

STUDY GUIDE

LETTERS FROM PRISON: PHILIPPIANS (Week 9)

A MESSAGE SERIES AT NEW CITY CHURCH

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Philippians 3:11-17

11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 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. 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. 17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

Background

If you ever been in an ocean, you understand the power of a wave. Before a wave forms, the water looks so harmless, almost tranquil. Then, the water gathers, begins to swell and before you know it tremendous energy is gathered up in a force that can be a lot of fun to surf or one that can create a lot of pain if you are caught on the wrong side of it.

In this passage, Paul teaches us, that like a wave being gathered, he is being caught up and turned into a powerful force for the cause of Jesus. If we are to grow into maturity we should follow his example. Today, we'll study how we can imitate Paul as he shows us what it means to seek after Jesus.

It is NOT about You.

Most religions and certainly all self-improvement programs share one thing in common: they teach people that to be “whole” they must start with themselves. *Look inside yourself and you'll find purpose*, is the common pitch. That is not the message of the Bible. Paul writes... *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.* Paul presses on BECAUSE Christ moved first. If we are to grown into maturity and follow Paul's example, we must understand that it doesn't **start with us**.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think we are tempted to start with ourselves when seeking “wholeness?”
2. What are some of the problems with looking inside ourselves for the answers? (see Proverbs 16:25)

You don't start it, BUT you have a part in it.

While Scripture clearly teaches that a life in Christ must start with Him, the Bible is also clear that growing in a relationship with Jesus requires our activity.

First we must understand that we are not there yet.

Paul, one of the greatest leaders and evangelists of all time says that he “hasn't attained it yet...” Too often, we are satisfied with where we are and don't see room to grow. Interestingly enough, the world seems to get the idea of hard work much better than we do. For instance, the best athletes always strive to get better. Why?

Questions for Reflection

3. Why do Christians not have the same approach to their relationship with God as athletes do to their sport?

Second, we must press on.

In verses 12 and 14, Paul says that he “presses on” to make a life with Christ his own. This word means “to impel” or “to set in rapid motion.” Greeks used this word to describe hunters persuing their prey and competitors racing toward the finish line. This word denotes a deep intense “going after.”

Vince Lombardi said: *A dictionary is the only place that success comes before work.* In the book “Outliers” by Malcolm Gladwell, he too notes the significance of hard work when it comes to success:

...the closer psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger role preparation seems to play. ... Once a musician has enough ability to get into a top music school, the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That's it. And what's more, the people at the very top don't work just harder or even much harder than everyone else. They work much, much harder.

While the saying “LET GO and LET GOD” sounds nice, it really paints an inaccurate picture of what the Scripture teaches. Yes, we must trust in God. Yes, we are saved by grace through faith and not by any works. Yet, advancing the Kingdom of God takes work, sacrifice and intensity. Jesus Himself said:

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. (Matt. 11:12)

Questions for Reflection

4. Why are most Christians afraid to talk about the “work” it takes to be a complete follower of Christ?

Third, we must focus on one thing.

In verse 13, Paul says “*But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.*” Paul is reorienting

his entire life around the pursuit of Jesus. Everything is being gathered into one point. Remember, Jesus taught us: “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [material needs] will be added to you.” - Matt. 6:33. Again, athletes get this. Arguably the best basketball player in history, Michael Jordan, failed miserably at baseball. He learned this lesson the hard way. Focus on ONE thing, in this case, Jesus Christ!

Questions for Reflection

5. Are you seeking Jesus above all things?
6. In your personal or professional life, are you trying to do too much and not focusing on the most important things?

Lastly, our part is to not look back!

Paul says that if we want to grow up in maturity we must forget what lies behind. “To forget” does not mean “to fail to remember.” We may wish that we could erase certain bad memories, but we cannot. We cannot change the past, but we can change the **meaning** of the past. There were things in Paul’s past that could have been weights to hold him back (1 Tim. 1:12–17), but they became inspirations to speed him ahead.

The past can trap us in a few different ways: **Some of us think the past is better** and we run right back to a life we hated. (remember the Israelites who wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt!). Others **are shackled by regrets of the past** and cannot let go of past hurts, abuses or failures. Lastly, some are **distracted by the successes** of the past. Arnold Toynbee said “nothing fails like success” and he’s right. If we keep looking back at everything we did in the past and admire it, we won’t realize all God has for our futures.

It is cute when a toddler learning to walk looks back and runs into a door. He or she doesn’t know better. But, when a 32 year old does this, it isn’t so cute. Paul says mature people run the race and look forward to prize at the end of the race.

Questions for Reflection.

7. Are you looking back? Why? Which of these three examples best describes you?
8. What would it look like to run with eyes looking forward to the prize?