

STRAINING FORWARD / STANDING FIRM

SERIES: PHILIPPIANS

by Steve Zeisler

One of the most difficult problems we face as Christians is the recognition that no matter how thoroughly we have been converted, no matter how deeply we love the Lord, we still sin.

The fact that a Christian's reception of the grace of God does not confer upon him immediate and unceasing victory over sin has stirred debate among followers of Christ all through church history. This, according to non-Christians, has always been the great weakness of the church. Non-Christians consistently hold up the failures of believers as evidence that the gospel is false.

At some time or other in his life, every Christian has felt discouraged, disappointed, and been deeply hurt by his own failures. We all have done things and acted in ways which we thought we had long since left behind. Problems we thought we had dealt with surface again to discourage us.

Today we are going to look at a passage from the letter to the Philippians which address the reality that Christians do indeed sin, and how we should deal with that fact. Three times in this passage the apostle Paul clearly says that God's work is not complete in him yet. In Philippians 3:12 he puts it in these words: "Not that I have already obtained it; or have already become perfect"; while in verse 13 he says, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet." Today we will be looking at that issue, and we will discover some practical suggestions on how to deal with it.

Earlier in chapter 3, Paul placed himself before us as an example. We found that his example was striking in his courageous purity of life and faith. Here is what he said. Philippians 3:8-10:

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

There is a magnificent statement of the Christ-centered essence of Christian living. But it is sometimes distressing and discouraging to have a good example held up to us. We find we are faced with all kinds of double motives, failure and discouragement. But it will be helpful to us to realize that Paul, the man who provides us with this wonderful example, has not yet "obtained" it, has not yet "become perfect" (Phil. 3:12), and "does not regard [himself] as having laid hold of it yet" (Phil. 3:13).

There are three paragraphs in this section, each of which has a practical note about how to deal with discouragement when we recognize our own sin. First, in Philippians 3:12-14, there is an important reminder that Christianity is, and has always been, a process. We are a product being formed through a process, and we are only part way through; this process has a present, a past and a future. If we can remember that that is God's plan for us we can be encouraged when we find that we still have a long way to go.

The second paragraph, Philippians 3:15-16, reminds us that lack of information, failure to know, to understand or see the plan and work of God is no problem to our Lord. He is able to teach us what we need to know, when we need to know it.

Third, in Philippians 3:17 through 4:1, we have a directive to choose a good example, to pattern ourselves after godly people. When we are discouraged we ought to seek out those who are walking with the Lord, those who are further along than we, perhaps, so that we can emulate them.

Let us look at the first paragraph, Philippians 3:12-14:

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that 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 goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Can you remember a time when you were learning to become proficient in a skill which you now take for granted? When I first encountered the language of the New Testament and tried to make sense of it I was convinced that it would forever be Greek to me, that I would never be able to learn the strange letters, the peculiar syntax and odd vocabulary, that I would always be cut off from the insight that was available to people who could understand the Greek of the New Testament. But that feeling was false. It is possible even for someone like me to make sense of a language I had no facility with when I began to learn it.

Think of some piece of machinery you use on the job every day--a computer terminal, a piece of heavy equipment, for instance--which you have now mastered. When you first began learning it seemed so difficult you wondered if you would ever be able to work with it. Marathon runners often talk about being partway through a race and experiencing the sensation of hitting a wall, as it were. Their minds, their bodies, their feelings, everything in them said it was impossible to keep running. As they took one step after another, however, they were able to regain their composure and finish the 26 miles. The feelings they had partway through the race were not objective reality; they could, in fact, finish; it was possible to make it. In the same way, the emphasis of Philippians 12-14 is the recognition that you and I as Christians are in a process. We have a past that we are to forget; we have a present condition; and we have a future we are to lay hold of, to strain forward for; we are only part-way through.

Looking at his present condition, Paul says he is still a failure in some areas; he is inadequate; he has not done everything he ought to have done; his behavior is not entirely exemplary. Christians are perfectly free to examine themselves and honestly conclude that there are things about them that are reprehensible, that it is wrong for them to act the way they do, and yet not be thrown off by that realization because they know that God is committed to completing them. They can unhypocritically judge their wrong behavior and conclude, with non-Christians, that they have been wrong.

Christians should not rationalize their behavior. The world has lots of advice on how to rationalize sin. The world says you are a terrific person despite the fact that you are, for instance, extremely selfish. That really isn't selfishness, we are told, that's assertiveness, that's strength of character. We are told that sexual promiscuity is really a healthy physical expression; it is something to your advantage because it demonstrates that you understand how life in the fast lane is lived. But a Christian can look honestly at himself and say, "I have failed and I know it. This is not the best that the grace of God can do. What you see is not what you will someday get. I'm going to be different one day, therefore I can be honest about the present."

In this process in which we are involved we need to regard the past correctly as well. “Forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead,” Paul says. The world is floundering in a sea of intransigent problems. Around the globe, deep-seated hatred and bigotry are passed on from generation to generation. Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, blacks and whites in South Africa encourage succeeding generations to remember all the evils done to them, to carry all the baggage of the past and pass it on to their children. On all sides we see an inability to leave behind the things of the past, and this determines the quality of lives of nations and individuals.

But Christians uniquely are free to forget the past: “Forgetting the things that lie behind,” Scripture says--the guilt, the grudges, the sense of failure--or, perhaps, the other side of the coin, the prominence you once clung to. You may not now be as physically beautiful as you once were, or as highly regarded, but in either case, Christians are not bound to the past; it need not own us, determine what we will do, think, or how we react. We are in a process which permits us to be honest about the present and which gives us the freedom to shed the past.

And third, our attitude toward the future is to be one of straining forward, of longing for, of pressing on for the things that God has made available to us. Twice in this paragraph, Paul says that what we press on for is something which God has initiated in our direction first. Look at Philippians 3:12: “I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus”; then verse 14, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. God himself is calling me heavenward and I am pressing on to apprehend what God has destined for me.”

It occurs to me that what Paul is saying here can be compared to the experience of a pregnant woman. As a father of three, I have had opportunity to observe three different pregnancies. Each time it became more clear to me that the joy of having a child is one of the greatest experiences God gives to human beings. Childbirth is a prize which God sets before us. He allows us to participate in the creation of human beings, made in his image, for whom Jesus died. What a great privilege! Throughout the pregnancy the mother looks forward to the day when she will have her child in her arms. God has ordained something wonderful in the future, when the pregnancy comes to full term. But in the meantime, perseverance is required. The mother has to press on, to go through all the hard work of the pregnancy. She has to be willing to be sick, to feel unattractive, to have headaches for which she cannot take aspirin, and colds for which she cannot take antihistamine, to restrict her diet, whatever, to press on because the goal toward which she is headed is so worthwhile.

That is what Scripture is saying about the Christian life. We can forget the things that are behind us; we are free as no one else is free to leave the past behind. And we can be honest about the present: we are not yet perfect and we know it. But, as we look to the future, we press on to grasp that for which God has laid hold of us. When we are discouraged it is important to remember that Christianity is, and has always been, a process. The fact that we still sin says nothing about the faithfulness of God or the certainty of our future, because there is a resurrection body, a future glory, to which we look forward. The gospel is not undermined when we recognize that we are part of a process.

The second paragraph, Philippians 3:15-16, speaks of another issue confronting Christians who are discouraged because they continue to sin:

Let us therefore, as many as are mature [that is a better translation than “perfect”] 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.

I have a great dislike for repair projects in the home. Anything to do with tools or skillful working with my hands is very intimidating to me. But recently I had to replace a furnace in my home. I was sure that some clumsiness on my

part would cause damage to this expensive piece of equipment. If it were left to me to install it myself I was certain that the gas leak that would result would blow up the house, asphyxiate my kids, whatever. It was not particularly motivating for me to realize how unskilled I was in this area. Finally, however, some knowledgeable help was provided and the furnace was installed.

When we are called on to do something we feel unskilled at and lack knowledge in, we are discouraged, so we avoid such situations. None of us wants to look like a fool, so we resist involvement in areas where we believe ourselves to be unknowledgeable. That is what this section is highlighting. Time and time again I have spoken to Christians in this congregation and in other places who resist getting involved in ministries because they regard themselves as unskilled.

For instance, I have heard Christians say, “I couldn’t possibly teach children’s Sunday school because I don’t know anything about children and I don’t know many Bible stories.” I have heard others say, “I avoid speaking to my co-workers about Christ because I don’t know how to answer their questions.” Or, “I’ve avoided ministering to my neighbors whose marriage is breaking up because I don’t know what counsel or support to offer.” Some men hate to hear any mention of the responsibility of husbands to be the spiritual leaders in their homes because they do not know how to be spiritual leaders; they would prefer to not even talk about the subject. When we look at Christianity and the various elements of the Christian life, we sometimes feel a keen sense of disappointment and rejection because we consider ourselves to be inadequately trained.

But the Scripture is telling us here that lack of information is never any impediment to God. All of us have blind spots in our lives where we act in the flesh and don’t even know it. The Word of God tells us that we only know in part. All of us are ill informed; nobody understands everything there is to know. All of us are confused about certain areas of the Christian life; all of us resist the Lord in some areas. And we are not even aware we are doing it. We are blinded to our own behavior.

I will never forget how blithely I cruised along the first couple of years in my Christian life, comfortable in the notion that the Lord would come back for me some day. I didn’t realize that there were hundreds of books which debate the intricate workings-out of the whole end- times scenario, and I hadn’t read any of them. As I was increasingly put in a position where I knew I ought to know more about this subject, it was depressing to realize that there was so much to read, so many details to work out, so many clashing points of view. I wondered if I would ever be able to draw any confident conclusions.

Yet all of us are there in one sense or another. But God is not troubled by what we do not know. That is the point of Philippians 3:15: “Let us, therefore, as many as are mature, have this attitude (or, ‘should be minded in this way’); if in anything you are minded differently, God will reveal that also to you.” If you need to be made aware of an area of your life which needs work, if you need to be made aware of the truth of Scripture, God is capable of revealing it to you.

But then Scripture goes on, in Philippians 3:16, to lay a responsibility on us; “However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained [at this point].” Let us do the things we already know, that is what this is saying. Don’t worry so much about what you are unaware of, but be thorough in your obedience to the things you already know. Obey with a whole heart what God has already made clear to you.

We have looked at two short sections dealing with the condition of people who are Christians yet who are still subject to times of sin and discouragement. First, we learned that we are in a process; and second, we learned to not be disappointed and discouraged because we are unaware of certain truths of Scripture. God can teach us what we need to know, when we need to know it. Now, the third paragraph. Let us first take verses 17-19 of chapter 3:

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, 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.

We need to choose to be influenced by Christians who are walking in faith, we are told. All of us have a choice to make about the people who will influence us. When we are particularly discouraged about where we are, when we feel ourselves to be losing our hope, when we are stagnant in our Christian walk, then we ought to emulate the example of one who is following after the Lord. Paul says he is an example whom we can follow (Phil. 3:17). But there are others. There are people in this congregation whose lives are worth emulating. Again, this is practical advice when you are discouraged. Choose someone to follow who is worth emulating; let your life be influenced by one who is mature.

Then Paul goes on to say that there are some--and I believe he is talking about people within the Christian community even--whose lives are headed in the wrong direction. Even among us, even within the Christian community, there are people who are enemies of the cross.

Avoid their influence; that is the point.

In Philippians 3:12-14 we read that we are involved in a process which will lead us to the goal for which Christ has called us, but here in Philippians 3:18-19 we read of those who are in a process that is heading them toward destruction. We who are rightly related to the Lord forget what is behind us, while these others who might influence us glory in things that are shameful. We are straining forward to what lies ahead, they are worshipping the sensual, “worshipping their bellies” (Phil. 3:19), worshipping the present reality, what can be felt and touched. Our minds are set on the call of God for us; their minds are set on earthly things. Choose as an example to follow someone who is worth emulating. We should beware of those, even those in Christian congregations, who promote greed in the name of receiving God’s blessings, who encourage prejudice under the guise of separation from the world, who gossip and cut up others but claim to share and pray, who advocate lust instead of Christian intimacy, who vie for personal prestige in the name of Christian leadership. Avoid those enemies of the cross who are headed toward destruction, and follow those who are worth following.

Here are the three practical suggestions in this section: remember that you are in a process; do not let the lack of information intimidate you; and choose to follow people who are worthy of being followed. That is good advice to follow when you are discouraged. Nothing is mentioned here about prayer or reading Scripture. There are a great many themes throughout the Word of God which minister to us when we are discouraged, but these three are most helpful.

Now the last section. Philippians 3:20-4:1:

For our citizenship 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. Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

Those who are described as enemies of the cross finally are enemies of the resurrection also. Those whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, cannot look forward in the same way that we who are trusting the Lord can to the exertion of the power of Christ to make our bodies like his--resurrection bodies, never again subject to corruption. He will act on our behalf in that way. As we realize that our life consists now of straining forward, of

reaching out to grasp the very thing for which God reached down to us to begin with, as we forget what is behind, as we are confident that the Lord will teach us what we need to know, as we choose to be influenced by people who are worthy, as we deal with our discouragement in this way we can look forward with hope and total confidence to the fact that the Lord himself will some day come back, he will act on our behalf, and he will set right everything which is now deteriorating within us. We who are not among the enemies of the cross can look forward with great hope to the resurrection.

A final encouragement is given in Philippians 4:1. "Therefore, stand firm," is the command. "Whatever you feel about yourself, don't let anything take away your hope and your confidence. Stand firm." Notice the tenderness, the confidence with which the apostle writes: he calls the Philippians "my beloved" (Phil. 4:1); he addresses them earlier, in Philippians 3:13, 17, as "Brethren." Here Paul is ministering to people who may be discouraged about sin, and he does so with tender compassion and hope.

We ought to do the same. If we are discouraged by a problem in our own lives we ought to recognize that our loving expectation is that we will stand firm and that we will strain forward. Rather than allowing ourselves to slip backwards or stagnate, we can have a renewed enthusiasm for the things God wants us to do because we know that we are in a process, that God will teach us what we need to know when we need to know it, and that we have in the Scripture and in our fellow Christians people who are worthy of emulation.

Catalog No. 3732
Philippians 3:12-4:1
7th Message
Steve Zeisler
January 17, 1982
Updated June 7, 2001

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