

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:  
Pastor Stephen Felker  
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
8/15/04

## Philippians 3:12-16 “Winning the Race of Life”

Intro. During the next two weeks, many will follow the Olympic games in Greece. Athletes from all over the world are competing for gold medals. And they are not just competing for gold, but to be the #1 athlete in the world for a particular event. Some will set world records. In fact, American swimmer Michael Phelps set a world record in winning the 400-meter individual medley yesterday. He is on a quest for eight gold medals.

As you probably know, the modern Olympics have their roots in ancient Greece. In the Greek & Roman world of Paul's day, athletic competition was as popular as it is today. Most major cities had athletic arenas where hundreds or thousands could watch the athletes compete. The winners were considered heroes, and received much praise. So we should not be surprised to find that Paul uses many illustrations from the world of athletics. This morning I begin a brief series of messages based on biblical athletic illustrations. My text this morning is an example of an athletic illustration. It is an illustration of a race.

Paul uses the analogy of an athletic race to describe the Christian's spiritual growth. Paul has just described his conversion in verses 4-11. In our text today, he is speaking about striving toward perfection and maturity in the Christian life. But too often, we live lives that are spiritually stagnant, without purpose & direction. Would that describe you today? Are you wandering through life, or are you like a runner in a race, with a clear focus on where you are going, with a clear goal in mind?

In this text of Scripture, the Apostle here is letting us see the secret of his own success in living the Christian life. Furthermore, Paul appeals to the Philippians to join him in pursuing the prize and winning the race. And so I want to glean from this text how to win the race of life, and how to succeed in the Christian life. There are 5 requirements that I want to share with you. The first requirement is:

### I. DISSATISFACTION OF SELF

According to Paul, the believer must first realize he is not perfect. The Philippian church was probably troubled by some who claimed such sinless perfection.<sup>1</sup> They felt that just because they *outwardly* conformed to Judaistic rites and laws, they were perfect. But Paul did not have that attitude. His attitude is rightly expressed in v.12, “Not as though I had already attained, or am already perfected.” He is no longer a self-righteous Pharisee. After 30 years of being a Christian, Paul Himself still had not arrived at complete conformity to the will of God, and he knew it. He knew that he still possessed a sin nature, and he remained a temptable sinner. Furthermore, he never permitted himself to be satisfied with his spiritual attainments as a Christian, and as a missionary.

I doubt that anyone here today thinks that they are perfect. But I am probably speaking to some who are satisfied with where you are spiritually. You feel like you have arrived in your

---

<sup>1</sup> It is evident from v.15 that the foregoing discussion on Christian perfection was set against a background of controversy. Apparently, in the Philippian church, there were those who tended to be otherwise minded. Clearly there were some who were teaching that it was possible to be ‘perfect’ in a final sense here and now.

Christian walk, and very little remains but to maintain what you have, and to wait until the Lord calls you home to heaven.

Now the lesson for us is that fact that we must never feel that we have arrived spiritually. People who become content with where they are spiritually have reached a dangerous point. So a sanctified dissatisfaction is the first essential to progress in the Christian race. There is to be no complacency.

One reason why we become satisfied with where we are spiritually is when we compare ourselves with others, especially with those who are not making much progress. Suppose you are running in a race against 12 others, and you look around and see that you are ahead of 7 others. Should you be satisfied with that? Had Paul compared himself with others, he would have been tempted to be proud and perhaps to let up a bit.

After many years of walking with the Lord and being involved in ministry, I am still acutely aware that I am not what I ought to be. Like every other believer, I am still in the process of growth. There is always more spiritual truth to learn, and more of the Lord's power to exercise in His service. We need to become more loving, more pure, more gracious, more patient, and so forth. We never in this life reach a point where we no longer need to pray, read our Bibles, attend church, and so forth. So as long as you live in the flesh and in this world, you must never become satisfied that you have arrived spiritually. There will always be room for progress.

Have you become satisfied and complacent in your spiritual journey. Are you just resting on the sidelines? I believe it is time for many of us to wake up, and realize that we are further back in the race than we realized. It is time to turn from our complacency, and to renew our commitment to make serious progress in our Christian lives. So let me challenge you to take the next step. In addition to dissatisfaction, you need:

## II. DIRECTION IN LIFE

In the last of v.12, Paul indicates that Jesus had laid hold of him, or saved him, for a purpose. In v.14 Paul makes reference to the high call of God upon his life. He took God's purpose in calling, and Christ's purpose in redeeming him, as being his great object in life. Three times in these brief verses Paul speaks of "pursuing" (*dioko*, follow after - v.12), "reaching forth" (*epekteinomai*, v.13), and again of "pursuing" (*dioko*, press - v.14). Here we see strong determination & focus to reach a goal. The word "pursue" is used of a hunter eagerly pursuing his prey. V.14 indicates that Paul was running, literally "according to a mark." That is an adverbial phrase, modifying "pursue." It tells us something about how to run the Christian race. You need a goal or mark to pursue. The "mark" (*skopos*) is something you can see,<sup>2</sup> something you can run straight at. An athlete running a race must fix his eyes on something ahead of himself. He can't watch his feet. He can't be distracted by watching the other runners.

In Florida they have greyhound racing. The way they get the dogs to stay on track and finish the race is to have a mechanical rabbit go around the track on a wire, always just ahead of the lead dog. One time on a race as they were going just around the first turn, the mechanical rabbit had a failure, exploded in flames, and all that was left was bits and pieces of the rabbit. The dogs didn't know what to do. Some crashed into the wall. Some just lay down. Some looked at the crowd and howled. None finished the race!<sup>3</sup> Even so, we need to set our eyes upon the mark, and keep running toward that finish line with determination & focus.

---

<sup>2</sup> The noun *skopon* is based on the cognate verb *skopein*, "to watch; to look."

<sup>3</sup> Told by Stephen Rummage, 12/3/02 [Illus.#C-517].

Paul had a purpose-driven life. We will learn more about that this fall with our *40 Days of Purpose* campaign. He had a purpose to fulfill. He had a goal that he was striving for. But most people seem to have no purpose in life. They aim at nothing and hit it every time. What is your goal in life? Do you have goals? Do you have a clear direction in life? What is your purpose in life? Is it just to make money, seek worldly fame, or to selfishly gratify your every desire, like a pig or dog? I believe we should have far loftier goals in life. In Mk. 4:19 Jesus warned that “the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things” will cause us to become “unfruitful.”

So what is this mark that we should strive for? What is the goal that we should set for ourselves? In the context, I believe it is perfectly fulfilling God’s call upon our lives. He has called us to become like His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the standard of perfection that we must keep before our eyes. Heb. 12:2 says that in the race of life, we must always be “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...” There are other verses of Scripture that indicate that being like Jesus is the goal and destiny of every believer. Col. 1:28 says, “Him we preach... that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Eph. 4:13 says, “till we all come ...to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Cf. also Gal. 4:19; Rom. 8:29.

Now there are two aspects of keeping a proper focus on the proper goal and direction of our lives.

A. Don’t Look Back – Paul says in the last of v.13, “...forgetting those things which are behind...” The runner must not look back. He knows that if he does, he will lose his speed, his direction, and finally the race itself. In everyday life, distractions are often disastrous. My car accident occurred because I was distracted and took my eyes off the road. I could have been killed if it were not for my seat belt. It was very costly for Lot’s wife to look back (Lk. 17:32).

What does “those things which are behind” refer to? Everything in the past, both good and bad. Unfortunately, many Christians are so distracted by the past that they don’t make any current progress in the race.

We must refuse to dwell on our sins and failures. Instead, we are to “forget” them. Here, “to forget” does not mean, “to fail to remember.” “To forget” in the Bible means “no longer to be influenced by or affected by.” When God promises, “And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 10:17), He is not suggesting that He will conveniently have a bad memory! He is saying, “I will no longer hold their sins against them. Their sins can no longer affect their standing with Me or influence My attitude toward them.” Some Christians are hung up on guilt from the past, thinking their mistakes were so bad that God can’t forgive or use them. Before he was converted, Paul had a hand in the persecution and murder of Christians. He had to forget that. So what Paul is saying here is that we should break the power of the past by living for the future. We cannot change the past, but we can change the meaning of the past. Joseph is a good example (Gen. 45:1-15). When he met his brothers the 2<sup>nd</sup> time and revealed himself to them, he held no grudge against them. He saw the past from God’s point of view. He realized that God had allowed him to suffer many trials, for through them he would put him in a position to save his family from famine. And what his brothers meant for evil, God meant for good. So past failure does not cause future failure for the child of God. You can overcome your past, and move on to fulfill God’s purpose for your life.

On the other hand, some Christians are being distracted by the successes of the past. Some people reach a certain level of Christian maturity and progress & become satisfied with that. You can’t live on past successes. We must always press on. Churches can make the same mistake. We

have accomplished much, and made progress in the last 26 years, but we must not look back. We must keep looking forward to what God wants to do through us.

Now the second aspect of maintaining proper direction and goals in life is to:

B. Establish Priorities - The runner in the race should practice persistent concentration on one, and only one, objective, namely, to press on toward the goal for the prize. One is amazed by this unity of purpose that characterizes the apostle's entire life after conversion. Notice in v.13 that Paul focused his attention upon "one thing." Too many Christians are too involved in "many things." The difference between the amateur and a professional is that one pursues a sport occasionally while the other makes it his life priority. There are a great many amateur Christians among us, who pursue the Christian life by occasional spurts. The man of one aim is the formidable and the successful man.

Before the tragedy of the Chicago fire in 1871, Mr. D.L. Moody was involved in S.S. promotion, Y.M.C.A. work, evangelistic meetings, and many other activities; but after the fire that took many lives, he determined to devote himself exclusively to evangelism. He understood that his calling was to evangelism. As a result, millions of people heard the Gospel. No athlete succeeds by doing everything; he succeeds by specializing in 1 sport. Michael Jordan was a great basketball player, but he never succeeded in becoming a great baseball player, though he tried.

What will your goal be from this day forward?

There is a third requirement for success in the Christian life, and that is:

### III. DILIGENCE

The Greek word translated "press on" (*dioko*) in v.12 was used of a runner and speaks of an aggressive, energetic endeavor. Then, the Greek word translated "reaching forward" (*epekteino*) in v.13 pictures a runner stretching and straining every muscle to reach the goal before him. Paul gives us the picture of the runner with his whole body thrown forward. Paul was running with all his might, pursuing the ideal before him (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27). He expresses no "let go and let God" theology in these verses. Heb. 12:1 says, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Back in High School, I ran the mile and two mile events. After the first lap, my body would tire, and part of me would want to quit. But I knew I had to keep going, keep running, and keep exerting myself to reach the goal of finishing the race well. Even so, I know that living the Christian life is not easy. The Christian feels like a swimmer who is swimming against the current of this world. You want to give up at times. But a successful athlete and a successful Christian does not quit. Instead, you must keep running, and keep making progress each day. Peter said in 2 Peter 3:18a, "but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

What must we do to grow spiritually? Though spiritual growth is a work of God in the believer, we have certain responsibilities. One requirement is to read & study the Word of God. 1 Peter 2:2 says, "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." Another is to pray regularly. Another is fellowship with God's people, and imitate those believers who have made more progress in the race of life. Look down at v.17, "Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern." Paul said we should pattern our lives after godly people. Finally, God uses trials to make us more spiritually strong and mature. 1 Peter 5:10 says, "But may the God of all grace..., after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you." James 1:3-4 says, "knowing that the testing of your faith

produces patient endurance. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

Are you diligent in living the Christian life? Are you putting forth any real effort to live for God? You can't succeed in the Christian life without such diligence. Paul said in Php. 2:12, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." However, lest we think that the Christian life is just a matter of trying harder, Paul went on to say in the next verse, "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Your responsibility is both to put forth serious effort, and to trust in God to do His work in your life. So you must keep reading your Bible, praying, coming to church. You must keep on resisting temptation, and serving God. Don't be a lazy Christian!

There is a fourth requirement for success in the Christian life, and that is:

#### IV. DISCIPLINE

A tremendous amount of self-discipline is necessary to run a race effectively. Even so, in v.16 he appeals to them to stay on course. When he says, "let us walk by the same rule," he uses a word (*stoicheo*) that means, "to proceed in a row as the march of a soldier, go in order." The word could be used of a runner who stays in his lane, or follows the prescribed course. The runner must obey the rules. Any infringement of the rules disqualified the athlete. 2 Tim. 2:5 says, "No contestant in the games is crowned, unless he competes according to the rules." At least one judge is present at every event to determine if there has been any rule violation. The issue is not what he thinks or what the spectators think but what the judges say. Even so, one day each Christian will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12). You will receive the victor's crown only if you have disciplined yourself to stay on course, and follow the rules.

Bible history is filled with people who began the race with great success but failed at the end because they disregarded God's rules. They did not lose their salvation, but they did lose their rewards (I Cor. 3:15). It happened to Lot (Gen. 19). He made the decision to follow Abraham in their quest to follow God's call, but he ended poorly. Think of Samson (Jud. 16). He was a devoted Nasserite, but he yielded to lust and temptation, and was defeated by his enemies. Saul (I Sam. 28, 31) started out so well, with so much promise, but he ended poorly. Let us be determined not to make the same mistake.

Friend, stay in your lane. Keep making progress each day in spiritual growth. Compete according to the rules. Don't turn aside by yielding to temptation.

Finally, there is a fifth requirement for success in the Christian life, and that is:

#### V. DRIVE

An athlete must practice self-denial in order to win, and be successful. They must go through months and years of rigorous training. They must exert great effort, even to the point of pain. What would motivate a person to do this? What would motivate a Christian to deny self and sin, and keep making progress toward Christ likeness? Notice in Paul says in v.14, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The ultimate object of the race is the "prize" of victory. The word translated "prize" (*brabeion*) is used only twice in the Greek New Testament. It refers to the award to the victor in the games. When an athlete won a contest, he was called up to receive a laurel wreath, a crown of victory (*stephanos*). In the Olympics today, the winner of an event is called up to the highest level of the platform to receive the gold metal.

Perhaps that is the imagery behind Paul reference to the “upward call” of God. It is a call to receive the prize.

Now my point is that successful athletes are highly motivated by the prize of victory. Thus, they are driven to train hard, and to exert great effort with the goal of winning the prize. This is our motivation and our inspiration to run the race. Even so, Paul clearly has in mind here the events of the last day, the resurrection, and the judgment that will also hold the distribution of rewards to the faithful believers. You will stand before the Judge of the Universe some day, Jesus Christ. Will He say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and award you a crown for successfully completing the race of life? Pastor Johnny Hunt said, “We have all eternity to enjoy our victories, but only one life to win them.”<sup>4</sup> You must be driven by such motivation in order to succeed in the Christian life.

Conclusion: So have you been running well in the race of life? (Reiteration) Are you focused, with clear direction in life? Are you putting forth serious effort to live the Christian life, and serve well? Are you growing spiritually? Are you motivated by the prize of hearing the Savior say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant”? Perhaps you need to refresh your commitment to run the race well. If you have not been growing spiritually, ask God to forgive you and help you move toward perfection. I hope, as a result of this message, that you have a renewed focus upon fulfilling God’s call upon your life.

I read a story of an elderly carpenter who was ready to retire. He told his employer-contractor of his plans to leave the house-building business and live a more leisurely life with his wife, enjoying his extended family. He would miss the paycheck, but they could get by. The contractor was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter reluctantly said yes, but in time, it was easy to see that his heart was not in his work. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. It was an unfortunate way to end a dedicated career.

When the carpenter finished his work, the employer came to inspect the house. He handed the front-door key to the carpenter. “This is your house,” he said, “my gift to you.” The carpenter was shocked! What a shame! If he had only known he was building his own house, he would have done it all so differently.

So it is with us. We build our lives, a day at a time, often putting less than our best into the building. Then with a shock, we realize we have to live in the house we have built. So build wisely while you can!<sup>5</sup> Run the race of life well. Now is your only opportunity to win the prize.

If you don’t know Jesus Christ, you’re not even in the race. Start the race by receiving Him as Lord and Savior.

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962); John MacArthur, Jr., *Reaching for the Prize: Study Notes on Philippians 3:12-21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1990); Alexander Maclaren (only sermon on vv.13-14), *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Ralph P. Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Philippians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

---

<sup>4</sup> Spoken at the FBC Jacksonville Pastor’s conference, Jan.’04 [Illus.#C-796].

<sup>5</sup> Received by internet 12/23/02 [Illus.#C-527].