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SERIES: GROWING AND GOING

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TITLE: Running for the Heavenly Prize Pt. 2

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are encouraged to run for a prize. What kind of prize? A Heavenly prize. That is what spiritually minded believers seek. We strive for our Heavenly reward. What is this Heavenly reward? What did Paul say in Philippians 3, verse 12? It was striving to become perfect or to become complete – mature as Christ is. This is the process of sanctification. It's the process of becoming holy - In other words, being set apart.

These are not Earthly rewards or the reward of man. This is not pressing on toward the goal of money, of cars, of friends, of popularity, the accolades of people, of the biggest house, one more plaque on the wall. You might get some of these things in your race, but they are not the prize to run for. We are to run for the prize of the call to be mature like Christ. Philippians 3, Verse 15 (NASB) says,

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;

Paul is saying, okay, we know salvation comes freely through grace, and once we experience this salvation, we look forward to being perfect in Christ. Knowing this, let's run this race of becoming like Christ, "therefore, as many are perfect." Is Paul saying *some* have achieved this perfection? No, a better translation might be "mature". It might be thought of as a comparison of grown men to children. Another way to think of it might be that of a banana. Bananas have 3 stages: First is when they are green. They are not ready to eat. Then when they are ripe or mature, they are perfect for eating. And then, of course, they can get beyond their prime and turn brown and be surrounded by fruit flies.

So the mature, the complete, banana is the one that is ripe and ready to eat. Paul is saying, "Let us who are mature – those who are developing rightly in our Christian walk - have this mindset." He then says, "***if in anything, you have a different attitude, God will reveal that to you also.***" The NLT puts it this way "***If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you.***" The believer has the Holy Spirit living inside them. He will reveal *the truth* to you. Your eyes, your heart, your mind will be opened to truth through prayer, through the reading of Scripture, and Godly counsel. And we must be willing to hear and obey when God reveals the truth to us.

Paul continues in Verse 16: ***16 however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.***

The word “however” could be in contrast to those who have a different attitude. It could also be “one more thing”. Either way, he says as believers, you need to keep living by the same rule which had preceded you. It is the idea of – stay in your lane. There’s that great racing metaphor: stay in your lane. God has given you a gift. He has uprooted you from where you were and put you in this race, which has a specific runner’s lane. *Stick to your lane.*

Verse 17: ***17 Brethren, join in following my example and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.***

Paul again uses the term of endearment “brethren.” It makes their ears perk up. It is talking directly to them. He tells them to imitate himself. He doesn’t say *envy* himself or *admire* himself. Paul here is not being prideful. Paul was well aware of his sin. In Paul’s letter to Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy that he was the chief of all sinners. Yet, Paul *pressed on*. He rested in God’s grace, to live a life pleasing to God out of love for Jesus. Paul probably recognizes that always looking at Christ as the example could be discouraging, because we will still struggle with sin. So instead, he says, “Look at me. Be active imitators of me.”

He then tells them to observe or watch those who are patterned or stamped or branded with our mark. This is another trait of the spiritual-minded believer: **Find and observe mature Christians and imitate them.** But notice Paul’s imperative: observe. We need to be discerning in who we choose to follow. We need to watch for accuracy in what they speak, and consistency in what they do. Some people are wolves in sheep’s clothing. So we need to observe and find the modern-day Pauls, Timothys, and Epaphroditis.

So as Christians, we need to go and find godly mentors to observe and imitate. If you are one of those faithful patriarchs, make yourself available to people around you. Remember, Paul wasn’t perfect. God doesn’t use perfect people. He wants willing people who will step up, who are spiritual-minded - people who are dependent upon Him and His strength. A pastor and friend of mine challenges me, and challenges his congregation, to pray to be used by God - Maybe this is just one of those ways.

Verses 18-19:

18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Paul then grabs their attention and ours, because here Paul is writing a letter with the theme of joy, yet he writes this section while weeping. Paul starts verse 18, saying, “For many walk...” This indicates it is not an isolated incident, but rather a large number who are actively walking in a certain manner. Paul has told the Philippians about these people frequently. Now he is telling the Philippians again, and it is making him weep. When he says weep, we’re not talking about a little tear in the eye – no, this a loud or guttural mourning.

Why does this group bring Paul to much sadness? Because they are enemies of the cross of Christ. I read various commentaries on this section, trying to figure out who exactly these enemies of the cross are. The one thing I can be confident of, is that these were most likely professed believers. These were people who claimed Christ, but there was a disconnect in their

thinking and actions. This would explain Paul's deep sadness. His deep sadness for these people results in the very strong language here: enemies, appetite, shame, and destruction.

Commentators suggest 3 possible groups that Paul could be referring to in this section: First is the Judaizers who are mentioned in Chapter 3, verse 2, and also in the book of Galatians. This would make sense, because he has already called them out in some pretty derogatory terms. The second group is the Antinomians, or the libertines – those who might promote a license to sin. These were people who believed, once we were saved, we were made free from living morally. They want to be forgiven, but do not want to change. They have the mentality of: where sin abounds, grace will be more and more. And the third group is simply unbelievers. They, at some point, claimed to know Christ, but walked away from their faith.

Paul describes these enemies as ones “**whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.**” Paul says *their end is destruction*. Paul often uses this term to describe eternal destruction. This would lend itself to the thought these people were unbelievers. There are other cases in Scripture, where it means the physical and temporal destruction. So it could be either for some, and it could be both. He says their god is their appetite or belly. Commentators who favor the Judaizer connection believe this comment reflects their commitment to the Mosaic dietary laws. Therefore, their god is their belly. Those who favor the libertine connection suggest their appetites are that of earthly things - the lusts, sensual pleasures, greed, gluttony, etc. These people actually find glory in their shame. They boast in their acts of the flesh, whether of liberty or of license.

DISCUSSION:

N: Let's pause here and invite Cara Whitney and Arnie Cole in to help us with a little perspective. Cara, Paul told new believers to follow his example and observe those who walk *like him*. Now, that was a bold, but I think a *necessary* statement. Are you willing to make that same statement to a new or growing believer?

C: Well, Nat, my knee jerk reaction is No, especially because it's Paul who said it. I guess - What's the criteria again for being a mature follower of Jesus?

N: Look at Arnie Cole - measure against that.

C: I don't know. I just have so much more to learn. But then again, it's not - I'm not doing anything crazy right now. I have my moments. You know what - Yeah. I'm not Paul though, Nat.

N: Yeah. But that's the great thing. No one is Paul, and even Paul - think about it - What did he say? Look at my past, look at my pedigree, look at my resume, and it's all garbage, right? It's all soiled undies; forget it - the past. And he had a lot that he could have pointed to, but at the end he realized it was all nothing. And think about how God used him, and what he had done. And you know what? The work that Paul was doing back then - writing a Scripture - those days are done. We are now commissioned to go be disciple-making disciples. And I know you are a person who has spiritual discipline, and you take your faith very seriously. So for that reason alone, I think

the answer should be Yes. I would say any of us in this room should, with humility, be willing to say, “Yes, follow me, watch me. But never forget to take your eyes ultimately off of our Savior and Perfector, because He's the true example”. Because so often, we will make mistakes, but that's the power of Christ, right? I mean, we don't have to be perfect. In fact, we can't be. We point to Him, and say, “Look, even when I make mistakes, His grace is sufficient”. And so, how do I respond to that? Again, another learning example. So I think, Yes, Cara, people can follow you. So Arnie, what does it mean to you personally, to press on in your faith?

A: I think, especially as a new believer, perseverance and pressing on is critical, until you get to the point that it all makes sense. And that takes a long time in your walk, until you just have complete faith in whatever happens - you know it's the Lord's will; you know it's the best thing. And that takes perseverance, because it takes years and years of looking back, and thinking, “Oh man, God didn't show up.” And then you - several years later - you say, “Yes, He did, and He was in control”, but that just doesn't come naturally. That comes from years and years of trials. And the key thing there is perseverance: keeping your eyes focused on Jesus. And that makes the difference.

Last, in Verse 19, Paul identifies the root of the problem: they are focused, fixated, obsessed with the things of the Earth. The pattern goes like this: they think about Earthly things. This thinking becomes obsessive. Their thinking creates a dependence to their actions – whether religious works or sensual pleasures. Next, they find pride in their actions. And what's the result? The result is destruction.

I think regardless of who you believe Paul is referring to here - those who practice legalism, those who practice license, or those who abandon their faith - Paul says they are enemies of the cross of Christ.

Those who add works as a requirement for salvation – they distort the Gospel. Those who promote a license to sin distort the Gospel. Remember, Paul blatantly shot down this libertine Gospel: **Romans 6:1-2 (NASB), “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”** Paul simply says, those who use grace as an excuse to sin is a no-go. Any of these distortions should result in the mourning for those, who distort the Gospel and are misled by false teaching. So let's read on in Philippians 3, Verses 20-21:

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

The citizens of Philippi understood this idea of foreign citizenship. Here they were in Macedonia, yet were a Roman colony. They were living as Romans in a place outside of Rome. They followed Roman rules. Paul says they are citizens of Heaven. Therefore, regardless of where you have your physical roots, or make your bed, or where you work, you are citizens of

Heaven. Wherever you land, today, tomorrow, or in the future – you are to make a Heavenly colony. This is the last trait of a spiritually-minded Christian: **They live as citizens of heaven.**

On this Earth, as believers, we are aliens, as Peter tell us. We are just passing through this world. But while we are here, we need to act as ambassadors for Christ. Ambassadors are people who represent someone else. And when you're an ambassador for Christ, you are to do this with gentleness and respect. They are knowledgeable, wise, and have good character. Being ambassadors here will likely not be easy. Peter and the apostles were clear with whose laws we must ultimately follow: We are to obey God instead of man. Our goal of being citizens of Heaven is to represent Christ as we run the race for the prize.

Paul says **we eagerly wait for a Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.** So today, we are waiting for Jesus to come. Paul was anxious for it 2000 years ago. And Christians have been anxious for it ever since. We can be sure God's Word will be fulfilled. Christ will come.

What will Christ do when He returns? Paul tells us in verse 21: **who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.** As citizens of Heaven, we are waiting for an incredible future and eternity. Christ will take our vile, feeble, broken, scarred, balding, greying, dying bodies, and make them new. Our bodies will become as Christ's glorious body. Finally, that which Paul is running for will become made real. And all this – that glorification, becoming complete, perfect, mature - will come from Jesus through His power and His working.

And then Paul tells us *He will subject all things to Himself.* In other words, He will put things into order in their proper ranking. He will put all things where they belong. He will make things right.

It is clear Paul was spiritually-minded. He learned how to see things from God's perspective. He understood and clung to his dependence upon Christ. He knew he was hopeless and lost without Him. In Christ, he experienced the true source of hope and joy. This motivated him daily to run the race of Christianity - not so that he would achieve Salvation - that was already signed, sealed, and delivered. Why did he run? He ran to gain the reward – the prize. He wanted to become like Christ: glorified, complete, perfect!

D.L. Moody was believed to have said, some Christians are “so heavenly minded, they are no earthly good.” I greatly respect and agree with D.L. Moody in a great many things, but if he did say this, I beg to differ. I think a good number of Christians are so Earthly minded, they aren't Heavenly good. You see, being Heavenly minded is seeing from God's perspective. When we see things from above, no trial, no temptation, no pain, no suffering, no hardship, no illness - none of that - is too great in comparison to the eternal reward of Heaven, and the glorification we'll receive forever! Revelation tells us that God will **“wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain...” (Revelation 21:4)** There is coming a day when our bodies will be glorified, our pains will be gone. We will rule with Christ forever. Friends, when we are spiritually minded, our perspective will be right. We will run with all we have, so we might receive the prize.

N: All right, this life is a race, so I'm going to bring in two of my favorite runners, Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Arnie, I love hearing your perspective on the race we're running. Could you share that with our listeners?

A: Yeah. You know, I think there's really two perspectives you can have, depending on what kind of person you are. You can either have: it's a battle, and we're fighting this spiritual warfare, and rulers of the darkness of the world. And that's a whole separate kind of trip. Or you can take the perspective - and I think both are right - you are in a race, and you're in a marathon, and you're training, and you're working. And nobody becomes a tremendous athlete without training, sacrifice, discipline. And it's not just about showing up. So you can't fight a battle and just show up without any weapons, or being ill prepared. You can't win a race without working out, trying out, all of those kinds of things. So both perspectives to me really motivate me. And it's so much better than being like a couch potato, or a pew sitter, sitting in church and just watching the world go by, and saying, "Ain't it awful?" It's like, join the race. You're already in it.

N: Okay, and I think both illustrations are wonderful. I think they're right. It doesn't matter if you're in a battle - and you have to train for a battle, as soldiers do - marathon runners, they have to train for the race. So then why aren't we doing it? Because let's face it. Many of us, we don't. We approach faith almost kind of spur of the moment. We don't prepare for the race - we just run in there and get it. Why do you think this is happening so often?

A: We sold our kids Kool-Aid, son. We have said that there's nothing required to be a Christ follower, but show up. If you could just show up, we'll be happy. We'll count you in our attendance. But showing up, and hanging out, and being comfortable is kind of the picture, which isn't a battlefield. And it most certainly isn't a race. I mean, most people I know that train in athletics and all that - they do it every day. They don't do it once a week. You know, oh, they've got to miss for three weeks. That's okay - "We'll get back in a while." "We'll miss for six weeks" - it just - it doesn't work that way. Don't get me going. Don't get me going.

N: Man, kindred spirits, right here. Kindred spirits. Yeah. God is not concerned about butts in the seat, though He desires for all men to be saved - all men and women to be saved. But the reality is, He would rather have a few faithful followers, than a bunch of notional pew sitters, who are there purely for recognition, but not because they love Him and are found through His Son. I think you're exactly right. Cara, let's talk about citizenship and our citizenship of Heaven. How does that mindset impact your daily life?

C: Well, a citizen is a person who belongs to a country, and then they have the rights and protection of that country. So I am born again into faith by Jesus Christ. And with that, I get to become a citizen of Heaven. So I have found, the closer that I'm getting to Jesus, the less I like it here, and the more I'm anticipating being home. It's kind of like being at the airport and finding out your flight's delayed. This will go with that race - you know, you're patient and you're doing what it takes to get home. But also, the more that you're told to wait, the more you just want to be home, you know? So I'm excited for Christ to come back. I think we all are. It puts an end to all these shenanigans, Nat.

N: I think that's one of the best illustrations I've heard in a long time. And if you're okay, I'm going to steal that. There's going to be a lot of stealing from each other I feel like in these discussions, but that is a great illustration - like at the airport waiting to go home, and we get delayed. And I think more of us need to adopt that mindset, because so many of us do enjoy Saturday morning football. We enjoy a great movie. We enjoy a great meal and dinner with friends. But the reality is, those things – as fun as they are - pale in comparison. And so these momentary tribulations and trials remind us, “Hey, the better thing is coming. So let's hurry up and wait.” But don't sit on the sidelines while doing so. You know, and speaking of that, we know that Paul, he was anxious for Christ to come. It's again - it's that picture of the airport. So I'd love to hear from each of you what you're looking forward to when Jesus returns.

C: I don't want to see my friends and family sad anymore, struggling with anything. You know, I've been in situations, I've tried to walk with my friends through, and I just want to take their pain away. And I ask God to do that, or at least to give me a fraction of it, so I can lighten the burden a little bit. And then, it's just not how it works here. So when Christ comes back, it's going to be nice to have my friends and my family members not dealing with anything that makes them sad. I just - I hate it.

A: You know, you've got questions - is my favorite horse going to be in Heaven, or is my dog going to be in Heaven? You know, you have those kind of silly things, but I'm sure it would be pretty trivial, but I think it's going to be awesome.

C: Right. I know we'll be in 100% agreement with whatever is there. And I just cling to that.