

“True Completion”
Philippians 3:12-16
June 7, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We return this morning to our series in the Book of Philippians.

Earlier in chapter 3 Paul spoke of the great blessing of knowing Christ – a blessing we receive as a gift in the gospel, a righteousness he gives to us which is not our own, and the ongoing work he does in our hearts to conform us in the pattern of his own sacrificial love.

That brings us through verse 11.

But if you look at our text you’ll notice that verse 12 begins with the phrase “Not that I have obtained this ...” And whenever a verse begins with a phrase like that – a phrase referring back to what came before – then we need to read it in light of what came before. [Fee, 339].

And so, while our focus today will be verses 12 through 16, we’ll start our reading back in verse 8.

With all that said, let’s turn to our passage from Philippians 3.

And please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul, after listing his own achievements writes:

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— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

[And now our main text – Paul continues:]

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. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, 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, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,
and our chief counselors.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

Introduction

Paul’s words in our text this morning, take what could be for some of us, a second unexpected turn in this chapter. Earlier in this chapter, Paul had been speaking about all we have in Christ, and how valuable it is.

Then, Paul’s words took their first unexpected turn, as Paul started talking about sharing in Christ’s suffering – and we considered that a few weeks ago. Now, Paul’s words take what might be a second unexpected turn.

As I said, Paul had been talking about all we have in Christ, and about how we cannot earn anything better than or in addition to what Christ gives us in the gospel.

But then, starting in verse 12, Paul speaks of what we still lack. And he urges us here to “press on” and to “strain forward” in order to reach a “goal” and get to a “prize” and to make it our “own.” Paul may sound to some of us as if he’s contradicting what he said earlier. But Paul’s words here are not a contradiction. They are instead an important clarification.

And what Paul’s clarifying is that: Though the Lord has given us much, we do not reach completion in this life, because true completion comes from knowing and being with Jesus, which is both a gift we have now, and a finish line we must strain forward towards, for the future.

Let me say that again: Though the Lord has given us much, we do not reach completion in this life, because true completion comes from knowing and being with Jesus, which is both a gift we have now, and a finish line we must strain forward towards, for the future.

Let’s take that one piece at a time.

The Lord Has Given Us Much

First, as we read this passage, we need to be clear that Paul’s words here do not contradict the fact that the Lord has given us so much.

The Lord has given us everything we need.

Paul is not cancelling out all the other things he’s said in his letter to the Philippians so far. Our hope in the gospel is not in our own efforts, or our own achievements – it’s in the gifts we receive from Jesus, by grace, in the gospel. Paul has made that point repeatedly in this letter, and he’s not contradicting, or denying, or diminishing it here. So, let’s not mishear Paul.

The Lord has given us so much – he’s given us all we truly need, in the gospel.

But even as Paul says that to us, he’s worried that we might misunderstand him. He’s worried that we might draw mistaken conclusions. And so, in these verses Paul seeks to clarify what this means and what it doesn’t mean.

We Will Not Reach Completion in This Life

Because even as Paul proclaims that the Lord has given us so much, he also wants to be clear that we will not reach completion in this life.

Though the Lord has given us so much, we will not reach completion in this life.

And this is a key point for us to hear, because both the religious world and the secular world frequently try to tell us that we can reach completion in this life.

And it’s everywhere.

Ad after ad tells us, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly: “Buy this product, and then you will be fulfilled – then you will feel complete.”

Meanwhile our workplace or our school or the social circles we run in tell us: “Achieve this level of success, accomplish this goal, reach that milestone, get yourself, or your family, or your kids, to this status or accomplishment, and then you will be fulfilled – then you will feel complete.”

Others voices whisper to us: “Store up this much wealth, get your 401K to this level, reach that level of financial security and prosperity, and then you will be fulfilled – then you will feel complete.

Wellness influencers tell us “Take up this practice, do that exercise, get your body into this kind of shape, and then you will be fulfilled – then you will feel complete.”

Still others say: “Immerse yourself in this game ... or indulge in this substance ... or seek out this sexual experience and then you will feel whole – then you will feel complete.” And the list goes on and on.

From all different corners of the secular world – liberal and conservative – the voices come, and the promise is the same: lay hold of this particular thing, and then, in this life you will be fulfilled, you will feel complete.

And often, religious voices are not so different. The Christian world is full of voices telling us: “Read this book” or “Go to this conference” or “Master this ancient practice” or “Put these spiritual steps into action,” do this or do that spiritual thing, and “Then you will be fulfilled – then you will feel spiritually complete.”

So many voices make this promise of completion and fulfillment ... which makes it somewhat shocking that so few people actually seem fulfilled or complete.

I mean ... if so many solutions abound ... then why is no one I know truly fulfilled? Why is no one I know truly complete? Every human being I know still experiences unfulfilled longings and real disappointments. Every human being I know is still a work in progress – none of them are finished or complete yet.

Which should be enough to make us suspect that these voices are selling false hopes.

And Paul here confirms that.

Because Paul wants to make it clear that he himself is not complete either.

And completion is what Paul has in view here in verse 12. That word, translated as “perfect” is derived from the word *teleios*. And it can mean not just to perfect, but “to complete” or to bring something to its goal. [BAG, 817]

And given the context, Gordon Fee argues that what’s primarily in view here for Paul is completion. To put it in theological terms, he’s talking primarily about personal eschatology, not personal sanctification. His focus is on the fulfillment of who we are meant to be, and the completion of what we are meant to be. True completion and true fulfillment are what Paul has in view here. [Fee, 342, 344-345]

And part of Paul’s point is that we do not experience this true completion in this life.

That’s the hard truth Paul wants to make sure we’re aware of here. Completion is not possible in this life.

Is that something you really recognize?

Do you live in light of that reality?

Maybe you know it's true. But do you still tend to live as if it's not? Do you still tend to expect to arrive at completion in this life, in one way or another?

And if you do, then what does it look like when you grasp at completion in this life? What are the false promises that you tend to believe? And how would your life change if you took Paul's words here to heart?

This is the hard truth Paul confronts us with here: Though the Lord has given us so much, we will not reach completion in this life.

True Completion Comes from Knowing and Being with Jesus

But even as we say that, the next thing we may need to ask is: What even is true completion?

What kind of thing really completes us? Some seem to suggest that what we most need are certain possessions. Others tell us that completion comes through an experience. Still others tell us that we are made complete by an achievement, or by some sort of change or adjustment in ourselves.

And while some of those things may be a result of our completion, the Bible tells us that at root our completion is about our relationship to a person. More specifically, true completion comes when we have a right relationship to our Maker, Jesus Christ.

Only when we are in a right, and good, and true, and rich, and deep relationship with the God who made us – only then will we be truly fulfilled ... only then will we both be and feel truly complete.

True completion comes from knowing and being with Jesus.

And we know this because Paul links those two things together here. As we said, Paul, in verse 12 talks about completion – “Not that I [...] am already complete.” he says. But then he puts that “completion” in parallel with something else. What he actually says is “Not that I have already obtained this or am already complete.” Already obtained what? What, for Paul, is synonymous with – or at least strongly linked to – being complete? What is the “this” of verse 12?

And that's where we need to look earlier in the passage – that's why we need verses 8 through 11. And it's there that we see that the “this” is knowing Jesus. More specifically, the “this” of verse 12 is knowing Jesus as Paul will know him at the resurrection – when Jesus returns to live with his people forever. [Fee, 342]

Paul is talking about knowing Jesus and being with Jesus, truly and fully. And then in verse 12 he says “Not that I have already obtained this or been made complete.” For Paul, being complete and being with Jesus are inseparable. They are inexorably linked. Because being with Jesus and knowing Jesus is what makes us complete.

And yet we, so foolishly, chase after other things. We look to health or wealth, or pleasure, or prestige, or comfort, or security, as if these things will make us complete. But Paul is emphatic

that nothing short of truly knowing, and truly being with our God and Maker, Jesus Christ – nothing short of that will make us complete.

True completion comes from being with and knowing Jesus.

But ... Paul has also said that we will not reach true completion in this life. So what do we do with that? What does that mean? Is Jesus unavailable to us in this life?

Being with Jesus Is Both a Gift We Have Now and a Finish Line We Must Strain Forwards Towards, for the Future

And that question bring us to Paul's final and larger point for us to consider here – that: being with and knowing Jesus is both a gift we have now ... and a finish line we must strain forwards towards, for the future.

Being with and knowing Jesus is both a gift we have now ... and a finish line we must strain forwards towards, for the future.

First, the Bible is clear that we can know Jesus in this life, and that Jesus is truly with his people.

And yet ... as Paul reminds us here, the Bible is also clear that something is missing. We don't yet fully know Jesus as we will when we see him face to face. Jesus is not with us in quite the same way as he will be when he returns to earth, or when we go to be with him.

Paul has stressed all that we have in Jesus. But he doesn't want his readers to misunderstand. Though we already have so much in Christ ... we will not have the blessings of the gospel in full – we will not know Jesus in full, we will not be complete – until we go to be with Jesus, and then Jesus returns to this earth.

Being with and knowing Jesus is both a gift we have now ... and a finish line we must strain forwards towards, for the future. [Fee, 342-343]

This gets at a concept that theologians often refer to as the “already but not yet” of the gospel: the many ways in which we have already received the riches of the gospel, and in which the Kingdom of God has already come in Christ ... while at the very same time we have not yet received the fullness of God's gracious gift, and the Kingdom of God is not yet seen in this world in its fullness.

And Paul brings out this sense of “already but not yet” in a striking way. He says in verse 12: “I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” Paul there uses the same verb for what Jesus has already done, and what Paul is still pursuing: Paul is pressing on “lay hold of” being with Jesus, because Jesus has already “laid hold of” Paul. Paul is pressing on to make Jesus his own because Jesus has already made Paul his own. [Fee, 346]

On one level it's confusing ... but even so it's an important gospel truth: As Christians we absolutely know Jesus, and Jesus is truly with us ... and yet, there is a sense still to come in which

we will know him much more truly, and be with him much more fully, in the future. And Paul urges us to press on towards that future.

And so, it's true that if we have placed our faith in Jesus, then he has already laid hold of us – he has already made us his own. We do not earn our relationship with him. And yet, at the very same time, Paul urges us to press on towards the gifts of the gospel that we have not yet fully received.

And Paul elaborates on this point in verses 13 and 14 using the metaphor of a race. As one commentator puts it, Paul pictures “himself as a runner whose every muscle and nerve is singularly focused on the goal, in hopes of winning the prize.” And he wants the Philippians to do the same. [Fee, 346]

Paul here urges us to think of the Christian life as a race.

And it's a race in which the thing we seek is in one sense already ours as a gift ... and at the same time, not yet in our possession, and our perseverance and progress towards it is essential.

And because it's so complex ... we may need to think of several kinds of races that together capture the dynamics Paul is describing.

First, in considering how what we seek is something that in some ways is already ours ... this might seem a little silly, but it makes me think of those baby crawl races that will sometimes be held during the halftime of a basketball game.

I don't know if you've ever seen a video of one of these, but babies are lined up at one of the free-throw lines. And each of their parents then set themselves up at the half-court line. And then at the same time, all the babies are released, and allowed to crawl, and their parents at the half-court line start calling to them. And the babies race from the free-throw line to the half-court line.

And it's adorable.

On one level the race is simple: The baby just needs to look to their parent at half-court, and listen to their voice, and crawl towards them.

But, of course, there are distractions everywhere. In fact, the basketball arena is full, and people are making noise. And usually at least half the babies get distracted and either start crawling sideways or they just sit down and look around or something like that.

Now, notice three things about this kind of race.

First of all, the key for these babies is staying focused on the person they love, who is waiting for them at the finish line: focusing on them, listening to their voice, that is the key to success – especially when there are many other distractions.

Second, from the babies' perspective, what's most important is not how they rank with the other babies. What's most important is just finishing the race – getting to the finish line. Because once

they reach the finish line, their parent will embrace them and pick them up, and that's what's most important to the baby.

Third, in this race, the baby is not earning their relationship with their parent. They already have a relationship with their parent. And that is a gift of grace. They have their parent. And yet, in that moment, sitting at the free-throw line, they don't fully have their parent. Because their parent is far away from them. In a sense, those babies are straining forward to lay hold of someone who has already laid hold of them – to receive something that is already theirs. And while that might seem contradictory, the thing for them to do in that moment is not to analyze it, but to press forward so that they can receive their parent's embrace.

And Paul is making very similar points here. First, key to success, he is telling the Christians in Philippi, is focusing on Jesus. Don't be distracted by all the false offers of completion around them, whether they come from people who seem pious or people who seem pagan – don't be distracted by what they are trying to sell you, but focus instead on Jesus. That is the key to success.

Second, what's most important in the race of the Christian life is not competing with other people. What's most important is finishing the race well. Because at the finish line, waiting for us, is Jesus. And when we reach him, he will embrace us – he will take us in his arms. And of all we receive at the resurrection, it's the presence and the embrace of Jesus that will matter the most.

And third, in a strange way, we are in fact striving for something that's already ours by grace. We are pressing on to lay hold of someone who has already laid hold of us. Because if we have trusted in Jesus, then Jesus has already made us his own. And yet, we don't fully experience that now. And if we want to fully experience it, we must persevere in the faith – we must press on, and follow Jesus, seeking him for the remainder of this life, so that we be embraced by him at the finish line.

And some of those dynamics, which might seem a little silly and kind of cute in a baby crawl race ... they're actually not that different in some more serious races.

Think, for example, of the Boston Marathon.

At 26.2 miles, a marathon is a serious event – it's no baby crawl. And yet ... some of the dynamics when things get tough can be quite similar. Most runners who run are primarily focused on simply finishing well – few expect to have a shot at actually winning, and so that's not really the point for them. And so, most runners are not focused on monetary or material prizes ... but they're more likely to be focused on people. Often it's loved ones, waiting for them at the finish line.

But where many other marathons are a large circle, or a figure eight, or a zig-zag throughout a city, the Boston Marathon is basically a straight line. Which means that if your loved ones are waiting for you at the finish line in downtown Boston, then when you begin the race out in rural Hopkin Massachusetts ... the loves ones you long to be with really are 26.2 miles away from you. And there's no way to be with them except to travel the 26.2 miles that lie between you and them. Every step forward really is a step closer to them.

There is no option in Boston to quit half-way through, at the center of a figure-eight-shaped, and then just cut across a couple blocks to see your loved ones at the finish line. If you quit halfway through the Boston Marathon, you're still 13 miles away from your loved ones. You need to finish the race to get back to them.

And so, in the Boston Marathon, while there are many temptations all around, promising rest and relief if you stop ... the only way to reach the people who matter most to you is to press on, and to strain forward.

Or, even more dramatically, it makes me think of Diana Nyad's famous 110-mile swim in 2013 from Havana, Cuba to Key West, Florida. There was no land between her starting point and her finishing point. She had to press on. As she went, as she strained forward, she said that her best friend and head coach Bonnie Stoll was in her sightline all the way, in a nearby boat. Eyes looking to friend, each time she turned to breath, and pressing forward, Nyad could not stop, or she would literally sink. It was straining forward, or sinking down for her.

And in a similar way, Paul is saying that we must press on, we must strain forward, we must persevere towards Jesus. For us, that means continually seeking him. It means continually pursuing him. And while that pressing on and that straining forward does not earn us our relationship with Jesus – any more than a marathon runner earns his family's love with each stride, or Nyad earned her friendship with Bonnie with each stroke – even though it's not at all about earning, even so, if we quit pressing on in the Christian life, if we stop straining forward, then there is a real spiritual danger for us. We too can, in a sense, sink, if we stop following Jesus. We too can, in a sense, leave the distance between us and Jesus uncrossed if we cease our efforts to follow him.

And so, Paul urges us to press on, to lay hold of the presence of Jesus, just as Jesus has already laid hold of us – to ignore the distractions, and to strain forward towards the goal, towards the completion, towards the rest, that only comes with fully knowing and fully being with Jesus Christ, our Savior.

What does pressing on need to look like for you right now? How do you need to strain forward towards Jesus in this particular season of your life?

Maybe it's recommitting yourself to a habit of speaking to Jesus in prayer. Maybe it's recommitting yourself to listening to Jesus through God's word. Maybe it's recommitting yourself to Jesus's Body, the Church. Maybe it's recommitting yourself to Jesus' Kingship, by striving to obey him more faithfully in a particular area of your life.

Whatever it looks like, Paul calls each of us here to follow his example, and to press on and strain forwards towards Jesus.

And even as Paul is clear that we will not fully lay hold of that prize in this life ... Paul is also clear that the finish line is real ... and Jesus really does wait for us there.

Friends, this life will end. Maybe it will happen soon and unexpectedly. Maybe it will happen a long time from now, in old age. But either way, this life will end. You will die.

For those who have rejected Jesus, who have turned their back on him, rather than striving towards him, death is a scary thing. It is a sinking into darkness. It's a separation from one's Maker that becomes permanent. It's a thing to be feared.

But for the Christian – for the one whom Christ has laid hold of, and the one who has pressed forward to lay hold of Christ, who has trusted in Jesus, and persevered in following him – to them, death is not a defeat ... but death is a finish line.

And right on the other side of that finish line is Jesus Christ ... our loving Lord and our gracious Savior. And he is there to embrace us. He is there to let us fall into his arms. He is there to give us rest. He is there to heal us, and to complete us. He is there to reward us with good things beyond what we can imagine. But most importantly, he is there for us to be with him and know him, forever.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us press on. Let us strain forwards. Let us strive to lay hold of him who has already laid hold of us.

Even as we rest in Jesus's presence with us now, let us also persevere in seeking him at the finish line. Because there, we will know Jesus fully. There we will see him face to face. There we will be with him, and he will be with us, for eternity – forever.

This is what awaits us in the gospel of grace.

Let us press on towards it together.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Ferguson, Sinclair. *Let's Study Philippians*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997.

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.