

## Permanent Press

*Philippians 3:12-16*

**T**hink for just a moment about your closets at home. In your mind's eye, walk up to your closet door, just as you probably did this morning. Pull out the clothes you are going to wear for the day. Chances are very good that those clothes have been treated by a process that we commonly refer to as "permanent press." The idea behind permanent press is that the clothes, if properly handled, washed and dried, will not need ironing quite so much. The creases and crispness have been permanently ironed in.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he challenged the Christians there to press on toward maturity in Christ. I suppose you could say that Paul was the first to think of the concept of "Permanent Press," because he was urging these believers to press on toward the goal of maturity in Christ on a permanent, life-long basis. Let's read what Paul wrote:

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It really sounds like a worthy goal, doesn't it? Unfortunately, for too many of us, the "press" fades too quickly. Soon the creases have disappeared, and the wrinkles in our lives appear with greater frequency. The starch has gone out of our spiritual lives. In our minds we like the concept of continuously pressing on toward maturity in Christ, but we run into problems when we try to translate it into the fabric of our everyday lives.

When we first became Christians, we may have begun with a lot of energy and passion for Christ, coupled with compassion for other people. Yet something has happened. Maybe we've grown tired. Perhaps we've just grown lazy or apathetic. Or it could be that some tragedy, disappointment or discouragement has struck. Is there some way to restore the permanent press back into our walk with Christ?

Paul was an old man by the time he wrote the letter we call "Philippians." It appears that some of the Christians who would receive this letter were having a problem with pride. Perhaps that is why we read beginning in verse 4,

*“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”*

In other words, Paul was saying that he had a lot to brag about! But in spite of that, Paul said beginning in verse 7,

*“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”*

Wow! You’d think that anyone who had it all put together as Paul apparently did wouldn’t have to worry about a permanent press toward the goal of Christian maturity. But Paul did! The closer he came to Christ, the more clearly he understood his own shortcomings. He had experienced a lot of things, including disappointment and heartache. Yet in all his experience, Paul was aware that he still had to press on toward the goal of maturity in Christ.

The word translated *“I press on,”* in verse 12 and again in verse 14 was often used by the Greeks to describe a hunter eagerly, persistently, relentlessly pursuing his prey through the underbrush. Paul took that word and used it to describe a runner in a footrace, who kept his eye on the goal.

This life in Christ *is* a marathon race, and we are to run it our entire lives. It cannot be run with a quick, short burst of energy. There are no shortcuts. There are no instant victories. Reaching for the goal of maturity in Christ is a life-long quest, and ours is to be a permanent press.

In a marathon race, there will often be several **checkpoints**, at which the participants in the race are monitored. This is to make sure that there are no cheaters. From his perspective, and writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul tells us that there are four checkpoints which will help us to press on—permanently!—toward the goal of maturity in Christ. Today, we will pass two of those four checkpoints.

## **1** Checkpoint Number One: Face our immaturity, v. 12

Think about a man in a marathon race. What keeps him going is the knowledge that he hasn't finished the race yet! It's not over, and this is not the time to sit down and rest! Paul is not resting. He admits, "*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.*" He was saying that the opposite was true, that he had quite a bit of growing to do.

We misunderstand what Paul meant if we think that by "perfect" he meant "sinless," or "without fault." The idea behind that word is "completion," "living up to its intended potential," or "mature." When you stop and think about it very long, it begins to make sense. No one is going to make very much progress in this marathon if he cannot see his own immaturity. Drawing nearer and nearer to Christ only reveals how very immature we actually are in a spiritual sense.

How could a man like Paul claim that he was spiritually immature? Well, there's no arguing the fact that he was probably more mature than most in his day. And if Paul had compared himself to other people, he could have been quite satisfied with his maturity in Christ he had already obtained.

Yet one of the marks of spiritual maturity is that we don't compare ourselves with others. The only standard of maturity for those who are permanently pressing on toward the goal is Christ! As human beings we are too prone to look around at other Christians who don't seem to be making much progress. But that only leads to self-satisfaction, and a false idea of where we really are. Soon we begin to slow down, to lower our standards, to coast a little bit.

That's not the way to win the prize! We're not racing against others—we're racing only against ourselves. It's true: you *are* doing better than some others. But the question to ask when alone with the Lord is, "Is the Lord pleased with *my* spiritual progress?" We are not to compare ourselves with others! We are to compare ourselves to Jesus Christ! That's when we see how far from the goal of maturity in Him we actually are. That's when we begin to see that we must keep on pressing on, that we haven't reached the goal yet!

And if you run across someone whose actions, speech or thoughts indicate that he thinks he has all the answers, consider that a red flag. For when a person considers

himself mature in Christ, that's a sure sign that he isn't. The first clue Paul gives us as to how we can press on permanently is that we must first *face our immaturity*. Admit it! Confess it! Get it right with God! Get alone with Him and ask Him some very soul-searching questions. Be painfully honest with Him, and get ready for the answers He will give us! Then when we realize, compared to Christ Himself, how really immature we are, we are ready to press on—permanently!

## **2 Checkpoint Number Two: Forget our past, v. 13**

Next, Paul said, "*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on...*" Here are three phrases which are extremely important to the Christian's permanent press:

The first phrase is "*one thing*." In the original Greek language, the words "I do" do not appear. If you have a King James Version in front of you, you will see that the words "I do" are in italics, a device the translators used to indicate that they were just filling in to make the translation read smoother in English. The emphasis is not on what **Paul** was doing; rather, it is on the fact that in order to press on permanently, the Christian must concentrate on *one thing*. That doesn't mean that the Christian can't or shouldn't be involved in other things. What it means is that there should be one all-consuming passion in the life and heart of one who belongs to Jesus: to be like Him.

How disappointing it is to see a person who has all the marks of genius, yet fritters away his life from one day to the next without accomplishing anything of real, lasting value. It is said of Michelangelo that when he was working on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel that he concentrated on the great task in front of him so intensely that he did not take off his clothes for a solid week, so caught up was he in "one thing."

The keys of Handel's harpsichord are said to have been hollowed out like spoons, because he concentrated on the "one thing" of incessant practice. A sculptor once worked on a statue tirelessly because he said "The image in my head is not yet in my hand." The Christian who presses on permanently must be caught up in "*one thing*," without being shackled by things already gone by.

Which leads us to the second phrase important to the Christian's permanent press: "*Forgetting what is behind.*" God has given us a beautiful gift called "memory" which not only provides us with strength and comfort, but also can help us to learn some very valuable lessons about life. So there are some things in our past it would be good to remember. When Paul says that he was forgetting what was behind him, he didn't mean that his memory was completely wiped clean. That's not what the word means. The word he used here means "to no longer be influenced or affected by something."

What joy it would bring to most of us here today if we could only escape the influence of some of the things in our past! How fortunate we would consider ourselves to be if we would no longer be affected by a mistake or a failure we committed in our past! Every one of us has something back yonder of which we are ashamed, or which we would do differently should we ever have the chance. But face it—those chances rarely, if ever, come to any of us.

Paul didn't say, "reliving the past," or "redoing what is behind me." He was saying, "I cannot permanently press on if I am constantly being influenced by the mistakes I've made in my past. I've got to forget them. I've got to go on."

But I think he was saying something else here. Occasionally we begin to think that we've done so much, and accomplished so much, that we really don't need to put forth as much effort as we have. We've worked hard, we tell ourselves, so we can afford to coast for awhile. Perhaps we begin to go over in our minds all the good things we've done, the people we've helped, the awards we've won, the praise we've received from others.

That's a little of what Paul was doing in vv. 4-6 which we read earlier. He had a list of religious accomplishments which would have made many people envious. Yet he realized that in order to permanently press on, he had to forget even his achievements, that if he kept looking at his accomplishments, soon he would take his eyes off the Goal. And if we allow the things we've done to absorb our attention, we too will lose the starch of our lives in Christ.

The third phrase Paul used which is important to the Christian's permanent press is "*straining toward what is ahead.*" This is vivid! Using the metaphor of a runner in

a race, Paul now pictures for us that intense straining of the runner who is just about to reach the goal, who reaches out with his entire body for the finish line, every muscle and fiber in his body bulging.

What is Paul saying here? He is saying that in order to press on permanently the Christian must not only face his immaturity, but he must also concentrate on the “*one thing*” of straining out to reach for the goal. *That*, he says, can be done only if the Christian will refuse to be influenced by his past, no matter how good or bad it is.

Since 1908, Australia's coat of arms has featured a kangaroo and an emu. These two animals are prominent on the coat of arms, because not only are they uniquely Australian, but they are unable to walk backwards, and therefore represent forward progression. The emu's three-toed foot causes it to fall if it tries to go backwards, and the kangaroo is prevented from moving in reverse by its large tail. Those two creatures would also be good symbols for any believer in Christ for the very same reason—always moving forward, never backward; always looking toward the path God is leading, never looking back with regret.

Those are the first two “checkpoints.” Are you still in the race? If you have passed the first two checkpoints, then you're engaged in a “permanent press” even now, one which will carry you eventually to the goal of maturity in Christ, of being all you were created to be in Him. But what if the starch has gone out of your life in the Lord Jesus Christ? What do you do then?

The first thing you must do is *face your immaturity*. Admit you don't have it all together. You have to do this at least once, but in order to press on permanently, you have to do this continuously. No one has arrived at the point where he can say he is everything Christ intends for him to be. There is still so much growing up to do. Face your immaturity.

The second thing you must do is *forget your past*. Don't let the bad things, the failures and mistakes, hold you back. We have been promised that if we will confess our sins (face our immaturity, in other words) that God is faithful and just, that He will forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

But just as importantly, don't get weighed down by pride in past achievements, either. Don't ever let yourself get too satisfied, or your progress in Christian maturity will come to a complete halt.

The secret to passing these two checkpoints is to totally surrender your life and heart, all your aspirations and ambitions, your failures and heartaches—everything about you—to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the prize. He is the goal.

If you're going to join the race, today is the day to do it. Don't be left behind.