

Reaching for the Goal Philippians 3:12-14

As most of you, they are going to be playing a little football game in Miami, Florida later today. It is estimated that over 90 million people will be watching the Super Bowl game between the Indianapolis Colts and the New Orleans Saints. How many of you are going to be rooting for the Colts tonight? How many of you are going to be cheering on the Saints? Come to think about it, if you're a Christian it could be a little awkward rooting against the Saints.

The Apostle Paul used many different illustrations to communicate truth about the Christian life. Most of his illustrations came from the world of athletics. Sometimes he used boxing. Other times he would talk about wrestling. I am sure if the game of football had been around he would have used it to illustrate some important truth as well.

In our text this morning Paul reaches into the world of track and field. He compares the Christian life to running a race. It is important to point out that Paul is not telling us how to be saved. We don't run the race in order to be saved; we run the race because we have been saved.

According to the Word of God if we have repented of our sins and trusted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we are children of God. As children of God we have the responsibility of "running the race" of faith the Lord has set for before us. If we faithfully run the race, finish our course, and reach the goal God has planned and prepared for us we will receive the reward that He has promised us. If we fail, we will lose our reward but, and this is important, we will not lose our salvation.

Sadly, there are many who profess faith in Christ and yet seem to have little interest in receiving a reward. They are quite content with just making it to heaven when they die. May I say that "just making it to heaven" is an unworthy goal for any Christian. In fact, if you are content with just making it to heaven and you have no desire to live a life that is well pleasing to God, I wouldn't count on making it to heaven if I were you.

All of us should desire to faithfully "run the race" the Lord has planned for us and to fulfill the purpose for which we have been saved. What are the requirements for reaching the goal and receiving the reward God has promised us? First of all,

1. Reaching the goal requires discernment

In other words, you have to know what the goal is. Every member of the two teams competing in this year's Super Bowl understands what their goal is tonight. Their goal isn't merely to compete, it's to win. So what should our goal be?

Look at verse 12 with me. Paul says, *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected."* It's important to understand that when Paul talks about being "*perfected*" he does not mean perfect or sinless. Paul understood that he could never be sinless; neither can we. The bible says in First John 1:8, *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* Beloved, we will never be sinless, but with God's help we should expect to sin less and less as we grow in faith and spiritual maturity.

Most of the time when the Bible talks about perfection it is referring to spiritual maturity.

It is talking about being Christ-like. In 2 Peter 3:18 the Bible says, "*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" Ephesians 4:13 says, "*Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*"

If you are going to reach the goal you have to know what the goal is. The goal isn't to be sinless; it's to be a mature, spirit-filled, Christ-like child of God. Secondly,...

2. Reaching the goal requires dissatisfaction

Paul goes on to say in verse 12, "*But I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*" One day on the Damascus road Paul met the Lord Jesus Christ. On that dusty road God reached down from heaven, laid hold of Saul of Tarsus, and saved him by his marvelous grace.

When did the Lord Jesus lay hold of you? Maybe it was in a worship service, or a revival meeting, or a VBS in church years ago. Maybe it was kneeling by your bedside at home one night. Maybe God will lay hold of you in this service this morning and save you. That's what has to happen before you get in the race. You have to start the race before you can run the race. You have to be born again before you can even begin. You have to become a Christian before you can live the Christian life. There has to be a definite starting point.

To be saved, Jesus must first lay hold of you. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus Christ is "*the author and finisher of our faith.*" He's the one that makes it possible for you and me to be saved. But the bible also says that we must lay hold of Jesus if we are going to be saved. First Timothy 6:12 exhorts us to "*Lay hold on eternal life.*" How does that work? Jesus lays hold of us by His grace; we lay hold of Him by our faith. He reaches out to us in grace. We reach up to Him in faith. Have you ever done that?

Now look at verse 13 with me. "*Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended.*" Paul is saying, "I want to be everything the Lord Jesus Christ saved me to be. I want to be a fully mature, spirit-filled, Christ-like child of God. But I'm not there yet. I do not count myself to have apprehended the goal just yet. That is why I keep running the race and pressing for the goal." There was no sense of satisfaction in Paul's life. Here is arguably the greatest Christian who ever lived confessing that he wasn't satisfied with where he was in his Christian Life.

When you think about it, a certain sense of dissatisfaction is necessary for success in any field of endeavor. Regardless of how much athletic talent the Indianapolis Colts or the New Orleans Saints have on their rosters, if either team runs out onto the football field tonight feeling satisfied with just making it to the Super Bowl they are bound to lose.

Satisfaction in the Christian life is something we must always be on guard against. Now don't misunderstand me. I am fully and completely satisfied with Jesus. My wonderful Savior saves, sanctifies, supplies, and satisfies. As the old hymns says;

*I am satisfied, I am satisfied,
I am satisfied with Jesus,
But the question comes to me, as I think of Calvary,
Is my Savior satisfied with me?*

That is the question, isn't it? Listen, we should be more than satisfied with who Jesus is, but we should never be satisfied with where we are in our Christian life.

A divine dissatisfaction is essential for spiritual progress. If you are satisfied with your knowledge of the Bible and don't think you need to learn more, if you are satisfied with your prayer life and don't believe you need to pray more, if you are satisfied with your witness and don't feel as though you need to share more, if you are satisfied with your walk with Christ and don't think you need to grow more, you will never be all God wants you to be.

We should never be satisfied with being anything less than everything Jesus saved us to be.

Reaching the goal requires discernment. It requires dissatisfaction. Next Paul tells us that...

3. Reaching the goal requires devotion

Look again at verse 13. *“Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do.”* One thing! That is the key.

The name Bo Jackson is certainly familiar to most sports fans. Bo Jackson was one of those rare athletes who seemed equally gifted in numerous sports. He was a professional football player. He was a running back for the Los Angeles Raiders. He was also a professional baseball player. He played left field and designated hitter for the Kansas City Royals, the Chicago White Sox, and the California Angels. Some of you here this morning probably had the privilege of watching Bo Jackson play the outfield in Kaufman Stadium. He was the first athlete to be named an All-Star in two major professional sports. On January 13, 1991, during an Oakland Raiders playoff game against the Cincinnati Bengals, Bo suffered a serious hip injury which essentially ended his professional athletic career. Fans and pundits alike have often wondered what might have been if Bo Jackson hadn't been injured in that game. What if he had just played baseball? How many home runs would he have hit? How many bases would he have stolen? How many eye-popping, jaw-dropping plays would he have made in the outfield? How many records would he have broken? Just how good would Bo Jackson have been he had focused on only one sport instead of attempting to play two?

Paul said, *“One thing I do,”* We need to focus on the things that matter most; and if you are a Christian, the thing that matters most is growing in your faith and becoming more and more like Jesus. Brothers and sisters, that ought to be our number one priority and the passion of our lives.

Reaching the goal requires spiritual discernment, a sense of dissatisfaction, and single minded devotion. And then...

4. Reaching the goal requires direction

Paul goes on to say in verse 13, *“Forgetting those things which are behind.”* What does Paul mean by that? Before I answer that let me just say there are some things you should never forget.

First and foremost you should never forget what God has done for you. You should never forget the love and mercy and grace of God. You should never forget the day Christ came into your life, forgave your sins and saved your soul. You should never, ever forget that.

But there are some things you ought to forget. First, you ought to forget your past sins. In Psalm 103:12 we read *“As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”* If you have confessed your sins to God with a truly repentant heart your sins are forgiven. God says, “I will remember your sins no more,” and you need to do the same. Here is another wonderful promise. The Bible says God takes our sins and buries them in the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). If the Lord has forgiven you of your sins then beloved, quit fishing. First John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* Do you believe God? Then accept His promise of forgiveness and forget about it. You can't win the race if you are constantly dwelling on all of your past sins.

Second, you ought to forget your past successes. Being distracted by the *successes* of the past is just as bad as being discouraged by the sins of the past. Don't spend your time dwelling on what you used to do. What are you doing for Jesus now? That's what matters. Forget your past successes. Jesus said, *“No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:62).

Too many of us are trying to run the race by looking backward! No wonder we stumble and fall. No wonder we get frustrated and feel like failures in our Christian walk. Paul said, *“Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.”* The *“things which are behind”* must be left in the past and *“the things which are ahead”* must take their place.

Reaching the goal requires that we keep moving in the right direction. Not living in the past but looking forward to *“the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Let me share one more thought and then I'll close. It is possible to have discernment, dissatisfaction, devotion, and direction, and still not reach the goal. There is a fifth requirement.

5. Reaching the goal requires determination

Look at verse 14. Paul says, *“I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* The word translated *“press”* carries the idea of intense effort. If you watch the big game tonight you are going to see what that word *“press”* means in living color. On every play you are going to see twenty-two men pressing toward their goal of winning the biggest game of their lives. They are going to be giving it all that they've got.

Here in verse 14 Paul pictures a runner who is pressing toward the tape. His lungs are burning in his chest. Every muscle in his body is straining toward the finish line. He is giving it all that he has as he reaches for the goal.

That's the way Paul lived his life. Before Paul was saved he was out and out against Jesus. After he became a believer he was out and out for Jesus. He was sold out completely to Christ. That's the way every one of us ought to live our lives for Christ; pressing, pressing, pressing toward the goal.

Paul says, *“I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”* In those days the first athlete to cross the finish line would be called up to the award stand. He would stand before the Bema Seat and a laurel wreath, the victor's crown, would be placed upon his head.

In the athletic world only one person or team can come in first. There can only be one winner. Only one team is going to be crowned 2010 Super Bowl champions tonight. The wonderful thing about the Christian life is that every child of God who is faithful to the finish wins the prize. Paul says "I'm running the race the Lord has set before me. There is no looking back. I'm pressing toward the goal, and when I cross the finish line I'm going to receive the reward of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Dear ones, it's going to be glorious when we cross that finish line. Two weeks ago brother JT crossed the finish line. Linda, your mother crossed the finish line Saturday morning. Just imagine what it's going to be like to stand before the Lord Jesus and receive our reward. Our reward won't be a golden medallion or a laurel wreath. No, our reward will be something much better. You see beloved, we don't run the race for the applause of men. We run the race for the approval and glory of our Lord and Savior. That is the prize. Our reward will be to look upon our dear Savior's face hear Him say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Well done."

Look at 2 Timothy 4:6-8. As far as we know this is the last letter Paul ever wrote. He knew the end was near. He could almost see the finish line when he wrote these words. *"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing"* (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Not long after Paul wrote those words a Roman soldier opened the door of his prison cell, marched him across the street and brought him to the executioner. With one swift blow of the executioner's axe, Paul's life on this earth ended. He finished the race.

Some day you will come to the end of your journey. When you draw your last breath, when your heart beats for the final time, at that moment you will break the tape and cross the finish line. When that moment comes may it be said that you gave your life pressing toward the goal, pursuing the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

At the foot of one of those magnificent mountains in Switzerland there is a little church. In the court yard of that church is buried the body of a young Englishman who lost his life attempting to climb that mountain. On his tombstone beneath his name and the date of his birth and death is written this brief epitaph: just three words, "He died climbing."

There's an old hymn we sang a couple of weeks ago that says,

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand;
By faith on heaven's tableland.
A higher plane than I have found.
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

Are you in the race this morning? Have you received Jesus Christ as your personal Savior? You can't run the Christian race until you have had a Christian experience. If you have never been saved, you need to be saved today.