

Philippians 3:12-17 Press Toward the Mark

In the world of the ANE, athletic contests were a common form of entertainment and sport. The Greeks and Romans built huge stadiums for people to gather to watch various forms of competition.

In Philippians 3, Paul uses such imagery to describe the Christian life. The Christian life is something like a foot race, perhaps a marathon. The runners are all striving and straining to win the race. Winners in the race must endure difficulties by keeping their focus on the finish line.

Winning a race or even finishing a race depends a great deal on how you approach it—what is your frame of mind, what are you thinking about, what you are focusing on. Contestants will not win if they are constantly looking back over their shoulder or being distracted by things along the way. They win by focusing on the goal.

The new year is approaching quickly. As we transition into 2026, it's a good time to consider how well we are running the Christian race. Are we persevering in the race? Are we keeping our eyes on the goals that God has given us? Are we distracted by other things? Have we quit the race, or perhaps we are sitting on the sidelines just watching?

This passage in Philippians gives us some encouragement for running the Christian race this coming year. Let's consider the advice Paul gives us for running the race successfully in 2026.

I. .12a Be humble.

- A. We have not attained the final goal. We are still running the race. Paul admits that he had not “apprehended/attained” the final goal.
- B. The word “attained” (λαμβάνω) means “to take, to lay hold of, to obtain, to take possession.” What was Paul trying to lay hold of? What was the goal?
 - 1. Cf. vs. 10 “That I may know him...”

2. Cf. vs. 11—“that I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.”

I.e., Paul had not attained final salvation or a complete knowledge of Christ. He had not attained everything in the Christian life.

Paul had spiritual goals—to know Christ more deeply and to live more consistently as a godly Christian. But he had not fully attained those goals.

C. .12a We are not perfect.

1. “... either were already perfect.” This word (τελειόω) refers to being complete, finished, or mature; it refers to accomplishing the goal.
2. Christians are both perfect in a sense and imperfect in a sense.
 - a) In their status/standing before God, they are perfect. The righteousness of Christ has been credited to their account. Every genuine Christian is a saint—a holy one.
 - b) Still, every Christian remains a sinner—an unholy one. In our practical, daily living, we are far from perfect, complete or mature.

Even the most spiritually mature person is still far from the perfection. We all fall far short of true spiritual maturity. We will not experience perfection in the practical sense until we get to heaven.

3. The level/degree of maturity or immaturity varies from person to person. For Paul to admit that he was still imperfect shows that even the most mature and godly person still is not perfect. Cf. Rom 14; Gal 5:17

D. Imperfection means that the goal is still in sight. We have not attained perfection or complete maturity. Conversion to Christ is not the end of the road. Conversion is only the beginning of a long process of becoming more mature in the Christian life.

App: We have not attained. We all have room for growth and improvement. We can learn more and be better Christians. We should be humble and admit that we fall short of God's expectations.

Immaturity is not an excuse for indulging in sin. Rom 6:1f.

As we approach the new year, we should humbly admit that we are not what we ought to be; we still have room for improvement.

What do we do before we reach the finish line?

II. .12b Fulfill your role/task/purpose.

A. What is the goal? He states is somewhat cryptically at the end of vs. 12 – “if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”

Or “that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.”

B. *When* did Christ lay hold of Paul? Jesus called Paul to be an apostle when he appeared to him on the road to Damascus some 30 years before this.

C. *Why* did Christ lay hold of Paul?

1. To save him from sin, death, and hell.

2. To put him into the ministry. The Damascus road experience was Paul's call into the ministry.

Acts 9:15 the Lord said to [Ananias], “Go, for [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.”

Paul continues to pursue the purpose for which he was saved, i.e., to glorify God by fulfilling his ministry. He is still trying to fulfill the goals that God had set for him some 30 years ago.

App: Like Paul, we ought also to consider what our goals/purposes are. Have you ever considered what your purpose is as a Christian?

Your highest purpose is to glorify God (1 Cor 10:31). We'll always come short of doing that, but we still strive after it.

Our goals are to live a godly Christian life, serve the Lord, and keep the faith. We strive to persevere in faith and in good works.

Our *goals* are connected to our *roles* in life – family, church, career, society.

As we approach the new year, we should make sure that we are striving to fulfill our purposes in life. And the highest purpose is to know God and to make him known.

III. Press on. .12mid KJV “I follow after”

If the Christian life is like a marathon race, our responsibility is to run and to keep on running.

- A. The word for “follow after” (διώκω) means “to pursue, to run after, to eagerly strive to acquire.” And it’s in the present tense, meaning “I continue to press on/follow after.” He continues to pursue the goal.

Paul pictures himself as a runner in hot pursuit of the goal. His goal in ministry was to bear Christ’s name before Gentile, kings, and Israel. His whole life was devoted to that goal.

.12a, .13a But he has not yet “apprehended” or fulfilled his goal. He has not laid his hands on the goal; he has not yet crossed the finish line. He is still striving to fulfill the goal.

App: No matter how spiritually mature you may be, you never get to the point where you no longer need to run the race. We do not attain a spiritual plateau where we can just sit down and relax. We should always be pressing on and striving to fulfill our responsibilities.

As long as you are still alive, you have not crossed the finish line yet. We are still in the race; we are still pressing on.

- B. In vs. 13, he tells us *how* to press on/follow after.

1. .13b Focus on the goal at hand. “This one thing I do.”

Literally, Paul says simply “but one thing.” There’s no verb. It’s a forceful and dramatic way of focusing attention on the one thing that Paul set as his goal.

What is the goal? For Paul, the “one thing” was fulfilling his ministry, answering his calling to be an apostle.

App: Like Paul, we should be striving to serve the Lord in the context where we are with the gifts and opportunities God has given us. The “one thing” is to serve God in the place he’s put us with the gifts we have and with the people who are around us.

2. .13b Forget those things that are behind.

Serious, competitive runners don’t usually look back over their shoulder when they are running. Looking back will slow you down and get your eyes off the finish line. People stumble and fall when they look back. It’s best to look ahead.

Cf. Lk 17:32 – *Remember Lot’s wife*.

- a) Paul tells us to forget those things that are behind. That does not mean that we forget about our life history or lessons we’ve learned through past experiences.
- b) In vss. 5-7, Paul describes some things that were behind him. He has not forgotten about these things. His point is that such things do not absorb his attention or energy. His past was not an excuse for lack of progress.

App: Some people live in the past or use their past as an excuse.

Some people use their past *failures* as an excuse—“I’m such a sinner that I can’t do anything; I’m unworthy.”

Some people use past *successes* as an excuse—“I already done plenty.”

App. We should not allow our past experiences to hinder us from serving God. It’s not that we actually forget past events; we simply do not allow the past to hinder us from fulfilling our responsibilities now and in the future. It means that we don’t allow distractions to divert us from the goal.

Life is filled with distractions that can slow us down in the Christian race—worries, money, family problems, desires, recreation, sports. Concentrating on other things can distract us from our higher responsibilities. We cannot allow past failures or successes to hinder us from achieving our goals.

3. .13c Reach forth unto those things which are before.

Quote: The verb used in the original [ἐπεκτείνωμαι] pictures the runner straining every nerve and muscle as he keeps on running with all his might toward the goal, his hand stretched out as if to grasp it.¹

We sometimes see runners at the end of the race stretching out and reaching forth to cross the finish line first. That seems to be the picture Paul is painting here.

We ought to have a strong, compelling desire to fulfill the goals and purposes God gives us. At least, we ought to be making progress in that direction. We ought to be out there running the race and moving in the right direction.

“things which are before” – opportunities, open doors

What opportunities lie “before” you this coming year? I’ve always advocated going through open doors. If an opportunity comes your way, make use of it.

4. .14 Press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Paul is racing ahead to finish the race and win the prize.

a) The word “mark” (σκοπός) refers to something in view, a goal that you are looking at. A runner focuses on the finish line; that’s the mark that he has in view.

¹ William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Philippians*, vol. 5, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 173.

In the ancient stadiums, there was often a pillar that marked the finish line of the race. So the runners would keep that pillar in view and run toward it.

- b) The highest goal is to bring glory to God. In vs. 10, Paul describes the goal as knowing Christ in both his power and his sufferings.
- c) He mentions the “high calling” or the “upward call.” At the end of a contest, the winner would be called up to the judges’ seat to receive his prize.

The prize in those days was a laurel crown—a wreath of leaves. Along with that, winners in the races often receives money, food, or even tickets to the theater. Cf. 1 Cor 9:24f.

- d) When Paul uses the word “call” or “calling,” he’s almost always talking about the call to salvation.

The ultimate prize of the Christian life, the highest reward, is the “upward call” to heaven. Salvation is like a prize or a reward.

Hebrews 3:1 *Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, ...*

The goal or prize is salvation. Salvation is a free gift that we receive by faith. But the Christian life is like a race in which the ultimate prize is heaven and the rewards God has for those who have served him.

So the Christian life is not merely sitting back and enjoying salvation. No, we are supposed to be running like we are in a race. The race is our ministry, our service to the Lord. As we serve the Lord, we keep our eyes on the goal, and we strive forward and stretch out like we are hoping to reach the finish line. And if we have served God faithfully, we will hear him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

IV. Practice your position. Live up to your position in Christ. .15-16

- A. .15 Be mature. Some are “perfect,” i.e., mature.
1. Paul has already said that he is *not* fully mature/complete.
 2. Still, he had achieved a certain degree of Christian maturity. He is not fully mature, but he is relatively mature. He is no longer a child in the faith.
- B. .15b Be mindful. “be thus minded” – have the attitude that Paul is advocating here; be of this mind; think this way.
- I.e., adopt this attitude of running for the prize. We are still far from the goal, but we are making progress toward it. We are far from perfect, but we are moving in the right direction, toward the right goal.
- [.15end Some may think otherwise about such things, but God will help them see how they ought to think.]
- C. .16a Be consistent; walk according to the level that we have already attained.
1. The word “walk” here (στοιχέω) means “to keep in step like soldiers marching in a row.” The idea is orderly progress, to walk in order.
 2. Thus, “keep in step with what you have attained.” I.e., live consistently with the progress you’ve already made.
- App:** It’s a sad reality that Christians do not live consistently with the progress that they’ve made. They backslide; they stumble and fall. They fail to fulfill the ministries God gave them.
- Paul urges us here to live up to the level that we have attained. Keep on going; don’t quit the race. Don’t get sidetracked.
- D. .16b Be like-minded; “let us mind the same thing” or “let us be of the same mind.”

1. In other words, adopt the attitude that Paul has been describing. We strive to glorify God while recognizing that we will not achieve perfection in this life. We strive for maturity while recognizing that we remain somewhat immature. We don't let distractions stop us from continuing on in the race.
2. A mark of Christian maturity is that you press on in the Christian life despite occasional setbacks or stumbles. When you fall down, you get back up. When you fail, you start over again.
3. Some people get frustrated and angry when life does not go the way that they expected. Some people quit the Christian life when things don't turn out for them.
4. Paul is urging us here to persevere in the race. We have not yet attained the prize; we are still on this side of heaven. Our work is not yet done. So we continue to surge forward in our efforts to serve God. We continue to run in the race in pursuit of the prize.

App: It's important that we adopt that attitude that Paul is advocating here. We are not fully mature; we continue to fail from time to time. But our occasional stumbles should not stop us from making progress. We should not expect perfection until we reach the goal—heaven. Until we cross the finish line, we are still in the race.

V. Follow good examples. .17

Vs. 17 begins a new paragraph, but I think the principle here goes along with what we've been looking at.

- A. .17a Paul exhorts his readers to follow his example. He does that several places in the NT (cf. 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1, Phil 4:9, 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7, 9)

1 Corinthians 11:1 *Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*

The words “followers together” (συνμιμητής) means literally “imitators with.” They should all join together in following Paul's example.

- B. .17b Paul exhorts us to follow others who provide good examples.
1. “mark” them – same root (verb) as vs. 14 “I press toward the mark.” Watch these good examples closely. Let these people show you the goal. Keep your eyes on them. Note those who are living according to the NT pattern and do likewise. Pay attention to those who are Christ-like and follow their example.
 2. The word “example” (τύπος) is the basis of our word “type.” The old-fashioned type writers made an impression on the paper. To follow an example is to let someone else make an impression/mark on you.

App: A large part of Christian sanctification is simply following the example of godly, Christlike believers. Note godly, mature believers and follow their good example.

It is particularly important that adults set a good example for young people to follow. That would be true for parents in the family and for adults in church.

These are very helpful principles for us to keep in mind as we approach the new year. We don’t know what the new year holds, but we can enter the new year with the attitude that Paul is advocating here—“mind the same thing.”

The Christian life is like a race. We are stretching out and striving to reach the finish line. Our ultimate goal is heaven, but we are not there yet. So while we are still here, we should be striving toward Christ-likeness in our attitudes and in our behaviors. We are certainly not perfect, but we are hopefully moving in the right direction. We should be fulfilling the ministries God has set before us. We should be using the opportunities God gives us and going through those open doors that are before us. And we don’t quit the race until we reach the finish line.

Are you in the race? Have you responded to the call to salvation?

Are you pressing on in the race? Are you reaching forward toward the goal?

As we approach the new year, we should commit ourselves to pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.