Pressing Toward the Goal
Scripture Text: Philippians 3:12-14

Introduction

A new year has come. The former one has gone. Did you make any New Years resolutions? Many people do. The most popular resolutions people make are weight loss, improving finances, improving one’s health, and getting a new job. According to an article in the Washington Post, somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of people make New Year’s resolutions. However, about 46 percent of those who do succeed — or at least say they succeed — succeed for only least six months. About 25 percent do not stick with their resolutions for more than a week. Of those who make resolutions, only about 19 percent considered themselves successful in reaching their goal at all. On a positive note, at six months, people who make New Year’s resolutions are more than ten times as likely to keep them as people who do not follow the annual tradition.

Where do you fit in those statistics? Maybe you have made resolutions and have kept them. Maybe you have make resolutions, but do not keep them. Maybe you do not make resolutions. Are they really necessary, anyway? Is there a better way to promote change in one’s life? It is helpful to have goals. The Apostle Paul expressed his desire to achieve a goal. He certainly had a resolution of sorts, but it was probably the same one each year. Maybe he renewed it from time to time, or maybe he reminded himself of it each day or week. Paul had a goal and he sought to make it. Christians who want to finish well will do three things mentioned in this passage: They will realize they have not attained perfection; they will refuse to be paralyzed or to become complacent by the past; and they will intensely pursue the calling of Christ until God calls them home. Let us look at Paul’s resolution and see if it will be helpful for us as we begin this new year.

Focus on the Goal with Humility

One thing that is necessary in setting goals, is realizing the need for the goal. If you do not understand the need for a goal, you will hardly be motivated to achieve it. Secondly, you have to realize that you have not yet attained that goal. That sounds like common sense, but some fail to do this. For Christians, God has changed us, but we are not yet completely changed. We are not yet perfect. Another way to say it is that none of us have yet arrived, although some people think they have. The Reformer, Martin Luther, had some interesting advice to proud preachers and teachers who may have thought they were perfect. Look at the following quote from Luther.

“If, however, you feel and are inclined to think you have made it, flattering yourself with your own little books, teaching, or writing, because you have done it beautifully and preached excellently; if you are highly pleased when someone praises you in the presence of others; if you perhaps look for praise, and would sulk or quit what you are doing if you did not get it—if you are of that stripe, dear friend, then take yourself by the ears, and if you do this in the right way you will find a beautiful pair of big, long, shaggy donkey ears.”

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
Martin Luther had a colorful way of expressing himself. Luther’s statement above may be more appropriate for preachers and teachers who are prideful and think they have learned all they can. That is certainly a temptation for many preachers, but it applies to all Christians in general. They think they know it all. I think the same, however, can be said of those who think they are righteous by what they do. Some think that they have achieved God’s greatness for themselves and there is nothing else for them to do except to wait for Jesus to come pick them up. We should never think we have reached perfection, something Paul wrote in this passage. Look at the following verse.

**Philippians 3:12** 12 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.

Paul acknowledged that he had not become perfect. He realized that he had not yet arrived and humbly accepted his status of imperfection. Paul was referring to becoming complete in Jesus Christ. He was probably referring specifically to the day he would obtain his complete salvation, when he would become a fully matured disciple of Christ. Paul realized that he was not yet there, that God still had work for him and was working on him. Thus, Paul pressed on to become more conformed to God’s will and to become more like Christ. Paul looked ahead to the completion of his salvation, when he would be raised to a new body without the struggles of sin. Paul was still involved in the struggles of life in a fallen world and hence he still sinned. That should humble us all.

We, too, must realize that we have not achieved our perfection. We cannot afford to say that we have arrived and that sin does not affect us, because it does. The struggle to resist temptation is very real and must be fought daily. The good news is that we do not have to fight it alone. God has given us His Word, the Holy Spirit, and each other to help us in our journey to become more like Christ. We cannot simply rest on a decision we made in the past. We cannot neglect our sanctification. Being humble does not mean we become comfortable with the way we are. We must never become complacent, as we will see in the next verses of the passage. God is still working on us and still using us. As Paul was humble and pressed on to become complete in Christ, so must we.

**Do Not Let the Past Hinder Progress**

In addition to humility, we must pursue a goal by leaving something behind. If we make a resolution to do something, but we never change, we will not attain that goal. If we stay in the past — if we keep doing the same things — we will not move forward to where we need to be. We will become stuck. Paul realized this about his relationship with God. He considered his past was not worth comparing to his present relationship with Christ or his glorious future with God. Paul mentioned this earlier in the letter.

**Philippians 3:8–9** 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—

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Paul saw that his former life experiences was not worth comparing to what he had gained in Christ, or would have when he was fully complete in Christ. Paul considered his former life before knowing Christ as useless compared to what really mattered. Perhaps Paul counted everything as loss, such as the pain and suffering he had experienced. Perhaps Paul reflected on his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:1-19) where he finally saw the foolishness of his past life and embraced Jesus Christ. Trying to earn righteousness, as Paul did, is foolish. No one can perfectly obey the Law of God or do what pleases God by his or her own efforts. We must rely on Jesus’ faithfulness and trust Him totally. In this way, you might say that once Paul accepted Christ, he did not dwell on the past. Paul kept his eye on what was ahead of him and not what was behind him. Thus, he wrote in verse thirteen about moving forward.

**Philippians 3:13**  
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,

Again, Paul acknowledged that he had not “made it”. He had not yet arrived, but he was still in the process of becoming something else. To do this, though, Paul had to keep moving. He could not afford to get stuck in the past. He wrote in this verse that he was forgetting the past. If the past meant his attempt to attain his salvation through the Law or by doing works, then he should forget that. We all should. Many Jewish Christians had a hard time letting go of their past and pursuing their future in Christ. When Christ came and offered salvation by grace, many of them were still trying to incorporate the legal demands of the Law with the freedom they received in Christ. Thus, Paul had to remind them to stop living in the past and embrace the grace and freedom of Christ. Another way to “forget the past” is to not dwell on what has happened, whether good or bad. We should not let past guilt enslave us and make us ineffective. If God forgives you, you are forgiven indeed. We also must not live in the “good ole days”. Maybe things are different now. What was done was done! The nostalgia of the former life and the “good ole days” can paralyze a Christian in terms of what God wants for the future.

Another way to see this is in how the church as a whole should move forward. Many churches have a difficult time “forgetting what lies behind”. For some, the past becomes a hero to them. Many of them think the way things were was the best way. The past contained the glory days when things were the way they should be. It is good to remember the good times and to celebrate what was good, but we cannot live in the past. We must “forget” what lies behind and “reach forward” to what lies ahead. The image Paul is describing here is exerting oneself to the uttermost. It is like stretching out to reach something. It is like a runner straining his muscles and having complete dedication in order to finish the race and to win the prize. To do this, we have to leave the past in the past and move forward to what God has planned for us in the future. We cannot let what was dictate what is or what will be. As one year closes and a new year begins, we can celebrate what has happened before but we must move forward and focus on what God has prepared for us in the future. This brings us to the next point.

**Keep Pursuing the Call of Christ**
Some may say that the present is all that we really have. We cannot live in the past, but we cannot live in the future either. We have to live in the here and now. Some believe in taking it one day at a time. That is true. In terms of time, all we have to work with is the present, and we need to use it well. When the present is gone, when that time has been spent, it cannot be recovered. It is forever gone. Therefore, we must make the most of the time we have. However, for the one who follows Christ, we also have the faithful promises of God. We have God's promise of something better that He has prepared for us. Therefore, Paul exhorted us to press on and work hard for the goal that God has set before us. Look at the next verse in this passage.

**Philippians 3:14**  

14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Once again, Paul mentioned that he was pursuing something. He was pressing on toward a goal. Earlier in verse twelve, Paul wrote that he was pressing on to his resurrection, to the completion of his salvation. The goal of completing his salvation was like a finish line or an archery target. Paul constantly aimed toward a heavenly goal. Here, Paul mentioned that he was pursuing the call of God in Christ Jesus. The call is probably associated with the final resurrection where on that day there will be a call for us to go to heaven. Like a victory in a race, Paul lived for the day when he would hear the announcement that he has indeed finished the race. This motivated Paul to work harder for Christ. Rather than slack off, as some are prone to do, Paul's anticipation of that victory call motivated him to work harder and seek harder the things of God. He kept reaching for the completion of God's work in his life.

To pursue something stresses an active commitment to Jesus Christ. Becoming like Jesus is the goal, but notice the reason why Paul pressed on for that goal. In verse twelve, “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” It is because Jesus had made Paul his own, because Jesus had claimed Paul for Himself, that Paul pressed forward to the goal of a life in glory. We press on, we work hard, because we belong to Jesus. We press on to know Jesus Christ better, to have a perfect fellowship with Him because He knows us. We press on to know Christ better because our citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Our pressing on to know Christ better, however, involves the whole church. Pressing on to the call of God involves the whole church working together, side by side. Look at the following verse.

**Philippians 1:27**  

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

The goal for the whole church is to be worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We should want to represent our Savior well while He has us stationed here on earth. We should all be striving together to become more like Jesus. When we see others missing the mark, or falling down during the race, we should go over to them and help them. When someone else is making poor decisions or not living a life according to what pleases Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
Jesus, we need to go to him or her and call that person to repentance. We are in this life together and we are living in this community together. Therefore, we must live our faith together. As the US Army says, we need to help each other be all that he or she can be...for Jesus Christ. We need to all work together toward the goal of becoming like Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

In closing, maybe the beginning of a new year is a time for resolutions. However, maybe the resolution we should make is to press on toward the same goal as the Apostle Paul did in this passage. The goal of every Christian ought to be to finish the race well — to become like Christ. Christians who want to finish the race well will do these three things: They will realize they have not attained perfection; They will refuse to be paralyzed or to become complacent by the past; They will intensely pursue the calling of the Christian life until God calls us home. This is not just an individual calling, but one that involves the entire church. We must work together and help each another to become more like Christ each and every day. We have to run this race together. May 2016 be a year marked by an increased desire to leave the past behind, move forward to the future, and become more like Christ in every way possible. May it be so! Amen!