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[0 : 00] In the Church Bible, it's page number 1180, if you have one. So, Paul writes in Philippians chapter 3 and verse 11, And so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

All of us who are mature 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. Amen. I mute, don't worry. It's because I'm frightened of you all hearing me sing in the midst of it.

[1 : 19] I know it probably gets muted from the back anyway, but I'd like to be sure. I shouldn't want to put you off so early on. Let's pray and ask for God's help before we come to his word. Heavenly Father, God of the universe, we pray that you would show us your glory.

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer, show us more of who you are and your place in our lives. Spirit of God, come and accomplish these things amongst us and point us to Christ.

Teach us your will and way, Holy Trinity. We ask these things through the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen.

So we're going to look more closely this evening at verses 12 to 16 of this passage. We read the whole thing this morning. I read verse 11 because it provides a very important piece of context to what we're about to say.

I've entitled this sermon, Christian Perfection. And I can already see there's a few reformed believers squirming slightly at the thought of Christian perfection.

[2 : 29] Don't worry, I haven't gone all Wesleyan on you this evening. I just want to examine this passage. In the issue of Christian maturity and in the matter of pressing on in the Christian life, what does it mean to be a mature Christian?

What are the issues surrounding that? What does it really take to carry on after we make a profession of faith? Specifically, what should our attitude be towards our own level of Christian maturity?

Well, we're going to make it a game of two halves. We're going to look firstly at the heart of maturity, what goes on in the heart of a mature Christian. And then we're going to look at the mind of maturity, what goes on in the mind and the attitude and the mindset of a mature Christian, according to Paul in this passage.

To provide a wider context for what we're reading about, Paul is writing from prison, probably in Rome, and he's facing potentially imminent death, which of course makes the letter more important. He's writing the letter to give encouragement and instruction, and also thanksgiving to a church that has supported his ministry in terms of manpower and money for quite some time.

[3 : 37] It's almost like a last missionary deputation letter, if you will, before potential martyrdom. Now, Paul didn't die on this occasion, but was delivered as he expresses his confidence that he may indeed well be.

And this section comes following Paul's declaration of his hope in the righteousness of Christ, as we looked at this morning. That his only hope of acceptance with God and the beginning point of the Christian life is turning away from self, turning away from trust in our good works, and putting our faith wholly and squarely in the lovely Lord Jesus Christ, who rescues anybody who comes to him in such a way.

Now, the section I've picked to look at from verses 12 to 16 would be entirely ambiguous if I hadn't read verse 11. The first problem we would come up against is the word this. Not that I've already obtained all this.

And the first problem, all what? I think he's referring at this point to resurrected perfection. He's looking forward to that resurrection hope on the last day, when he will be made into a perfect being, able to fully and entirely enjoy and worship God forever and ever.

And Paul makes it clear from the off. His sanctification is not finished. He has not finished growing, despite the fact he is a Christian of many years' experience, despite the fact he's a Christian of a deeper understanding and knowledge of Christ than I would guess anybody here in this room.

[5 : 04] He doesn't view himself as having arrived. He doesn't look at himself and think, yeah, I've reached a point in my Christian life now where I can sit back a bit. I can take it easy with respect to my growth.

I'm not sure I can really get any holier. You know, Paul has an attitude of saying, I haven't already obtained all this. But he makes it clear then that he wants to carry on and take hold of it.

Paul comments that despite having not obtained this perfection that he desires, he nevertheless presses on to make it his own. It's interesting, isn't it, that having already established in the verses previous that this kind of perfection that he's looking for, this real experience and maturity and knowledge of Christ that he's looking for, belongs to the world to come, belongs to the day of resurrection, he doesn't view that as a kind of license to stargaze and draw up charts about the second coming.

He doesn't view it as an opportunity to say, oh, well, you know, I guess I can't really be any better than I am, so, you know, I'll just have to wait for Christ to come and redeem me.

You know, I'll just sit here and wait for a saviour. Which is, of course, true. That is exactly the hope for which we wait. But instead, Paul views the fact that there is a greater perfection ahead of him as license to press on towards it.

[6 : 27] As to say, I want that. I want to live a life that's pursuing that. I want to get to that place. What is the reason that he gives in the passage? Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize.

And he says also in verse 12, I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me. Follow the dynamic that Paul is pointing out here then.

Let's pretend to be Paul for a moment. I want to obtain the perfection of resurrected glory. Fairly good goal, I'm sure we'd all agree. That's a good ambition. I want to obtain this resurrected glory. Freedom from sin and sadness of all kinds. Infinite resources of energy and delight. Unwaring, untiring, unwaning devotion to God. So what motivates him then to strive for it now?

If it belongs to a world to come. And the answer is Christ himself. As we covered this morning, Christ is not a means to an end.

[7 : 40] Christ is the end. He's the reason that Paul wants to be a Christian. Because Christ has made Paul his own. He's taken possession of Paul.

Paul belongs to Jesus. He's no longer on his own mission. He's no longer living his own life. He's living the life that Christ calls him to live.

And that means he doesn't have any of his own purposes or goals. He doesn't ultimately have any of his own ambitions. He needs to make everything, bring everything in subjection to what Christ desires.

And what is it that Christ commands? Be perfect, he says. Even as your Father in heaven is perfect. Somebody please show me in the Gospels where Jesus says, take it easy.

Relax. Take it easy with your Christian life. It's okay. You're going to be saved anyway. We believe in the perseverance of the saints here. You know, relax.

[8 : 41] No, he says, take up your cross every day. Carry around an instrument of execution. Live that kind of life.

Where all of your passions and desires are just crucified. And it's about what Jesus wants for your life. That's why Paul doesn't feel a license to take it easy.

He feels he's got to press on towards this goal. He's got to use the fact that he doesn't belong to himself. He belongs to Christ as a justification to his own mind and his own motives.

To press on and become more like Christ. Towards this goal of becoming the perfect being that he would one day be. Paul accepts that despite the fact this perfection is unattainable in this life. It ought nevertheless to be his goal. Because you see, this is the wisdom of it. If you press on towards something that is unobtainable, you can't fail to improve.

[9 : 44] That's the wisdom of the matter, isn't it? If you're pressing on towards a goal that is impossibly high, at least you will reach somewhere significantly different to where you are now.

It's the old proverb, isn't it? Shoot for the moon, for even if you fail, you land among the stars. Give everything you can to being perfect.

And I don't mean in a kind of spirit of legalistic self-perfection. I'm not telling you to go out and buy a lot of self-help books. That's not what I'm telling you to do. But I'm telling you, in light of what Christ has done, in light of the fact that he has made you his own, give your life over to him.

Do as he asks. Rearrange your life around his priorities, if you must. Paul accepts this tension.

He says, So the first and most obvious application of what we're looking at is, how is your heavenly journey going?

[10 : 50] How is your walk to glory faring? David Brainerd, a great New England missionary and colleague of Jonathan Edwards, who happens to be a great personal hero of mine, wants to remark this, Oh, that I may never loiter on my heavenly journey.

Oh, that I may never loiter on my heavenly journey. Don't be hanging about. Be in a rush to get to glory.

Have a desire to be where Christ is. That comes out all over this letter. If you were to turn back to earlier chapters, Paul says things like this. He says, I'm hard pressed between the two.

I do not know which I will choose. To depart and be with Christ would be far better. Paul is saying, It would be great if I could die in Rome. Is that an attitude that sounds alien to us?

Are we thinking, Actually, I'd kind of rather not die and be with Christ, actually. I sort of like my life.

And if that's the attitude we have, we need to examine ourselves carefully. Because the temptation can be to imagine that somehow the world to come, where Christ is, that if we were to go there right now, we would be missing out on something.

[12 : 05] You know, that we would somehow, that that wouldn't then be perfect if we hadn't had A, B, C, D, E, F, G first. Maybe if I never got married, or if I hadn't achieved a certain progress in my career, or if I hadn't achieved a certain academic standard, or if I hadn't done a certain thing, or gone a certain place, that somehow glory would be incomplete.

Nonsense! Christ, in the place where we will finally meet him face to face, will entirely satisfy.

What is it they sing about in heaven? Worthy are you, O Lamb of God, who was slain to receive honour, glory, blessing, and thanks, and might, and power, and praise.

They're just taken up with Christ. And they're not thinking, Worthy are you, O Lamb of God, who was slain, but are really, really sad about the fact that I didn't get to do this before I was perfect.

It's not like that. So let us not become mesmerised by the things of this world. Let's not grow spiritually complacent, for any number of reasons.

[13 : 17] It could be based on the fact that we simply have years of experience behind us, and feel ourselves to have reached a comfortable position. It could be that we've lost concern for the global cause of Christ in this world, or that we could simply have been seduced by the things of this world.

Now, further in verses 13 and 14 of chapter 3, Paul explains a bit more about how this works in his heart. He doesn't consider the process to be over, but what he does in order to get his heart in this place of desire for Christ, is this.

The image is of a race, isn't it?

Runners competing neck and neck to win a prize, and in order to fully receive it, Paul knows that he has to forget everything that was behind him, and just focus on what lies ahead.

He has to be dedicated to this task of reaching the finish line. But when you consider who Paul is, it's quite a shocking statement for someone like that to make.

[14 : 29] What's Paul's past? Paul has a murderous past, doesn't he? It's a past that gives approval, and aids and abets the death of Christians.

You would think of any person who could be wracked with guilt, after they became a Christian. It would probably have been Paul, you would think. But he doesn't have. That attitude here, does he?

He says, I forget what lies behind. I forget the horrible and grotesque and vile things that I used to be. And I even forget the things behind me that I've continued to sin in, since becoming a Christian.

Sometimes I think Christians seem to think that it's somehow holy to kind of wallow in your guilt. I'm not denying the importance of a conviction of our sin, and a knowledge of the depth of our wrongdoing, and our need to repent on an ongoing basis.

But we're not called to live miserable lives. We're not called to live lives that just wallow in the things we've done wrong in the past, and that kind of self-pitying pride.

[15:43] Forget about it. The past is gone. It cannot be changed. But what lies ahead for you still can be. Paul is not letting the guilt and remembrance of former sin cripple his experience of God, and his passion to win the prize.

He's not wallowing in that kind of pride that looks inward. His self-pity and sadness can sometimes just be pride's response to failure, rather than humility.

Whereas pride's response to success would have been boasting. The truly humble thing to do, when you sense yourself having fallen into a sin, is to look to Christ, and away from yourself.

The heart of humility is self-forgetfulness. And sometimes, when you get taken up with the things you've done wrong in the past, actually, you've fallen into the kind of pride that just makes you obsessed with yourself, and excludes your thoughts of Christ.

It's not a humble thing, necessarily. Many Christians live in the past. There might even be people here, still lying in the coffins of your old lives, remembering the wickedness that lies behind you, and letting it bind you, and prevent you from pressing forward.

[17:02] And I would like to proclaim to you today, that if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed. I would like to let you know that Christ offers a great, great freedom to Christians from their sin.

You see, Christ's blood, not only cleanses our account with God, but it says it cleanses our conscience from dead works. Christ doesn't want you to live your entire life with a guilty conscience. Jesus wants you to live your life taken up with him. And that is how you will conquer sin. Some of you might be wracked by the thoughts of specific sins, maybe even from the early days of your Christian life.

Maybe the guilt of sexual failure and its effect on your marriage. Maybe bitterness over wrong things done to you. Jealousy over the success of others. Grief from a lost loved one.

Regret at choices you wish you could undo. But the gospel means that you don't have to live in any of those things. Every single sin, not some sins, not just the little sins, every single sin is forgiven in Christ for the one who trusts in him.

[18:17] And every wound can be healed. Every sorrow turned into a joy. Every regret, a chance to thank God for his sovereign wisdom. Just forget it. Join Paul in this attitude of forgetting what lies behind.

and press forward for the prize because you have been freed to do so. You have God's permission. Even for the sins that you're wrestling with on an ongoing basis.

You may have to forget them one at a time as days go by. Let me give you an illustration. I work for BT and in the office that I work, they've recently changed, there's like a two-door system that lets you from the office to where the bathroom is, okay?

And it used to be that the right-hand door opened and they've changed it now so that the right-hand door is locked and the left-hand door opens. So about 15 or 16 times this week, I've tried to push the right-hand door.

So I've gone up to it, oh, it's broken again, that's time number seven. And I go in the left-hand door. But I just, I forget about it every time and come back to it freshly and kick myself. But then as the week went on, I say, ah, I got there and I recognised the situation.

[19:28] I could see it. It's the left door that opens. This is probably about Thursday. So I got to Thursday, I'm opening the door. I'm in. I'm going to the bathroom. It's fantastic. I'm going back to work after this. Blah, blah, blah. But in that circumstance, that's an illustration of the kind of forgetfulness that God is asking us to have about what lies behind.

When I came to that temptation freshly, it wasn't so much of a temptation, but when I came to that situation freshly, I completely forgot what was behind and I dealt with the circumstance in front of me. And through force of habit, I eventually came to the right conclusion.

I got used to what I was supposed to do. Now, there might be sins that you're facing where every single time you face them, you feel like you make the wrong decision. You pick the right-hand door every single time, like I did till Thursday.

And God is saying, don't give up pushing the doors. Just push the left one. He's saying, forget what lies behind you. Forget the guilt of those sins that you're struggling with.

Forget the last time you sinned. Forget the time before that and this sin. Just approach it fresh every time and think about what lies ahead. Focus on Christ. Meet every temptation individually.

[20 : 37] You don't have to carry around the guilt and burden of your sins. And I believe that that's how God, as we meet temptations like that, will change us.

Not as we wallow in the fact, oh, I can't beat this sin, we say. I've failed so many times. I've pushed the right-hand door. I'm never going to push the left-hand door. But as we get there, I believe that God will change us by his spirit.

And we will begin to push the left-hand door. So, what exactly is this, the prize that we come to?

When it says, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. What's the prize? What's the crown?

What's the reward? What precisely is this prize? Given the context, it's reasonably obvious, I think, but in fact, that makes it more profound, not less.

[21 : 37] the prize of the upward call of God is the prize ahead of us of living in unbroken, unblemished, eternal joy with Christ.

Right, we're really digging into the dirty mires of our motives now, aren't we? Do you really want to go to heaven? Why? Why do you want to go to heaven?

What, what, what, what gives you this sense of heaven being so important that you want to go there? If I could quote one preacher who says this, would you be satisfied to go to heaven, have everybody there in your family that you want there, have all the health and restoration of your prime, and have infinite resources of money and time available to you, would you be satisfied if God weren't there?

No. The very reason for heaven is that God is making his dwelling place with men. That we shall all fully know Christ as we have been fully known.

Christ is the point of heaven. If you don't love Jesus, heaven will be boring for you. Because it's all about him. So then the conclusion I draw is this, what's at the heart of Christian maturity?

[23 : 04] It's a love for Christ. It's quite plain. It's a love for Christ and a desire to be with him that transcends all other desires. That's searching, isn't it?

Now on that basis, I don't think I could consider myself to be a mature Christian. I have a love for Christ. And at times, it burns within me. And it's in my best and brightest moments, he's all my delight, all my treasure.

And then I get to work and I entirely forget him. And it's easily done. In the humdrum of life and the busyness of life, it's easy not to be so enamored with Christ as we ought to be.

And I don't believe that God expects us to live in a kind of constant ecstasy all the time. but I do believe he wants us to, in all things that we do, have a consciousness and a love for Christ in what we're doing.

And if you can't do it with those things, probably ought not to be doing it at all. None of us have arrived at a place where our love for Christ is as it ought to be.

[24 : 09] But, as one hymn puts it, let us run this earthly race with great desire to see his face. So, we've discovered, firstly, that Christ himself, love for Christ himself, is the heart of Christian maturity.

The quality of an individual Christian is, to my mind, the extent to which he or she loves Jesus and nothing else. It's not about gifts, it's not about positions, it's not about how much responsibility a particular Christian bears in the church or at home.

The quality of a Christian is, to my mind, the extent to which he or she loves Jesus. So, that's the heart. Love for Christ is the heart of mature Christianity.

So, the next question that I believe the passage then engenders, and I think it's, due to the fact I've used a slightly different translation of verse 15 that I believe it engenders this, and my translation has, that all of us who are mature think this way.

How should we think then, about our Christian lives? If that's what's in our hearts, that love for Christ is the central matter of Christian existence, what should our mindset be about this kind of maturity that we can obtain?

[25 : 31] How should the mature Christian think? How should you think about your maturity, which is a separate issue, connected but separate? And that's something we'll explore very briefly

together.

Now, I think that verses 15 and 16 hold two very key attitudes that lie within the mind of the mature believer. When in place, these attitudes, I think, protect us from the extremes both of pride and of presumption.

Okay, I'm really sorry to do this, but I'm going to break out some Greek on you. Okay, nobody panic. I just want you to try and follow this with me. I'm going to make it as simple as I can. The word in this passage that the NIV renders perfect in verse 12 is a word that is very closely related to and in fact has exactly the same definitions as the word translated mature.

In fact, you can use the words interchangeably and they are used interchangeably elsewhere in the New Testament and in other literature outside of it. You might be asking what difference does that make to the line parts of anything.

But look at the verse. There's no reason you couldn't translate this section with the word mature both times. And how would it read then? Not that I have already obtained this or I'm already mature, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

[26 : 54] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let those of us who are mature think this way and if in anything you think otherwise God will also reveal that to you. Do you see it? Let those of us who are mature think that we are not mature.

Do you see that there? He's saying not that I've already been made perfect or mature, but then he says let those of us who are mature think this way. Let those of us who are mature think that we are not mature.

Now does that mean that you can't with sober judgment view yourself to be a Christian of some experience? No, it doesn't mean that. But it does mean that the attitude you have to the progress you've made in your Christian life should not be one of being satisfied.

don't foster an attitude towards yourself that says you know I'm spiritually mature. Don't think of yourself that way especially in comparison to what you will become.

[28 : 11] I want you all just to take a moment and think of yourself ten years ago. How do you view the you of ten years ago? I'd imagine as you think about it you say well I didn't know what I know now you know I wasn't in a place that I'm in now honestly I was a bit of a fool ten years ago certainly then again I was eleven ten years ago but you know certainly I'm sure this is true of all of us when we think about who we used to be and who we are now we can look back on our former selves and say yeah they were not who I am now.

So what do you think the you in ten years time will think of the you now? Yeah I didn't know as much then as I know now I wasn't as mature I didn't grasp what I grasp now and if that's the case don't look at yourself and think yeah I've reached maturity think to yourself I have got so far to go with respect to becoming the perfect being that I will one day be.

One of the elders in our church a gentleman by the name of Colin Mountain some of you will know him once over the dinner table looked me square in the eyes and he said this he said it's remarkable how little progress I've made in the Christian life.

This is a man who's been a Christian maybe twice as long as I've been alive and he looks me in the eyes and says it's remarkable how little progress I've made in the Christian life.

And Colin's a man of upstanding godliness that I have only commendation for. But his view of himself was I do not view myself as somebody who has attained to something.

[29 : 54] I don't view myself as somebody who has arrived as a Christian. I've got so far to go. And that is how the mature believer thinks about their maturity. Now like I said that doesn't mean you can't with sober judgment assess yourself to be a Christian of some experience.

but even entering into that world of thought I would counsel against because it very quickly becomes a slippery path from a brief conclusion that you've made some progress to a full blown Pharisee flavoured spiritual pride.

Very quickly it can become such a way. And it happens in local churches. I'm not talking about big church splits or huge bust ups but imagine it it can be a quiet thing can't it?

An imperceptible thing. Maybe it begins in a prayer meeting. One newer member to the church recently converted throws out a comment that they believe is helpful but you as a Christian of some knowledge and understanding recognise is entirely incorrect.

So they say something and you feel the need to correct what they've said gently humbly graciously but nevertheless the need is there and you correct it and you do it well but maybe you dwell on it briefly and you think yeah I did that kind of well didn't I?

[31 : 07] I handled that situation like a mature believer didn't I? And that seed has been planted. Now imagine five other people in the church do that too. None of you in cahoots with each other.

It just happens in your mindset and before you know before you know it quietly invisibly you become kind of smug in your spiritual condition. After a while maybe certain ministries stop. You know evangelism is not something we need to press forward in right now you might say. Now we're in a good place as a church and we've got the right number of people and the right mix of people I wouldn't want to spoil that you might think.

Perhaps you stop reaching out to difficult people. I don't want to get my hands dirty with council estate folk. I live on a council estate so I feel justified in saying that.

I don't want to get involved with single mums who've got needs. I don't want to dirty my hands with drug addicts and people who really need mercy. Quietly almost imperceptibly you become loveless because your focus has almost invisibly slipped off of Christ away from others onto yourself.

[32 : 25] And you just live for those moments when you can bring your Christian wisdom to bear upon a church discussion. You know when they're discussing you know how many flower pots to have at the next gala or whatever and you well we need to have this many and it's very easy in the midst of that despite the fact that you are a mature believer and you have some experience as a Christian just to begin to get caught up in the paraphernalia of church life and Christian existence and slowly stop looking out of yourself and look inward.

You become cold maybe to the plight of the lost or the weakness of a struggling Christian or a desperate single mum drug addict to the marriage that's collapsing parents that are warring widow painfully lonely don't get your hands dirty with these things I'm a mature believer I'll leave that to the workers but if you cultivate a mindset that says this instead I am not a resurrection being I am not standing before you glorified I have not obtained the fullness to which I one day will my journey is far from complete instead the seed of humility is then planted isn't it instead you then begin to sense a deeper need for Christ every day as you go on and you realise I'm still so far I've been going at this for years and I'm still so far from where I one day want to be you realise yesterday's manner has gone stale I need fresh grace from God every day and help and you begin to depend upon him and you realise that by the grace of God you are what you are but you're not what you will be and those kinds of people who give themselves over to work for Christ is who you will become when you cultivate that mindset that says there is so much that needs to change about me you're then willing to make changes you're willing to do something new that you've never done before you're willing to make a step that you've never made you're willing to be challenged and willing to do things differently because you recognise

I'm not the be all and end all of the Christian life I don't have all the wisdom I haven't got all the answers I don't understand what it is we're supposed to do in any circumstance I need God's help and we need to do it together those kinds of people are dangerous disciples in God's kingdom and they do great work for him so let's close with the way that Paul closes in verse 16 only let us live up to what we have already attained or let us hold true to what we have attained you see the reality is that the Christian who falls into that mindset of thinking of themselves as you know I'm one of the mature I'm the real pillar of the church here is actually falling into the sin of pride and is actually a backslider and it's against such things that every one of us must stay watchful the devil knows not to take you head on especially if you're a Christian of some experience he knows not to try you with the big obvious things he'll do it subtly he'll seduce you with comfort instead he'll let you get used to things the way they are and stop you being fresh or doing anything different and that kind of backsliding can really damage the ministry of churches and the ministries of individuals in the different ways that they serve so Paul warns us let us hold true to what we have become let's not be thinking about sliding back anywhere but let's focus on what lies ahead and continue from where we are towards the goal so I could summarise

I'd say this this is the whole whole sermon in a nugget the heart of the mature Christian loves Christ and the mind of the mature Christian looks away from self to the good of others and the tasks that still remain to do and so may God give extraordinary grace to change our hearts through a vision of Christ and an abandonment of self in the hope of eternal glory Jesus we look forward to that day when we all our days will gladly spend in praising you and we pray you can help us to press on

towards that prize of living in unbroken fellowship with you and Lord in the meantime we pray may the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus that great shepherd of the sheep equip us with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever Amen