

**Run to Win**  
**Philippians 3:12-16**  
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For those of you who are visiting with us this morning, we're continuing our study of Philippians 3 which occurs to me we began the first Sunday of November last year. We find ourselves in chapter 3 and are looking forward to looking again at the amazing letter of the apostle to the church in Philippi.

If you're a sports fan, you may have already heard about what was the most classic marathon in the history of the Summer Olympics. Many of you watched as I did the recently, the recent Summer Olympics and you may have even seen some of that event. But by far, the most classic in the history of all of the Olympics was 1904. 1904, the Olympics were held in St. Louis. It was only the third of the sort of modern set of Olympics, and there were a number of characters who gathered there. But the person that made the marathon of 1904 a classic was an American runner by the name of Fred Lorz. Fred was not expected to be the winner, but the leader dropped out early on with a stomach hemorrhage. And so, Fred found himself in the lead, and for nine miles or approximately nine miles, he held the lead. And after nine miles, he reached the end of his endurance and simply stopped. It was a hot day. It was ninety plus degrees, and that was before modern sports medicine. And the first place where they could get something to drink was at the twelfth mile, and at mile nine he had had enough, and he stopped.

There was a car driving past with some of the judges, one of the pace cars keeping track of all the runners, and Fred jumped on the pace car and just sat back and enjoyed the ride. He waved at some of his other runners who had passed him as he stopped and sort of left them in the dust with the pace car. Well, about five miles away from the stadium, the car, as in those early days cars were prone to do, broke down. Fred later said that he needed to go to the stadium anyway. He was heading that way to get his clothes which were there, and so he just sort of struck out and headed into the Olympic Stadium.

And as he burst into the Olympic Stadium, this thunderous applause began to raise because everyone thought that Fred had won the marathon in record time. Well, Fred admitted that he kind of got carried away with the moment, and he raised his hands as if he had somehow won the gold medal. Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, came over and gave him a hug and had a photo opportunity with him. They put the wreath on his head. And for fifteen minutes, Fred enjoyed his moment of fame. Then the judges caught, the officials caught up with him, and came crashing,

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everything kinda came crashing down around him. Fred knew in fifteen minutes of time the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.

The apostle Paul was obviously a sports fan. When you read his letters, he's constantly referring to things relating to sports. He mentions the Corinthian Games there in that great city. He refers to boxing. He talks about the Christian life as a wrestling match not with any human being, but with the powers of darkness. But far and away, Paul's favorite sports analogy for the Christian life and experience is the foot race. He seemed to be absolutely fascinated by it. For example, in Acts 20:20:24, he said to the Ephesian elders: "I don't count my life ... dear to myself that I may finish my course."

In 1 Corinthians 9:24, he says, "All of us who are in Christ, if you're a believer (he says), you're running a race. Run to win." In Galatians 2, he says, "I don't want to have run in vain." And in Galatians 5:7, he says to the people scattered around Galatia, he says: "You were running well; who has hindered you [who's gotten in your way]?" And then of course in that famous passage at the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:7, he says as he approaches execution: "I have finished [what?] my course", [I finished the course.]

In chapter 3 of Philippians verse 12 - 16, Paul takes that same sort of approach to our Christian life and experience using the analogy of running. Let me read it to you. You follow along beginning in verse 12 of Philippians 3. Paul writes:

Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on ... [so] that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have ... [this] attitude; and if ... anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

In these verses, Paul provides for us a sort of an extended analogy comparing his own Christian life and experience to a race.

Let me remind you what we looked at a couple of weeks ago. We looked at verses 10 and 11. And in verses 10 and 11, Paul tells us that that day, at the moment of his conversion outside the

city walls of Damascus when Christ confronted him with his sin and with himself, Paul says that day everything radically changed for me.

We looked at what we called the aftermath, the results of justification. And in verses 10 and 11, Paul says, what changed, the thing that immediately changed in me were my goals and my ambitions for living. And he recounts for us in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 3 exactly what his new goals and ambitions in life are and they're all about Christ. He says, Now more than anything in the world, I want to know Christ. I want to be like Him, and I want to be with Him. Those are the things that drove the apostle. That was his mindset. And Paul says, if you're a Christian, if you've been justified, if you've been declared righteous before God, then that's the mindset you have as well. Maybe not the perfection of your life, but it's the direction of your life – toward Christ.

But undoubtedly, as the Philippians read those magnificent verses 10 and 11 and they heard about the apostle's ambitions in life, undoubtedly they have a question that you and I have and that is: how can we go about in our own lives cultivating that kind of a Christ-centered mindset, that kind of a Christ-centered life? Well, that's the theme of verses 12 - 16. Paul tells us in these verses how to cultivate the same driving ambition for a Christ-centered life that he had.

Now, when Paul writes these words here in the book of Philippians, he's obviously had some experience about what it means to know Christ. He's been in Christ for almost thirty years. He also has some measure of Christ-likeness. And yet he tells the Philippians, thirty years later, after Damascus, these are still the great ambitions of his life. These are the things he wants more than anything else. And as he develops this analogy of running a race, Paul provides us with the six skills we need to run effectively, to win and ultimately to obtain the prize, the prize of perfectly knowing Christ and the prize of perfectly being like Him.

Like any good coach who knows what it is to compete, Paul uses his own performance as the model to teach us. Notice what he says about himself. Notice the lessons that he had learned and the skills that he wants us to develop.

We find the first skill in verse 12. We'll call it this: recognize the opportunity to win, recognize the opportunity to win. Notice the first part of verse 12: "Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect..." You see, Paul, after presenting those great ambitions of his life in verses 10 and 11, he doesn't want us to misunderstand. He doesn't want us to think that he's saying that he has arrived at his goals. He says, "No, I'm still running." "Not that I have already

obtained ... [those goals]”, he says. In spite of all of the wonderful experiences that had filled those thirty years between his salvation outside Damascus and when he writes the Philippians from a Roman prison - in spite of all of the wonderful experiences of those thirty years, Paul says I haven’t arrived. He adds literally in verse 12: “I haven’t already been perfected.”

It may have been that some of the Judaizers that were beginning to infiltrate the church in Philippi were teaching that you could arrive at perfection in this life. The apostle Paul frankly admits, “Whatever they’re teaching, let me tell you I haven’t arrived at perfection after thirty years of being in Christ and ministering the gospel.” I don’t know about you, but that’s a great encouragement to me. We tend to think of Paul and the other heroes of the faith as being completely unlike us, but they weren’t. In fact, James 5, James 5 tells us that they were men with natures like ours.

I love Romans 7 because I find myself there, but it’s wonderful to see Paul describing the struggle. Even as an apostle of Christ, he says, “The things that I want to do I don’t do and the things that I don’t want to do I find myself doing.” And he gets down to the end of 7:24 and he says: “[O] wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” Paul says I haven’t arrived at perfection.

But don’t misunderstand Paul. Paul is not somehow complaining or making some sad admission about his lack of progress in the Christian life. No, Paul is essentially saying this: “I’m still in the race. I can still win the prize. It’s not over.” It’s sort of the ancient equivalent of Yogi Berra’s famous line “It ain’t over till it’s over.” He said, “I haven’t arrived yet. I can still win the prize. There’s still time in the race.”

Do you want to be like Jesus Christ? If you’re in Christ, there is within you a desire to be like Jesus Christ. Do you want to know Him? Paul says, “Listen, you can still receive the prize. The race is still going on. Recognize that you have the opportunity to win. Get back in the race.” Sadly, many Christians for a temporary period of time find themselves stepping out of the race and sort of sitting back. It’s like the story that John MacArthur often told of his college track team. He ran in a relay team in college and at one particular track meet in one particular race, they were doing quite well. And one of the members, I think it was the third in the relay started out with a lead, and he ran a little bit, and he just stopped.

And all of them were deeply concerned that, somehow, he had been injured, or, you know, he pulled a muscle or something dramatic had happened. And when he got over to the pit area, he

told them. He said, “Look, I just didn’t feel like running.” There are a lot of Christians who take approach to their faith like that – “I just don’t feel like running.” Paul says, “Listen, you’re still in the race. Recognize that you have an opportunity to win. Don’t quit.” If you’re going to win, you got to develop this kind of mindset to recognize that you still have the chance to win.

There’s a second skill that Paul models for us in this account of his own spiritual journey, and that is this: expend the maximum effort, expend the maximum effort. The second half of verse 12, he says, “... [I haven’t] ... already obtained [and I haven’t] ... become perfect, but I press on ... [so] that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.” I love this word “press on”. It’s a word that means “to pursue, to chase”. It was used in the ancient language of an army pursuing its enemy. It was used of a hunter pursuing his victim. And it was used of a runner. The picture in this word, the picture of this word to “press on” is of a runner who has run the entire race and now the finish line is within sight, maybe within just a few steps, and he strains every muscle, every fiber of his being to reach the finish line.

In English “press on” sounds pretty weak, but in the original language, this word is a word that’s filled with intensity. Let me show you the intensity of this word. It’s used three times here in Philippians 3. Two of them are obvious - verse 12: “I press on”, verse 14: “I press on”. But the third occurrence of this word is not so easily recognized. It’s up in verse 6. Paul writes of his former life before Christ: “as to zeal, [he said at that time I was] a persecutor of the church.” The word “persecutor” is the same Greek word as “press on”. Literally translated, he says: “as to zeal, pursuing the church.”

How did Paul pursue Christians at that time? Let me give you a picture of the intensity. Turn to Acts 26. Acts 26 and notice verse 9. He’s recounting his former life to Agrippa, and he says this: “So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme [Jesus Christ]; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.” That’s the intensity that’s behind that word “to press on”, to pursue. Paul says, “Listen, before I was in Christ, I pursued, I persecuted the church with this huge intensity, but now I’ve taken that same intensity, and I’ve translated it into my pursuit to know Jesus Christ.”

Is that how you pursue knowing and being like Jesus Christ? Do you expend that kind of effort? Paul's saying we should expend maximum effort. Why? Well, notice the rest of verse 12. He says: "I (I) press on [I pursue] so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus." What does he mean? Paul is saying, "Listen. On the Damascus Road outside the city, Christ seized me, He laid hold of me. And He did that for a very specific purpose." And it's the same purpose, that if you're a Christian today, Christ seized you. What is that purpose? Well, according to Romans 8:29, He did it so that we would be "conformed to the image of His Son". Christ seized you so that you would become like Him, so that you would demonstrate His beauty and His glory in your life. Like Paul, you and I are to expend the maximum effort, to strain every fiber of our being to seize that prize because that's the very reason Christ seized us.

Let me ask you a probing question. Is there anything in your life for which you expend more effort, more energy, for, toward which you provide more enthusiasm than knowing and being like Jesus Christ? Paul says if that's true, it shouldn't be. He said, "I expend the maximum effort that I can expend to know Christ and to be like Him."

The third skill that we have to master if we want to win this race is found in verse 13: maintain a single-minded concentration, maintain a single-minded concentration. He writes: "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead." Paul begins verse 13 by re-iterating what he'd said in verse 12. He says, and it's sort of an emphatic expression in the original language, he says, "I am not considering or reckoning myself to have grasped or seized it yet." Seized what? He says, "I haven't laid hold or seized my goal of perfectly knowing Christ and perfectly being like Him." And what follows is an interesting expression in the original language.

You'll notice in verse 13 in our English Bibles the words "*I do*" are italicized. That means they're not in the original text. As Paul dictated this letter to his amanuensis who was writing it down for him, it's as if Paul sort of loses himself in the emotion of moment, and he says this. He says, [Just one thing. Here it is. This is the crucial thing. Concentrate on this.] To reach the finish line and to win requires a single-minded concentration.

How can you and I concentrate like that when our lives are so filled with distractions? Well, the rest of verse 13 explains. Here's how you can develop concentration in the race. We're supposed to maintain this sort of single-minded concentration. How do you do it? First of all, by forgetting what lies behind", forgetting what lies behind. The word "forget" means to care nothing about, to neglect. The image is of a runner who refuses to look back. He refuses to look over his shoulder

to see how far he's come or how far away his competitors are. And the tense of the verb is in a present tense. It means this forgetting, this failing to look back, is a constant thing. It's an ongoing thing. You're constantly failing and forgetting, refusing to look back. At what? Well, notice he says "the things behind". "The things behind" is simply a reference to the part of the race that's already been completed. Don't look back at the part of the race you've already finished.

Now that doesn't mean we're never to look back or reflect on our spiritual progress. Paul did that. We have a number of accounts of it in the New Testament. So, what does it mean, "don't look back"? It means not to allow anything from the past to distract your gaze from the finish line. Don't let your past spiritual achievements or your past spiritual failures distract you from running. You see, there's a real temptation for all of us to live in the past.

Let me ask you a personal question. Do you spend your Christian life living a life of regret about what's happened in the past? Maybe sins you committed, maybe opportunities you squandered, maybe bad decisions you made. And you spend your life poring over those things, bringing those things up, drudging them up. Paul says, "Stop looking back, and keep running. You're still in the race. Remember that there's a race going on. Get up. So you've fallen – get up. Dust yourself off. Pick yourself up. Confess your sin to the Lord and start from where you are. Start running again."

But maybe your temptation isn't to look back on your past failures, but maybe your temptation is to look back on your past achievements and victories and successes. You find yourself living as it were in the good old days, remembering when you were eager to learn, when you were eager to worship, when you were eager to serve. You find yourself reminiscing about past ministry instead of looking to future ministry. Paul says, "You can't live in the past whether your temptation is toward past failures or toward past successes. Stop looking back. Keep your eyes fixed on the finish line. You have to maintain a single-minded concentration on running. Stop allowing your past, good or bad, to distract you. Forget the past and run."

You can also improve your concentration not only by forgetting the past, but notice he says 'by reaching forward to what lies ahead'. The word "reaching forward" is another one of those words that pictures a runner with his eyes fixed on the goal, sort of straining with all of his might toward the finish line. Again, the verb is in the present tense. He says, "Keep straining toward what lies ahead." What is it that lies ahead? It's the rest of the race. It's the rest of your Christian

life. Forget the ground you've covered. Don't let that distract you. Think about the ground you have yet to cover.

David Livingstone, the famous missionary to Africa, after many years of living in Africa returned briefly to England. And one of his fellow brothers in Christ asked him, he said, 'Well, Doctor Livingstone, where are you ready to go now?' And Livingstone answered, "I'm ready to go anywhere provided it's forward." He wasn't living on his past successes and neither should we. Strain to what lies ahead.

You've probably heard people talk from time to time about the joys of running. If you're like me, you're deeply concerned about those people. There's something terribly wrong in their minds. I've always hated running personally. Part of it's my build. As I often say, I was built backwards. My nose runs, and my feet smell.

But in football, I was forced to run. I loved football and because of that, I wanted to play so I had to run. And when you run in football practice, at least this was true where I, where I played, where you finished in the races that were there on the practice field mattered because if you finished poorly, it meant you had to (what?) run more. And so while I didn't love running, I did love being done with running. And so I remember expending the effort, expending the energy not to be the last few who had to run yet more.

For some of us, it's been a long time since we've done any running to anywhere except the refrigerator, but do you remember that feeling, that what it feels like to drain every ounce of energy out of your muscles as you approach the finish line? Do you remember shutting everything else out of your mind, and all you could think about was crossing the finish line and winning? Paul says that's how we're to run as Christians. Forget what lies behind you and press yourself, strain yourself toward the finish line. Blot everything else out of your mind. Concentrate on what you're doing.

Sadly, many Christians lose their concentration. And often, I think it's because of what the writer of Hebrews says. Hebrews 12:1 says we get in the race, but we have these encumbrances, these things that weigh us down, these things that distract us. Let me ask you to do a little heart searching. What is it in your life that distracts you from concentrating on being like Jesus Christ and on knowing Him? Is it some sin, some sin habit? Is it some person? Is it your work? Your spouse? Your children? Have you allowed trivial things to consume all your time, some hobby,



television, entertainment, sports? Paul says if you want to run to win, you're going to have to maintain a single-minded concentration.

But what is it exactly that we're to concentrate on? Well, that brings us to the fourth skill that Paul gives us here: He says if you're going to win, you've got to focus on the prize. You've got to concentrate on the prize. Notice verse 14, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The word "goal" is simply the word for the marker that was at the end of the race on which the runner would fix his eyes. In our terms, it's the finish line. He says, "I've got my eyes focused. I'm pursuing with great intensity the finish line, the goal." But Paul isn't merely running to cross the finish line. He says he wants to win. Notice he says, "I press on toward the finish line for the prize. I want the prize." The Greek word that's translated "prize" here is often used in the secular language to describe that wreath that those who won in the games received.

Paul uses this word elsewhere. Turn over to 1 Corinthians 9. First Corinthians 9:24, another of these passages where he uses this analogy of running. He says in verse 24: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." Notice here that Paul says in the secular sports in the ancient games, only one person wins the prize. But in this race, he's saying you need to run to get the prize. Notice verse 24: "You [Corinthians, all of you] run that you may win." Verse 25: "We do it to receive an imperishable crown. We all do it." You know what Paul is saying? He's saying in the Christian race, everyone who finishes gets the prize, the prize of knowing Christ and the prize of being like Him.

Notice how he describes this prize in verse 14. He says it's "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus". What does that mean, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus? You see, Scripture describes the moment of salvation as God's calling us to Himself. But that call that began the moment you came to Christ will culminate in glory. It will find its final expression when you are called upward to be with Christ forever.

Paul talks about this in 2 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians 2:13. He writes this, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation." So, you have sovereign election.

Then you have: He's done that through sanctification. Now here he's not talking about that process by which we're made more and more holy or progressive sanctification. He's talking about what's called positional sanctification. At the moment of your conversion, you were at that moment set apart for God. That's what he's talking about here. He set you apart "by the Spirit and faith in the truth (verse 14). It was for this He called you through our gospel."

God called you to Himself as it were as you heard the good news about Jesus Christ. But notice at the end of the verse, verse 14. He did it, He called you "that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ". You see, God's call always had this in mind. The aim of God's call all along was to call us to heaven to share in His eternal presence.

So back in Philippians 3, let me paraphrase what Paul is saying. Paul is saying, "I'm pursuing the prize of fully knowing Jesus Christ and being perfectly like Him. And that prize will only become mine when I'm called upward, either by death or Christ's return, where I'll forever dwell in His presence."

Let me ask you a question. Are you like Paul? Do you spend your life focusing on the prize? Do you ever think about the prize? Do you ever lift your eyes above all the distractions and trivial stuff of this life and think about eternity, think about the future, think about that day that is coming inexorably closer toward us every moment when Christ will come or you will die? You ever think about that? Paul says, "I never stop thinking about it. I focus on the prize."

I mentioned when I began my message this morning the 1904 marathon in the Olympic Games. Well interestingly enough, there wasn't just one story in the marathon that day. There were several fascinating stories. One of them was a runner by the name of Felix Carvajal, Felix Carvajal. He was a Cuban postal worker who decided that he was going to run in the marathon. And so he went around the square in Havana trying to raise some support to get him a ticket to get over here and for him to live for the five days that the Olympics Games would run in 1904. Well, he was able to raise that money. He, he was able to get to New Orleans by boat. And when he got to New Orleans, he managed right away to lose all the money that he had gained in a gambling game.

And so, he had to hitchhike to St. Louis. He got to St. Louis to compete in the marathon and Felix had forgotten a few important things. For example, he had none of the proper equipment to run the marathon. In fact, Felix showed up on the day of the Summer Olympic marathon in 1904 with long pants and a long-sleeved shirt ready to run the race. They actually had to stop the start

of the race for a moment. They, held off on starting the race so that someone could bring a pair of scissors because it was a ninety plus degree today and cut off the sleeves of Felix's long-sleeved shirt rather, and cut off his pants to a level where he could run. He ran the entire twenty-six miles in street shoes, in dress shoes. But amazingly, Felix came in fourth. The sports historians say that Felix probably would have won except for his stomach cramps.

You see, Felix got hungry during the race. And as he ran by one of the pace cars, he reached in and stole a couple of peaches from one of the judges. Now that probably wasn't the smartest thing Felix had ever done, but he ate those peaches as he ran. And then he took another little detour later on in the course through an apple orchard, and he ate several green apples, and he developed stomach cramps and that's what kept Felix from winning the 1904 marathon in street shoes. You see, Felix allowed himself to be distracted by the unimportant. He took his eyes off the prize. Paul says if you want to win the race, you've got to stay focused on the prize.

The fifth skill that Paul teaches us here in this text is in verse 15: keep the right mindset, keep the right mindset. "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you." Notice he begins here with the word "therefore". He's going now to move beyond his own personal example that he's been giving us, and he's going to make some very direct application to his readers and to us. The key word in verse 15 is the word "perfect". Paul often uses this adjective to describe Christians who are spiritually mature, who are spiritual adults if you will. You can see that in 1 Corinthians 2:6, in 1 Corinthians 14:20, in Ephesians 4:13, and in other places in the New Testament. He's talking about those who are not perfect in the sense of having no sin in verse 12. He's already said he's not perfected. Here, what he means is he's mature, and he says if you are spiritually mature, you will have the same attitude I have, the one I've just described in verses 12 - 14.

Let me ask you. Do you think like Paul? Have you seen yourself honestly in verses 12 - 14? Paul says if you're spiritually mature, you have. Notice the first half of verse 15 deals with our basic thinking, our overall direction. We think like Paul thinks. But in the second half of verse 15, Paul turns to the more minor issues of life, the minor issues of Christian living. He's saying, Listen, if you're spiritually mature, let me encourage you. Even if you're spiritually mature, undoubtedly there are inconsistencies and inadequacies in less crucial areas of your Christian life and experience and God will lead you into His truth in those matters as well.

You know what Paul is saying? You worry about the big things, and don't sweat the small stuff.

Bishop Lightfoot in his commentary puts it this way: “If you are sound at the core, God will remove the superficial blemishes.” If you’re sound at the core, God’s going to help you see those blemishes that you need to clean up. In other words, if you’re right about the big thing, if your life is about pursuing knowing Christ and being like Him, then all the small stuff will fall into line.

Did you notice in verse 15 that the measure of your spiritual maturity is whether or not you have the mindset we’ve been studying this morning? If you’re a Christian, and you don’t have the mindset of verses 12 to 14, then you are a spiritual infant. And even if you think yourself mature, if you don’t think like this, Paul says you’re not mature.

Sadly, some Christians are immature and don’t even know it. They spend their entire Christian lives fiddling around with relatively unimportant issues, and they miss the big picture: knowing Christ and being like Him. They’re not straining every muscle to know Him better and to be like Him as much as they can in this life. And they aren’t focused on the prize of arriving at perfection in those areas when they cross the finish line as they enter into glory.

The final skill that Paul, our model and our coach, wants us to learn is found in verse 16. He says: if you’re going to win, if you’re going to run to win, then stay on course. “however (he says, verse 16), let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained.” Now this sentence is a difficult one as you can even see from the English translation. Let me translate it for you literally. This is how it reads in the original text: “Regardless, unto that which we have attained or arrived at, to the same let all of us conform our conduct.” What’s Paul saying? He’s saying, “I want you to live in keeping with what you’ve already learned. Stay on course. Practice what you know.”

D.A. Carson, in his excellent little summary of the book of Philippians, puts it this way: “All Christians, without exception, should live up at least to the level of what they already know.” Do you live up to the level of what you know? Paul says, “that’s the bottom line. That’s the lowest hurdle.”

The finish line doesn’t come until this life ends. You remember what Paul says at the end of 2 Timothy 4:7? He’s nearing execution. He’s soon going to have his life put out by the enemies of the gospel. And only then does he say, “I have finished my course” because the finish line doesn’t come until life ends. Until then, Paul says, “Stay on course, keep running and follow the rules you know.”

You want to run to win? Then you've got to have this mindset. You've got to copy our coach here, the apostle Paul, who says, "This is how I approach my Christian life. Imitate me."

I've always been fascinated by marathons, by watching them, that is. But maybe you don't know the history of the marathon. It actually began or was initiated by a famous historical event, an event that occurred in 490 B.C., five hundred years before Christ. It was a time of battle between the Greeks and the Persians. The Persians came to take the city of Athens, and through a series of feints and strategy, the Greeks with the smaller force were able to actually win. They conquered the Persian army. I should say they defeated. They routed the Persian Army on the plains of a place called Marathon.

Marathon, where the battle took place, was about twenty-five miles from the city of Athens. The city was waiting, of course, for word of the battle because the entire fate and future of Europe rested on the outcome of the battle. And so, the winning general, the Athenian general appointed one of his couriers, one of his runners, to take the message to the city of Athens that the battle had been won. Tradition says that that runner ran at his maximum speed for twenty-five miles, the twenty-five miles between the place where the Battle of Marathon had occurred and the city of Athens. And as he reached the outskirts of the city of Athens, the city fathers had gathered to find out the news from the battle. And as he came and approached them, all he could do, the only energy he had remaining, was the ability to gasp one word. He said the word "victory" and then fell down and died. May God help us to run the Christian life like that, expending maximum effort to know Jesus Christ and to be like Him. Listen, if you're going to run, don't just run. Paul says run to win.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for this amazing example of the apostle Paul. Forgive us for our weak, lackadaisical efforts to pursue the prize of knowing Christ and being like Him. Lord, I pray that You would help us today to commit ourselves to pursuing with maximum effort that goal.

Lord, I pray for those who are here this morning who are distracted by what lies behind them in the race; perhaps their past failures, perhaps their past achievements. Father, help them to stop looking back and to fix their eyes on the part of the race that remains until they are in Your presence.

Lord, I pray for the person here this morning who claims to be in Christ, but who isn't running, who isn't pursuing Christ. Lord, I pray that You would bring deep conviction, bring self-examination and help them to see whether or not they're really in the faith at all.

And Lord, I pray for the person here this morning who isn't pursuing the prize because they aren't even in the race. They've never bowed the knee before You. They've never confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I pray that this morning would be the morning when they would cry out to You, and they would get in the race. Help us to end well.

I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.