

PERFECTION
PHILIPPIANS 3:12-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

C. Northcote Parkinson was a British naval historian and author from a generation ago who wrote sixty books. His most famous work was *Parkinson's Law*. (PROJECTOR ON-- PARKINSON'S LAW) It was an analysis of dangers faced by government agencies and many companies. He is remembered by management experts for his maxim: **"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."**

Parkinson also coined a term to describe a problem that he found in many government agencies and companies. He combined the words "incompetence" and "jealousy" to produce "injelititis." In his analysis injelititis manifests itself at the top levels of management in a dull and plodding spirit, a lack of the creativity and energy that got them to the top in the first place.

Among less senior officials injelititis reveals itself as political factionalism. People at this level expend their energy in bettering their own position in the company or agency at the expense of others and with little concern for the well being of the organization as a whole.

Among junior officials the disease shows symptoms in frustration. The enthusiasm and energy and creativity of younger employees encounters resistance from supervisors, and frustration is produced. The end result for an organization with injelititis is a slowdown of productivity and progress. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Unfortunately injelititis can also infect Christians. We can begin our spiritual lives with a lot of zeal and enthusiasm for the Lord. But along the way we can lose that excitement. We can begin to rest on our past accomplishments and become complacent. Or we can get caught up in factionalism in a church or Christian organization. Or we can encounter church bureaucracies and older Christians who put a damper on our enthusiasm. Or we can run into trials and hard times in life that threaten our Christian enthusiasm.

Injelititis is not a new development in the history of the church. In the first century the Apostle Paul was warning Christians in Philippi about an early strain of the disease. Paul wanted Christians there to experience joy. But a form of injelititis was threatening the congregation. Persecution and legalism were two contributors to the infection. To ward off injelititis personal sacrifices were necessary. Last time we considered Paul's testimony that the sacrifices required were worth the cost. In v. 8 of #3 he testified that **"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."** He also called what he gave up as "rubbish" in comparison to what he gained from his relationship with Jesus.

If it is worth it to follow Christ, if there is joy that comes from knowing Him, if we want to ward off spiritual inelitis, how can we maintain our spiritual health? How can we sustain our Christian commitment and enthusiasm in the face of the challenges of life? The passage before us today provides four principles that we can adopt if we want to persevere in following Jesus. Let's look at them.

I.

First, in v. 12 and the first part of v. 13 Paul says that Christians need to have a SANCTIFIED DISSATISFACTION. (I. SANCTIFIED DISSATISFACTION) The apostle had just finished criticizing the Judaizers, who wanted the Gentile Christians to adopt Jewish customs and to follow the law of Moses. Some commentators speculate that Paul here is countering other kinds of false teachers. Paul now adds that even according to the way of faith and grace, he does not claim to have achieved perfection.

In v. 12 he begins by saying, "**Not that I have already obtained this...**" The object of what he has obtained is not specifically expressed. But the next phrase suggests that it has something to do with "perfection." So to determine the exact reference we have to go back to the preceding context. Verse 11 mentions resurrection from the dead. Obviously Paul has not obtained that. He hasn't died yet. So when we go back a little further, we encounter in v. 10 a discussion about knowing Christ and experiencing His power and being conformed to his death. So it would seem to make sense that what Paul has obtained, or has not yet obtained, has to do with this Christ like character and behavior.

Paul has obviously come to know Jesus and His power and His suffering to a great extent. He has become a lot like Christ in his character and behavior. But he has not yet fully obtained it, and he has not yet become perfect.

The Greek word for "perfect" which he used means "to be complete, or finished, or fully grown, or mature." The author indicates that he still has some growing to do. He is not fully perfected. He may be an apostle, but he still has not completely arrived in the Christian life. Thus he adds in v 12, "**...but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.**" Christ Jesus made Paul his own when he miraculously confronted him when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians there.

What was the Lord's purpose in doing that? (GALATIANS 1:15-16) In Galatians #1 vv. 15 & 16 Paul wrote, "**[God] who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...**" God's goal has become Paul's goal. He wants to become more like Christ and to preach about that relationship and to display it to others.

Paul says that he hasn't fully obtained it yet. He has not yet been perfected. (PROJECTOR OFF) At the beginning of v. 13 he adds, "**Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.**" Another translation says, "**I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet.**" Paul is repeating himself to emphasize the point that he has

not become perfect. He is not fully mature. He exhibits what I am calling an attitude of sanctified dissatisfaction. He does not want Christians to dump on themselves and go around focusing on how bad they are and how they never measure up. A central theme of this book is the desire that Paul has for Christians to experience joy. But at the same time he wants Christians to be aware that they always have room to grow spiritually. He wants them, and he wants us, to always be working on being more like Jesus.

My suspicion is that the Judaizers were telling the Gentile Christians at Philippi that if they got circumcised and agreed to follow the Jewish traditions, then they really would have arrived in the Christian life. They would be complete.

That kind of perfectionism is still around today. My mom used to tell me about a man in her church who claimed that he did not have any more sin in his life. One of the things that I noticed was that he was divorced. I wondered how a wife could divorce a husband who was perfect and never did anything wrong.

More often in Christianity today perfectionism has a more subtle form. It may take the form of adherence to certain rules. Some churches or Christian groups may have a heavy emphasis on certain rules. If you don't drink or smoke or go to certain bad places and follow a certain dress code, then you are in. If you follow our code of conduct--- whatever it is--- then you are good to go. You are OK with us, and you are OK with God. You are complete. You have arrived.

A **second** form that perfectionism may take involves religious experience. If you have had some kind of miraculous or spiritual or emotional experience, then you are really "in" with God. You have arrived. I knew a guy once who had two "near death" experiences. Twice he almost died. In both instances he saw himself going through a long tunnel and ending up before God in heaven. Each time a celestial being told him that it was not his time yet to die. He had to go back. So he was certain that he was good to go and would eventually be in heaven. The sad thing from my perspective was that he didn't understand the gospel. When I questioned him about what he believed, he didn't buy the notion of the need to be born again or to have a personal relationship with Jesus. His experience was the basis of his confidence that he was going to heaven some day.

The Apostle Paul had experienced all kinds of amazing things. He had healed people. He had exorcised demons. He had uttered prophecies. He had raised someone from the dead. He had spoken in tongues. Yet his testimony was that he had not yet obtained complete maturity.

A **third** form that perfectionism takes is doctrinal orthodoxy. It is a good thing to study the Bible and to come to theological convictions about Biblical doctrines. But some Christians become so focused upon certain theological convictions that they convey the attitude that they have arrived in the Christian life solely because they have recognized and accepted these truths.

In the course of my life I have encountered Christians who have developed strong convictions about the need to separate from worldliness and from other Christians who don't accept their same standards of separation. Some of them convey the notion that if you accept their standards, then you have arrived in the Christian life. There are other Christians who have strong convictions about Calvinism and Arminianism and Pentecostalism and Dispensationalism and Reformed theology and seeker sensitive worship. It is fine to have convictions on these subjects. But the danger is that we can convey the idea that simply buying into our convictions makes us mature or complete.

As Christians we need to avoid complacency in our spiritual lives. We need to check ourselves for spiritual smugness where we tell ourselves that we have really arrived in the Christian life. It is good to have a sanctified dissatisfaction. We can be confident in God's love for us because of our membership in His family. But we need to strive for continued growth in the Christian life.

II.

Secondly, we need to cultivate a SINGLE-MINDED DIRECTION. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. SINGLE-MINDED DIRECTION) Look at the last part of v. 13: **“But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...”** The focus of Paul's life was serving Christ. He had become single-minded in his approach to life.

We live in a world where there is a multitude of choices about what we do with our time and energy and talent and money. Each day we are barraged with hundreds of messages about what we should pursue, where we should go, and what we should buy. Our society sends us messages that the good life comes from having an education, traveling, having nice things, eating a variety of good food, and experiencing pleasures of various sorts. It is fine to have choices, and there is nothing wrong with enjoying the benefits of technology and an improved standard of living. But the key is our priority in life. What do we really want? What is our purpose in life?

The Biblical answer is to pursue God. A Presbyterian document called the Westminster Catechism perhaps expresses it best. The question posed is: What is the chief end of man. The prescribed answer is: To worship God and enjoy Him forever. Within that broad purpose there are still choices to be made. How should I serve Him? Where should I serve Him?

Dwight Moody (DWIGHT MOODY) is one of the most famous figures in American church history. In the latter part of the 1800s he built a large church in Chicago. He was influential in promoting the Sunday school movement in Chicago and the rest of the country. He also became a big promoter of the YMCA, which in its early days was an evangelical organization. Moody also held a lot of crusades and evangelistic campaigns around the country. In 1871 the huge Chicago fire burned much of the city, including his church building. After the Chicago fire Moody reevaluated his commitments and came to the recognition that he was spreading himself too thin. He recognized that he needed to focus upon what was his greatest strength and talent. So he decided that he could be best used in evangelism. For the rest of his life he focused upon evangelistic

outreaches and campaigns, which extended even to Europe. Thousands of people came to Christ as a result of his single-minded direction in life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In our deteriorating culture we need parents who will become focused upon being the best possible parents that they can be. In our congregation with a lot of senior citizens, at some point our single-minded focus may need to be upon being a caregiver for a loved one. That may be God's primary purpose for us. Last week I made reference to the Christian businessman R. G. LeTourneau. As a result of his Christian commitment he became focused upon giving generously and wisely to Christian causes. That kind of investment of time and energy and money became his single-minded focus.

In v. 13 Paul is using the language of racing. In the first century that typically meant foot races. Large cities like Philippi had stadiums with a field of a standard length to be consistent with the competition at the Olympic games. (PROJECTOR ON--- GREEK STADIUM) Foot races were one length of the stadium, or 192 meters, two lengths of the stadium, or 384 meters, or 24 lengths of the stadium, or 4614 meters. In the shorter race, as with sprints today, a turn of the head could mean the difference between winning and losing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Thus Paul warns runners to forget about what lies behind and focus on the end of the race. This requires a single-minded direction. I doubt that Paul meant that Christians should erase our minds of the past. That would not really be possible, and Paul did not do that himself. Back in vv. 5 & 6 he talked about his own past. I suspect that he means that we should not be controlled by the past. It should not dominate us.

The past can control us in two ways. We can choose to focus on our failures. When we do that, we get depressed and discouraged. That can hinder us from growing in the Christian life. But we can also focus on our past successes in the Christian life. That can also be dangerous. That can make us complacent and proud.

The best thing to do is to treat the past like a rear view mirror. If we try to drive a car by looking entirely at the rear view mirror, we will get into big trouble. On the other hand if we never look at the mirror, we can also get into an accident. We can get hit from behind or from the side when we are trying to change lanes.

The wisest course of action is to focus on the road ahead. Occasionally we need to take a brief glance at the rear view mirror to see what is behind us, or beside us. We need to remember the progress that we have made, where we have come from, and what things from the past might sneak up on us. But we don't let what is behind control us. We seek to maintain a single-minded direction by focusing upon our Biblical priorities.

III.

So if we are serious about following Jesus, we need to have a sanctified dissatisfaction, a single-minded direction, and, thirdly, a **SERIOUS DETERMINATION**. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. **SERIOUS DETERMINATION**) That is what v. 14 tells us: **"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."**

The original Greek word for “goal” is *skopos*. (SKOPOS) This is a modern version of the ancient Greek stadium. The two pillars in the foreground are the *skopoi*. They are the goal markers for the finish line of the race.

When the term “call” appears elsewhere in the New Testament, it refers to the call of God to sinners that results in eternal salvation. (PROJECTOR OFF) I suspect that this is the meaning here as well.

The desired response to this sovereign call of God is to “press on toward the goal.” The same verb was used in v. 12. In v. 13 Paul used a slightly different verb translated there as “straining forward.” The imagery which Paul is using involves athletic competition, specifically running. To be successful in running competition requires training and discipline--- a serious determination.

I took up running when I was twenty and have been doing it ever since, but I am not a serious runner. There are some among us who have been competitive runners. Clive has won a number of awards. Mick has competed in distance races. Both of the North Dakota Nelsons are currently in Florida at the national Senior Olympic Games, competing in several different running competitions.

I have only competed in one official race in my life. A few years ago the church custodian had a granddaughter who died tragically as a result of a gun accident. A memorial race was held at Sunset Park and Reggie asked if I would participate. I did. I won my age division. I decided afterward that it would be my last race so that I could have added to my epitaph: “After a long running career he retired from racing, never having been defeated on the field of competition.”

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews was using the same imagery of athletic competition when he wrote the words of #12 v. 1 (HEBREWS 12:1):
“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” With that sports analogy as background--- specifically running races--- the author encourages Christians to lay aside not only outright sins but also weights that might slow us down. As far as I know, there are no rules in athletic competitions that prohibit runners from carrying weights in their races. I have heard of athletes who do that in their training. But to do it in a competitive race would be just stupid.

So the author’s point is that if we have a serious determination to follow Jesus we should give up things which are not just specifically contrary to God’s Word but also things that just weigh us down in following Jesus according to whatever specific path God has laid out for us. Those weights would probably vary for each one of us. Maybe it is watching too much TV, or spending too much time shopping, or surfing the web for hours at a time. The prize--- the promise of eternal rewards and eternal life and being in

heaven--- is such a great thing that we ought to have a serious determination to pursue Jesus.

IV.

Fourthly, according to vv. 15 & 16, following Christ requires SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE. (IV. SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE) The apostle writes, **“Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”** The word translated here as “mature” is actually the same Greek word which is translated as “perfect” in v. 12. Paul there said that he wasn’t perfect yet.

It is possible that Paul intends here for the word to have the specific meaning of “maturity.” But it is also possible that he is making a jab at those legalists and perfectionists who think that they have really arrived in the Christian life. He is saying, “OK, you Judaizers, if you think that you are really such hot stuff in the religious realm, then you will recognize that what I am telling you is from God, and you will believe it. If you are a little off in your understanding, God will show that to you.”

In any case, the meaning of v. 16 is clear: **“Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”** Paul is telling the Gentile Christians at Philippi, “Don’t give in to these Judaizers. Don’t succumb to legalists and perfectionists. Live according to the gospel of grace which you have received.” If these Christians fall into believing the message of the Judaizers, they will fall into one of two bad situations. They will either become complacent, thinking that they have already achieved all that is to be achieved in the Christian life. Or they will fall into despair, thinking, “Oh well, I’m never going to be perfect. There is no hope. The standard is too high. I might as well give up. There is no hope for me.” With either option Christians might drop out of the race.

What the Philippian Christians needed, and what we need, is spiritual discipline. An athlete can lose his competitive edge when he becomes guilty of two ways of thinking. He or she can decide, “Oh well, I am never going to win an Olympic gold medal. I might as well give up.” This is the problem of defeatism. On the other hand an athlete can decide, “I have won all of the medals that I need. I might as well stop competing. I will enjoy the benefits of what I have already accomplished.” In both situations the athlete gives up the progress that he has already made. He will lose his competitive edge and will begin to get out of shape.

In the Christian life we need spiritual discipline. If we give up because we despair of ever becoming perfect, or if we give up because we think that we have accomplished all that we need to accomplish--- that we have been perfected--- we will lose the progress which we have made in the Christian life.

Paul saw significant parallels between sports and the spiritual life. When I am running regularly, I feel better physically. I also derive spiritual, emotional, and physical benefits from running. When I stop running for a time, I feel a little more sluggish. It has a definite physical effect and at least a little bit of a negative mental and emotional effect.

Spiritual discipline in the Christian life at a basic level means a regular intake of the Bible. It means some kind of regular devotional time. It also means regular prayer. Many Christians find additional benefits from Scripture memorization and journaling and devotional books. The important thing is to do what works for you and what can be sustained on a regular basis.

The issue comes down to the depth of our commitment to Christ. Are we serious about following Jesus? If we are, then we need a sanctified dissatisfaction. We need a single-minded direction. We need a serious determination. And we need to exercise spiritual discipline.

Consider one more illustration from the world of sports. It involves a baseball trivia question. To the best of my limited baseball knowledge there is only one player who ticks off all of these following boxes: .300 lifetime batting average. 3000 career hits. 300 home runs. 600 doubles. 100 triples. 200 steals. Who is the only major league baseball player who has accomplished all of these feats in his career?

The answer is George Brett (GEORGE BRETT), who played for the Kansas City Royals. How did he accomplish what he accomplished? I would suggest that there is a close parallel with the four ingredients which we have considered this morning.

First, George Brett exhibited a certain dissatisfaction with his play--- I don't know if we would call it a sanctified dissatisfaction. Perhaps we could. George Brett studied other players. He tried to learn from other great players so that his own game would continue to improve. He credited another Royals player for having the greatest influence on his game. That was a guy by the name of Hal McRae. He says that early in his career he would come out early for batting practice every day and learn from Hal McRae.

Second, George Brett had a single-minded direction in life. He lived and breathed baseball. Sports writer Peter Gammons from the *Boston Globe* said of him, "**His life is uncluttered; he has fun playing baseball and he has fun after the game, but that is it.**" His life revolved around baseball. Notice that he experienced joy in the process.

Third, George Brett had a serious determination. He was always known among other major leaguers for his hustle. He was famous for trying to stretch singles into doubles and doubles into triple. He once remarked, "**If you go as hard as you can for every play of every game, you never get tired. It's all mental, and when you play that way, there are no second guesses, nothing that you have to live with. So nothing weighs on you.**"

Fourth, George Brett exercised discipline. In his second year in the minor leagues he led the league in number of errors in his position at third base. In the next year he made a brief trip to the big leagues, where he batted only .125. But he worked hard. He put in extra time in the batting cage and on the practice field. He continued that work ethic as

a big league player. Habits of discipline were essential to his eventual success.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

The point is this: If someone can be that committed to a game, and win so much respect and admiration and honor from other people for that commitment, how much more significant is a commitment to the God who loved us and sent His Son to die for us and called us to Himself! And how much more eternal significance is there in being committed to a cause that will affect the eternal destinies of other human beings!

If some can give their lives to the pursuit of baseball perfection, how much more value there is in pursuing Christian maturity and perfection! Only some of us have the physical abilities to be successful in sports. But all of us have the opportunity to be successful in the game of life. Will we be committed to following Jesus? Will we continue to pursue Christian maturity? Will we give our all to that which has eternal value?