Pressing Toward the Goal

In 1954 Roger Bannister from Middlesex, England became a sports hero by breaking the four-minute barrier in running the mile. At Riffley Road, Oxford University's track, on May 6, 1954, the young medical student ran the mile in 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. The victory was all the more remarkable because of a stiff 15 MPH crosswind which gusted to 25 MPH.

The crosswind almost caused Bannister to cancel the run. Athletes had been trying to run the mile in less than four minutes for many years. Some trainers insisted that it was not humanly possible to do it. They said the body would collapse under the stress.

A psychological barrier was broken when Bannister smashed through the four-minute time in 1954. A few weeks later in Finland, John Landy ran an even shorter mile at 3 minutes, 57.9 seconds. Landy beat Bannister by almost two seconds.

A running contest was arranged to determine the world's fastest runner. On Saturday, August 7, 1954, at the Vancouver Empire Games in Canada, Bannister and Landy ran the decisive race. Landy, with the faster time, was the favorite. Bannister allowed Landy to take a twelve meter lead as the race began. That lead diminished as the four laps were run. At the start of the final lap, Landy was four meters ahead.

In the final 80 meters of the race, Landy made a fatal error by glancing back over his left shoulder to see where Bannister was. As Landy looked over his left shoulder, Bannister shot past him on the right to break the tape in triumph.

Bannister's time was 3 minutes, 58.8 seconds, with Landy at 3 minutes, 59.6 seconds—The first time in history that two athletes had simultaneously broken the four-minute barrier.

In our passage today, the apostle Paul almost certainly refers to the Isthmian Games which were held every other year close to Corinth in Greece.

He writes in vv. 13-14:
Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, 2I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. 1

Paul makes frequent reference to athletic events in his epistles. He probably attended the Isthmian Games in 51 AD while he was at Corinth.

In 1 Cor. 9:26 Paul says, "...I box in such a way, as not beating the air..." 2
In Eph. 6:12, in the language of the wrestling match, Paul writes,

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 3

As he drew to the close of a long illustrious life, he wrote triumphantly in 2 Tim. 4:7, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith..." 4

Probably referring directly to the Isthmian Games, Paul writes to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 9:25, "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." 5

Paul's favorite athletic metaphor seems to be the footrace.

In Acts 20:24, in the touching farewell talk to the Ephesian elders, Paul says, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God." 6

To the Romans he wrote, "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." 7

In 1 Cor. 9:24,26, reminding the Corinthians of the dedicated runners at the Isthmian Games, Paul writes,

Doy ou not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim... 8

1 The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.
Paul makes several allusions to the footrace in his writings to the Galatians. In Gal. 5:7, he laments, "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?"

The picture is of an athlete who is running well until someone cuts in in front of him.

In Gal. 2:2, Paul expressed his fear that he might be running or had run in vain. As mentioned before, it is that metaphor of the Christian life as a race, which Paul expresses in verse 14 of our passage: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." This verse reveals Paul's passionate concern for spiritual growth.

The Isthmian Games were second in importance only to the Olympic Games. They were established in approx. 581 BC. They were held in the spring of the first and third years of the Olympiad. They primarily honored the pagan gods Palaemon and Poseidon.

The Isthmian Games were very much like the Olympic Games but on a smaller scale with added amusements. The convenient journey from Athens made the games very popular.

Isthmia was located at a very important crossroad between north and south Greece. It was between Athens and Corinth and drew many important participants and spectators.

The running stadium was approx. 192 meters long. It had a unique triangular starting device called the hisplex. This starting gate consisted of 16 lanes, each 1½ meters wide. Channels were cut in the walls of the lanes. Wooden bars were fitted into the channels. The bars were controlled by a gate official who stood behind the runners in a large pit. The official held 16 cords which ran to each of the gates. When he released a cord, that bar would fall. He could open one gate, any combination of gates or all the gates simultaneously.

Events at the games included the following and more:

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Footraces
Leaping
Boxing
Wrestling
Quoit (a game somewhat like horseshoes)
Discus/Javelin hurling
Chariot and horse races
Music, poetry, and drama
Dance

Athletes were in three classes...Adult men, Boys, and Adolescents.
The athletes were rubbed with oil and normally performed without clothing.
This, and the fact that the games honored the pagan deities was why the
conservative Jewish community hated the Greek games so much.

Originally, the games were in two parts.
First was the presentation of offerings to the pagan god or gods.
The second part of the games was the contests.
The victors received a perishable wreath of celery, pine, laurel, or olive leaves.
They were given a triumph at their hometown. Sometimes they received money.
They had a right to a permanent place of honor at all public games and were held
in high honor by their countrymen.

In vv. 12-14 Paul uses the images of the footrace to inspire the Philippians to
greater zeal in service to Christ. It seemed to me to be appropriate as we stand on
the threshold of a New Year to examine this passage to glean some lessons we can
use in the New Year as we strive for spiritual growth in our lives.

In verse 12, Paul deals a devastating blow to the false doctrine of
perfectionism—the idea that through a second work of grace one may be made
sinless. Paul has listed an impressive array of human accomplishments in vv. 5 and
6. Now, lest the Philippians will think Paul's righteousness was the result of his
human effort, he clearly states, "I have not obtained perfection, but I am pursuing
it with all my might."
No Christian will ever achieve perfection in this life—that will come with the redemption of our bodies.

Perfection will always be a goal, never an achievement. John tells us if we say we do not sin, we make God a liar.

While we cannot ever hope for complete spiritual perfection, we should all be pursuing spiritual growth.

We get very concerned when our children do not grow physically. Spiritual children, like physical children, should have a built-in desire for growth.

1 Peter 2:1-2:

1 Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander,
2 like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...11

John McArthur suggests several reasons why Christians must grow spiritually:

First: It glorifies God.
Second: It provides evidence that their salvation is genuine.
Third: It makes the truth of God visible to others.
Fourth: It protects the cause of Christ from reproach.
Fifth: It produces joy in believers' lives.
Sixth: It equips us for ministry to others.
Seventh: It enhances our witness to a lost world.

John suggests six prerequisites for effectively striving for the prize of Christlikeness. Allow me to share them with you...

1st, Pursuing the prize requires a Proper Awareness.

V. 12..."Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect..."12
Before we will be serious about spiritual growth, we must realize that we are not now what we should be spiritually.

We get that awareness through God's Spirit and God's Word. Paul tells us in 2 Cor. 3:18 that as we behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, we are transformed into the image of Christ. Just as from the Lord the Spirit. As we continue to look into the face of Christ, through the Word, we will be more and more aware of our need for Christlikeness.

I was fascinated several years ago to hear a tape of my grandfather Samuel. He was one of the most godly men I ever knew. Some of you knew him. He said in his message, "I feel so unworthy to be preaching to you. I feel like I should hide behind this table rather than talk to you." Those words were spoken by a very godly man, but he realized his need for spiritual improvement. The apostle Paul had this awareness that he needed to improve spiritually.

He begins verse 12 with "Not that I have already obtained..."13. The word means "to receive," "acquire," or "attain" the prize he pursued.

He had not yet "become perfect"14.

Twice he repeats the word "already"15, indicating that he recognized he was still imperfect. Pursuing the prize of spiritual perfection begins with a dissatisfaction with one's spiritual condition. Those who think they have arrived at spiritual perfection place themselves in grave danger of becoming insensitive to their sin and blind to their own weaknesses.

As we continue to cultivate holiness and eliminate sin in our lives, we will grow spiritually. Less sin will actually feel like more as we develop an awareness for it. The truly mature and godly will have the most awareness of their sins and the most humility before God because of it.

Along with a proper awareness of our spiritual condition, the second prerequisite for striving for Christlikeness is...

2. Pursuing the prize of spiritual maturity requires a maximum effort.
Paul says in verse 12b, "...but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."\(^{16}\)

Knowing we are not spiritually perfect will not improve our spiritual condition. There must also be a diligent pursuit on our part. Paul says, "I press on."\(^{17}\) The words speak of an aggressive, energetic endeavor.

Paul pursued the spiritual prize with all his might, straining every spiritual muscle as he ran to win.

Paul knew that he was dependent on God's power in his life. Writing in Colossians 1:29, Paul says, "Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily."\(^{18}\)

In this scripture Paul acknowledges God's power in his life. But he also says he labors and strives.

Paul tells Timothy to "Fight the good fight of faith..."\(^{19}\)

He writes in 2 Tim. 4:7, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."\(^{20}\)

To Paul the quest of spiritual maturity required a maximum effort.

Paul gives a motivation for maximum effort in the Christian life in verse 12c where he writes, "...I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."\(^{21}\)

The New American Standard translates this verse, "...I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."\(^{22}\)

The word "apprehend" may be translated "to overtake," "to seize," "to catch". Paul says his goal was consistent with Christ's goal in saving him.

Paul states that goal in Romans 8:29: "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren."\(^{23}\)

God chose us, Paul says, to make us like Jesus Christ. That is the purpose we should live for.

The Christian life is a lifelong pursuit of Christlikeness.

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18 The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.
20 The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.
23 The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.
Each of us should give this pursuit of Christlikeness a maximum effort.

A Proper Awareness
A Maximum Effort

3. Now in verse 13, A Focused Concentration

"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..." 24

A maximum effort without focussed concentration is useless. Runners know that they cannot be looking around or behind. If they watch their own feet they will probably trip. If they look behind like Landy, other runners may shoot past them. If they look anywhere except the goal, they will loose focus. Maximum effort without focused concentration is like spinning your tires on ice.

In the passage, Paul addresses the Philippians with the intimate term "Brethren". False teachers—we call them Judaizers—were attempting to lure the Philippians away from Paul. They taught that the Law must be kept along with faith in Christ to have salvation.

Paul is presenting his case against the Judaizers who taught that spiritual perfection is attainable in this life.

For the third time in this passage, Paul says, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet...". 25

Even though Paul had not attained spiritual perfection, he had a discontent with his own spiritual maturity which drove him to pursue it.

He says, "...but one thing I do...". 26 "I do" is not in the text. He communicates his single–minded pursuit of the goal in an impassioned, almost abrupt way. His focus on the goal of spiritual maturity was total, his concentration complete.

We know that in business, sports and other endeavors it is the focussed individuals who excel.

Many people dabble in many things; there is much sound and fury, but without focussed concentration they don't accomplish much.

James says, "...being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways". Solomon said (Prov. 4:25-27),

25 Let your eyes look directly ahead
   And your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.
26 Watch the path of your feet
   And all your ways will be established.
27 Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
   Turn your foot from evil.

When we have a focussed concentration on spiritual maturity we will move toward it. There is a negative and a positive aspect to this concentration.

Negatively, Paul maintained his focus by "forgetting what lies behind". A runner who looks back looses focus and is in danger of being passed. A runner cannot rely on past successes or failures. He/she must run now with maximum focus.

The past is simply not relevant to our growth. While it is true that we must remember the good lessons we have learned and that we must remember lessons we have learned from past failures. Paul made a clean break with the things of his past.

Forgetting the past is important for two reasons:

1st, it is possible for us to rely on past victories and slack up in our present focus on spiritual maturity. It is possible for us to develop a spiritual "smugness" whereby we consider ourselves superior to others because of past successes.

This focus on past spiritual victories will cause us to become critical, legalistic and unChristlike. It will cause us to loose our present focus on "pressing on to the goal".

2nd, It is possible for us to be crippled emotionally/spiritually by a focus on past failures and hurts.
McArthur writes,

"Quote"

Churches are full of spiritual cripples, paralyzed by the grudges, bitterness, sins, and tragedies of the past. Others try to survive in the present by reliving past successes. They must break with that past if they are to pursue the spiritual prize. God is interested in what believers do now and in the future. "No one," declared Jesus, "after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62). The clearest vision belongs to those who forget the past.

"End of quote"

A.W. Tozer writes,

"Quote"

Spiritual life cannot feed on negatives. The man who is constantly reciting the evils of his unconverted days is looking in the wrong direction. He is like a man trying to run a race while looking back over his shoulder!

There is an art of forgetting, and every Christian should become skilled in it. Forgetting the things which are behind is a positive necessity if we are to become more than mere babes in Christ.

And here's the good part: into the empty world vacated by our sins and failures rushes the blessed Spirit of God, bringing with Him everything new. New life, new hope, new enjoyments, new interests, new purposeful toil, and best of all a new and satisfying object toward which to direct our soul's enraptured gaze!

"End of quote"
Positively, Paul says we can maintain our focus by "...reaching forward to what lies ahead...".29
The word picture is of a runner straining every muscle to its limit to reach the finish line.
That goal, for us, should be to become like Christ.
The pursuit of Christlikeness will continue until we are made like him in glory.

A Proper Awareness
A Maximum Effort
A Focussed Concentration

4. And now, in verse 14, a Proper Motivation

"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."30 This verse is the heart of the passage. "I press on..."31 tells us of Paul's determination to continuously pursue the goal of Christlikeness. The runner in the Isthmian Games won when he crossed the finish line. He received a perishable wreath of leaves.
Paul, and you and I, will win the race when we enter the portals of heaven.
We will receive a crown or crowns which we will cast at the feet of our blessed master in worship and adoration. We will be able to say triumphantly with the great apostle,

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;
8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...32

--2 Tim. 4:7-8

The hope of the crown is a proper motivation for us to continue pressing toward the goal.
A Proper Awareness
A Maximum Effort
A Focussed Concentration
A Proper Motivation

5. And now, a Proper Recognition

Paul writes in verse 15, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you...". 33

Paul was not running alone. He was running with "...as many as are perfect...". 34

Perfect carries the sense of our being positionally perfect in Christ.

Paul says we should have the attitude, set our minds on, or to think this way.

Believers are being urged on to a total focus on pursuing the prize of Christlikeness. Paul knew we would not all, always, think like that.

Paul says simply, "If you don't hear it from me, you will hear it from God."

God, through his Word, his Spirit, or through chastening, will do what is required to make us recognize our need for pursuing Christlikeness.

A Proper Awareness
A Maximum Effort
A Focussed Concentration
A Proper Motivation
A Proper Recognition

6. And finally in verse 16, a Proper Conformity

"...however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." 35

"However" could be translated "one more thing". It is often used to express one last final thought.

This prerequisite for pursuing the prize could be described as "consistency".

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Paul says believers must "...keep living by that same standard to which we have attained." "Keep living" means "to line up", "to follow in line". We must keep running in our lane.

Four resources from God will help us to "stay in line" spiritually...

1st is The Word of God.

We need to take our direction and make our choices based on God's Word.

2nd, Prayer

We will draw our strength for the race from communion with our Father.

3rd is following A Godly Example.

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to "...be imitators of me." Can you and I confidently say to others, "Follow Christ as you see me following Him"?

4th, God can use Trials to mold us into the image of Christ.

1 Peter 5:10...

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

A Proper Awareness
A Maximum Effort
A Focussed Concentration
A Proper Motivation
A Proper Recognition
A Proper Conformity

At the foot of one of the Swiss Alps is a marker honoring a man who fell to his death attempting the ascent. The marker gives his name and this brief epitaph: "He died climbing." The epitaph of every Christian should be that they died climbing the upward path toward the prize of Christlikeness.