
The Best Goal

Philippians 3:12-21

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What is your aim in life? What do you aspire to? What achievement would make you feel like you have arrived in life?

An American football player once said, “I have always wanted to play professional football, to play on Sunday. But I will never be satisfied until I play on Super Sunday. And I will not then be satisfied until I have the ring.”

What do you really want? No, not the stuff you tell people, but the stuff you dream about but would never say.

“You cannot escape the results of your thoughts. Whatever your present environment may be, you will fall, remain or rise with your thoughts, your vision, your ideal. You will become as small as your controlling desire; as great as your dominant aspiration.” So wrote the American novelist James Lane Allen.

Are Christians supposed to have aspirations, achievements, life hopes and aims? I assure you that you have them – all of you. The question is, are your goals in life shaped by the Scriptures and pleasing to God?

Let’s think about this together as we listen to Paul challenge a church and wrestle with this issue himself.

A Personal Aspiration

(v. 12-14)

Because we are made in God’s image, we have personal aspirations and goals. We need to have goals that are defined by the Scripture and put us on trajectories that please the Lord. So, Paul can say, “I press on...”

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.

An Accurate Assessment

(v. 12 & 13)

Remember what Paul aspired to:

¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

But he has an accurate self-assessment. He knows he has not achieved nor arrived. His maturity is not yet complete. His knowledge of Christ, his experience of resurrection power, his participation in suffering with Christ is not yet reached the highest level. He knows he has a way to go.

Sobering isn’t it? But sometimes, we think (though we may never say it) that we have really reached the pinnacle of *attainable* maturity. We know we are not yet

Jesus. But we also think we are about as close as is possible for us. May I suggest to that this is not true, will never be true in this life.

Our Powerful Determination

(v. 12 & 14)

Therefore we have a powerful determination. It is echoed in words like, “I press on...” and “One thing I do...” We know that this is not human actualization – that our own human will and strength cannot bring it about. But, the grace of God through the Spirit of God works in us so that we are powerfully determined to press forward till the end, till our last breath.

Philippians 2:12–13 (NLT) Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. ⁷

What does this effort and striving look like? We have all seen the Olympic 100 meter dash or even better, the 400 meter. You can see the powerful runners accelerating around the turns, opening up their strides and increasing their turn over and then at just the right moment, leaning forward with all their might to hit the finish line at full speed. See it? That’s it. We want to hit the finish line straining forward and still accelerating!

The Glorious Prize

(v. 14)

What are we striving for? What is that glorious, dazzling prize that we strive for? What can so dazzle us that we will pursue it mightily? Here it is in verse 14.

¹⁴ I press on toward the goal...

Why press on towards the goal?

for the prize...

What is that prize? What is gold medal that will draw out from us such lifelong striving? The prize is...

... the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The prize is the heavenly life with Jesus. Now don’t think just rapture here. In fact, the resurrection is simply the culmination of this. We do participate in the heavenly life now. But as we reject our own self-salvation projects and strive forward to reach for what God has acquired us for and what we want to experience – the reality of living in and with Christ.

Paul is not aspiring to get out of here, to escape the surly bonds of this earth. He is striving to live Christ in this world so that when the finish line is reached, heaven is simply the next step in the race.

The Marks of Maturity **(v. 15-16)**

What does this kind of life look like? What marks this kind of maturity? Once again we turn to the theme of harmony and unity. One of the marks of maturity is that we all have this same way of thinking.

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.

A Way to Think **(v. 15a)**

We are all prepared to align our thinking with the Word of God. Paul is looking for a sense of unity in view of the threats to their partnership. There was a lack of oneness in their agendas and aspirations, their goals in life and ministry. If we have different fundamental aspirations and agendas then disunity and disharmony will result. This will be true in whatever sphere you apply this.

A Willingness to Change **(v. 15b)**

We must also have a willingness to change. I hope that as I grow older, I am more and more open to the change and the transformation the Spirit of God is pointing to. This must be true of all of us. An unwillingness to be taught, to be corrected, to grow and change will result in stubbornness and ineffectiveness in our life and ministry.

A Durableness in Growth **(v. 16)**

As we are seeking to think together and to be willing to grow and change, we must remain steadfast in growth. In other words, not everything is up for grabs. A great deal of what we have learned and what we have matured into has to remain in place. It is the foundation for continuing to grow.

Living this way is risky and dangerous and full of potential to be hurt. What truth could possibly cause you to say, “Yes” to this?

A Heavenly Citizenship **(v. 17-21)**

We are to live this way because we, not just me, not just you, **we** headed for home. We are citizens of heaven. That makes all the difference.

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. 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.

The emphasis here is on the corporate or community aspect.

An Example to be Followed **(v. 17)**

Part of the striving forward is finding those who are running the same way. They are running heavenward with all their might. Their walk, their lifestyle, is marked by the example we have in Paul. It is perfectly legitimate to find in Paul an example of this kind of life. Then, we look around us and see who runs like this. Then, we pick up our baton and run like they do as well.

An Enemy to be Grieved Over**(v. 18-19)**

But be careful. Not everyone is as they seem to be. Some running on the track are actually there to trip you up. Their life marks them as enemies of the cross. They lived a life of physical appetites, boasting in what is shameful. Their minds are wholly occupied with earthly things. Living like this they will end up in destruction.

Paul has warned us over and over again. People like this cause havoc in the church. I am guessing that it was people like this who were behind the threats to their partnership and fellowship. This is why Paul spoke with tears. It grieved him that these people could cause such damage. Their false teaching and sinful life were driving a wedge between the church and the apostle.

Choose who influences you wisely. Are they an example or an enemy of the cross kind of living?

An Explanation to be Believed**(v. 20)**

“But our citizenship is in heaven...” Here is an explanation that when we believe it, radically changes our lives. It redefines our identity. We are heaven’s citizens. We have been transferred from the realm of this world into the kingdom of heaven. This is not mere theological theory – this is spiritual reality. Do you see the contrast here? Through this whole text are running two essential mindsets, ways of thinking.

There is an “of this world” mindset that tends to put confidence in our self-salvation projects, eliminates a cross kind of living, and rejects suffering like Jesus. This way of thinking tends to focus on the here and now, on our pleasures and pursuits. And people like this tend to be charming, winsome and influential with the effect they draw others into their orbit and break fellowships and partnerships.

There is a “citizen of heaven” mindset that puts no confidence in anything we do, seeks first to please Christ, rejects self-righteousness and performance Christianity. It embraces a lifestyle of the cross, knowing Jesus as the greatest achievement in life, and suffering for Christ as an aspiration. It relies totally on the grace of God while striving forward to attain what the Lord purchased us for.

An Expectation to be Affirmed**(v. 20-21)**

What is the hallmark of citizens of heaven? You are a person who lives expecting your Redeemer and Ruler to arrive from heaven.

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.

This expectation is focused on the Lord Jesus at His coming. Each of us and all of us together, look and long for Jesus to come. We have trusted Him as our Savior and we have bowed to Him as our Lord, our Sovereign.

This expectation is grounded in what Jesus will do when He comes. He will transform this body that so dominates our lives now into a body intended to serve

the redeemed soul. It will be a body like Jesus'. This is one of the huge things that fills our longings now – that we will finally have all that we have been saved for.

This expectation recognizes Jesus' as sovereign and supreme in this life and in the life to come. This last phrase causes heaven's citizens hearts to swell with courage and hope. It may be dark and hard now. It may seem like the world-focused enemies of the cross who threaten our fellowship and partnerships are prospering. But our King Jesus has the power and authority to bring everything into submission to Himself.

Reflect and Respond

Which one of these is you?

Are you focused on the joys and pleasures of this life, aiming to enjoy its pleasures? Are food, fun, finery and fulfillment your primary pursuits? Now don't blow me off just because you are a Christian, even one with some standing in this church. If this really describes you in your heart of hearts, then it is really who you are. My friend, you need to believe the gospel and repent of your sins and bow to Jesus to day.

Are you exhibiting the marks of maturity? Do you strive to continue to grow and change? Are you looking and longing for Jesus to return?

What does this look like in daily living? It looks like the book of Philippians...

You support the fellowship and community of the believers...

You put others first and seek their interests above your own...

You do all things without murmuring and complaining...

You reject your self-salvation projects and are not a performance oriented, good day/bad day Christian.

You never think of yourself as having arrived spiritually and, by grace, keep pressing on...

You have not made this world the center of your life. You fully see yourself as a citizen of heaven first...

And so, I say with Paul in chapter 4:1; "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved."

Notes

⁷ Note verses 14-18 as well: Do everything without complaining and arguing, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless. But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God. And I want all of you to share that joy. Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share your joy.