

Straining Forward to What Lies Ahead
Philippians 3:12-21
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Read Philippians 3:12-21

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

In 2013, a 16-year-old named Ethan Couch was driving drunk in Texas after playing beer pong with his friends and killed four people who were on the side of the road. The four people included a stranded driver whose car broke down, plus a mother and daughter who had come out of their house to help her, and a youth pastor who had pulled over to help as well. Couch’s legal team used a unique defense to help him avoid jail time and only receive a sentence of 10 years of probation: they claimed that he had “affluenza.”¹ Never heard of it? They claimed that because he had no structure and no proper role models growing up, that he was irresponsible because of his family’s wealth. Hence the new made-up term “affluenza” – a play on the words affluence and influenza. To paraphrase *West Side Story*: “I’m deprived on account that I’m not deprived.” Here’s one definition of affluenza: “a painful, contagious, virally transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.”² While that may sound tongue-in-cheek, there are some serious issues that our never-ending search for more produces: family conflict, addiction, abuse, loneliness, and workaholism; not to mention the underlying ache for meaning.

How do we cure affluenza? There are a lot of ideas and tips that you could find, such as moderation in all things, using technology wisely, resisting advertising, aiming for more simple living, and many others. Lots of good, helpful ideas there. But God has the true solution to this affliction: finding our desires and meaning in Him. Losing our lives to find them. As our Scripture passage today teaches, it is too easy to set our minds on earthly things and be distracted but ultimately disappointed that they don’t satisfy our deep spiritual needs. We should be in “dogged pursuit” (to use the earlier definition’s phrase), but not of acquiring more and more things to make us happy and comfortable. We pursue the things of God, we strive to for His kingdom with all of our might. Paul uses one of his favorite metaphors to remind us that the Christian life is not to be lived either in an endless search for pleasure or on our recliners at home. We are to imitate him and others who give their all to following hard after Jesus.

Our first five verses exhort us to

I. Strive For The Prize (vv. 12-16)

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

¹ <https://www.foxnews.com/us/what-happened-affluenza-teen-ethan-couch>

² John de Graff, David Wann, Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (Alameda: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

What is the “this” and the “it” that Paul refers to in verse 12 – “*obtained this... make it my own*”? Look back at verse 11 – that “*I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*” The apostle was saying that he hadn’t completely arrived as a Christian, either in coming to some advanced perfect state of being here on earth or to the resurrected life after his death. So he says that he will press on, strain forward to the end of his days. Reading this might make us think that Paul thought his salvation was in doubt. That if he stopped running hard after Jesus, that he would lose the prize of heaven and being delivered to eternity. Why else would he be trying so hard? But then he says to “*hold true to what we have attained.*” He was not in doubt – he knew that he had salvation and eternal life; that being united to Christ guaranteed that he would rise with Christ after his death. But he still strove with all of his energy because it was worth charging hard after the Lord and His will. If we believe that God has the best in store for those who follow Him, and that we will have heavenly rewards, we will be motivated to run hard.

This is not the only place that Paul has used this running imagery:

Hebrews 12:1 – “*... let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*”

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 – “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.*”

Is Paul saying that we have to beat out other people for our salvation, as though me winning the race means someone else doesn’t get to go to heaven? No, we can’t press the metaphor too far. Paul is saying that the things of God are worth striving for and worth being intense and highly committed to. Never forget what Jesus said about moderate, bland commitment in Revelation 3:16 – “*So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.*” The emphasis is on not taking victory for granted, but working towards it.

We have to hold these truths in tension: that we are secure in our salvation when we have been given new life in Christ and the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives, and there’s nothing we can do to lose our salvation once we’ve been adopted into God’s eternal family; at the same time we are exhorted to not be complacent, but rather to strive hard in our Christian lives. As one commentary said: “*Earning is not a good word for Christians because we can’t earn any acceptance before God, but effort is a good word for those who have already been made new creations in Christ.*”³ Paul says the mature believers think this way; they all understand this and don’t see security and striving as conflicting ideas. The implication is that immature Christians might think, “Hey, I’m saved, I can sit back and not do anything.”

What happens when you look back in a race? You can stumble, you can lose time. So Paul says, “don’t look back, look forward.” But do any of you have trouble with “*forgetting what lies behind*”? I do. I can think of my past sins, or when I’ve said dumb things to people, or when I’ve been cowardly or lazy and not pursued opportunities to minister to others. I regret the way things ended in some relationships and harbor guilt for wasting so much time through the years. There’s no end to self-flagellation if I let myself really wallow in regret. But I think Paul would remind me, “those things are keeping you from making progress, from pressing on. You need to deal with some of that stuff by repenting to the Lord or by asking forgiveness/making amends to people; whatever you need to do. But after that, you need to forget it. You need to drop it. You can’t run a race with that burden weighing you down.”

³ Tony Merida & Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Nashville: Holman, 2016), p. 152.

I think that Paul is also telling us to forget what lies behind that was good. Don't rest on the accomplishments in the past, the times that you were close to God or that you were active in ministry. You served at church for so many years and now you just want to sit on the sidelines and watch other people do the work. You read through the entire Bible back in your twenties, so you're good to go, right? "Hey, I used to help people and have them over for meals and volunteer to run things, but I'm done with that; it's time to live life for me now." You don't get to retire from serving the Lord until you die. God wants you to redeem the time, to respond to His call for using your gifts and doing your part to advance His Kingdom. I promise you that you don't have as many spiritual accomplishments as the Apostle Paul or as many bad things that you need to forget (unless you were arresting and killing Christians like he was). So if he could forget what lay behind, you can too.

One thing that will help us in our striving is to model our faith after the right people.

II. Imitate the Godly Not the Earthly (vv. 17-19)

¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

Paul said something very similar to verse 17 in 1 Corinthians 11:1 – *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”* This is important to remember as we hear the command to imitate Paul and the others who give a good example in the faith. Since no Christian is perfect, we follow them only insofar as they model Christ. Obviously, Jesus is the perfect example and we should pattern our lives after Him as much as we can. But it's also valuable to have other believers who are role models for us. Jesus never sinned and never had to apologize for what He did or said, so it's good to have another fallen human being who has to do those kinds of things. Watching and imitating someone who is more mature than you is a wonderful way to grow in your faith. We do this in every other area of life: if you want to be a great musician, you study the masters; if you want to excel in sports, you watch the pros; if you want to learn how to act or do art, you watch those who do it well. I remember my High School youth pastor reciting the entire book of Colossians from memory when I was about 15 years old. I remember being stunned, thinking, “You can do that?” I didn't even know that was a possibility until I heard him do it. We can all see godly things that we can shoot for in those who are more advanced and mature than us.

This section tells us who we don't imitate as well. Paul was crying tears of frustration that there was a group of people who were against him, who didn't understand the gospel. He was very upset, maybe broken-hearted that they were potentially leading people in the church astray. Many commentators think that he was referring to the group that we talked about last week – the Judaizers, the people who were forcing the old covenant laws on the new converts. But it's more likely that this is a different group, one that was preaching a “live however you want” gospel. They said, “Don't worry about the law because you're saved by grace.” You can indulge in any sensual thing because you're forgiven. But Paul clearly says that they walk in a way that makes them enemies of the cross. They don't understand that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross makes us new creations that are to act in accordance with the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work. They heard that Jesus forgives and frees you, but they misunderstood that freedom. Galatians 5:13 warns: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”* They had taken it so far that they were not even trying to follow Jesus at all, as Romans 16:18 warned: *“For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve.”*

“They glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” Those two things always go together, don’t they? We can either set our minds on heavenly things and then in the light of knowing God and His holiness, we are rightly ashamed of what we should be ashamed of. Or we only ever think about earthly things, and we rationalize and excuse the shameful things. Elsewhere, Paul spelled out the things we should be ashamed of - Colossians 3:5-6: *“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.”*

The last two verses turn from those who look only to earthly things to those who

III. Keep Heavenly Glory in View (vv. 20-21)

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

In my introduction to this book, my first sermon back in January, I mentioned that Philippi was an outpost of Rome and that many of its residents were Roman citizens even though Rome was 800 miles away. I think that Paul is playing on this in his reminder of verse 20 that *“our citizenship is in heaven.”* The Philippians would have known better than most what it was like to have a citizenship in a far-away land. They lived under Roman law rather than local law, they had to keep in their minds their true allegiance to a land that they rarely saw. And so we are to think of ourselves first as citizens of heaven before our citizenship of an earthly country and government.

Verse 21 says that Jesus *“will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”* 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 sheds more light on this transformation of our bodies: *“What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.”* Combine that with the idea that our bodies will be like Jesus’ glorious body, and that in heaven, as Revelation 21:4 says, there is *“no mourning, nor crying, nor pain.”* I think we can be confident that our spiritual bodies will be amazing, not limited in any way like they are now, no longer be subject to the earthly, physical laws. The only bodies we’ve known are weak and diseased. Our resurrection bodies will be free of the curse of sin, redeemed and restored to their original beauty and purpose that goes back to Eden.⁴

We’ll be able to run and play games without being injured. We’ll never need medical attention.

Our allergies, any limitations of our bodies will be a thing of the past.

We’ll have unlimited energy and perfect health, bodies that will work for all of eternity!

We will never get tired of worshipping our Creator.

Remember that verse 14 called this a prize. That makes me think of those game shows where you see what’s behind Door #1 or Door #2 – imagine the spiritual version of that:

If you choose Door #1, you get to ignore God and pursue every pleasure imaginable in this world and live for yourself. But behind that door Paul says there is destruction, Hell awaits.

If you choose Door #2, you become a disciple of Jesus and walk the narrow road of doing what He asks of you, setting aside your desires and plans for His. Behind this door you find that your prize is an eternity of true joy awaiting you. Jesus will take your fragile, worn-down, limited earthly body and give you a glorious body that you will live forever in.

We have so much joy and pleasure awaiting us in heaven. If we will lift our eyes beyond this life to remember the glorious life that awaits us, we will find the motivation to live for Jesus now.

⁴ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), p. 281.

Conclusion

There's been a lot of talk about what happened at Asbury University as a chapel service on February 8th turned into an ongoing worship and prayer meeting that lasted for two weeks before college administrators brought it to an end. It attracted over 50,000 visitors from all over the country, even other countries who wanted to experience it, and it has spread to other Christian schools. Was it a true revival? I have no idea; but we should all be praying that God will use that experience to bear beautiful, deep fruit in the lives of those who were part of it. Here's the thing, though: you don't have to jump in your car and try to get to Asbury or wherever the next move of the Spirit will be. You don't need to go find the Spirit moving somewhere else because the Spirit can move inside of you. If you want to experience revival and renewal and see your life be more in line with the Scriptures and the will of God, start living out Philippians 3!

Start with reminding yourself of your salvation, that God has saved you from hell and freed you from both the power and curse of sin. Despite your depravity and unworthiness, God broke through your defenses and made you a new creation in Christ, with the Holy Spirit working His will in your heart and life. Remind yourself of your future - that because you are united to Christ and therefore are sinless in God's sight, that when you die you will be raised to new life. In heaven, you will be given a perfect spiritual body and a forever home that Jesus Himself prepared for you. And then remind yourself that God will stoke the fires of renewal and revival in your life as you follow hard after Him. Set aside the empty thrills of sensuality, the illicit sexual desires that always promise so much more than they can ever deliver. Resist the affluenza that sets in on your life and the pull to become comfortable and entitled. Challenge the passivity that you find in your life, the ways that you excuse being spiritually lazy. Read the Scriptures as though they were God's words written for you (because they are). Don't rest on what you learned about God and the Bible in the past, keep learning. Don't just shine the spiritual trophies from your childhood or from years ago, pray that God would show you where He wants to use you today and in the coming days and years. Spend time praying that God would ignite a fire in you to follow hard after Him, using your talents and inner abilities and passions to minister to others. God is calling you to a single-minded pursuit of Him and all of the wonders and treasures that He has in store for you.

Bryan Chapell talks about a friend who was a marathon runner who had entered a particularly difficult race. He knew that it would end on an uphill climb, so he decided to do something that would give him the energy that he needed. Instead of his own name on the back of his jersey, he put the name "Christian," so that as he approached the finish line and he was struggling, that the crowd would be yelling: "Go get 'em, Christian! You can do it, Christian! Take the hill, get to the finish line, Christian!"⁵ And those are the same cheers that the great crowd of witnesses surrounding us are yelling to you. Finish well, press on, and run the race to win and receive the prize. It's all worth it.

→ Transition to Communion

Benediction - Galatians 4:4-5 - *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."*

⁵ Bryan Chapell, "Are Vocation and Occupation the Same Thing?" found at: <https://www.crossway.org/articles/are-vocation-and-occupation-the-same-thing>