

“God’s Goals” (Philippians 3:12–21)

The famous English sculptor Henry Moore was asked a fascinating question by literary critic Donald Hall. “Now that you are eighty, you must know the secret of life. What is it?” Moore paused ever so slightly, with just enough time to smile before answering. “The secret of life,” he mused, “is to have a task, something you do your entire life, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is: It must be something you cannot possibly do.”¹

I like this! Moore recognized that the secret of life is pursuing a task that you can’t possibly pull off. Unfortunately, as Christians, we can find ourselves lulled into complacency because we don’t stretch ourselves to achieve God-sized goals. Stop for just a moment and ask yourself: “Am I currently doing anything that requires divine intervention?” If the truth be known, most of us would do just fine without God’s enablement. All the tasks that we do on a daily basis don’t seem to require His assistance. Of course, I would suggest that this is precisely the problem! We may not have God-sized goals. It is even possible that we may not have God’s goals at all.

In Philippians 3:12–21, Paul imparts the secret of life. He is going to call you and me to an impossible task that can only be pulled off by God. This great task is pursuing intimacy with Jesus Christ, which leads to significance, purpose, and joy in this life and in the life to come. Thus, Paul urges you to *set your earthly goals on heavenly gains*. He provides two training tips which will help in this endeavor.

1. Pursue God’s prize (3:12–16). In this section, Paul likens the Christian life to a race in the Isthmian games. The goal of such a race is to win the prize (usually a wreath). The metaphor of a race does not represent salvation, rather it depicts sanctification. In other words, those who enter this race are believers who are called to spiritual maturity—knowing Christ intimately and passionately. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to become so preoccupied with the tyranny of the urgent that we miss what is most important. It’s so easy to become victims of the loudest or latest commands. Everyone has a plan for your life. But you have to decide what matters most. Paul, whose focused life made him a literal world-changer, shares his personal experience in 3:12–14. He writes, **“Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect,² but I press on so that [lit. “if I may even”] I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal³ for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”** Paul is quick to assert that he has not yet reached the goal described in 3:10 and 11—the prize of knowing Christ and being rewarded by Him.⁴ Twice he acknowledges this: “Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect” (3:12) and “I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet” (3:13). It is a relief to realize that even Paul did not reach perfection in this life. He did not feel like he had arrived. If this is true of Paul, how much more is this true of me? Paul has a humble dissatisfaction, a holy discontentment. He doesn’t compare himself with other believers; he compares himself with Jesus Christ and recognizes that he has a long ways to go! Thus, Paul says twice, “I press on” (3:12, 14). This present tense verb (*dioko*) is often translated “pursue or persecute.”⁵ It is a strong verb that is used figuratively here of one who daily runs swiftly in a race to obtain the prize. The prize (3:14) is referred to as “*it*” in 3:12 and 13. The prize refers to the goal of knowing Christ that also results in eternal reward. Paul strives to “lay hold” (*katalambano*) of this great pursuit because Christ “laid hold” (*katalambano*) of him.⁶ God’s goal is not just to “get you in the door.” He is not merely looking to “save” you and provide you with “fire insurance.” Instead, He is working to transform you by moving you toward Christ-likeness. God saved you, not just for heaven; He saved you so that you would be of earthly good. God has called you TO something. He DOES have a plan for your life. His plan will lead you to joy, fulfillment, contentment, and eternal blessing. God’s great goal is for you to pursue the prize of intimacy with Christ and eternal reward. *Set your earthly goals on heavenly gains.*

Perhaps you're thinking, "Thank you, Keith, for these spiritual platitudes, but tell me how to adopt the mentality." In 3:13, Paul shares two specific ways you can pursue God's prize: First, choose to forget what lies behind. Past successes are just that—PAST. Yet, it is easy to live in yesterday and revert to what Bruce Springsteen calls "the glory days." You know, those days in high school or college when you were really something (or at least thought you were). It's easy to fixate on past successes in your marriage, family, professional life, or spiritual life. But in our world, it's all about, "What have you done for me lately?" This is true at work. You can't be satisfied with a great year in 2009; your boss expects even greater things in 2010. You can't breathe a sigh of relief when you earn a 4.0 in school one semester; your parents and teachers want you to repeat this feat the following semester. As a pastor, I can't rest because I preached one decent sermon. The congregation I serve expects me to come back Sunday after Sunday and do the same thing again and again and again. As believers, we can't rest on our laurels.

We also can't get bogged down in our past failures. Perhaps you gave away your virginity at a young age, divorced your spouse, neglected your children, or rebelled against God's Word. It is easy to beat yourself up over issues from your past and assume that God can't possibly use you. This is a lie from Satan that only results in discouragement. You need to know that all of your past is forgiven, forgotten, forever. Consequently, it's never too late to press on in Christ and be who He wants you to be. God can make a great finish out of a slow start. Ultimately, there is no past defeat so devastating as to exclude us from going forward in the present; there is no past success so great as to exempt us from going forward to more victory.⁷ Thus, we must consciously refuse to dwell on the things which lie behind us. Past failures will keep you discouraged; past successes will keep you apathetic or complacent. Both are not from God.

On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister became the first man in history to run a mile in less than four minutes. Within two months, John Landy eclipsed the record by 1.4 seconds. On August 7, 1954, the two met together for a historic race. As they moved into the last lap, Landy held the lead. It looked as if he would win, but as he neared the finish he was haunted by the question, "Where is Bannister?" As he turned to look, Bannister took the lead. Landy later told a Time magazine reporter, "If I hadn't looked back, I would have won!"⁸ What a great reminder to you and me. Don't look back unless you're planning on going there. May we press on in Christ and not look back.

The second way you can pursue God's prize is choose to reach forward to what lies ahead. The word for "reaching forward" (*epekteino*) speaks of stretching out or straining forth, as a competitor in a race.⁹ This word pictures the body of a runner bent forward, his hand outstretched toward the goal, and his eye fastened upon it. Paul is using this athletic metaphor of the ancient Isthmian games where a runner would intently strain and win his race. Upon crossing the finish line he would be called up by the president of the games to receive his prize, possibly a laurel wreath, which was the symbol of victory. In this passage Paul is reaching forward and pressing on "toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." It is a heavenward call of Paul to Christ Jesus Himself and the promise of eternal rewards.¹⁰ Paul longs to hear Jesus say "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matt 25:21).

In 3:15–16, Paul transitions from his own personal experience to apply an exhortation to the church. He writes, "**Let us therefore, as many as are perfect [mature], have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.**" The "therefore" (*oun*) ties back into 3:10–14 and emphasizes the theme of spiritual maturity. Paul's exhortation is: Keep living to the same standard to which you have attained. Apply what you know. Persevere in your faith. Don't worry about what you don't know. Take a baby step this week. Just be obedient one day at a time. We are all at a different place in our spiritual growth. However, as individuals and as a community, we are called to press on and pursue Christ.

As I reflected on these verses this past week, I was deeply challenged and convicted. The Lord revealed to me that I take too much responsibility for the responses of others. When people in our church sin and choose to ignore biblical confrontation, I am the one who typically feels badly. I can put a great deal of pressure on myself to “be used by God” to bring those who are wayward back to the Lord. Yet, often my best attempts end in failure. Fortunately, the Lord reminded me that He cares more about the sanctification of believers than I do. Indeed, I have a thimble’s worth of love and care for others compared to the Lord’s endless oceans of love and care. That is why I find so much comfort and encouragement in 3:15. When believers’ minds are set on other pursuit and goals, God will reveal it to them. He will make it clear. I just need to learn to leave it in His hands. What a comfort to know that when believers get off track God will point it out to them so that they can once again press on. Of course, certain believers may choose to ignore God and rebel against His authority, but He is capable of dealing with them. His love is eternal and constant.

Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald’s, was asked by a reporter to rank his priorities. He responded, “I believe in God, my family, and McDonald’s.” Then he added, “When I get to the office, I reverse the order.”¹¹ I sure appreciate Kroc’s refreshing honesty. What a rarity! If you are honest, perhaps you would have to acknowledge that work, family, marriage, or a hobby is your top priority. Regardless, as we conclude this section, Paul wants you to remember to pursue God’s prize—intimacy with Jesus. When you focus on Jesus, He tends to grant you His grace in every area of your life. It’s all about putting first things *first*. *Set your earthly goals on heavenly gains.*

[You must pursue God’s prize because this is what you were created for. Moreover, Jesus, and Jesus alone is the only pursuit that will completely satisfy you. Paul’s second training tip is...]

2. Imitate godly leaders (3:17–21). Scholars often wrestle with how this section connects with the previous. However, a careful examination of these verses makes it clear that one strategic way we can pursue God’s prize and grow to Christian maturity is through the influence of other believers. We desperately need each other. In 3:17, Paul writes, **“Brethren, join in following my example,¹² and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”** Paul commands the Philippians to follow his example. He issues similar exhortations at least eight other times throughout the New Testament.¹³ While this may sound arrogant to you, Paul understood the importance of providing a real life, flesh and blood example for other believers. One of the great dangers in Christian circles is that no one wants to be a role model. We fancy ourselves with the mentality of many contemporary athletes: “Just let me do my thing, but don’t expect me to be someone for others to look up to.” If you are a Christian, you don’t have that luxury. You are either a good example or a bad example. You can’t opt out of being an example. I like what Paul does here. First, he says, “Follow my example.” But he doesn’t stop there. He is not seeking to produce Paul clones. He’s trying to produce Jesus-look likes. So, he again commands the church to “observe” (*skopeo*) others who live out Christ-like lives. (The “us” includes Timothy and Epaphroditus.) Paul is smart. He doesn’t want all the imitation focused upon him; he wants to make sure that the church recognizes that there are many godly examples that they can learn from. Are you also able to share the wealth and say, “There are a lot of other godly men and women in our church?”

I have two important questions to ask you: (1) *Who are you following?* If there isn’t another brother or sister that you’re presently following, I can assure you that you’re not growing spiritually to the degree that you should be. There needs to be another believer in your life further along than you are who you imitate. This is how you will mature in Christ. (2) *Who is following you?* Are you able to say to your spouse, your children, and your fellow Christians, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ?” I hope so. This is critical. However, the safe answer is to limit your example to: “my spouse, children, and grandchildren.” But this may be myopic. The average American has a sphere of influence of 250 people...some less, some more. This means that God likely desires you and me to impact and influence far more people than we currently are. How will you fulfill the influence that God has given you?

In 3:18–21, Paul gives two reasons (“for,” 3:18, 20) why it’s important to imitate godly examples. First, in 3:18–19, he draws upon ungodly examples and contrasts them with the godly examples in 3:17. Paul writes, **“For many walk,¹⁴ of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”¹⁵** Before we look at these ungodly examples, it is important to humbly acknowledge that we cannot be certain of the identity of these people. Many commentators think that this group was the Judaizers, whom Paul has already warned against in 3:3. The problem with this view is: The people in 3:18–19 seem more inclined to loose, licentious living than to the legalistic, ascetic practices of the Judaizers. It seems clear that Paul is warning about people who turned the grace of God into licentiousness, taking their freedom from the Jewish law off the deep end into supposed freedom from God’s moral law. Hence, it appears that Paul is writing of yet another group the Philippians must be wary of. It seems to me that Paul is speaking of professing believers who have walked away from the church.¹⁶ Paul is deeply concerned about these people and about the influence they could exert on the church at Philippi. He weeps over these unbelievers and shares five descriptive characteristics that contrast with true believers.

1. False professors are “enemies of the cross of Christ.” Paul is not talking about doctrine here; he is referring to the walk/lifestyle of these people. It is also worth pointing out that Paul says these individuals are “enemies of the cross of Christ,” not “enemies of Christ.” This suggests these individuals may seek to identify themselves with Christ, but diminish or distort what the cross represents.¹⁷

2. False professors are those “whose end is destruction.” These individuals never believed in Christ alone as their Savior and consequently are headed to eternal judgment.

3. False professors are those “whose god is their appetite.” This sinful characteristic is not just a reference to gluttonous behavior. It can refer to the unbridled pursuit of any physical gratification (an appetite for sex, money, power, etc.). Their God does not reside in the heavens but in their body. This is a graphic way of saying that they live only for the temporal pleasures of this life and their lives are enslaved to gratifying their lusts.

4. False professors are those “whose glory is in their shame.” This is a description of those who are proud of their excesses (e.g., drunkenness and promiscuity). It is glorying in their sin and their independence from God. It is a lifestyle that says, “I don’t need you, God. I call the shots. I have my freedom.”

5. False professors are those “who set their minds on earthly things.” This is the summary statement. These individuals put their heart and hope in the things of the world. Instead of setting their earthly goals on heavenly gains, they set their earthly goals on earthly gains.

The point of 3:17–19 is that people matter. In fact, your relationships can make the difference in whether or not you are rewarded by Christ. What will keep you from gaining a heavenly prize? If you are not following godly examples, do so today. Don’t let anyone take your prize.

The second reason that it is important to imitate godly examples is: Heaven is your home (3:20–21). Paul states: **“For our citizenship¹⁸ is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”¹⁹** We are aliens and strangers just passing through this life.²⁰ Our “citizenship” (*politeuma*) is not on earth, it is in heaven.²¹ Thus, we ought to live lives that portray our position in Christ. This past April, I went to study in England. In order to get into the UK, I had to show my US passport. This past week I received an e-mail letter from the school I am studying at that informed me due to accreditation and legislation, the next time I enter the country, in addition to my passport, I will also need a letter from my school. The UK wants to make it clear that I am not a citizen. Similarly, it should be clear to you and me that we are citizens of another country—a heavenly one! This should compel us to live for Christ and to *set our earthly goals on heavenly gains*.

In the meantime, as heavenly citizens we should be eager for Jesus' return. The phrase "eagerly wait" (*apekdechomai*) speaks of zealous anticipation.²² In classical Greek, this word has the idea of a child standing on tiptoe waiting for his daddy to come home from work at the end of the day. What a picture! Even to this present day, when I come home from work and press the garage door opener, my children run out to greet me. They even try to open my car door and jump into my lap before I turn off the engine. As believers in Jesus, we should have this same type of childish fervor. Like Paul, we should have a radical fixation on Christ's return. If we love Christ's appearing, He will one day reward us with the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8).

Additionally, we have the promise and expectation of the glorious transformation of our earthly bodies. We are on our way to our eternal homeland where we will receive our eternal bodies. In that day there will no longer be any trials, tests, temptations, or sins. Furthermore, our body will not experience weakness, sickness, or decay. On the contrary, we will be given glorified bodies just like Jesus! Right now we are caterpillars creeping slowly across the sidewalk, unaware that one day we will be butterflies flying into the heavenly realm. Since this is our glorious future, it should have profound implications for our present.

At the foot of one of the Swiss Alps is a marker honoring a man who fell to his death while attempting to climb to the top. The marker gives his name and then this brief epitaph "He died climbing." This should be the epitaph of every Christian. We should be able to say with confidence as we slip from this world into the next that "we died climbing" as we pressed onward toward the prize of grabbing hold of Christ Jesus and living like Him.

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Scripture References

Philippians 3:12–21
1 Corinthians 9:24–27
Ephesians 2:10; 4:11–13
Colossians 1:28–29; 3:1–4
2 Timothy 4:7–8
Romans 6:1–13; 8:10–17
Corinthians 4:16–5:10

Study Questions

1. What are my current spiritual goals and objectives (3:12, 14)? How do these affect goals and priorities in other areas of my life? Am I relentlessly pursuing Christ? Why or why not? What or who holds me back from going all-out in my quest to know Christ?
2. What elements of my past still plague me (3:13)? Are there past sins that I sense God has not forgiven me for? Are there past successes that I still glory in? How is my past keeping me from living in the present? What will I do this week to refocus my future gaze and ensure that I persevere in my Christian race?
3. Is there an area of my life that I am overly satisfied with (3:15–16)? How can I balance the need to be spiritually content with the call to aggressively press forward and never be satisfied? How has God revealed to me the need to grow in various areas of my life? What area of my life is He currently working on? How am I responding?
4. Who is currently following my example (3:17)? Who are my disciples? How are they currently impacting God's kingdom? What must be altered in my life so that others will pattern themselves after me? Who is God calling me to take a special interest in? Am I being inappropriately influenced by ungodly people (3:18–19)? In what way do the activities of the ungodly remind me of the importance of living for Christ?
5. Do I reflect frequently on my spiritual citizenship and heavenly home (3:20–21)? What am I most looking forward to? How can I spend more time pondering the wonder of the eternal? Who do I know who has an eternal perspective? How can this person help me focus on that which really matters? This week, how will my life be different as a result of this passage?

Notes

¹ Preaching Today citation: John Byrne, Fast Company (Jan 2005), p. 14; submitted by Gino Grunberg, Gig Harbor, WA.

² This is the only time that Paul uses the verb *teleioo* (“perfect”).

³ “Goal” (*skopos*) refers to a mark on which to focus or fix the eye, the goal. For emphasis, the text literally says, “Toward the goal, I press on” which highlights the concept of fixing one’s eyes on the goal.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 420–21.

⁵ BDAG s.v. *dioko* 2–4.

⁶ BDAG s.v. *katalambano* 1: “to make something one’s own, win, attain.”

⁷ Dwight Edwards, “Earthly Conduct of Heavenly Citizens”: A verse-by-verse study through Philippians:

www.bible.org.

⁸ Henry G. Bosch, “Winning The Race”, in *Our Daily Bread*, 7/7/1995: www.workarea.rbc.org/devotionals/our-daily-bread/1995/08/07/devotion.aspx.

⁹ BDAG s.v. *epekteino* “to exert oneself to the uttermost, stretch out, strain.” This word is only used here in the NT.

¹⁰ It is possible that “the upward calling” is a genitive of apposition, which further describes the “prize.”

¹¹ Steve Shepherd quoted in PreachingNow Vol. 8 No. 29 8/18/2009.

¹² The noun *summitetes* (“join in following an example”) is only used here in the NT. See BDAG s.v. *summitetes*: “one who joins others as an imitator, fellow-imitator.”

¹³ Paul challenges his readers to imitate him elsewhere in 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12; Eph 5:1; 2; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; and 2 Thess 3:7, 9.

¹⁴ The verb “walk” (*peripateo*, Phil 3:17, 18) is generally used to describe how believers live.

¹⁵ Boa writes, “The identity of these people must have been clear to Paul’s readers in Philippi, but it is uncertain to readers today. Commentators have debated this point, some arguing that they were pagans, others that they were Judaizers, and still others that they were Gentile libertines. The problem is that in different ways, these verses could describe all three groups. But since the context concerns problems within the church, it is more likely that Paul is either referring back to the legalists (see 3:2-3) or to libertines who were abusing the grace of God.” Ken Boa, “A Matter of Modeling”: www.kenboa.org/text_resources/teaching_letters/kens_teaching_letter/2163.

¹⁶ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 452–53. D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 91.

¹⁷ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 452–53.

¹⁸ The term the *politeuma* (“citizenship”) appears only here in the NT, and like the verb *politeuesthe* (“conduct yourselves”) in Phil 1:27, has political overtones.

¹⁹ These words would have had special meaning to the Philippians since they were granted Roman citizenship even though they were 800 miles from the imperial capital. They lived in Philippi, but their citizenship was in Rome.

²⁰ Vance Havner once said, “If you are a Christian, you are not a citizen of this world trying to get to heaven; you are a citizen of heaven making your way through this world.” See www.kentcrockett.com.

²¹ This is synonymous to Phil 1:27 where the verb form of “citizenship” (*politeuomai*) is used.

²² See also Rom 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor 1:7; Gal 5:5; Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 3:20.