

ONWARD!
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A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”
Philippians 3:13-14

SO far as his acceptance with God is concerned, a Christian is complete in Christ as soon as he believes. Those who have trusted themselves in the hands of the Lord Jesus are saved, and they may enjoy holy confidence upon the matter, for they have a divine warrant for so doing. “There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” To this salvation the apostle had attained.

But while the work of Christ for us is perfect, and it were presumption to think of adding to it, the work of the Holy Spirit in us is not finished—it is continually carried on from day to day and will need to be continued throughout the whole of our lives. We are being “conformed to the image of Christ” and that process is in operation as we advance towards glory.

The condition in which a believer should always be found is that of progress. His motto must be, “Onward and upward!” Nearly every figure by which Christians are described in the Bible implies this. We are plants of the Lord’s field, but we are sown that we may grow, “First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.” We are born into the family of God, but there are babes, little children, young men, and fathers in Christ Jesus.

Yea, and there are none who are perfect or fully developed men in Christ Jesus. It is a growth evermore. Is the Christian described as a pilgrim? He is no pilgrim who sits down as if rooted to the place. “They go from strength to strength.”

The Christian is compared to a warrior, a wrestler, a competitor in the games. These figures are the very opposite of a condition in which nothing more is to be done. They imply energy, the gathering up of strength, and the concentration of forces, in order to the overthrowing of adversaries.

The Christian is also likened to a runner in a race and that is the figure now before us in the text. It is clear that a man cannot be a runner who merely holds his ground, contented with his position. He only runs aright who each moment nears the mark. Progress is the healthy condition of every Christian man, and he only realizes his best estate while he is growing in grace, “Adding to his faith virtue,” “Following on to know the Lord,” and daily receiving grace for grace out of the fullness which is treasured up in Christ Jesus.

Now, to this progress the apostle exhorts us—nay, he does more than exhort—he allures us. He stands among us. He does not lecture us *ex cathedra*, standing like a learned master far above his disciples, but he puts himself on our level. And though not a whit behind the very chief of the apostles, he says, “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.”

He does not give us the details of his own imperfections and deficiencies, but in one word he confesses them in the gross, and then declares that he burned with eager desire for perfection, so that it is the one passion of his soul to press onward towards the great goal of his hopes, the prize of his high calling in Christ Jesus.

We cannot desire to have a better instructor than a man who sympathizes with us because he humbly considers himself to be of the same rank as ourselves. Teaching us to run, the apostle himself runs.

Wishing to fire our holy ambition, he bears testimony to that same ambition flaming within his own spirit. I desire so to speak from this text that every believer may pant for progress in the divine life.

Paul's statements in the text call us to look at him under four aspects—first, *as forming a just estimate of his present condition*, “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.” Secondly, *as placing his past in its proper position*, “forgetting the things which are behind.” Thirdly, *as aspiring eagerly to a more glorious future*, “reaching forth unto those things which are before.” And fourthly, *as practically putting forth every exertion to obtain that which he desired*, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

I. First, admire our apostle as PUTTING A JUST ESTIMATE UPON HIS PRESENT CONDITION.

He was not one of those who consider the state of the believer's heart to be a trifling matter. He was not indifferent as to his spiritual condition. He says, “I count”—as if he had taken stock, had made a careful estimate, and had come to a conclusion.

He is not a wise man who says, “I am a believer in Christ, and therefore it little matters what are my inward feelings and experiences.” He who so speaks should remember that keeping the heart with all diligence is a precept of inspiration and that a careless walk usually comes to a very sorrowful ending.

The apostle took account, but when he had done so he was dissatisfied, “I count not myself to have apprehended.” Nor was that dissatisfaction to be regretted. It was a sign of true grace, a conclusion which is always arrived at when saints judge themselves rightly. Most weighty is that word of Chrysostom, “He who thinks he has obtained everything, hath nothing.” Had Paul been satisfied with his attainments, he would never have sought for more.

Most men cry, “Hold,” when they think they have done enough. The man who could honestly write, “I press forward,” you may be quite sure is one who felt that he had not yet apprehended all that might be gained. Self-satisfaction rings the death-knell of progress. There must be a deep-seated discontent with present attainments or there will never be a striving after the things which are yet beyond.

Now, beloved, remark, that the man who in our text tells us that he had not apprehended was a man vastly superior to any of us. Among them that were born of women there has never lived a greater than Paul the apostle. In sufferings for Christ, a martyr of the first class. In ministry for Christ, an apostle of foremost degree.

Where shall I find such a man for revelations? He had been caught up into the third heaven and heard words which it was not lawful for him to utter. Where shall I find his match for character? A character splendidly balanced, as nearly approximating to that of his divine Master as we may well expect to see in mortal men.

Yet, after having duly considered the matter, this notable saint said, “I count not myself to have apprehended.” Shame, then, on any of us poor dwarfs, if we are so vain as to count that we have apprehended! Shame upon the indecent self-conceit of any man who congratulates himself upon his own spiritual condition, when Paul said, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.”

The injury which self-content will do a man would be hard to measure—it is the readiest way to stunt him and the surest method to keep him weak. I should be sorry indeed if I should be addressing one who imagines that he has apprehended, for his progress in grace is barred from this time forth. The moment a man says, “I have it,” he will no longer try to obtain it. The moment he cries, “It is enough,” he will not labor after more.

Yet, brethren, far too often of late have I come across the path of those who speak as if they have apprehended—brethren whose own lips praise themselves, who descant upon their own fullness of grace, with an unction rather too unctuous for my taste. I am not about to condemn them. I cannot say I am not about to censure them, for I intend to do so, from a deep sense of the necessity that they should be censured.

These friends assure us that they have reached great heights of grace and are now in splendid spiritual condition. I should be very glad to know that it is so, if it were true. But I am grieved to hear

them act as witnesses for themselves, for then I know that their witness is not true. If it were so, they would be the last men to publish it abroad.

There are brethren abroad, whose eminent graciousness is not very clear to others, but it is very evident to themselves. And equally as vivid is their apprehension of the great inferiority of most of their brethren. They talk to us, not as men of like passions with ourselves and brethren of the same stock, but as demigods, thundering out of the clouds—giants discoursing to the little men around them. If it be true that they are so superior, I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. But my suspicion is that their glorying is not good and that the spirit which they manifest will prove a snare to them.

I meet, I say, sometimes with brethren who feel contented with their spiritual condition. They do not ascribe their satisfactory character to themselves, but to the grace of God. But for all that, they do feel that they are what they ought to be and what others ought to be but are not. They see in themselves a great deal that is good, very much that is commendable, and a large amount of excellence which they can hold up for the admiration of others. They have reached the “higher life,” and are wonderfully fond of telling us so, and explaining the phenomena of their self-satisfied condition.

Though Paul was compelled to say, “In me, that is, in my flesh, there dwelleth no good thing,” their flesh appears to be of a better quality. Whereas he had spiritual conflicts, and found that without were fightings, and within were fears, these very superior persons have already trodden Satan under their feet and reached a state in which they have little else to do but to divide the spoil.

Now, brethren, whenever we meet with persons who can congratulate themselves upon their personal character or whenever we get into the state of self-content ourselves, there is an ill savor about the whole concern. I do not know what impression it makes upon you, but whenever I hear a brother talk about himself, and how full he is of the Spirit of God, and all that, I am distressed for him.

I think I hear the voice of that stately professor who said, “God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are.” I feel that I would prefer to listen to that other man, who said, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” and went down to his house justified rather than the other.

When I hear a man crow about himself, I think of Peter’s declaration, “Though all men should deny thee, yet will not I,” and I hear another cock crow. Self-satisfaction is the mother of spiritual declension. David said, “My mountain standeth firm: I shall never be moved.” But ere long the face of God was hidden and he was troubled.

In the presence of a professor who is pleased with his own attainments, one remembers that warning text, “Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.” Great I! great I! wherever you are, you must come down. Great I is always opposed to great Christ. John the Baptist knew the truth when he said, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

There is no room in this world for God’s glory and man’s glory. He who is less than nothing, magnifies God, but he “who is rich, and increased in goods, and hath need of nothing,” dishonors God and he himself “is naked and poor and miserable.”

Furthermore, we have observed that the best of men do not talk of their attainments. Their tone is self-depreciation, not self-content. We have known some eminently holy men, who are now in heaven, and in looking back upon their lives, we note that they were never conscious of being what we all thought them to be. Everybody could see their beauty of character except themselves. *They* lamented their imperfections while *we* admired the grace of God in them.

I remember a minister of Christ, now with God—I will not mention his name—if I did, it would be familiar to your ears as household words. It was proposed by some of us, when he left the ministry in his old age, that we should hold a meeting to bid him farewell and testify our esteem for him. It was my duty to propose the fraternal act, but I hesitated as I saw the blush mantle his cheek, and I paused when he rose and besought us never to think of such a thing, for he felt himself to be one of the most unworthy of all the servants of the Lord.

Every man, of the associated ministers that day assembled, felt that our venerable friend was by far the superior of us all, and yet his own estimate of himself was lowliest of the lowly. He had sacrificed

much, but I never heard him speak of his sacrifices. He lived in habitual fellowship with God, but I never heard him declare it, much less glory in it.

Shallow streams brawl and babble, but deep waters flow on in silence. Of all the departed saints whom it has been my lot to esteem highly in love for their works' sake, I do not remember one who dared to praise himself, though I can recollect several poor little spiritual babes who did so to their own injury.

If ever true saints speak of what God has done by them, they do it in such a modest way that you might think they were talking of someone five hundred miles away, rather than of themselves. They have scrupulously laid all their crowns at the Savior's feet, not in word only, but in spirit.

When I remember these sacred names of the great departed, I feel it hard to have patience with the unspiritual, unholy boastings of personal holiness and high spirituality, which are getting common in these days. Drums make much noise, but we know by observation that it is not their fullness which makes the sound.

Again, we have noticed that we ourselves, in our own holiest moments, do not feel self-complacent. Whenever we get near to God and really enter into fellowship with Him, the sensations we feel are the very reverse of self-congratulation. Job, in this, was the type of every believing man. Till he saw God, he spoke up for his own innocence and defended himself against the charges of his friends. But when the Lord revealed Himself to him, he said, "Mine eye seeth thee, therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

We never see the beauty of Christ without at the same time perceiving our own deformity. When we neglect prayer and self-examination, we grow mighty vain fellows, but when we live near to God in private devotion and heart-searching, we put off our ornaments from us. In the light of God's countenance we perceive our many flaws and imperfections, and instead of saying, "I am clean," we cry out, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips."

Now if this be our own experience, we infer from it that those who think well of themselves must know little of that revealing light which humbles all who dwell in it.

My observation of personal character has been somewhat wide and I cannot help bearing my testimony that I am greatly afraid of men who make loud professions of superior sanctity. I have had the misfortune to have known, on one or two occasions, superfine brethren who were, in their own ideas, far above the rest of us, and almost free from human frailties.

I confess to have felt very much humbled by their eminent goodness until I found them out. They talked of complete sanctification, of a faith which never staggered, of an old nature entirely dead, until I wondered at them. But I wondered more when I found that all the while they were rotten at the core, were negligent of common duties while boasting of the loftiest spirituality, and were even immoral while they condemned others for comparative trifles.

I have now become very suspicious of all who cry up their own wares. I had rather have a humble, timid, fearful, watchful, self-depreciating Christian to be my companion than any of the religious exquisites who crave our admiration. These great-winged eagles who fly so loftily will, I fear, turn out to be unclean birds. The excessive verdure of a super-finely flourishing religiousness often covers a horrible bog of hypocrisy.

Let me add, once more, that whatever shape self-satisfaction may assume—and it bears a great many—it is at bottom nothing but a shirking of the hardship of Christian soldierhood. The Christian soldier has to fight with sins every day, and if he be a man of God, and God's Spirit is in him, he will find he wants all the strength he has, and a great deal more, to maintain his ground and make progress in the divine life.

Now, self-contentment is a shirking of the battle, I do not care how it is come by. Some people shirk watchfulness, repentance, and holy care, by believing that the only sanctification they need is already theirs by imputation. They use the work of the Lord Jesus *for* them as though it could thrust away the necessity of the Spirit's work *in* them.

Personal holiness they will not hear of—it is legal. If they come across such a text as, “Without holiness no man shall see the Lord,” or “Be not deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,” they straightway force another meaning upon it or else forget it altogether.

Another class believe that they have perfection in the flesh, while a third attain to the same complacent condition by the notion that they have overcome all their sins by believing that they have done so. As if believing your battles to be won was the same thing as winning them. This, which they call faith, I take the liberty to call a lazy, self-conceited presumption.

And though they persuade themselves that their sins are dead, it is certain that their carnal security is vigorous enough, and highly probable that the rest of their sins are only keeping out of the way to let their pride have room to develop itself to ruinous proportions.

You can reach self-satisfaction by a great many roads. I have known enthusiasts reach it by sheer intoxication of excitement, while Antinomians come at it by imagining that the law is abolished and that what is sin in others is not sin in saints.

There are theories which afford an evil peace to the mind by throwing all blame of sin upon fate, and others which lower the standard of God’s demands so as to make them reachable by fallen humanity. Some dream that a mere dead faith in Jesus will save them, let them live as they list. And others think that they are already as good as need be.

Many have fallen into the same condition by another error, for they have said, “Well, we cannot conquer all sin and therefore we need not aim at it. Some of our sins are constitutional and will never be gotten rid of.” Under these evil impressions they sit down and say, “It is well, O soul, you are in an excellent condition. Sit still and take your ease, there is little more to be done, there is no need to attempt more.” All this is evil to the last degree.

I have used few theological terms, because it does not matter how we get to be self-satisfied, whether by an orthodox or a heterodox mode of reasoning. It is a mischievous thing in any case. The fact is, my brother, the Lord calls us to this high calling of contending with sin within and without until we die. And it is of no use of our mincing the matter—we must fight if we would reign.

Our sins will have to be contended with till our dying day and probably we shall have to fight upon our death-bed. Therefore, every day we are bound to be upon our watchtower against sin around and within us. It is of no use our deluding ourselves with pretty theories, which act only as spiritual opium to cause unhealthy dreams.

Sin is a real thing with each one of us and must be daily wrestled with—there is an evil heart of unbelief within us and the devil without us, and we must watch, and pray, and cry mightily, and strive, and struggle, and own that we have not yet apprehended. If we dream that we are at the goal already, we shall stop short of the prize. The full soul loathes the honeycomb. A man full of self, cares for nothing more. Shake off these slothful bands, my brethren. Quit you like men—Be strong. You are as weak as others and as likely to sin—watch, therefore, and pray, lest you enter into temptation.

What is it, at bottom, that makes men content with themselves? It may be, first of all, a forgetfulness of the awful holiness of the law of God. If the law of the Ten Commandments is to be read only as its letter runs, I could imagine a man’s judging himself and saying, “I have apprehended.” But when we know that the law is spiritual, how can we be self-complacent?

My dear brother, if you think you have reached its perfect height, I ask you to hear these words, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself.” Can you say, in the sight of a heart-searching God, “I have fulfilled all that”? If you can, I am staggered at you and think you the victim of a strong delusion, which leads you to believe a lie.

Brethren who can take delight in themselves must have lost sight of the heinousness of sin. The least sin is a desperate evil, an assault upon the throne of God, an insult to the majesty of heaven. The simple act of plucking the forbidden fruit cost us Paradise. There is a bottomless pit of sin in every transgression, a hell in every iniquity.

If we stay clear of sins of action, and if our tongue be so bridled that we avoid every hasty and unadvised speech, yet do we not know that our thoughts and imaginations, our looks and longings of heart, have in them an infinity of evil?

If, after having learned that sin can only be washed out by the death of the Son of God, and that even the flames of hell cannot make atonement for a single sin, a man can then say, “I am content with myself,” it is to be feared that he has made a fatal mistake as to his own character.

Is there not a failure, in such cases, to understand the highest standard of Christian living? If we measure ourselves among ourselves, there are many believers here who might be pretty well satisfied. You are as generous as other Christians are, considering your income. You are as prayerful as most other professors, and as earnest in doing good as any of your neighbors. If you are worldly, yet not more worldly than most professors, nowadays, and so you judge yourself not to be far below the standard. But what a standard! Let us seek a better.

Brethren, it is a very healthy thing for us who are ministers to read a biography like that of M’Cheyne. Read that through, if you are a minister and it will burst many of your wind-bags. You will find yourselves collapse most terribly. Take the life of Brainerd amongst the Indians or of Baxter in our own land. Think of the holiness of George Herbert, the devoutness of Fletcher, or the zeal of Whitefield. Where do you find yourself after reading their lives? Might you not peep about to find a hiding place for your insignificance?

When we mix with dwarfs, we think ourselves giants, but in the presence of giants we become dwarfs. When we think of the saints departed, and remember their patience in suffering, their diligence in labor, their ardor, their self-denial, their humility, their tears, their prayers, their midnight cries, their intercession for the souls of others, their pouring out their hearts before God for the glory of Christ—why, we shrink into less than nothing and find no word of boasting on our tongue.

If we survey the life of the only perfect One, our dear Lord and Master, the sight of His beauty covers our whole countenance with a blush. He is the lily and we are the thorns. He is the sun and we are as the night. He is all good and we are all ill. In His presence we bow in the dust, we confess our sins, and count ourselves unworthy to unloose His shoe latches.

It is to be feared that there is springing up in some parts of the Christian church a deceitful form of self-righteousness, which leads even good people to think too highly of themselves. It is a fashionable form of fanaticism, very pleasing to the flesh, very fascinating, and very deadly. Many, I fear, are not really living so near to God as they think they are, neither are they as holy as they dream.

It is very easy to frequent Bible readings, and conferences, and excited public meetings, and to fill one’s self with the gas of self-esteem. A little pious talk with a sort of Christian who always walks on high stilts will soon tempt you to use the stilts yourself. But indeed, dear brother, you are a poor, unworthy worm and a nobody, and if you get one inch above the ground, you get just that inch too high.

Remember, you may think yourself to be very strong in a certain direction, because you do not happen to be tried on that point. Many of us are exceedingly good-tempered when nobody provokes us. Some are wonderfully patient, because they have a sound constitution and have no racking pains to endure.

And others are exceedingly generous, because they have more money than they want. A ship’s seaworthiness is never quite certain till she has been out at sea. The grand thing will be to be sound before the living God in the day of trial. I pray every believer here to get off his high horse, and to remember that he is “naked and poor and miserable” apart from Christ, and only in Jesus Christ is he anything, and that if he thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself, but does not deceive God.

II. In the second place, look at Paul as PLACING THE PAST IN ITS TRUE LIGHT.

He says, “Forgetting those things which are behind.” What does he mean? Paul does not mean that he forgot the mercy of God which he had enjoyed, far from it. Paul does not mean that he forgot the sins

which he had committed, far from it—he would always remember them to humble him. We must follow out the figure which he is using and so read him.

When a man ran in the Grecian games, if he had run half way, and passed most of his fellows, and had then turned to look around and to rejoice over the distance which he had already covered, he would have lost the race. Suppose he had commenced singing his own praises and said, “I have come down the hill, along the valley, and up the rising ground on this side. See, there are one, two, three, four, five, six runners far behind me.”

While thus praising himself he would lose the race. The only hope for the runner was to forget all that was behind and occupy his entire thoughts with the piece of ground which lay in front. Never mind though you have run so far—you must let the space which lies between you and the goal engross all your thoughts and command all your powers.

It must be so with regard to all the sins which we have overcome. Perhaps at this moment you might honestly say, “I have overcome a very fierce temper,” or “I have bestirred my naturally indolent spirit.” Thank God for that. Stop long enough to say, “Thank God for that,” but do not pause to congratulate yourselves as though some great thing had been done, for then it may soon be undone.

Perhaps the very moment you are rejoicing over your conquered temper it will leap back upon you, like a lion from the covert, and you will say, “I thought you were dead and buried, and here you are roaring at me again.” The very easiest way to give resurrection to old corruptions is to erect a trophy over their graves—they will at once lift up their heads and howl out, “We are still alive.”

It is a great thing to overcome any sinful habit, but it is needful to guard against it still, for you have not conquered it so long as you congratulate yourself upon the conquest. In the same light we must regard all the grace we have obtained. I know some dear friends, who are mighty in prayer and my soul rejoices to join in their supplications. But I should be sorry indeed to hear them praise their own prayers.

We love yonder brother for his generosity, but we hope he will never tell others that he is liberal. Yonder dear friend is very humble, but if he were to boast of it, there would be an end of it. Self-esteem is a moth which frets the garments of virtue. Those flies, those pretty flies of self-praise, must be killed, for if they get into your pot of ointment, they will spoil it all.

Forget the past. Thank God who has made you pray so well. Thank God who has made you kind, gentle, or humble. Thank God who has made you give liberally. But forget it all and go forward, since there is yet very much land to be possessed!

And the same is so with all the work for Jesus which we have done. Some people seem to have very good memories as to what they have performed. They used to serve God wonderfully when they were young! They began early and were full of zeal! They can tell you all about it with much pleasure. In middle life they wrought marvels and achieved great wonders, but now they rest on their oars. They are giving other people an opportunity to distinguish themselves—their own heroic age is over.

Dear brother, as long as ever you are in this world, forget what you have already done and go forward to other service! Living on the past is one of the faults of old churches. We, for instance, as a church, may begin to congratulate ourselves upon the great things God has done by us, for we shall be sure to put it in that pretty shape, although we shall probably mean the great things we have done ourselves. After praising ourselves thus, we shall gain no further blessing, but shall decline by little and little.

The same is true of denominations. What acclamations are heard when allusion is made to what our fathers did! Oh, the name of Carey, Knibb, and Fuller! We Baptists think we have nothing to do now but to go upstairs and go to bed, for we have achieved eternal glory through the names of these good men.

And as for our Wesleyan friends, how apt they are to harp upon Wesley, Fletcher, Nelson, and other great men! Thank God for them. They were grand men. But the right thing is to forget the past and pray for another set of men to carry on the work. We should never be content, but “On, on, on,” should be our cry!

When they asked Napoleon why he continually made wars, he said, “I am the child of war. Conquest has made me what I am and conquest must maintain me.” The Christian church is the child of spiritual war. She only lives as she fights, and rides forth conquering and to conquer. God deliver us from the self-congratulatory spirit, however it may come, and make us long and pine after something better!

III. And now the third point. Paul, having put the present and past into their right places, goes on to the future, **ASPIRING EAGERLY TO MAKE IT GLORIOUS**, for he says, “reaching forth unto those things which are before.”

Does he not here give us the picture of a runner? He reaches forth. The man, as he speeds, throws himself forward, almost out of the perpendicular. His eye is at the goal already. His hand is far in advance of his feet, the whole body is leaning forward—he runs as though he would project himself to the end of the journey before his legs can carry him there.

That is how the Christian should be—always throwing himself forward after something more than he has yet reached—not satisfied with the rate at which he advances, his soul always going at twenty times the pace of the flesh.

John Bunyan gives us a little parable of the man on horseback. He is bidden by his master to ride in a hurry to fetch the physician, but the horse is a sorry jade. “Well,” says Bunyan, “but if his master sees that the man on the horse’s back is whipping and spurring, and pulling the bridle, and struggling with all his might, he judges that the man would go if he could.”

That is how the Christian should always be, not only as devout, earnest, and useful as he can be, but panting to be a great deal more so—spurring this old flesh and striving against this laggard spirit, if perchance he can do more. Brethren, we ought to be reaching forward to be like Jesus. Never may we say, “I am like so and so, and that is enough.” Am I like Jesus, perfectly like Jesus? If not—away, away, away from everything I am or have been. I cannot rest until I am like my Lord.

The aim of the Christian is to be perfect—if he seeks to be anything less than perfect, he aims at an object lower than that which God has placed before him. To master every sin, and to have and possess and exhibit every virtue—this is the Christian’s ambition.

He who would be a great artist must not follow low models. The artist must have a perfect model to copy. If he does not reach to it, he will reach far further than if he had an inferior model to work by. When a man once realizes his own ideal, it is all over with him.

A great painter once had finished a picture and he said to his wife with tears in his eyes, “It is all over with me. I shall never paint again, I am a ruined man.” She inquired, “Why?” “Because,” he said, “that painting contents and satisfies me. It realizes my idea of what painting ought to be, and therefore I am sure my power is gone, for that power lies in having ideals which I cannot reach, something yet beyond me which I am striving after.” May none of us ever say, “I have reached my ideal, now I am what I ought to be, there is nothing beyond me.”

Perfection, brethren, absolute perfection—may God help us to strive after it! That is the model, “Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” “Shall we ever reach it?” says one. Thousands and millions have reached it—there they are before the throne of God—their robes are washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

And we shall possess the same, only let us be struggling after it by God’s good help. Let every believer be striving, that in the details of common life, in every thought, in every word, in every action, he may glorify God. This ought to be our object—if we do not reach it, it is that which we must press for—that from morning light to evening shade we shall live unto God.

Whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we should do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. This is what we are to seek after, praying always in the Holy Ghost to be wholly sanctified, spirit, soul, and body. “It is a wonderfully high standard,” says one. Would you like me to lower it, brother? I should be very sorry to have it lowered for myself.

If the highest degree of holiness were denied to any one of us, it would be a heavy calamity. Is it not the joy of a Christian to be perfectly like his Lord? Who would wish to stop short of it? To be obliged to

live under the power of even the least sin forever would be a horrible thing! No, we never can be content short of perfection. We will reach forward towards that which is before.

IV. And now the apostle is our model, in the fourth place, because he PUTS FORTH ALL HIS EXERTIONS TO REACH THAT WHICH HE DESIRES.

He says, “This one thing I do,” as if he had given up all else and addicted himself to one sole object—to aim to be like Jesus Christ. There were many other things Paul might have attempted, but he says, “This one thing I do.”

Probably Paul was a poor speaker—why did he not try to make himself a rhetorician? No, he came not with excellency of speech. But you tell me Paul was busy with his tent making. I know he was—what with tent-making, preaching, and visiting, and watching night and day, he had more than enough to do, but all these were a part of his pursuit of the one thing—he was laboring perfectly to serve his Master and to render himself up as a whole burnt-offering unto God.

I invite every soul that has been saved by the precious blood of Christ to gather up all its strength for this one thing—to cultivate a passion for grace and an intense longing after holiness. Ah, if we could but serve God as God should be served, and be such manner of people as we ought to be in all holy conversation and godliness, we should see a new era in the church. The greatest want of the church at this day is holiness.

Why did Paul pursue holiness with such concentrated purpose? Why, because he felt God had called him to it. He aimed at the prize of his high calling. God had elected Paul to be a champion against sin. Selected to be JEHOVAH’s champion, he felt that he must play the man.

Moreover, it was “God in Christ Jesus” who was the choice, and as the apostle looked up and saw the mild face of the Redeemer, and marked the thorn-crown of the King of Sorrows, he felt he must overcome sin. He could not let a single evil live within him, and though he had not yet apprehended, yet he felt he must press forward till he had apprehended that to which God in Christ had called him.

Moreover, the apostle saw his crown, the crown of life that fades not away, hanging bright before his eyes. What, said he, shall tempt me from that path of which yon crown is the end? Let the golden apples be thrown in my way, I cannot even look at them, nor stay to spurn them with my feet. Let the sirens sing on either side, and seek to charm me with their evil beauty, to leave the holy road. But I must not, and I will not.

Heaven! Heaven! Heaven! is not this enough to make a man dash forward in the road thither? The end is glorious, what if the running is laborious? When there is such a prize to be had, who will grudge a struggle?

Paul pressed forward towards the mark for the prize of his high calling in Christ Jesus. He felt he was a saved man and he meant through the same grace to be a holy man. He longed to grasp the crown and hear the, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” which his Master would award him at the end of his course.

Brethren and sisters, I wish I could stir myself and stir you to a passionate longing after a gracious, consistent, godly life. Yea, for an eminently, solidly, thoroughly devoted and consecrated life. You will grieve the Spirit if you walk inconsistently. You will dishonor the Lord that bought you. You will weaken the church. You will bring shame upon yourself. Even though you are “Saved so as by fire,” it will be an evil and a bitter thing to have in any measure departed from God.

But to be always going onward, to be never self-satisfied, to be always laboring to be better Christians, to be aiming at the rarest sanctity—this shall be your honor, the church’s comfort, and the glory of God.

May the Lord help you to perfect holiness in the fear of God. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—PHILIPPIANS 3

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.