

## Permanent Press 2

*Philippians 3:12-16*

If you compared your life as a Christian to fabric, would you say it more closely resembles seersucker, or fabric which has been permanently pressed? Seersucker, you may recall, is puckered or wrinkled because that is the way it is supposed to look. Clothes which have been permanently pressed, on the other hand, nearly always have a crisp, neat appearance.

Seersucker, or permanent press? Has the starch gone out of your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, or are you engaged in a permanent pressing on to know Him more and more deeply?

When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, he told them that in spite of all the things he had done and of which he could be proud, he would not boast of them. He realized that even though he was reaching the end of his life, that he had not reached the goal yet. Because he was willing to face the immaturity which yet remained in his life, Paul was able to see all his past achievements in proper perspective.

And since he still had some growing up in Christ to do, he described himself as “*pressing on.*” As we saw last week, the word translated “*press on*” was used by the ancient Greeks to describe a hunter pursuing his prey, even through the dense underbrush. But Paul took that same word and used it to describe the Christian life as being a marathon race rather than a fifty-yard dash. He told us that winning the prize in the Christian life cannot be accomplished with a quick, short burst of energy. It is how the Christian runs the race over the long haul that makes the difference.

There are no instant victories in the Christian life. You will not find any shortcuts along the way. Reaching for the goal of maturity in Christ is a life-long quest. In that sense, our experience with Christ is to be a ***permanent press***. Paul tells us that there are four checkpoints in this particular marathon which help us to press on—permanently. A checkpoint in an actual race is that place at which the runners are monitored to make sure that no one tries to take a shortcut or cheats in any other way.

Last week we passed the first two checkpoints. The first checkpoint was that we had to *face our immaturity*, and in verse 12, that is exactly what Paul was doing. We cannot advance any further in this quest for Christian maturity until we are willing to admit that we don't have all the answers, that there is still some growing up in Christ we have to do.

The second checkpoint was that we have to *forget our past*. Paul wrote in verse 13, “*But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind...I press on.*” He was telling us that in order to press on permanently the Christian 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. Don't let the bad things of your past hold you back, but don't let pride in past achievements keep you from continuously reaching out for the goal of being fully grown-up in Christ.

Now, as we round the bend, we can see the third checkpoint looming in the distance.

### **3 Checkpoint Number Three: Focus on our goal, vv. 13-14**

The “*one thing*” upon which Paul was concentrating involved a forgetting of what was behind him, so that he was no longer influenced by those things, whether they were good or bad. But it also involved keeping his eyes on the goal in front of him. He wrote that he was “*straining toward what is ahead.*” The language Paul used here is precise and descriptive. We covered this briefly last week. The word translated “*straining toward*” (KJV: reaching forth) is used to describe a racer going hard for the goal, giving it everything he has.

Can you picture that in your mind? Here is a man who has been running a marathon race many miles long. He is nearing the finish, and he summons from deep within him the power and the will to keep going. His hair, dampened with perspiration, is flowing in the breeze. The veins on his neck are bulging. His clothes are soaked through. The muscles in his legs are standing out in bold detail.

As he nears the finish line, he reaches out with both hands to cross the tape ahead of anyone else. Paul is saying that that is his attitude toward this race for Christian

maturity. He's not running against anyone else, but he is reaching out with both hands for the finish line.

Now get this: Luke used this same word in his gospel to picture the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before His arrest and trial. *“And being in anguish, he prayed **more earnestly**, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”* (Luke 22:44). Jesus saw the goal of the cross before Him, and He reached out for it with everything He had.

Here in Philippians 3, the word literally means “to stretch out with a purpose.” That is what this marathon for Christian maturity is all about! In Christ, we have a purpose! Stretching out our very lives to reach that purpose and that goal should be the all-consuming passion of our lives in Jesus. Paul says, “I’m not all I should be—yet! But I’m not giving up! I’m nearing the finish line, and I’m giving it all I’ve got!”

Then, Paul writes in verse 14, *“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”* He's not just “*pressing on.*” He's not just running a race. He has focused on the goal ahead of him, the goal of becoming more and more like Christ.

This word translated “goal” (KJV: mark) is used only one time in the New Testament, and gives us our English word “scope.” It's been used to describe various instruments which help us see better: microscope, telescope, oscilloscope, radarscope.

So the idea of what Paul is communicating to us is that this goal is something on which to focus the eyes. What is the goal of your life? I'll tell you what it is. The goal of your life is whatever your spiritual eyes are focused on at this moment.

The only way you and I are going to permanently press on toward the goal of growing up in Christ is to keep your eyes on that goal. If you are constantly being distracted from the race for Christian maturity, if you are always allowing yourself to concentrate on the petty, non-essential things of life, then you're a long way behind in the race! There may be some who started the race a long time after you

did, who have caught up or passed you altogether. What was their secret? They simply kept their eyes on the goal ahead of them.

What is our goal as Christians? Paul said it was a “*prize*.” Winners of the marathon race were often awarded prizes at the end of the race. But look at where Paul says this prize is to be found: “*for which God has called me heavenward*” (KJV: high calling). Again, Paul is describing the marathon. In those days of the ancient Greek games, the three top winners would be placed on an elevated stand so all could see who had won the race. The first-place winner was placed in the middle, and highest, stand, a practice which continues to this day.

In some cases, if the king or emperor was present, the winner would be summoned to come up to his private viewing box, where the runner would receive his prize from the king himself! This is what Paul has in mind. One day he is going to be summoned into the very presence of God Himself, Who will personally award Paul with the prize: being just like Christ!

If we permanently press on, we, too, will one day be summoned into the presence of God, Who will award us with the prize of being like Christ! Glory! But the only way to get there is to keep our eyes focused on the goal set before us. If your eyes are focused on something other than the target of becoming more and more like Christ, then I challenge you—I encourage you—I plead with you—to refocus your eyes, your very life, on Christ!

There’s one more checkpoint which has to be passed in this race for maturity in Christ.

**4 Checkpoint Number Four: Follow the path, vv. 15-16**  
Paul wrote in vv. 15-16, “*All of us who are mature (KJV: perfect) should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*”

If a runner leaves the path which has been marked out ahead of time, he will be disqualified. In our lives with Christ, there is a path already marked out for us. It has been characterized by humility and love, and stained with the precious blood of

the One Who has cut the path out for us. Paul tells us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that in order to complete this marathon, we must stay on the path!

We all have different opinions, and Paul realized that this matter of maturity in Christ would be viewed differently by different people—even to this day. But he wasn't going to argue with them. He knew he had the mind of Christ on this particular issue, and that Christ would work in the minds of other believers to show them what their viewpoint should be about spiritual maturity.

Paul said in verse 15, “*All of us who are **mature** should take such a view of things.*” Look at the phrase “*view of things*” (KJV: thus minded). The Greek word refers to a frame of mind, the way a person thinks. And when he wrote “*should take*” he used a verb tense which shows us that this particular frame of mind should be something we should have continuously. There is no resting place in this race—it really is a permanent press! We are to be running with everything we have—all the time!

But what if a person doesn't know the course of the race? What if his marathon takes him on paths he's never been? How does he know which way to go? As a person matures in Christ, wonderful things begin to happen. Old attitudes are replaced with the mind of Christ. Harsh criticism is replaced with loving concern. The attitude of knowing it all is replaced by a teachable spirit which desires to know more and more about Christ.

Look at the way Paul described it. He said in verse 15, “*And if on some point you think differently, that too God will **make clear** to you.*” The word translated “*make clear*” means “to uncover something so that it can be seen clearly. When the way we are to think and the attitude we are to have is uncovered for us, we have only one choice: to follow the path in front of us.

Then Paul wrote in verse 16, “*Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*” One of our biggest problems as Christians is that we do not closely follow the path which has been uncovered for us. Many of the problems which arise in our lives are problems we ourselves have caused because we did not run in the path we knew to run. We didn't do what we knew to do.

So Paul was saying, “Let’s live up to the things we already know.” The KJV says “let us walk by the same rule.” This word translated here is a military word which means “to follow, to be in line with another.” The same word is found in Galatians 5:25 which reads, “*Since we live by the Spirit, let us **keep in step with the Spirit.***” The word also means “to advance in a line,” much like an army would advance against an enemy. Isn’t it interesting that Paul would use a word here which means “to advance,” since he is talking about spiritual progress in the first place?

There is a principle here built into verse 16 to which we should pay heed. The word “*already*” is a word of emphasis in the original: “*Only let us live up to what we have **already** attained.*” Paul is saying that if we do what we already know to do as Christians, the way and the path upon which we can advance into even deeper maturity will be uncovered for us.

So how are you doing in your permanent press to know the Lord better? How are you doing in your permanent press to be more and more like Christ? How long has it been since you sat down in a quiet place with your Bible open in your lap, and asked the Lord how you were doing? Where are you in this marathon for Christian maturity? Has the starch gone out of your walk with Christ?

Seersucker, or permanent press? Is there any way you can restore the permanent press back into your relationship with Him?

Sure, there is! Get up and start running along the path you know. As you run, or as you mature in Christ, you will need to pass four checkpoints:

- 1. Face your immaturity.** Admit you still have some growing up in Christ to do.
- 2. Forget your past.** Don’t allow either the bad or the good things of your past to influence you more than Christ does.
- 3. Focus on the goal ahead of you.**
- 4. Follow the path which God uncovers for you.** Do what you know to do.

Perhaps you will need to take that first step, first. Perhaps you will need to recommit your life and heart to Jesus. Perhaps you need to return to Him with everything you've got. Go ahead! Reach for the goal Jesus has set for you!