

January 17, 2021

RESTING, PRESSING ON, AND STRAINING FORWARD

Philippians 3:12-16

*(9 of 12 in a series through Philippians)*

Harold Best, former professor at Wheaton College, once noted, “A mature Christian is easily edified.” It’s a quote that I’ve shared with the interns repeatedly, especially when they’re about to stand in front of the congregation and preach. I think it helps ease the nerves to think that those about to listen to you don’t need to hear the most amazing sermon in order to be encouraged—and to find reason to encourage you! But the observation itself (i.e. that mature Christians are easily edified) might feel a bit surprising. We might be tempted to think that if someone is a really mature believer, then he or she is going to be quite hard to edify, maybe like a mature weightlifter requires a lot of weight resistance to be challenged. And yet I think Harold Best’s observation is correct.

This may well raise the question in our minds, “What other features characterize mature believers?” And one place we can look to answer that question is Philippians 3:12-16. After taking some time at the end of chapter 2 to hold up Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of what he has been calling the Philippians to do, Paul turns back to himself once more in chapter 3, giving the Philippians insight into how he thinks and lives his own life.

This shouldn’t be surprising because before the chapter ends, he’s going to tell these believers, “Join in imitating me” (3:17). What *could* be a little surprising, though, is how he describes his own life and ambition. For one who has accomplished so much for the sake of Christ and sits in a Roman prison, you might think that Paul is ready to coast into the sunset. What more is there to accomplish? Someone could go ahead and begin writing his biography, and he can just rest until the end. But when he turns the focus on himself in 3:12-16, what we find is that Paul has a godly restlessness about him. And what’s more, when he tells the Philippians about this, he notes that all “who are mature” should “think this way” (v. 15). Therefore, if Paul gives us a glimpse of what’s going on with him, while telling us that all mature believers should think the same way, and eventually telling the Philippians to imitate him, then I think it’s fair to say that what we see in verses 12-16 is a picture of how Paul envisions mature believers thinking and living. Therefore, this morning I want to note a few things, based on Paul’s declarations in these verses, that characterize mature believers. The first of these is that mature believers want to know Christ more.

**Mature believers press on to know Christ more**

Right before the section we’re looking at today, Paul had laid out his ambition in 3:10-11, saying, “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” In other words, as Paul contemplated his life, he looked to the end—the resurrection. For him, that day to come meant that he would—to use his language in 1 Corinthians—“know [Christ]

fully, even as [he has] been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). And that’s what he wanted. He’d known Christ in his sufferings, but his great longing was to arrive at the resurrection so that he might know fully the one who had died for him, risen for him, and given him life that day as Paul was traveling to Damascus. Paul wanted to know his Lord as fully as possible—and he knew that day was coming at the resurrection.

But he starts our section by noting that he hasn’t arrived at where he wants to be. He says, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own.” Then he adds, “I do not consider that I have made it my own” (vv. 12-13). In these first two verses it seems that Paul is intent on saying that he hasn’t arrived or obtained or achieved what he wants. And if what he wants to obtain or achieve is knowing Christ as he will know him at the resurrection, then we can say that Paul begins this section by saying, “Though I know Christ, I do not know him as fully as I desire to know him.”

In other words, mature believers aren’t complacent, thinking they have achieved some state of maturity where they can sit back and rest and settle in. They know that until the resurrection, they will not have what they eagerly desire. But this reality doesn’t lead them simply to sit and wait for the return of Christ but to press toward that goal of knowing Jesus more. Paul says twice that he presses on toward this goal. He writes in verse 12, “I press on to make it my own,” and then in verse 13, he notes that he is “straining forward to what lies ahead,” before saying again in verse 14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”—the prize being knowing and gaining Christ.

He states this repeatedly. He is not content. He is not complacent. Nor are his goals simply attaining that which is here today and gone tomorrow—like wealth, fame, or worldly success. His great ambition that he strives after is knowing Christ more and more until the day when he knows him fully at the resurrection. And this pursuit of Jesus is the first mark of mature believers. How might we judge whether one is mature and maturing as a believer? The answer seems to begin with that person desiring to know Christ more.

So, let’s allow this to be a time of evaluation for ourselves. Is it your goal in life to know Jesus more and more as you press forward to the day when you will know him fully at the resurrection? Or are you allowing other things that are much less glorious to crowd out your pursuit of knowing Jesus? Since we’re at the beginning of the year, and each of us is probably looking at what we want to be and do over the next year, why don’t we determine today that we want to end 2021 knowing Jesus more fully than we know him now? That is what mature believers do. But that’s not all. Second, mature believers rest in Christ as they strain and press forward.

### **Mature believers rest in Christ as they strain and press forward**

As we have just noted, there is a godly restlessness with mature believers. There is straining. There is pressing forward. There is a hunger to know Christ more. This is the furthest picture from complacency. And yet there is a kind of restlessness that I don’t want us to think of. There

is a restlessness in believers that I think is dishonoring to God and dishonoring to the sufficiency of Christ's work and of his sovereign and gracious work in our lives.

But by making this point that mature believers rest in Christ as they strain and press forward, we are raising a couple of questions: 1) Where do we see this in the text? and 2) How does rest work together with this godly restlessness we've just spoken of? Let's start by answering the first.

The place I see this in the text is in the second half of verse 12. Paul writes, "I press on to make it my own." "It," being his full knowledge of Christ and all else that will be his at the resurrection. Then he continues, "Because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Now let's think about what he's saying and how this works. Remember last week, we looked at Philippians 3:1-11, and we noted that Paul was celebrating the fact that we're justified by faith in the finished work of Christ alone. So, there is a rest in the fact that Paul is not looking to what he has done or is doing as if he's meriting favor by his works before God. He knows that it is what Jesus did—and what Jesus did alone—that merits his approval before God. Therefore, as I've noted, there is a certain rest in that in that one justified by faith is not constantly working to measure up. But it gets even better. Paul recognizes that his salvation itself is the work of God. Think back to what he noted in 1:6. He told the Philippians, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." You see, he views the work of his salvation—from beginning to completion—as the work of Christ. Christ began his salvation, and he'll complete it. And this fits his own testimony. Paul was on his way to persecute Christians when the risen Christ appeared to him out of the sky and called him to himself. I think that's what he's now summarizing in the statement "Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v. 13).

Therefore, Paul is able to rest in the reality that Christ has taken hold of him, Christ has done everything necessary for Paul to be approved of by God, and we can even add that Christ is now the one willing and working within Paul (2:13). That is a restful position for the believer. If Paul were restless in doubting whether Christ will complete the work that he began in him, or wasn't enough to merit Paul's approval before God, or wasn't willing to continue to work in him by the power of the Spirit, that would be an ungodly, God-dishonoring restlessness. It would be a restlessness rooted in doubt concerning God's ability and doubt in Christ's sufficiency and grace. But Paul doubts none of these things. He stops and says, "I know Christ has made me his own." What rest and assurance that provides! And it is from that restful foundation that Paul then says, "So I am hunger, eager, and restless to do everything in my power to know him more as I run toward the day of the resurrection."

Now, this might feel a bit contradictory in our minds. We might say, "Well, if he's the one who'll began a good work and will bring it to completion, then I'll just sit back and let him," or "Well, if he's justified me because of what Jesus has done and not because of what I contribute, then I'll just be lazy." Both of those thoughts are unbiblical and may reflect a terribly sinful heart. But notice what Paul does. Because Christ "has made me his own," he says, I'll "make it my own." He rests in Christ and from there strains forward and presses on. And so do all mature believers.

So, once again, let's evaluate ourselves. Do you live your life in a constant state of restless anxiety with regard to the Lord? Are you always anxious about whether he'll continue to carry you through or whether he'll find you acceptable? If so, I want to encourage you to consider God's promises. The one who began this work in you will complete it. He'll not leave nor forsake you. He's done everything for you to be approved of by God. Rest in that. And as you rest, press forward to know him more. And speaking of pressing forward, let's move on to the next characteristic. Third, mature believers don't dwell on past achievements and become complacent.

### **Mature believers don't become complacent by dwelling on past achievements**

As Paul continues, noting that he hasn't attained all that he hungers for, pressing on and straining to know Christ more, and doing it from a place of resting in the fact that Christ has made him his own, Paul also notes another element in his approach of pressing on after Christ. He writes in verse 13, "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead." He forgets what lies behind.

But what is he forgetting? We could suggest that he's forgetting all the things that he listed earlier in verses 4-6. That is, he's forgetting that he was circumcised on the eighth day, was from the tribe of Benjamin, was a Pharisee, etc. We could label this forgetting all the things that he once looked to for confidence in the flesh as earning him favor with God. And the strength of this view is that he does acknowledge in verse 8 that he has counted all of that loss and as rubbish.

But I actually don't think that works. For one, he's already ruled out these things. He's already noted they're rubbish. Why note again that he forgets them? Second, he's noted these things as things that he might look to in order to gain merit before God. This is why he's counted them rubbish, because nothing we bring to the table can gain us merit before God except faith in the finished work of his Son. So, as I noted, let's label these things in verses 4-6 as "confidence in the flesh." Well, now let's insert that labeling of this reality in verse 13. Paul would be saying, "I forget all that in my past that might merit me before God, and I strain forward to things in my future that might merit me approval before God." You see, I just don't think it works. What then is Paul talking about when he speaks of "forgetting what lies behind"?

I think he's talking about all that he has done in obedience to Christ and all that the Lord has done through him. In other words, he's forgetting *good* things. Now, I don't mean he's forgetting good things in the sense that if someone were to ask Paul, "Remember when you preached the gospel to the Corinthians and then stayed there a year and a half to build up the church?" Paul would answer, "Nope. Can't remember it at all. I've forgotten all that stuff." What I mean is that he's forgotten good things that he's accomplished in the sense that they might allow him to be complacent. That is, he's not sitting around saying, "Look at all that I've done. Look at all the experiences I've had. I think I'm just going to coast the rest of the way."

Rather, he is like a basketball team that goes into halftime with a twenty point lead only to come out and play the second half like they're tied. Coaches regularly tell teams in those situations to forget that first half because they don't want them to become complacent in the second half. Or think about a long distance runner who with only a short way to go in the race decides to stop running so that he might dwell on all that he's accomplished to this point. He might be amazed at the pace he's established to that point or how far the other runners are behind him. But we know that by stopping and dwelling on what he's accomplished, he's actually in danger of losing the race. Paul is like a runner who has run amazingly well, but he keeps his eye on the finish line and is running like he has no lead at all. Mature believers do not become complacent because of past achievements.

Once more, then, let's look at ourselves for a second. Do we simply dwell on past achievements and experiences and let this lead to a complacency in our lives? How many of us talk about glorious encounters we've had with the Lord that happened more than five or ten years ago? How many of us speak of how the Lord has used us only being able to point to what was done in the earlier part of this century? Brothers and sisters, the Lord wants you to know him more now. He wants you to experience a greater depth of who he is now. He wants to reveal more of his love and goodness and grace and mercy to you now. Don't rest on past achievements. Chase after him now.

Let me mention one more characteristic. Mature believers love others by trusting the Lord.

### **Mature believers love others by trusting the Lord**

Let me show you what I mean. As Paul ends this section, he writes in verse 15, "Let those of us who are mature think this way." This is why I've framed the sermon as I have. If Paul does these things, and other mature believers should also think this same way, then Paul is giving us a portrait of what mature believers are like. But it's what he says next that is most interesting. Paul writes, "And if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained" (vv. 15-16).

This feels like a very tricky verse. Paul thinks all believers should think about the things we've just been going over just like he thinks. But then he brings up that some may disagree with him. He says, "If in anything you think otherwise." And by "anything" I don't think Paul means literally anything. I don't think, for example, he's saying that if any of you disagree with me about Jesus being the Son of God who lived, died, and was raised for us, then I trust that God will reveal this to you." No, he wouldn't be nonchalant about those things. When the Galatians were abandoning justification by faith alone Paul said, "O foolish Galatians" (Gal 3:1). He wasn't nonchalant at all.

So it seems that he is referring to the things he's mentioned in these verses. Maybe they have a little different perspective on what motivates someone to run after God more. Maybe they might parse out a little differently how Christ takes hold of us to make us his own. Maybe they think that by remembering past achievement people are more encouraged and more motivated

to run, not less. Whatever the issue, Paul could have said, “If any of you think differently than me on this, then I’m writing you off. What a pathetic person you are.”

But instead he simply trusts God, saying, “God will reveal that also to you” (v. 15) before adding, “Only let us hold true to what we have attained” (v. 16). In other words, I think Paul is saying that if they’ll just hold fast to the gospel and commit to God’s Word, then Paul trusts God to straighten them out in any area they need.

What strikes me about this is how charitable Paul is here. How much does it just warm your heart when someone says, “I disagree with you. I think differently about that”? Doesn’t it sometimes just make your blood pressure rise? How dare someone disagree with me about anything, we might think. But Paul here is not up in arms. He’s not bent on defending himself because he entertains the idea that some might not see things as he does. He simply acknowledges that some may disagree on these lesser matters, but he trusts God to reveal what is true as long as they keep holding tight to the gospel. Mature believers love others by trusting the Lord.

So, let’s ask ourselves, how many of us are as charitable as Paul when it comes to believers disagreeing with us on lesser matters? How many of us can continue to walk in warmth with those who disagree with us, even on minor things? I mean just think of how many things we can disagree on. How should one respond to the election and recent events in our country? How should one respond to Covid? How should we interpret this police shooting or that one? I mean, I’m just hitting the tip of the iceberg, and right now there may be a thought in our hearts that says, “No one in this room better think differently than me about even one of those issues or I’ll feel animosity in my heart toward that buffoon.” And you know what, if we think that way, we’re reflecting immaturity. A mature believer knows that the brother and sister across the aisle from you love the Lord, and one of you may be wrong on any number of issues, but you trust the Lord to work with that person while you keep on loving them. A mature believer walks in love by trusting the Lord.

Let us then this morning strive to characterize these things. Pursue knowing Christ more, as we rest in his sovereign, gracious, sufficient work. Let’s forget what lies behind us so that we don’t become complacent, and as we run after the Lord, let’s love each other as we trust the Lord. And let’s demonstrate our commitment to these things as we come to the table. Amen.