6) by producing in them both desires and deeds that were pleasing to him (Philippians 2:12-13). Yet his confidence in Christ's righteousness and the Spirit's renewal *already* received did not make him complacent. Rather, his first tastes of grace in regeneration, justification, adoption, and the beginnings of sanctification whetted his appetite for the whole feast: for God's Spirit to complete his task of transforming his desires and deeds, and for God's Son to return from heaven to transform his sin-stained body into a flawless reflection of Christ's own glory (Philippians 3:21). The apostle John promised that "*when [Jesus] appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is*" (1 John 3:2), and John showed that this hoped-for future must influence our present values and conduct: "*And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*" (1 John 3:3). So also Paul's future hope for Christ's return fired his present pursuit of "*the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" through a consistent race toward selfless love and purity. The Greek Olympics originated in the cities of Achaia, south of Macedonia, so the Philippians would recognize Paul's allusions to those ancient competitions in the word "prize" and in the picture of runners "forgetting" the opening section of track and the competitors behind them and "straining forward" toward the finish line ahead (See 1 Corinthians 9:24, written to a city of Achaia).

Paul's recognition that he himself had not reached the finish line injected a note of patient realism into his expectations that his fellow-believers should imitate his maturity. He recognized that they might not have come to see things as he had: "*if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you*" (Philippians 3:15). Their disagreement on this point was a mark of immaturity, and it would eventually be remedied by God's help. It was not, however, a lethal

denial of the gospel in doctrine: they were not "*dogs, evil doers, mutilation*" (Philippians 3:2). Nor was it a denial of the gospel's sin-destroying power in life: they did not "*walk as enemies of the cross of Christ,*" worshiping their stomachs and finding glory in their shame (Philippians 3:18-19). Therefore, without condoning complacency or relapse from maturity already "attained," Paul gave his friends space to grow and to catch his fervor for the fullness of salvation that Christ had prepared for them. Paul would soon exhort two of his treasured coworkers, Euodia and Syntyche, to exercise such patience with each other in their differences (Philippians 4:2-3).

Paul had been subtly teaching by example—his own, Timothy's, and Epaphroditus'—throughout the epistle. Here he dropped the subtlety: "*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us*" (Philippians 3:17). It was so crucial for them to pay attention to the pattern of these men's selfless humility, others-serving love, and pursuit of holiness because a rival pattern of values and actions could be seen in "many," to Paul's great grief. That alternative way of "walking" (an Old Testament metaphor for one's pattern of behavior, used frequently by Paul) was so spiritually lethal that Paul shed tears over those who followed that path and warned his friends against it in the strongest terms. Some New Testament scholars have identified those who were walking as "enemies of the cross of Christ" as the Judaizers whom Paul critiqued so sharply in 3:2 and refuted in 3:3-11. Paul certainly considered Judaizers to be enemies of the cross (Galatians 6:12); but in Philippians 3:18-19 he seems to have another group in view. Their divergence from the gospel was not so much theological as it was ethical. It was not that their *doctrine* detracted from Christ and his grace, but that their *desires and behavior*, their "walk," were inconsistent with the fruit that the gospel should bear in believers' daily lives. Secondly, Paul shed tears of sorrow over these people, whereas his response to the Judaizers was a holy anger (Philippians 3:2; see Galatians 1:8-9; 5:10-12) because their pseudo-"gospel" was endangering others' faith. In fact, Paul did not exactly say that these folks *were* enemies of the cross, but rather that they *walked as* enemies of the cross. What caused him such sorrow,

it seems, was that their orthodox confession of the gospel was contradicted by their self-indulgent and sensual lifestyle, expressing a shortsighted fixation on “earthly things” and a disregard for the heavenly destiny that defines real Christians’ identity. In charging that “*their god is their belly*,” Paul was not exclusively concerned with obesity or the overeating that is often (but not always) its cause. His point was that these people were driven to seek their joy in bodily pleasures such as gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual gratification. This sensuality ruled their hearts like a god, but one that could impart no lasting satisfaction of joy. On their present trajectory, unless repentance radically reversed the direction of their “*walk*,” their destination could only be “*destruction*.” Whatever their professed beliefs, their worship of their appetites and their boastful pride in what should have caused them shame were signals that God had not even begun his “good work” in them to move them “*to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Philippians 1:6; 2:13). The believers of Philippi must not be misled into embracing their earthbound mindset or following their indulgent example.

Over against the earthbound horizon of those whose lifestyle contradicted Christ’s cross, Paul reminded his beloved Philippian believers that they shared with him a status as citizens that transcends the present and visible world: “*But our citizenship is in heaven*.” The dignity, rights and responsibilities of Philippi’s citizens were defined by the distant capital of the Empire, Rome, for Philippi was a Roman colony. So also, Paul argued, the identity and destiny of those who trust and obey Jesus is defined by a distant city, in which the King of the universe is enthroned. Earlier Paul had urged these believers to conform their *conduct as citizens* to the gospel of Christ, in unity and humility toward each other and in calm courage toward their opponents (Philippians 1:27-30). Here again he reminded them of the unseen reality that should form their self-perception, values, relationships, and actions in their day-to-day interactions with each other and the other residents of Philippi.

Writing to the Colossians from this same imprisonment, Paul drew the implications of Christians’ union with Christ, who rules and reigns in heaven, in similar terms: “*If then you have been*

*raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*” (Colossians 3:1-4). He went on to describe the “things above” that must fill believers’ minds: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love (verses 12-14).

Likewise, here Paul focused the Philippians’ thoughts *above* (toward heaven) and *ahead* (toward their future resurrection), but preeminently toward Jesus Christ himself, the Lord who now reigns in heaven and the Savior whose glorious arrival we eagerly await (Philippians 3:21). He repeated a variety of terms and concepts from his great narrative of the humbling suffering and glorious exaltation of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11): “Lord,” “Jesus Christ,” “transform,” “lowly,” “be like,” “glorious,” and “subject all things.” Paul’s purpose in concentrating these echoes here was to renew his readers’ recollection of the history of their Savior, whose humble suffering for their sakes issued in his exaltation to the height of glory and secured their hope for eternal life. Jesus had walked the path of humble service all the way to the cursed death of the cross and the darkness of the grave, but emerged from the tomb into the light and life of resurrection glory. Those who trust him must follow in his footsteps, patiently enduring present suffering with joy and humble love and purity in their eager and certain hope of his return and the resurrection of their bodies in his presence on that day. As residents of a Roman colony, every Philippian knew that the titles “Savior” and “Lord” were attributed to the emperor on coins and monuments, in imperial edicts, and elsewhere. Paul boldly calls his Philippian friends, who are heaven’s citizens, to anticipate eagerly the arrival of a Lord who stooped low, to a Roman cross, to be their Savior.

The earthbound mindset of the “many,” which promised exemption from suffering and indulgence in pleasure in the present, would certainly bring those deceived by it to the end of “destruction.” On the other hand, believers who follow Paul’s lead, whose desires are being transformed by their

heavenly citizenship and the prospect of their Savior's return, will eternally share in his glory and enjoy his supremacy over all of creation.

Such hope gave the Philippians—and it gives us—strong reason to “*stand firm thus in the Lord*” (Philippians 4:1).

**Notes**

1. In the Old Testament the pattern of a person's behavior is pictured as “walking” in such texts as Exod. 18:20; Deut. 5:32-33. Paul uses the metaphor of “walking” often to sum up either the conduct of Christians who are being renewed by God's Spirit or the conduct of those who do not know Christ.

**Recommended Commentary**

*Philippians* by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



# Philippians Lesson 6

## Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 3:12-21.

1. Paul's "not that" in Philippians 3:12 suggests that he expected some of his readers to conclude from what he had just written that he thought he had "already obtained" and was "already perfect." Why might they draw that conclusion? Why was it incorrect?
2. In this text and the one before it, how did Paul refer to the benefits that he already possessed because of God's grace in Christ? How had he described God's prior acts of grace in the Philippians' lives earlier in the epistle?
3. How does (or should) God's prior grace in your life give you hope and motivation to "press on" toward the finish line and the prize for which Christ has called you? What is that full prize?
4. In light of Philippians 3:15, how did Paul's sense of his own point of spiritual growth influence his attitude toward other believers, including those who differed from him on some issues?
5. How did Paul draw the line between issues that demanded immediate and decisive correction and areas in which he could grant others "room to grow"? How and why are these categories sometimes confused when Christians differ with each other today?
6. How do Paul's words "if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you," show a different perspective from our modern slogans such as "different strokes for different folks" or "we will just agree to disagree?" How does Paul's mindset differ from "my way or the highway?" What gives Paul the patience and hope to expect that believers will one day agree? How does Ephesians 4:11-16 (especially verse 13) address this issue?

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7. Romans 6:1 and the motto at Corinth, “All things are lawful” (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23), show that in Paul’s day some people concluded that the gospel set them free to indulge in sin, so it is plausible to infer that those whose “god is their belly” saw themselves as Christians. Why might they conclude that liberty in Christ is freedom to sin? What were they failing to see about the cross of Christ and its fruit in the lives of believers?
  8. Paul found joy in his own sufferings, and yet shed tears (or got angry) over the self-destructive behavior of others. What explains the difference between how his emotions worked and the way that most people naturally react to their circumstances or to others? How can you cultivate the “recalibration” of your emotional life to bring it into line with the joys and the sorrows of Jesus?
  9. Some of the symptoms of the lifestyle of those who “walk as enemies of the cross” are blatantly self-centered, self-destructive, and shameful. Beneath these obvious exhibitions, however, is a subtle secular short-sightedness that worships the present and ignores the future (“minds set on earthly things”). How are you tempted to set your mind on earthly things, even if you do not act out your preoccupation with the present?
  10. What do people mean when they say someone is “so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good”? Paul’s concept of “heavenly-mindedness” in Philippians 3 and Colossians 3 is of *great* earthly good in the nitty-gritty of everyday life and relationships with Christians and non-Christians. What is Paul’s idea of heavenly-mindedness? Why is it so practical? *Who* is central to such heavenly-mindedness?
  11. Our heavenly citizenship and our hope for Jesus’ return give strong reasons for us to resist an earthbound focus on passing pleasures and “creature comforts.” Yet it is all too easy to lose sight of such eternal realities amid the pressures of the present. How can we keep alive—both in ourselves and for each other—a vital and vivid awareness that our identity is defined and our destiny secured by the Savior who reigns in heaven and will return in glory?
  12. How does the assurance that our Savior *already has* the power “to subject all things to himself” calm our fears about present problems and our worries about future dangers?