

## “Winning the Race”

August 24, 2025

Philippians 3:12-16

### I. Introduction

Judging from Paul’s use of sports analogies in his various letters, Paul and many of the people of Paul’s day must have been sports fans, things haven’t changed much in 2000 years! In 1 Corinthians 9:26 Paul wrote, “I do not fight like a boxer beating the air”; in Ephesians 6:12 Paul wrote about struggling or wrestling; in 2 Timothy 4:7 he wrote, “I have fought the good fight.” But Paul’s favorite sports analogy was running: in Acts 20:24 he said, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me;” in Gal. 5:7 he wrote, “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?” Here in Phil. 3:14 Paul wrote about racing, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” In today’s Scripture Paul compared the Christian life to a race—not a sprint, but a marathon—a life-long marathon.

Earlier in Philippians 3, Paul described his treasures of birth and treasures of human achievements which in human eyes had made him “*something*.” But after his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul realized that in God’s eyes and, therefore, in his eyes all these things were useless; he even wrote in Philippians 3:8, “I consider them rubbish.” Paul may have lost his so-called treasures and even his reputation when he trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. But he had gained more than he lost. He gained the knowledge of Christ, the righteousness of Christ, the fellowship of Christ, and the guarantee of his future resurrection from the dead.

Concerned that some might feel that he had reached spiritual perfection, that he, the great Apostle Paul, “*had made it*,” he wrote, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Far from having obtained perfection, Paul wrote that he was pursuing spiritual perfection with all of his might. Just as a runner strains for his goal of crossing the finish line, Paul was straining for his goal—to become more Christ like.

Romans 8:29 says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.”

All of us want to be “*winning Christians*” as we fulfill the purpose for which we were saved. In today’s verses Paul gave the essentials for winning the race and one day receiving the promised reward.

## II. Essentials for Winning the Race

**A. Dissatisfaction** The first essential for winning the race and reaching spiritual perfection is dissatisfaction, i.e., dissatisfaction with one’s present spiritual condition. Paul wrote, “**Not that I have already obtained this.**” Paul had gained the knowledge of Christ, but his knowledge wasn’t complete; in 1 Corinthians 13:12 he wrote, “**Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.**” Paul had gained the righteousness of Christ, but he still hadn’t made it. In Romans 7:19 he wrote, “**For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.**” With the knowledge and the righteousness of Christ, he wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “**Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.**” Paul may have had fellowship with Christ, but he still needed the Holy Spirit to intercede for him—turn to Romans 8:26-27. Paul wasn’t satisfied with his spiritual condition.

Many Christians are satisfied with their spiritual condition because they compare their Christian lives, their “*running the race*,” with that of other Christians—especially with those who are not making quite as much progress. Paul could have done the same thing and could have felt very proud of himself and could have let up a bit on his so-called “*race*.” But Paul didn’t compare himself with others; he compared himself with Jesus Christ. As he wrote earlier in Philippians 2:5, “**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.**” 1 Peter 2:21 adds, “**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**” Christians are to compare themselves to Jesus Christ.

In Paul’s record of the Lord’s Table in 1 Corinthian 11:28 he wrote, “**A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.**” But self-examination can also be a dangerous thing because we can err in two directions: a) we can make ourselves better than we are, or b) we can make ourselves worse than we really are. Paul had no illusions about himself; he knew that he had to “**press on**” in

order to “take hold of that for which Christ Jesus told hold of” him. As we read earlier in [Romans 8:29](#), God chose each believer, including Paul, to make him or her like Jesus Christ. The purpose for which God saved us is also the purpose for which we live—[2 Thessalonians 2:14](#) says, “[He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.](#)” The Christian life is a life-long pursuit of Christ likeness and bringing glory to God. That was the Lord’s goal in saving Paul and, therefore, was Paul’s goal. This should be the goal of every Christian: to be more Christ-like. David put it this way in [Psalm 42:1](#), “[As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.](#)”

**B. Be Focused** Back in [Philippians 3:13](#) Paul then wrote, “[But one thing I do.](#)” This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> essential: be focused. Too many Christians are too involved in “many things,” but the secret of progress is to concentrate on “one thing,” i.e., be focused. The believer must focus on running the Christian race. Few athletes succeed by doing everything; if they try, *they often become jacks of many trades and the master of none*—success comes through specializing. The winners are those who concentrate, who are focused as they keep their eyes on the goal and let nothing distract them. [James 1:8](#) (KJV) says, “[A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.](#)” In [Luke 16:13](#) Jesus said, “[No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.](#)” To win his race, each believer must be focused on this one goal—to become more like Christ.

**C. Look Ahead** Next Paul wrote, “[Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.](#)” “*To forget*” in the Bible means to “*no longer to be influenced by or affected by*” something [Turn to](#) [Hebrews 10:17-18](#). In other words, God is saying that “*I will no longer hold their sins against them. Their sins can no longer affect their standing with Me or influence My attitude toward them.*” Here in [Philippians](#) Paul was saying that, although we cannot erase the sins and mistakes of the past—since they are forgiven, we are no longer to be influenced or affected by them. We must look ahead—this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> essential: look ahead. Just as we look ahead away from our past sins, we must also refuse to rest on past successes but press on toward the day when we will stand before the Lord. *The past is not relevant; what matters is making the maximum effort in the present as we strain for the goal in the future.*

Too many Christians are hindered by grudges, bitterness, sins, and tragedies of the past. Still others try to survive in the present by reliving past successes. In both cases people are trying to run the race by looking backward. A runner who looks back risks being passed or even worse tripping and falling down. The things which are behind must be set aside and the things which are before must take their place. To reach the goal, every Christian must look ahead.

**D. Determination** It is possible to have dissatisfaction with the present spiritual condition, to be focused on the one goal of becoming like Christ and looking ahead but still lose the race. The 4<sup>th</sup> essential needed is determination—Paul said, “**I press on toward the goal.**” A runner isn’t successful without pressing on—reaching with determination for the prize. One doesn’t become a winning athlete by listening to lectures, watching movies, reading books, or cheering for those participating in the games. A person becomes a winning athlete by getting in the game himself and determining—straining—to win; putting all he has into crossing the finish line. The same zeal, the same determination that Paul demonstrated when persecuting Christians, he used in serving Christ. *How successful would we be if we used as much energy in serving Christ as we do in doing other things?*

Before we go on, it must be made clear that the race is **NOT** about salvation. Salvation is **NOT** the prize for which one is running. **1 John 5:12** says, “**He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**” You either trust Jesus Christ or you don’t. The only way to have salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a gift. **Eph. 2:8-9** says, “**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.**” Salvation is not won in a race. Salvation is a gift which must be accepted. If you haven’t accepted God’s gift—Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in your place, then God has no reward for you, no forgiveness, no eternity in heaven—Jesus said in **John 3:18**, “**Whoever believes in him i.e. the Messiah, the Christ is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.**”

The “*race*” that Paul wrote about is the life of a person *after* he or she has accepted God’s gift, i.e., after becoming a Christian. Turn to 1 Peter 2:1-3. The “*race*,” the marathon, is to grow up, to become a mature Christian who is becoming more like Christ every day. Paul wrote that the goal is “**the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Jesus Christ.**” Only in the future in heaven will Paul and all Christians receive the “**crown of righteousness**” mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:8; only then will Christians receive the prize which was pursued with determination. Turn to 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. In the Olympics only one athlete may win the prize, but all Christians may receive a reward. The laurel wreath of the Olympic Games may fade, but the crown of Christ will never fade. The important thing is that in order to reach the goal God has established for His children, one needs determination.

**E. Discipline** In 1 John 2:28 the Apostle John wrote, “**And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.**” In any race, it isn’t enough to run hard and win; the runner must obey all the rules. In the Greek games, the judges were very strict about this. Any infringement of the rules, including breaking training, disqualified the athlete—he lost his privilege to participate and win the prize. Although he would be ashamed, he did not lose his citizenship. In Philippians 3:15-16, Paul emphasized the importance of Christians knowing, remembering, and obeying the spiritual rules laid down in the Word of God, i.e., the runner must be disciplined. 1 Corinthians 9:25 says, “**Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.**” The 5<sup>th</sup> essential for winning the race is discipline.

The first part of **verse 15** says, “**All of us who are mature should take such a view of things.**” Some versions use the word “*perfect*” instead of the word “*mature*.” Paul has already denied being “**made perfect**” and since spiritual perfection—being completely Christ-like—isn’t possible until a believer is called “**heavenward,**” Paul was referring to spiritual maturity; those who have grown past the basics of salvation. In other words, he is referring to mature believers who were like-minded with him in regard to the essentials for winning the race: dissatisfaction, focused, looking ahead, determination, and discipline.

Paul closed this short section by urging the Philippian Christians to continue in the path that they have been following as they pressed towards the goal of Christ likeness; **"Only let us live up to what we have already attained."**

### **III. Conclusion**

Paul was writing to Christians—**Philippians 1:1** says, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.” As a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, every Christian has the responsibility of “running the race” and achieving the goal God has set for him. Each believer is on the track; each has his or her lane in which to run; and each has a goal to achieve. If we reach the goal the way God has planned, then we receive a reward. If we fail, we lose the reward, but we do not lose our citizenship; our salvation. Turn to **1 Corinthians 3:11-15.**

Some Christians are so sure they can make it on their own that they never stop to read God’s Word, or pray, or ask for the power of the Lord. They shouldn’t be surprised when God allows things to come into their lives to get them back on the right track. In **John 15:5** Jesus said, **“Without me you can do nothing.”** The Christian runner with a spiritual mind realizes that God must work in him if he is going to win the race. This is what Paul meant in **Philippians 2:12-13**, **“Continue to work out your salvation ... for it is God who works in you.”** *God works in us so that He might work through us.* As we apply ourselves to the things of God, He is able to mature us and strengthen us for the race. Then when our time comes to be called home we can say along with Paul in **2 Timothy 4:7-8**, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”** Then we will hear, **“Well done, good and faithful servant.”** If God were to call you home today, what would He say to you? Are you pressing on or just floating along? Are you winning the race?