

STUDY GUIDE

PLEASANT RIDGE BAPTIST CHURCH
PHILIPPIANS: CITIZENS OF HEAVEN LIVING ON EARTH
ZEALOUS FOR GOD
PHILIPPIANS 3:12-21
10/29/2017



MAIN POINT

We are not to grow tired in our zeal for God.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What are some things in life that you are zealous about?

What are some things in your life that bring out “the sloth” in you?

What area of your life do you wish you had more diligence and zeal for?

We all have things in our lives that we have worked hard for because we were zealous for the results. We are zealous about what we love and slothful over what we do not love. For instance, consider who or what you love in your life. Do you fight for what you love? You love your spouse so you pursue him/her, you love your kids so you play with them, you love your team so your root for them. We are passionate about what we love. When it comes to God, we are zealous for Him because we love Him. Sometimes, however, we find ourselves lacking zeal and drifting into slothfulness. What are we to do? We must go back to the center, the source of our love. We are going to look at a passage in Philippians that is going to take us to the heart of God, the root of our zeal.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PHILIPPIANS 3:12.

What is Paul’s motivation to press on?

Explain the paradox of pressing on toward perfection while knowing we will never attain it in our lifetime.

When you think about Christ Jesus making you His own, what response does that evoke inside of you?

Paul pointed us to the heart of the matter. He wanted to press on because of what Jesus did for him. Likewise, we find our zeal in that same place. Gratitude is a powerful motivator that kicks the sloth right out of us.

In what ways has gratitude toward God motivated you to live for Him?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14.

In these verses, what other biblical truth does Paul give to motivate us forward?

We have a prize awaiting us: we get to be with Jesus forever. How does this eternal perspective help us when we feel as if we are starting to coast in our Christian walk?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PHILIPPIANS 3:15-16.

Why do you think the Holy Spirit led Paul to equate maturity to “thinking this way” ?

What does “holding true” have to do with “pressing on”?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21.

Here we see the importance of having other Christians help us in our walk with Christ. It is good for us to look to those who are pressing on and follow in their footsteps. Sadly, there are many people who do not continue in the faith but instead live as enemies of the cross and reveal that they were never truly converted. That, however, will not be us; we zealously move forward because of our love of Jesus. Paul's zeal is clear, and we, by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, have the same zeal.

Paul was passionate about Jesus and people. He was brought to tears by apostasy. Have you ever seen someone fall away? What kind of zeal for Christ's work came over you, or did sorrow over sin induce in you?

What are the three things that were listed as the characteristics of those who fell away? What would be some similar idols that people are zealous for today?

How does the information contained in verses 20-21 help us be zealous instead of slothful?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

In light of what we have studied, how are you going to overcome slothfulness this week?

What are some ways you can rekindle your zeal for God? How will you invite the Holy Spirit to renew your passion?

This week, consider how zealous Jesus was. Remember that in Christ, we have forgiveness even for our lack of zeal. Let that truth make you more zealous than ever!

PRAY

Father, give me zeal afresh and anew. I know what You have done for me and what You will do for me, and I am grateful. Set the truth of Your love and forgiveness before me this week, that my heart may burn with excitement for Your name.

COMMENTARY

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-21

3:12. Paul's description of his desires pointed forward to a goal. Not yet mature, he was still very much in the race of the Christian life. The perfection he would have at the future resurrection was not yet attained. He still had to deal with what in Romans 7 he calls "the flesh," an innate pull to sin. He had to deal with his sinful body and was only too aware of the need for further spiritual growth. He purposes to press on as he had not attained the intense personal knowledge of Christ that he desired and had not become all that Christ wanted him to be. Paul always held God up as the source of every part of the salvation experience.

3:13. Paul, in verse 13, underlines his denial of personal power or attainment and his single-minded focus. To describe that focus, he employs the image of a runner in a race who hopes to win the prize. He cannot look back. He cannot cloud his mind with past memories. He strains every muscle in his body to achieve forward motion. Eyes focus on the finish line. Paul forgets the guilt of persecuting the church. He forgets the pain of prison and physical punishment. He forgets the frustration of disobedient church members and false teachers. He looks ahead to see the resurrection, where he will meet Jesus face-to-face.

3:14. With this focus he pursues his goal intently (v. 14). His goal is to win the prize for which God had called him in Christ Jesus. He wants to hear God call his name and summon him to the victory stand, where he will meet Jesus face-to-face and know Him in perfect intimacy. Earthly prizes do not last. Eternal prizes do. The goal can never be realized on earth. It is a goal that pulls us heavenward. Note 1 Corinthians 9:25: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." While Paul was not spiritually where he thought he would ultimately be, he intended not to be distracted by anything as he pursued his goal (Heb. 12:1-2). Both discipline and determination are required to accomplish this objective.

3:15. Paul believed that all spiritually mature Christians would agree with or would share his philosophy toward life (v. 15). Mature translates the same Greek term as did perfect in verse 12. Paul pointed to a difference of opinion as to the meaning of perfection. His opponents thought they had obeyed the law and achieved perfection in this life. Paul knew he would never obtain perfection. The only persons who could claim to be part of the "perfect ones" were those who knew that running the race and seeking the goal was the only mark of perfection possible on earth. If they thought differently, Paul was confident God could cause them to change their minds, since Paul's human arguments could not. Paul was content to shed some light on the subject.

3:16. As followers of Christ, we are responsible to live out or put into practice what we have learned (v. 16). We are not perfect, but that is no excuse not to run the race and seek the prize. God is calling us to the victory stand. We must run as hard as we can to cross the finish line.

3:17. Paul urged his brothers in Christ to join in imitating him (v. 17). He was not bragging or holding himself up as the perfect model; yet he was the best example of Christ's follower they had. He urged the Philippian believers to fix their attention on believers who were following his example. The Philippian Christians were to pattern their lifestyles after Paul and other believers who imitated him—all of whom were following Christ's model.

3:18. With deep emotion, Paul warned his friends against enemies of the cross of Christ (v. 18). Paul described these enemies as unbelievers and wept because of their tragic condition and their negative effect on others in the church. They were enemies of the cross because their lifestyles contradicted their professed commitment to Christ.

3:19. Paul declared that these pseudo-Christians were headed for destruction—that is, ruin in the sense of eternal separation from God (v. 19). Though they professed to worship God, they had made an idol of their stomach, a term for the wide range of their sensual (bodily) appetites. Their self-indulgence contrasted sharply to Christ's sacrificial self-giving. Rather than center their lives on heavenly or spiritual values, truths, and goals, the professing Christians were focused on earthly (material) things. The Greek term rendered are focused on means "to set the mind on," "to be intent on," and conveys continuous action. They consistently pursued material things as their priority.

3:20. In contrast, genuine believers' citizenship is in heaven (v. 20). Paul maintained that Christians were (and are) members of two realms. They were citizens of the Roman Empire and should be exemplary citizens. More important, they were citizens of God's kingdom and owed their primary loyalty to God. Their heavenly citizenship governed their earthly lives. Paul emphasized the creative tension in which believers lived: they eagerly awaited the return of Christ their Savior. Paul's emphasis may have been on the fulfillment or culmination of Christians' salvation at that time or their being delivered from

persecution.

3:21. Christ has supernatural power to subject everything to Himself (v. 21). He is sovereign. With such unlimited effective energy, Christ will transform believers' bodies when He returns. The Greek word translated transform has the idea of changing something so it conforms to something else. The body of our humble condition is the physical body. The phrase His glorious body refers to the Lord's spiritual or resurrection body appropriate for eternity. Christ will change believers' bodies to be like His, not merely in external appearance but also in essential nature. Believers will reach full maturity.

Richard R. Melick, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, vol. 32, *The New American Commentary*

3:13b–14 The content of Paul's goal is given. Repeating the word "press on" of v. 12, Paul employed athletic imagery to make his point. Since the Greek athletic games captured the imagination of all of the peninsula, Macedonia included, it spoke vividly to the readers.⁴⁷ The manner of attainment is explained by two participles. First, "forgetting what is behind" comprehensively expresses Paul's future orientation. What was done was done! Both the nostalgia of the former life and the "good ole days" of his Christian life would paralyze him in terms of what God wanted in the future. Every day was a new adventure. Second, he was "straining toward what is ahead." This word continues the athletic metaphor. It is particularly graphic, bringing to mind the straining muscles, clear focus, and complete dedication of the runner in his race to the prize. Both mental and physical discipline were necessary.

The goal is the heavenward call of Jesus Christ. The text is ambiguous here. The "goal" ("mark," KJV; *skopos*) is the "goal marker" in English. It was the focus of the eye when a runner ran the race. For Paul, it was probably the model provided in Christ who demonstrated both obedience unto death and the resurrection. The prize is explained as the heavenward call (an). The NIV translates it, "for which God has called me heavenward," correctly seeing that the word an refers to heaven as opposed to earth. The translation seems to make the call at the beginning of the race, however, rather than the end. That corresponds to Paul's life if the call is understood as at the time of conversion, but there is no hint of that here. It seems best to take it as the call associated with the resurrection. At that day there will be a call to heaven. Further, in 3:21, Paul mentioned the resurrection and the transformation that will occur then. He lived for the day when the heavenward call would come, like a victory in a race. Rather than slack off, as some were prone to do, the thought of it motivated him to further purity and service. He would get to know every dimension of Christ (reign and suffering), through every means. The joy of the process kept him going, but he realized that the ultimate joy was the completion of God's work in his life.

3:15a First, Paul called the Philippians to unity. The words "take such a view of things" use the verb "be minded" which characterized 2:1–11. It occurs again later in this verse. The word includes both thoughts and values. The church was to value these truths as Paul did. Several problems occur in this verse. First, who did Paul mean by the word "mature"? He called the believers "mature" ("perfect," *teleios*), but in light of the relative infrequency of the word as a description of persons, questions arise. Two primary possibilities exist regarding it. Conceivably, Paul addressed a group of people who shared his outlook and were perfect in their understanding of their imperfection or in their desires to be perfected. This meaning requires different uses of two words built on the same root, which is awkward. On the other hand, Paul could have been speaking in irony, addressing a group of people who assumed they were perfect. If so, he was calling them to admit their imperfect knowledge about such matters and accept his evaluation. The choice between the meanings is difficult, but the latter is likely the correct reading.

3:15b Second, Paul warned about misconduct. The interpretation depends in part on knowing who Paul addressed. It could have been a correction to the false teachers or instructions to mature Christians. Some scholars take the position that Paul meant that those who differed with him had a right to their own positions because ultimately the way they thought did not matter. That hardly seems consistent with Paul's attitude. Others argue that Paul really meant it would do little good to try to convince the false teachers of their error. God would reveal it to them. Another possibility is that Paul turned his thoughts to the general problem of disunity in the congregation, which he addressed in 4:2ff. Paul did address the mature and realized that God would work in them. Further, his words were corrective, i.e., that God would correct their wrong attitudes in the course of time. Their misunderstanding involved their perfectionistic ideas, which had reached a deep level of personal commitment, evidenced by Paul's use of the term "think differently" (*phrone*).

3:16 Third, Paul gave an exhortation. The believers were to remain steadfast. What they achieved to this point was to guide them into the future as the standard by which they would walk collectively. Here Paul used another relatively rare term, which the NIV translates "let us live up to" (*stoiche*). Generally it means an orderly walk or a disciplined walk. It has overtones of a collective discipline, of all walking in the same row or by the same measure. Two emphases appear in this sentence. First, they were to remain true to what they had. Second, they were to remain true with a collective discipline that was to characterize the entire church.

The last sentence summarizes this section by presenting a challenge to continue in the faith. Obviously some believers had tendencies toward deviating from what they had learned from Paul. In rebuking the false teachers, Paul presented his own testimony and urged the group at large to have the same attitude. While the exhortation related primarily to 3:12–16, it ended Paul's first line of apology against his opponents. It also placed faith in the church members' attitudes and ability to continue in the things they had learned.