Pressing Forward
Philippians 3:12-4:1

As we look at this passage, I want to remind you of the context. Paul is in prison, most likely in Rome. And he's awaiting trial there, and the threat of execution is hanging over him. And his friends in the church in Philippi have heard he's in trouble again, so they've sent him some money, to help him support himself. And it seems that Epaphroditus, the guy who's brought that gift has also filled Paul in on the troubles that the Philippians are facing, because life is hard for them too, and they're facing difficulties on a number of fronts.

Firstly, persecution from those on the outside is on the rise, and that kind of pressure is beginning to reveal some relational cracks within the church, with the first signs of disunity and discord beginning to show.

And so Paul has been encouraging them to see all of life, even the hard times, even relational difficulties, through the lens of the gospel, that just as Christ, out of his love for us, humbled himself and put the interests of others before his own, so the church there in Philippi can stand together and united if they have that same attitude of mind.

But they also face another challenge, and this time it's not from the outside pagan authorities. Instead it's from good, moral, upright, religious people. There are these folk, who theologians call the Judaisers, who had become Christians from a Jewish background, but who went around teaching that faith in Jesus alone was not enough, that to be really saved, to be really 'in', you had to live a moral life, you had to follow the Old Testament law, you had to become a Jew. That, sure there was Jesus, but you had to do your bit, you had to go someway to making yourself acceptable to God.

And in the previous passage, as Mark showed us last week, Paul faces that head on. And in comparison to Christ, and all that he has done for us, Paul describes the religious and moral credentials that people hope to trust in for salvation as 'rubbish', that nothing else comes close to comparing with Jesus and what he has done for us. And in response to all that Jesus has done for us, Paul describes the passion that drives him: he wants to know Christ ever deeper, he wants to know his righteousness in his life, he wants to know his power at work in his life, and ultimately he wants to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

But then Paul takes a pause, which is where we've got to today, because he realizes there are two further dangers facing his friends there in Philippi. And the first one is that they might hear Paul saying that the Old Testament law is no longer in force and read that as him saying that's because he has already attained some super-spiritual level of perfection, that he's made the grade, that he's passed the test, and that's why the law's no longer necessary, because no further progress is necessary, he's got there. Or they might hear him saying 'it's not how you live morally that saves you', and read that as him saying, 'so, it doesn't matter how you live, you don't need to bother about growing as a Christian, 'cos Jesus loves you anyway.'

And interestingly, both of those dangers – the danger of spiritual pride and the danger of thinking how you live doesn't matter are just as relevant for us as for them, so that's what we're going to look at this morning.

And the first one he tackles is this danger of spiritual pride, of thinking you've arrived.

Think Like the Mature

Now Tuesday morning was interesting at the church offices this week, because one of our rooms gets taken over by the ladies with all their babies and those who are expecting babies.

And I was sat at my desk thinking about this issue of Christian maturity, when Basile, whose wife Claire was in the group, arrives with this bumper size packet of diapers. Which got me thinking, because no one thinks it's odd that a 20 something guy should turn up to a mum's and babies group with diapers, because we all know they're for the babies. But we'd think it seriously odd if he'd brought them to share for the men's prayer meeting wouldn't we, because there comes a time when we grow up and mature and we leave sucking our thumbs and wearing diapers behind us.

And Paul wants these Philippians and you and me to do the same, to continue growing up and maturing as Christians. Listen how he puts it: v15, 'Let those of us who are mature think this way.' And verse 17, 'Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.'

So he's saying, look, there's a way of thinking, there's a way of looking at life that characterises the mature Christian, the person who's grown up in their faith, and I want you to think like that. In fact, I want you to imitate me, to follow my example and to follow those around you who follow my example.

Now, you might hear that and think, now that is the epitome of religious pride. I mean isn't that exactly what's wrong with religion, this sense of I'm better than you, if only you were more like me, if only you were as good as me, things would be ok, this sense of looking down our nose at others. And it would be, if it wasn't for how Paul describes the way a mature Christian thinks and sees life. Because when he says, in v15, 'let those of us who are mature think this way' he's already explained the three characteristics of what *this way* looks like, the way of thinking that characterizes the mature.

Firstly, the mature Christian **knows they *haven't* arrived**. Verse 12: 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect.' Now, when Paul says 'obtained this' he's referring back to what he's been speaking about: about wanting to know Christ and his power and the final resurrection of the dead. So Paul is saying, look, I know I'm not there yet. I know I'm not yet all that Jesus wants me to be, I know I'm not yet the finished work he would have me be, I know I've not arrived.

And Paul uses a wonderful little play on words here, because the word perfect in v12, and the word mature in v15 come from the same word, of reaching the goal. So he's saying that real Christianity, far from it being a source of spiritual, religious pride, should produce in you and me a deep sense of humility, that the mature Christian knows they aren't mature; that they are way off being perfect, that they know they haven't arrived.

Which is funny, because there was a time when Paul thought he had arrived. We saw last week how he said in v6, that 'as to righteousness under the law, [he was] blameless.' There was a time when Paul thought he could look down his nose at others, that he could criticize and point the finger. And of course with that kind of pride comes the thinking that no one can teach you anything. But now, as he looks to Christ, and what real perfection looks like, he knows he's way off the real thing.

So that's the first characteristic of how a mature Christian thinks, how he wants you and me to think, to have the humility that knows you haven't arrived. And that should sound the deaf knell of spiritual pride.

But the second thing that characterizes the way a mature Christian thinks is that **they forget what's past**. Verse 13: 'Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind...'

You see, there is a danger, isn't there, that you can be held captive by the past, and that might be good or bad past. Now don't get me wrong, it's inevitable that your past, good and bad, is going to shape you, just as it did Paul. But whilst his past shaped him, Paul's pretty clear here that he doesn't let it define him, because it's the gospel and Christ's love for him, that defined Paul. And Paul raises this, because there is a way of dwelling on the past that hinders you making progress in the present.

You can be held captive by the good past. And you look backwards to times when things were great, at least they were better than now. And maybe it was *that* relationship, or that church, or that job, or that time in your life, and it was wonderful, but the problem is that in keeping on looking over your shoulder, nothing else can now quite match up. And as a result, the future, which becomes the present, is frittered away, because it's not quite as good as the past. Or you can look back on the past with satisfaction but then kind of just sit on your laurels, and thinking you've achieved and arrived already, there's no push for personal growth.

And Paul could have done that. He could have settled for past glories and success and sat on his hands. Or he could look around him at his present dismal conditions there in jail, and be filled with a growing sense of resentment at what once was, how he used to preach to great crowds, how he was a person of influence, and now he's chained to a wall, a nobody lost in the legal system.

But he refuses to be chained by a good past.

But similarly, you can be held captive by a bad past, either by your own sins and you're consumed by guilt, and you can't move on, or by others' sins against you. And Paul had good reason for both: he had persecuted the church. There were women and children in other churches who were without husbands and fathers because of Paul. So he had plenty of reasons for guilt. But he was also the present victim of injustice.

And guilt, or bitterness, and unforgiveness, the toxic waste of a bad past, can be like prisons, chaining us to a wall.

But Paul says that the mature Christian forgets the past. He knows that in the gospel, in the good news of all that Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection, the shame of the past is washed away, and the sins of others against us, what others meant for evil, God takes and works for our good. And knowing that, Paul encourages you and me to turn our backs on the past, the good and the bad, and live and take joy in the present, but to do so, looking to the future.

And that's the third characteristic of the way a mature Christian thinks. Whilst they know they haven't arrived, whilst they forget what is past, **they also press on to the prize**, and that prize is Christ.

Verses 13-14, '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.'

Now, those of you who know us both know that Mark, our assistant pastor, and I are different in many ways. I mean to start with, I'm good looking and hip and Mark is just Mark. But we do share one thing in common and that is that we are both highly trained athletes. And Paul uses this image of an athlete running, straining every muscle to win the prize. And he's saying that Christian maturity is marked by that kind of attitude when it comes to wanting to grow as a Christian.

You see, whilst maturity is going to be marked by this deep humility that knows it hasn't arrived, it's a humility that is also dissatisfied with the present, but not in a way that looks back to the past, but one that is earnestly striving to grow more like Christ in the future.

And look what he says in v12: 'Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' So what's motivating Paul to take hold of all that Jesus would have him be, is that Christ has taken hold of Paul, from that first day he knocked him off his horse on the way to Damascus, until now. And knowing that out of his love for him Jesus has pursued Paul like that, leaves Paul wanting to pursue Jesus like that.

And it's that kind of thinking that's going to mark the growing, maturing Christian Paul says. It's not quick fixes, or quick prayers, or quick answers that will put us on this road to maturity. It's realizing that out of his great love for you, Christ has taken hold of you, when like Paul you didn't deserve it, and you let that love thaw your heart into a deep and growing love for Him in response.

So Paul longs to arrive all the time knowing he is way off arriving. He is far off perfection, but he's in hot pursuit of it. Because he wants to be more like the Saviour who has taken hold of him.

And Paul applies himself to this Christian growth as an athlete does to the race. Twice, in v12, and v14, he describes his attitude as 'I press on' toward the goal, for the prize. And that alone tells you that this is a race of endurance not a walk in the park, because there is going to be stuff you have to press through, you are going to face hindrances. There are going to be times when you feel like you just

want to quit the race. When you feel like you can't take anymore, when you just want to stop and drop out. Like the runner there are going to be times when you face fatigue, bodily, physical, spiritual weariness. Or like the runner forcing his way against the wind and the rain, there may be times when you face external opposition and life would be so much easier if you quit. Or there are your frequent failings, your own lack of perfection, that keep tripping you up and send you sprawling on the ground.

And so Paul says, 'I press on' I keep going, because the prize of Christ is worth it. He calls it in v14, 'the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'. It's the 'well done, good and faithful servant'; it's the crown of life awaiting the righteous, it's the smile of the saviour, it is Christ, a prize better than life or death.

And so Paul is saying to these Philippians in danger of spiritual pride: look, imitate me, run this race with me: you know you haven't arrived; forget the past, and press on for the prize that's Christ.

But whilst they could follow Paul's example, the problem was there were others who might also catch their eye.

The Wrong Kind of Example

Verse 17-18: Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.'

So whilst these Philippians, and you and I, face the danger represented by the Judaisers, of thinking that Christ isn't quite enough and we need to live a moral life to be saved, which is linked to this spiritual pride, there's another danger and that is that we throw off all the rules and think it doesn't matter how we live. That the sacrifice of Christ on the cross does not require anything of us.

And this easy, we might call it cross-lite Christianity, can seem really attractive compared to a race of endurance.

But before he spells out their error, look how Paul introduces them: 'I… tell you even with tears.' And the problem is, that we often don't do we? I mean speak of others with whom we disagree, with tears. When Paul thinks of these people he's going to tell us about he is moved to tears by their condition. That is a far cry from finger pointing and harsh criticism isn't it? And if you care about truth there is this trap you can fall into of being convinced you are right, and warning people about error, but there's this hard edge to it, there are no tears. But the compassion of Jesus weeps over the Jerusalem that will crucify him.

And then through his tears, Paul describes these alternative examples: v19: 'Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.'

Their god is their belly. And yet, he's not talking about the guy with a beer can in one hand and a big mac in the other, is he? He's talking about making an idol out of our appetites: that instead of the self-sacrifice of the cross, we look to sex, or food, or drink or entertainment or a relationship to satisfy us. That our inner longings for love and significance can be met, and our lives can find meaning, by

pursuing these kinds of natural desires. And those things, which may very well be good things, become our god when we make them an ultimate thing. But because they each have 'me', and 'my needs' and 'what I want' at the center, they are in opposition to the cross of Jesus, which puts self to death. And the mantra of this kind of living is 'if it feels good, do it,' and pleasing myself takes number one spot.

And the tragedy is that we can pursue these things thinking they will give us the happiness we look for, and Paul says, it ends with these things controlling us, even destroying us, and with people glorying in stuff that they should really be ashamed of.

And so Paul ends this section by pointing to a better way of seeing the world.

Citizens of Another City

Verse 19-20, their 'minds [are] set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven.' Now, if you remember, Philippi was this Roman colony. Laws in Philippi applied as if its citizens were in Rome itself, and so these guys who were Roman citizens, knew very well what it was to live as citizens governed by the rules and culture of a far off city.

And Paul is saying, look, rather than set your mind on earthly things, thinking that these can satisfy you, lift your eyes up, and see the city to which you really belong, and live now as citizens of that heavenly land. Because whilst the spiritually proud think they've already made it, we know we'll never be truly perfect until we reach that city, or the Lord returns. And whilst others make their body and its desires their god, hoping that in satisfying its desires they'll satisfy their souls, Paul says that as citizens of heaven, v20-1, 'from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.'

This body of ours, that reminds us just how far we have fallen, with our tongues that we can't control, and our lust that we struggle to keep down and our greed that we struggle to keep in check, and it's failings that tell us we're aging, Christ is renewing it all, and will one day transform us, even these bodies, to be like him. And that day, we will become all he has created us to be, and all he wants us to be. There will be a day when we have arrived.

And Paul is saying, live with that kind of mindset now, because nothing can thwart God's good intentions for you, because He's the one, in the words of v21 with 'the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.'

So, Paul says in 4:1, 'Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved': By thinking like the mature, by avoiding following the wrong kind of example, and by living now as a citizen of another city.