

Passion and Perseverance

Philippians 3:12-16

I want to start this morning by telling you the story of two famous races from the early-to-mid-twentieth century. The first one took place on August 7, 1954, at the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada. The only two sub-four-minute mile runners in the world were competing against each other. The race was dubbed “‘The Miracle Mile,’ the ‘Race of the Century’ and the ‘Dream Race’; it was heard over the radio by 100 million people and seen on television by millions more.”¹ As they entered the final lap, Englishman Roger Bannister had closed the gap with Australian Tom Landy, who was in the lead. And as they neared the finish line, Landy made the fatal and now famous mistake of checking to see where Bannister was. As he looked back over his left shoulder, Bannister passed him on the right and beat him to the finish by five yards.²

Turn the clock back about thirty years to another race: a triangular meet between Scotland, England, and Ireland in July 1923. It was the 440 meter dash, and as the men rounded the first corner of the race, shoulder to shoulder, one man was shoved to the ground, clean off the track. In a shot he was back on his feet, now *twenty meters* behind everyone else. He ran so hard, head back, flying down the track, that he collapsed after crossing the finish line . . . in first place. The runner was Eric Liddell, the “flying Scotsman” who was immortalized in the film, *Chariots of Fire*.³

So what’s the difference? One man took his eye off the prize, looked back, and lost the race. The other man, though cast down, never took his eye off the prize. He never looked back, straining with everything he had not only to finish the race, but to win it. Sounds an awful lot like what Paul is talking about in our passage this morning. Verse 12: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect . . . But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (3:12-14).

For Paul, the prize was nothing less than knowing Jesus. His greatest aspiration, as we saw last week in 3:10-11, was to know Christ by walking in the power of the resurrection and following the pattern of the cross. He said in 3:8 that he was willing to lose everything compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. Jesus was his prize.

¹ “John Landy,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Landy.

² This illustration was applied to this passage by R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 148.

³ This illustration was also used by Hughes (150), who credits Tom Wright for the idea and application (*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* [Louisville: WJK, 2004], 122). See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_of_fire.

So what does it take to finish the course and obtain the prize Paul is after—the prize of knowing Christ in this vibrant, personal, life-giving, singularly-devoted way? According to vv. 12-16, it takes the humility to know the race is not yet over, that you haven't arrived and there's no time to look back until you've crossed the finish line. And it takes the passion and perseverance to strain toward what's ahead with singular focus, bouncing back up when you're knocked down *because you know the prize is worth it*. And so Paul calls us to a gospel-shaped humility and a gospel-fueled passion and perseverance.

Look with me first at v. 12 and Paul's gospel-shaped humility.

A Gospel-Shaped Humility

As he finishes declaring his great desire to know Christ and share in his death and resurrection, “and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead,” he now says, v. 12: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect . . .” And in case you missed that, he says it again in v. 13: “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.” Paul has motivation, passion, vigor; but he also has the humility to know that he has not yet arrived. And he wants to make sure that no one mistakes him for claiming some sort of spiritual perfection, the kind of relationship with Jesus where he has nothing left to learn and no more need of change, as though that were possible this side of heaven.

The reality is, that until the Lord returns and removes sin from this world once and for all, or until he takes us into his presence in heaven, you and I will continue to sin and be in continual need of God's grace and forgiveness. But in the meantime, as we grow in our relationship with Jesus, as our love for him deepens, as we learn more and more what it looks like to depend on his Spirit instead of our flesh, and as we see him bless our lives and service, there is always a temptation to take that progress from God and begin to think that we've kind of arrived. We look back on others running and we see that we're out ahead a little bit, and it feels good. Maybe we're so far ahead that we feel like we can kind of relax a little bit, like the hare and the tortoise. But if that's our mindset, something's dreadfully wrong.

First, it means we've messed up the race analogy. The prize of the race is not beating others—Christianity is not a competition against one another to see how much holier we can be than the next person, as if to impress God or each other. Sadly, it gets played that way a lot. And that completely misses the point of grace—that we are not accepted by God because of who we are or what we do, but because by faith we are united with Christ—who he is and what he did for us. Jesus is our identity, and it's by his life and death that we are accepted before God; not by our own hard work or privileged heritage. Those are the kinds of things Paul disavowed earlier in the chapter in order to be found righteous before God solely on the basis of Christ and faith in him. We run, not in order to beat out our friends or win God's favor. Rather, we run to delight in the favor he's already given us in Christ. We run for the joy of knowing him fully and being changed for the sake his glory, and so to be used by him to spread that glory and knowledge to our neighbors and the nations.

The prize is not defeating one another; it's taking hold of Jesus. Which means that, second, if we think we have somehow arrived, that shows that we've clearly taken our eyes off the prize. We're no longer focused on Jesus. And so our perspective is completely messed up. We begin to think so highly of ourselves and so little of our sin that in our minds, we have nothing further to

learn or gain. But this would be to deceive ourselves. We need a gospel-shaped humility to war against the foolish pride in our hearts that tells us we've already arrived and those poor people over there might someday catch up.

When we say *gospel* we're talking about the good news of what God has done to rescue us and deal with our sin—our rebellion against him and all its consequences—through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus lived for us. Jesus died for us. And Jesus rose again—to bring us back to God through faith in him. So a gospel-shaped humility first takes a good look at our *sin*. It means taking off the mask we wear to manage people's perceptions and cover our shame and guilt, and taking a good look into mirror, letting it expose every selfish, lustful, violent, greedy thought; letting it replay for us every lie, every burst of anger; every broken promise; everything we do to take advantage of someone or feed some ungodly pleasure in disobedience to his Word. Believing the gospel means that we treat sin as it is—*utterly sinful* and deserving of condemnation before a holy God. And the gospel shows us our sin by comparing our lives to the prize—to Jesus, where see what completion, what perfection really looks like, and we know in our soul that we fall so miserably short.

But then, and just as important, a gospel-shaped humility takes an even better look at the cross, where all our sin, our wicked thoughts, our cutting words, our ungodly deeds, were taken up by Christ that he might bear the penalty for them in our place. As Christ died on that cross, God's wrath against sin was satisfied—there is no wrath left for the believer. And as he died on that cross, we were cleansed from our sin. Jesus took them away, and in their place God ascribed to us his righteous life. Yes we are sinful, but there is forgiveness and hope and new life in Jesus. So believing the gospel means treating grace as it is as well—as *utterly sufficient* to deal with our sin.

And so a gospel-shaped humility reminds us of the obvious: that we still have a long ways to go in our relationship with Jesus, but that he is *with* us, he's *for* us, and he's *worth* pressing on.

And that is what we must do. Humility—recognizing that we haven't arrived—doesn't mean we sit on our duff, resigned to never arrive. Pastor and author Dave Harvey writes, "Humility, rightly understood, shouldn't be a fabric softener on our aspirations. . . . True humility doesn't kill our dreams; it provides a guardrail for them, ensuring that they remain on God's road and move in the direction of his glory."⁴ We humble sinners have been rescued for a purpose; we've been given passion and ambition for a purpose. And so Paul goes on to model for us both the passion to know Christ and the perseverance necessary to keep running, even when it gets hard or the track takes an unexpected turn. We need a gospel-fueled passion and perseverance.

A Gospel-Fueled Passion and Perseverance

Perseverance—to work hard at something even when it's difficult or you face opposition—is the fruit of passion, ambition. And our passion is shaped by what we value. So think about shopping on Black Friday—that wretched American tradition the day after Thanksgiving. Where does the drive come from that moves people to do crazy things like getting up at 2am to go stand in line to buy a TV or a sweater? That's a hard thing to do. It takes a lot of passion and ambition to do it,

⁴ Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 14.

especially if you're not a morning person. Where does it come from? Well, how much do you *value* owning that TV? Your value shapes your passion, and your passion moves you to persevere. It's the same thing that drives athletic teams to train in season and off—their value for the prize fuels their passion to compete. If you don't value it, you won't be passionate about it. And if you're not passionate, you won't fight to get it.

Similarly, knowing Christ and delighting in him requires value, passion, and perseverance. A passion for the prize. Paul speaks of “one thing” in v. 14: “One thing . . . pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”—again, that prize being what he's already described in vv. 10-11: knowing Christ. If Jesus is our prize, knowing him will be our passion.

And that passion will bear fruit in perseverance. Paul says twice that he “presses on”—in v. 12 and v. 13—same word. Because we live in a fallen world, our pursuit to know Christ is not always easy. We're often tempted to think so lowly of the prize and so little of God's grace and Spirit that we become disenchanted with the whole pursuit.

So what can we do practically to cultivate passion and perseverance in our pursuit of Christ? To avoid getting distracted or derailed from the course? Just as we need the gospel to give us humility, Paul lays out three ways that the gospel of Jesus directs and fuels our passion and perseverance.

First he wants us to *let the purpose of your salvation motivate you*. If you apply for a job, and you're selected from among 500 candidates, or you try out for the swim team or the hockey team, and are selected from among a hundred other students, you don't walk in on your first day, throw your feet up and just take a nap. You get to work because you have a job to do. You've been selected for a purpose; you've been made part of a team, and that team has a goal. So it is in Christ—we've been saved for a purpose.

Paul says in v. 12: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of *that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*.” Listen to that again: “I press on to take hold of *that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*.” The only way we're able to pursue Christ and race to take hold of him, is that he has first taken hold of us. And he has taken hold of us for a purpose. Again, Paul speaks of the “prize for which God has *called* me heavenward” (v. 14). We have a calling and a purpose. And it's not just about what we get out of it—forgiveness of sins, the joy of heaven. That's true and beautiful, but we're called to so much more—to know and enjoy Christ, to serve him by sharing in his sufferings and his resurrection. We're called, as 1:27 tells us, to be partners in and for the gospel. So we can't put our lives in cruise control. Let the purpose of your salvation motivate you to push toward that for which you were saved—to know and serve Jesus. This is Paul's concluding exhortation in our passage—v. 16: “Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” We've been given a gift of salvation, and God has been faithful to grow us in different ways. Let that motivate us to keep fighting, and live in step with what God has already done in our lives.

Second, *let the prize of God's heavenly call focus you*. We need motivation to persevere; we also need focus. Listen again to Paul's focus in v. 13: “One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize . . .” (3:13-14). In

other words, Paul is saying “keep your eye on the prize.” Think of Eric Liddell. Think of Roger Bannister. We focus on Jesus and strain toward what’s ahead.

It’s easy to become distracted by other prizes—lesser ones, that seem more attractive, or more readily available at the time. Sometimes we’re just tired and weary of fighting, and feel like God isn’t doing anything to help. We try hard to walk with God, but we feel like we’re taking one step forward and two steps back, and we’re no longer convinced that it’s possible, or even worth it to keep trying. And so we give ourselves to lesser prizes—treasures that can’t really fulfill, but at least feel good for the time being. Treasures that have a shorter and easier racetrack, where we can get to the prize sooner with a lot less effort. Treasures like entertainment, food, sports, sex, relationships, school, work, family, even church activities—anything that helps us forget about our sin and medicate the shame and fear so we can feel good about ourselves and pretend that everything is okay.

Now, none of those things are intrinsically bad things. Properly used, each is a gift from God. But that’s just it—they’re a gift, *they’re not god*. The problem is when we treat them like God and make them the prize, exchanging the Creator for his creation. Those treasures won’t last. They can’t make good on their promises. There’s only one prize worth fighting for—one treasure that will satisfy and give us a significance and joy that lasts forever. Only Jesus. We have to keep our focus on him—straining toward what’s ahead, depending on God’s grace and the power of his Spirit every day. As we sang earlier:

So Spirit, come, put strength in ev’ry stride,
Give grace for ev’ry hurdle,
That we may run with faith to win the prize
Of a servant good and faithful.⁵

And Paul tells us that straining toward what’s ahead also means forgetting what’s behind. Sometimes that’s the hardest part. Forgetting our mistakes and the shame of our failure. Repenting and turning away from our sin. Forgetting even our successes—the things that tempt us to take pride and fool ourselves into thinking we’ve already arrived. All our focus is Jesus. The gospel of Jesus frees us to forget what’s behind because we’re not defined by our performance or our heritage—for good or for ill. You’re not defined by that abortion in your past. You’re not defined that failed marriage. You’re not defined by your secret struggle with anorexia. You’re not defined by your lust for pornography. You’re not defined by your perfect family. You’re defined by Christ and your relationship with him. And so you are free to lay every sin and pride aside and follow joyfully after him.

Had Eric Liddell, when he was knocked off the track, stayed his attention on that tragic moment, and given up altogether, he would have never won the race. But the prize was worth it. Jesus is worth it. And he’s with you. Listen to Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

⁵ “O Church, Arise,” Words and Music by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend. Copyright © 2005 Thankyou Music.

Jesus is our focus. And the people of God are our encouragement and guidance—the great cloud of witnesses. Which brings us to Paul’s third point: *let the perspective of the mature guide you.*

Listen to v. 15: “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.” The perspective that Paul describes here—the necessary qualities of gospel-shaped humility and gospel-fueled passion and perseverance, are so obvious that he exhorts everyone to share them, and assumes that if there’s any disagreement, then God himself will sort people out. It’s so clear, that there’s really no discussion needed. All who are mature in Christ—all who have walked with him for some time and seen personal growth in character and holiness—including a deepening awareness of their own sin—should readily agree. And so we should let the perspective of the mature guide us in our effort to persevere in knowing Christ.

When you’re disheartened, discouraged, confused, afraid, do you have someone to go to? Someone who is a little further down the stretch in experience and can offer wisdom and encouragement for staying the course? Those of you who are seasoned in the faith, do you keep your eyes open for others who need your wisdom and encouragement? Those whose youthful zeal can even spur you on in your own race?

Paul talks a lot about models and mentors in Philippians. He offers his own example, those of Timothy and Epaphroditus, and the ultimate example of Christ. Next week he’ll tell us very directly that we need to put ourselves around examples worth following (cf. 3:17-4:1). We need to remember that we’re not the first to face these challenges, and that we’re not in them alone.

So we need a gospel-shaped humility that reminds us the race is not over. And we need a passion and perseverance, fueled by the gospel as we let the purpose of our salvation motivate us, the prize of God’s heavenly call focus us, and the perspective of the mature guide us, lest we stop running.

As many of you know, the race in 1923 when Eric Liddell came back to win against all odds wasn’t his last race. He went on win a gold medal in the 1924 Olympics, though not in his best race. He refused to participate in the 100 meter because it was being held on a Sunday, and he devoted that day to the Lord. He won his medal in the 400, to the surprise of everyone. In the years that would follow, Liddell’s passion and focus would take him not to the fame of the sports world, but to the mission field of China, where he grew up as a missionary kid. He served faithfully in China for 20 years. When China felt the heat of Japan and the looming occupation during World War II, he sent his wife and daughters to safety in Canada, while he remained behind to help his brother with the poor, needy, and children. He spent his final two years in a Japanese internment camp. At one point, when the British government had negotiated for his release, he gave up his spot to a pregnant woman. He died in 1945 from an inoperable brain tumor, five months before the liberation. “According to a fellow missionary, Liddell’s last words were, ‘It’s complete surrender,’ in reference to how he had given his life to his God.”⁶ He never lost his focus. He never looked back. He never stopped running in his pursuit to know Christ and make him known.⁷

⁶ “Eric Liddell,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Liddell.

⁷ Again, this illustration was inspired by Hughes (151-152).

God grant us the humility to know that we haven't arrived, and the passion and perseverance necessary to never stop running, but to give all to God in complete surrender.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul describes the need for a gospel-shaped humility. What's at stake in recognizing that we haven't arrived at spiritual perfection or the glory of heaven and the resurrection? What errors do we stand to make by overlooking this simple fact?
2. How do you define humility? How do we cultivate it?
3. If perseverance is the fruit of passion, and passion is shaped by what we value, then what do your ambitions tell you about what you value most?
4. Discuss Paul's description of what God has rescued us for (cf. 1:9-11, 20-21; 2:14-16; 3:1, 7-11, 12-14, 20-21; 4:8-9; feel free to look at other places in the Bible). How should this understanding fuel our passion and motivate us to persevere?
5. How does keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus bring focus to our walk? What does this look like amid a busy day at work or doing laundry or helping kids with homework? How does the prize of our heavenly call in Christ even bring focus to the mundane?
6. When Paul speaks of forgetting what's behind, he's not talking about erasing our memory, but finding our identity and focusing our pursuit. What do you find it hardest to forget about your past? Particular sins? Tragic sins committed against you? Your track record of success and achievement? How does who you are in Christ, what he's done for you, and what he promises to do when he returns speak to your past?
7. Paul indicates in this passage (and spells it out in the next) that we need the help of the mature to persevere in our pursuit to know Christ. Whom has God used in your life to guide and encourage you? What's the most important thing you learned from them? How can you help and encourage others?