Sermon Series: Standing Firm:
The Philippian Church: A Model Gospel Community

Sermon Title: Relentless Pursuit
By: Neil Silverberg

Scripture Text: Philippians 3:15-21

Last week we looked at Paul’s attitude towards the Christian life in Philippians 3:12-14. He is totally focused on the race and what he has to do to win. That meant that he had to forget what lies behind and not look at the other runners in the race to see where he stood. It also meant that he had to strain with all his power for what lies ahead as runners strain their bodies at the finish line. In a word, Paul is anything but spiritually stagnant when it comes to how he lives his Christian life. He is ever relentlessly pursuing more of God, more of the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, ever pressing in to Him.

He knows that there is so much more of the Lord Jesus than he has presently realized and experienced. When we read of Paul’s relentless pursuit of Christ we should immediately realize something; that this is the opposite of how most Christians today live. So many believers today are spiritually stagnant. What I mean is that they’re saved and they know they’re going to heaven when they die, but they have sort of ‘settled on their lees’. They are content with what they have of Christ and what they know and are not really pursuing him. If you asked them if they want more of Christ they will tell you: “Yes, I want more” but they won’t actually pursue it ardently. They know nothing of language such as this:

On my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him, but found him not. The watchmen found me as they went about in the city. “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” Scarcely had I passed them when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mother’s house, and into the chamber of her who conceived me.

Song, 3:1-4

That is absolutely strange language to them for they are satisfied. If you ask them they might tell you that they are ‘resting in Christ’. Regardless of what they might call it, this attitude is totally contrary to biblical Christianity. Paul clearly lived constantly with what can only be called a ‘holy dissatisfaction’ which compelled him to seek more and more of Christ. So I want to use these words in this text to encourage all of us to re-engage with Christ and to re-enter the race. Maybe you’re stuck on looking at things behind (living in regret, wounded from past hurts, past regrets, past victories). Maybe you are no longer straining forward for what lies ahead. If so, these words of Paul are for you. I believe in these verses Paul gives us three things that will keep us relentlessly pursuing and avoiding spiritual stagnancy: (1) having the right mindset, (2) having the right models, (3) and having your eyes on the goal.

Having the Right Mindset (verses 15-16)
Paul is dealing in these verses with errors that he wants them to avoid so he strongly urges them to think the way he does (‘let those of us who are mature think this way’). He tells them that the mature should think the way Paul does about the Christian life. ‘Mature’ here is the same word translated ‘perfect’ in vs. 12. So Paul says I am not yet perfect but then in vs. 15 he speaks of those who are ‘mature’ (perfect). Comparing those together here’s what we understand: There is a perfection that Paul is pressing on to that no one has yet achieved (but he is pressing on towards it). Yet he wants all those who are seeking perfection to be mature or complete. What he means is that we are to live up to our present level of attainment.

A child of three is ‘perfect’ or mature for that age. He or she has everything they need to become a mature adult. But no one is upset that they are acting and thinking like a three year old for that’s their present level of maturity. But something is wrong if at sixteen they are still acting like a three year old! The New Testament says there are four levels of spiritual maturity each of which corresponds to physical maturity (babes, children, young men, and fathers). Do you know where you presently are? And are you living up to that level of attainment?

But one thing Paul says emphatically: the mature will relentlessly pursue Christ as Paul did. This helps us to realize something; that the reason people don’t mature is they become spiritually stagnant, no longer pursuing with all their might. They become satisfied with the status quo (things as they presently are). But Paul says that the mature should think the way he does as expressed in vs. 10-14 (that I may know Him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings). Paul says the mature should be on a relentless pursuit of Christ, never settling for their present level of attainment. The mature keep pressing on, letting go of what lies behind and straining to know Christ. A.W. Tozer said, “To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul’s paradox of love.” It is a sure sign that you can count on—your maturity can be accurately judged by how hungry you presently are.

Some people have a desire for Christ but it’s on the same level of other interests (I want more of Christ but I also want more money, more friends, more vacations). Let me assure you that you won’t find more of Christ if He is just one of many desires you have. The mature have one overriding passion above all else—to know Him, and every other interest is subordinate to that! Is that your present level of spiritual attainment? Are you satisfied with where you are presently at?

**Having the Right Models (vs. 17-19)**

One of the ways we can relentlessly pursue God and keep from spiritual stagnation is to make sure we have the right models. Paul was not afraid to set himself and others as examples for people to follow. Before there were Bibles in the form that we now have it there were apostles who modeled Christian living. Paul knew that the way he was living his life was a pattern for others to follow. This is one of the most powerful incentives to live the Christian life. For example, *I used to do a lot of marriage counseling but then I began to send people to spend time with people who have great marriages.* People can learn more from observing others live the Christian life. Paul wants them to learn from good models because there were a lot of bad models around.

I do not believe that Paul is talking in vs. 18-19 about unbelievers but people who claim Christ but deny him by the way they live their lives. The sad thing is, sometimes these people who live this way have people listening to them. Paul said they walk as “enemies of the cross of Christ.” There are two ways that people become enemies of the cross. First, like the Judaizers they try to avoid the cross by trying to be good enough by doing good deeds and trying to keep the law. It looks spiritual but it denies the cross of Christ. The other extreme are those who are libertine—who say, “It doesn’t matter what we live like, we are free in Christ.” Paul says it breaks his heart and brings him to tears when he sees how some people who claim the name of Christ live. More harm has been done by
people who claim the name of the Lord but are thieves, adulterers, liars, or cheats. “Their end is destruction” (these people are deceived thinking they are saved when they are not). There are so many deceived people today who think they belong to the Lord, yet live as the children of the devil.

I am not talking about people who are struggling to live the Christian life but are pressing on. I am talking about people who live as described: their god is their belly. ‘Belly’ here doesn’t just mean stomach but represents their appetites. It reveals that the Christian life is a life of strict discipline. This verse bids us to ask the question, “Am I controlled by food or does food control me?” Am I given to appetite so that it is my god?” When you feel depressed or lonely or rejected what do you turn to? Some people turn to food. We say they have a ‘food’ addiction. The truth is, when we turn to anything for our comfort and joy than the Lord we become addicted to it. I understand that drugs, food, drink have physiological ramifications. But in our culture we have made a god out of feeding our own lusts.

Paul says these people “glory in their shame”. Today, some Christians boast in shameful things like homosexuality. Other Christian teachers boast in the million dollar houses they are building. Instead of being ashamed of these things, they boast in it. They have “their minds set on earthly things”. There was a survey done not long ago that demonstrated that most Christian’s values in America differed only slightly with the values of most other Americans. They set their minds on the same things as most Americans: bigger houses, bigger cars, bigger bank accounts, prestige, fame, getting more for themselves.

Having the Right Goal (vs. 20-21)
Paul closes this section by reminding the Philippians that they should keep their eyes on the goal. Paul really here summarizes everything he has said in this chapter. This is really a grand finale and a perfect description of a Christian. Paul is really describing here what New Testament holiness is. He says that the motivation to be holy comes from two things: what the believer already is and then, what the believer shall yet be. Let’s deal first with what the believer is. “Our citizenship is in heaven” (notice the word ‘is’) The Christian is not waiting to be a citizen of heaven but already is. That’s because heaven is not his destination, it is his or her ‘origin’.

What doctrine is this? It is the glorious truth of regeneration, the fact that we have been born from above. Remember how Paul put it in the Ephesians’ letter? “And raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”. The Christian is seated with Christ in heavenly places already. Because the Christian is seated with Christ in heaven already, he or she is told to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things on the earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Those who are hypocrites set their minds on earthly things but Paul says the true Christian has his mind on heavenly things. Every person on this planet is in one of two kingdoms: the earthly kingdom or the heavenly kingdom. He has already described what those living in the earthly kingdom live like. He doesn’t describe here what the believer lives like but it is simple: the believer has his mind on the values of his homeland.

Then Paul describes what the Christian shall be. Notice, it is not heaven that is our hope but a Savior we await from heaven. The Savior has already saved me from the penalty of sin, he has been daily delivering me from the power of sin. But one day, one blessed day he will deliver me from the presence of sin forever.

The emphasis is not on when it happens but what happens when he comes (who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body). This doctrine of glorification has a direct effect on how you live the Christian life today.
“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

Having this hope is the ultimate incentive to live the Christian life. We know that this is the resurrection from the dead. He will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body. That is why we have the attitude we have when Christians die. We are sad and mourn because we are separated from them but we know that even though they die, they will be resurrected and we will see them. Is this a living hope in your heart? Or is your ultimate goal getting ahead in this life, getting more money, working for retirement? Nothing is wrong with that but it is wrong if these are our ultimate goals.

Conclusion
Perhaps you’re here today and you realize that you have stagnated. What should you do? Start with dealing with these three things. What is your present mindset? Has it been a mature one, that there is so much more of Christ that you have not yet realized? If not and you discover that you have stagnated, repent. Change your mind! Perhaps you have had your eyes on the wrong models of those who look successful but they are not good models for living the Christian life. Maybe you’re struggling in your marriage and need a model of how a marriage should be. Or perhaps your goals have only been earthly, worldly, and temporal. Set your mind on the ultimate goal, that of your eternal reward.

####

The questions below are for your use during House Church Group Discussions.

1. Can 'holy dissatisfaction' be a good thing? How did it affect the Apostle Paul?
2. What three things will keep us relentlessly pursuing the Lord and avoid spiritual stagnancy?
3. What are the four levels of spiritual maturity?
4. If you were to assess your level of attainment where would you place yourself? How and what will you do to progress?
5. Who has been a model to you in your Christian walk?
6. What does 'belly' mean in the context of this passage?