A Study of the Book of Philippians

The Call for Perfection (Philippians 3:12-21)

“The mark of a saint is not perfection, but consecration. A saint is not a man without faults, but a man who has given himself without reserve to God.” ~ B. F. Westcott

I. Overview

After stating his desire to know the Lord in 3:1-20, the apostle Paul provides both a warning and a word of encouragement for the believers of Philippi. His word of caution recognizes that spiritual perfection cannot occur this side of eternity. Such rhetoric appears to counter those who are seeking to undermine the Gospel and argue that one can be completely righteous in this life. Instead, Paul directs his readers’ attention to the hope of the future when we will be made perfect—a body transformed into the likeness of Christ.

II. The Call for Perfection (3:12-21)

A. A Word of Caution (vv. 12-16)

v. 12 - The identification of what Paul has not attained is unclear. Scholars have proposed it is the “prize” at the end of the race, the resurrection of the dead, God’s righteousness, or all that Paul mentions in verses 8-11. Based upon the immediate context, it seems best to view this matter of attainment as the goal of knowing Christ. Indeed, as one scholar aptly writes, “To know the incomprehensible greatness of Christ demands a lifetime of arduous inquiry” (Hawthorne, Philippians, 151).

Paul’s grasp of fully comprehending the significance of Christ is ongoing; while, Christ’s grasp of Paul was complete.

v. 13 - If it is true for Paul, it is true for all believers. There is a life-long pursuit of knowing the Lord. However, note that Paul’s language is personal, intense, and emphatic.

Paul is not pessimistic about his spiritual progress, rather, he understands that he is continually being conformed to Christ’s death and growing in his understanding of the power of Christ’s resurrection (v. 10).

Paul’s single focus ignores the past (e.g., injustices, failures, and even successes) and concentrates on the future. Both terms are used of a runner in athletic events.

v. 14 - Continuing the athletic metaphor, Paul refers to the finish line (see 1 Cor 9:24). “It is this vision of the end of the race that ever directs and speeds his hastening feet” (Michael, Philippians, 162).
What is the meaning of “the upward call of God”? Major interpretations include the following:

- **Residence in Heaven (Col 3:1-2)**. Unlike the false teachers who think they have obtained an exalted status in this life, Paul looks to eternity.

- **Christ**. Appealing to the athletic language, Paul is referring to the winner being summoned forward to accept his award. In this case, that prize is Christ Himself.

- **The blessings of everlasting life**. This interpretation sees this as a general prize—one that entails not only Christ, but also all that eternal life with Christ affords.

One commentator notes that the “goal” and the “prize” both indicate perfection in Christ. However, the former is viewed “as the object of human striving” and focuses on the race that is being run, while the latter is understood as “the gift of God’s sovereign grace” (Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 175).

v. 15 - In humility, Paul includes himself with his readers when he calls for an attitude that recognizes we cannot believe we have “arrived” in the Christian life. In a tone of irony, Paul states what is later repeated by a leader in the Early Church: “it is the mark of the perfect man, not to reckon himself perfect” (Chrysostom). For whatever reason, there appeared to be individuals at Philippi who felt they had reached a level of spiritual perfection.

Rather than create disunity, Paul graciously trusts that the Lord will reveal the truth to those who approach this subject differently.

v. 16 - While Paul is confident that the Lord will reveal what is true, the apostle calls for an open mind and a teachable spirit as they hold fast to what they do know.

B. A Word of Encouragement (vv. 17-21)

v. 17 - “be imitators of me” - Instead of assuming Paul’s command is lacking humility, scholars have argued for consistency with this edict and the rest of Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. Leading interpretations include the following:

- **The command is actually an admonition to submit to his apostolic authority.** However, this interpretation misses the plain meaning of Paul’s words and that the church at Philippi never challenged Paul’s apostleship.

- **The command is actually a corporate call for both Paul and the Church to follow Christ.** However, the immediate context, namely verses 8-11, focuses specifically on Paul’s devotion to the Lord.

- **The command is to follow Paul’s example.** The statement is not out of arrogance, but based out of concern. The basis for this interpretation is: (1) Paul already highlighted that Christ is the ultimate role model (2:5-8); (2) Paul noted that he is not perfect, but that he does strive to walk in obedience and self-denial (3:12-14); (3) Paul also referred to other
leaders as a model to follow (2:19-30); and (4) Paul's life is to serve as a great contrast to those who are serving as poor role models in Philippi.

vv. 18-19 - The call to imitate Christ functions as an antithesis to those who serve as an ungodly example. These “enemies of the cross” oppose the work of Christ at Calvary.

Observe the following descriptors Paul ascribes to these enemies:

- *End is Destruction.* Paul indicates that eternal judgment awaits this group (see 2 Pet 3:7).

- *God is their bellies.* Many scholars believe that this is a reference to Jewish laws about food. In other words, “their scrupulous observance of food laws became their belly-god” (Hawthorne, 166).

- *Exult in their shame.* This term speaks of one’s nakedness. Thus, it would appear that Paul is mocking their practice of circumcision. Instead of the cross functioning as a point of shame (Heb 12:1), their own religious actions are what is shameful!

- *Think about earthly things.* Their worship of God was eclipsed by their obsession with religious practices. By adding works to the Gospel, they eliminated Christ's work and added to the Gospel message. They also fail to walk in unity by their lack of humility and love.

v. 20 - The term for “citizenship” refers to the rights and privileges of belonging to a state or colony. The citizens of one of Rome's greatest colonies, Philippi, would have fully understood this image. The believer’s citizenship serves as a great contrast to the “enemies of the heavenly state” seen in verses 18 and 19.

“Savior” or “soter” was a common title ascribed to the Roman emperor. Unlike Roman citizens who look to their “savior,” the emperor, heavenly citizens look to their Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (see Isa 35:4; Phil 2:9-11).

v. 21 - Paul is speaking of a radical transformation that involves the whole person (1 Cor 15:42-44; also, see O’Brien, *Philippians*, 464). As Christ was exalted because of His obedience (Phil 2:6-11), the believer will also be glorified. No wonder Paul wrote that dying is gain (1:21)!

### III. Intersect

A. Legalism, and narcissism for that matter, deceives the soul in to thinking that he/she is capable of living the spiritual life on his/her own accord.

   Galatians 3:2-3 -
B. Growth in the spiritual life does not come through inactivity, a mediocre lifestyle, or a carefree attitude. Instead, spiritual vitality calls for action, passion, and a determined attitude.

Romans 12:1-2 -

C. A flawed widget cannot serve as a prototype. To serve as a role model for godliness, a man has to be actively pursuing Christ with his whole heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Matthew 22:37 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

In Philippians 3:17, the apostle Paul calls for the believers to imitate him. It is a profound command with huge implications. For instance, could you tell a group of Christians to imitate your spiritual walk? Would the Church be healthier if the saints were mimicking how you follow Jesus?

If such a thought gives you pause or even makes you cringe, then identify an area in your life that you need to address in order for you to serve as a model for godliness. Take some time this week being intentional on how you will work on this area.

“Puritan writer Thomas Watson said, ‘Eternity to the godly is a day that has no sunset; eternity to the wicked is a night that has no sunrise.’ Eternity is the grand climax of all history. It is the age to come when every person will acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Eternity will bring to this world all God intended for us. Sin will have been judged and banished. Rewards will have been presented. Life will continue with new vitality, meaning, and perfection. What an age that will be!” ~ G. Sweeting