

Growing in Christ

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[0 : 00] Good evening, friends. It's great to be with you here tonight, July 3rd. Upcoming is a big event.

And while, yes, I could be talking about the 4th of July, and that would be accurate, there's actually a larger event in the Ryder household that's coming up in four weeks and five days, to be exact.

It is the 2016 Summer Olympics. For those of you who don't know, my wife is Jamaican. So once every four years, we clear a good three weeks of our schedule that we might stop and celebrate together the reality that Jamaica, specifically Usain Bolt, with what seems like minimal effort, makes the rest of the world look very slow.

And this is a celebration for us, and it's a time that we gather together. We have her family on FaceTime watching with us. And it's a feast of sorts, a three-week feast.

I say that only to say this. The story of Usain Bolt is a phenomenal one. It's a story that leads us directly into the passage tonight, where Paul takes us as we talk shortly about spiritual growth.

[1 : 14] The story of Usain Bolt is this. At age 14, he was tabbed as a prodigy, as the future of the 400-meter dash. At age 14.

There was men such as Michael Johnson touting him as better than himself. For those of you who are unaware who that is, that would make Usain Bolt, at the age of 14, theoretically on track to be the best 400-runner to ever live.

He was 14. He ran most often barefooted on a dirt track at his middle school and high school. And he was fast. He was very fast. It was a gift that he had been given.

However, before he ever made it to the Olympics, he had developed this penchant for going to the clubs, for eating fast food, for training minimally, just enough to get by.

And something happened to Usain Bolt that would define his career for the rest of his life. And it would change the way you and I would ever see or think about Usain Bolt. And that's this.

[2 : 21] At the age of 17, 18, he started to have hamstring injuries. Due to his lifestyle and his lack of training, lack of focus. What happened following that is, although he tried to come back and run the 400, he never was able to get back to the speed and the times he previously had.

So, as his career was starting to look like it was floundering, he requested for his coach to let him run the 100-meter dash just once. We think about that today, and it seems pretty silly that he never had before run the 100-meter dash in competition.

But he hadn't. And his coach said, no, you can't. You cannot run the 100-meter dash until you first break the national record in the 200-meter dash. Okay.

Usain Bolt, for the first time in his life, he had focus. He had drive. He had desire. He had something that he needed to work for. For the first time in his life, he couldn't skate by on the natural gifting that he had from birth as just being a fast individual.

In six short months, Usain Bolt broke the national record, which had previously stood for 35 years. He was 21. Within a year after that, at the Summer Olympics in 2008, he broke the world record in both the 100 and 200, and has not looked back since.

[3 : 44] Right? And I was going to use this analogy to tell you how excited we are to watch him this year, and then two days ago, he tore his hamstring. So maybe he needs to cut back on the fast food once again. Anyways, I share that with you because I feel like in a lot of ways, it's the perfect metaphor for what Paul's doing here in Philippians chapter 3.

You see, in the same way, we as followers of Christ are not yet finished products. As we heard last week from Tommy, we've been given a gift, something that's been planted within us.

We did not earn it. It did not come with merit. It was freely given, and we have received it as believers. However, this week, Paul takes the next step, and he says, yes, the gift is received.

However, you're called to mature this gift of faith through spiritual growth. So tonight, as we explore Philippians chapter 3, verse 12, through chapter 4, verse 1, we'll look at Paul's three key steps to spiritual growth.

We'll do so by asking three questions. Where are you now? Where are you going? And how will you get there? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, God, as we come to you tonight, we thank you for the gift given.

[5 : 07] We happily receive this gift, God, of faith, of salvation through your Son. Tonight, as we move on in chapter 3 with Paul, and explore what that call and what that responsibility looks like for us as believers.

God, I ask that you open our hearts, open our minds, that you let these not be my words, but your words, and that they might fall upon listening ears. We pray all this in your Son's name.

Amen. So what Paul's dealing here with in Philippi is two main issues. The two issues are really one of legalism, I'm sorry.

That's what Tommy addressed last week. The idea that you could earn faith, right? This sort of Judeo mentality that faith was achieved. It was by merit.

It was by rule following. And Paul came and he preached and he said, no, that's not the case. But then he very quickly doubled back on what he was saying and he said, that being true, don't get lazy in your faith.

[6 : 11] Don't let that mean that you do nothing. Don't rest on your laurels, so to speak. All right, so this week, we're going to look, starting in verse 12, at how Paul addresses this need for growth.

So in verse 12, as he kicks things off very quickly, he uses some beautiful language for us, right? This being Paul. He says, not that I have already obtained it.

Not that I am already perfect. What's he doing here? He's saying, yes, me, Paul, the one who planted this church, the one who you look to as a spiritual father, I am unfinished.

And in the same way, if Paul is unfinished for all of us today, we should be able to look at that, read these words, and see ourselves also as works in progress, as unfinished.

And while that might sound a little disheartening, that we're unfinished, that we're works in progress, it comes as two things from Paul. It comes as a challenge and a comfort.

[7 : 18] The challenge is this. We have growing to do. Friends, we're not there yet. We have growing to do. We're called to cultivate this faith which has been given to us.

That's the challenge. The comfort is this, that Paul gives us in those few simple words. We aren't finished products yet. That's right. The thing that's the challenge is also the comfort.

Why is that a comfort? Because I promise you that I will fall down. I promise you that you will fall down in your spiritual journey as you grow in Christ.

And these words from Paul are meant to say, that's okay. It's okay because you're not finished. There's still work going on. There's still development being had and progress being made.

What Paul then pushes us to do as he uses this sort of analogy or metaphor of an athlete is to do exactly what an athlete does and ourselves take a baseline assessment.

[8 : 19] For an athlete, specifically a runner, a baseline assessment is composed of five things. A baseline assessment measures speed, stamina, skill, suppleness or flexibility, and strength.

These five areas then set this sort of baseline metric on which the athlete or runner says, okay, this is where I'm at. This is where I grow from. This is the soil, so to speak, in which I'm planted.

Right? And all this is a starting point. It doesn't really matter where the athlete begins. All it does is establish ground zero for where you're going.

Right? It establishes your launch point. In our spiritual lives, we ought to do something similar, Paul says.

It drives us to ask the question, where am I in my spiritual growth? He drives us to ask, where are you in your spiritual growth? Are you new to Christianity? Exploring it for the first time?

[9 : 28] Are you a young believer, but you don't yet feel like you have a deep-rooted faith? Are you a deeply rooted Christian who's looking excitedly for the next thing, the next opportunity, the next level of spiritual growth?

Maybe you feel like you've stagnated a bit in your faith. Whatever the case might be, you need to answer that question, Paul says, of where am I? It's a question of self-awareness.

And Paul says, for himself and all of us, we're not there yet. Then he says you ought to take an assessment of your spiritual life. Based upon the outcome of that question, consider yourself.

Consider your prayer life. Are you a person committed to prayer? And how often are you praying? Do you have a committed devotional life?

What is your devotional life look like? How committed are you to reading the scriptures, studying them, letting them shape your day and your life? What about your family life or vocation?

[10 : 35] How are those things shaped? Right? Are you loving your family as Christ loves you? Are you loving your job, your employer, as Christ loves you?

These are all questions not to ask to give us a guilt trip, but rather to establish ground zero, to establish our baseline. And these are just a few examples, a few ways in which we can start to think about where it is that we're starting tonight in our spiritual growth process or journey that Paul says we all must take.

Once you've established this baseline, once you've asked some of these questions and thought about this, Paul brings us very quickly on to the next step. He says, having established your baseline, knowing where you are, every believer must know where he or she is going.

For Paul, it was clear. In verse 13 and 14, he says, one thing I do. Looking forward to what lies ahead.

Right? He's got his eye on the prize, he tells us. Paul says this in response to a notion in the Philippian church that we addressed briefly earlier.

[11 : 52] This notion that once you had said yes to Christ, you were good to go. You had your faith. You had your salvation. And Paul is saying that's not the case. That's not the case because unless you continue to look forward, you really aren't looking at Christ at all.

What does he mean by this? He means that we have to have a finish line focus. Right? Think again of the analogy of a runner, of a sprinter.

Right? As they say, take your blocks. And you get ready to run. Right? As we get ready to watch Usain Bolt. Because I promise you, I don't run in this fashion. Never once does he look down at his feet.

Right? Never once does he check out what's going on around him. Or look behind. Because he knows as soon as he does that, the guy who was behind him when he started the gaze is now in front of him. And he's lost the race.

Where does he look? In order to be victorious. Where does he look in order to be perfected in this event of his? He looks to the finish line. Paul tells us what our finish line is.

[12 : 57] He tells the Philippian church the finish line is Christ. The goal is Christ. The prize is Christ. In verse 19, he tells us what the opposite of this is.

He says, Some people have misplaced focus. Their God is their belly. They focus on earthly things. So what Paul is asking the Philippian church and us tonight to consider is.

Where is your focus? Do you know where you're going? Or have you been sidetracked by the things of this life? What reigns supreme in your life?

Is it your family? Is it your work? Is it school? Is it your hobbies? What is it that reigns supreme?

If it's not Christ, Paul says, you cannot succeed. You cannot grow spiritually. He said Christ, as the focal point, is somewhat, right?

[13 : 59] It's a little bit like glasses. Those of you who wear glasses can appreciate this. Once you take them off, everything is foggy. Nothing seems very clear.

Put them on. And all of a sudden, everything gains clarity. You gain perspective. You see things in reality.

I remember when my father told me about the first time he got glasses. He was 13 years old. And it was the first time in his life that he knew that bark had texture.

It was the first time in his life that he knew that a tree leaf had veins. Right? That's what Christ is for the believer. He's the lens through which you look and which everything else comes into perspective.

And if he is not the focus, if he is not the thing on which we set our eyes, nothing else makes any sense. And he's not saying that these things are earthly in a negative way, Paul.

[15 : 02] Right? I use the example of family and of work. I don't want you to walk out of here thinking, oh, I shouldn't value my work or my family. No, that's wrong. Right?

That's not Paul's intent at all. Paul's saying those are very good things. But you need glasses to see them well. You need Christ to love them well.

To be present well. The best way I could think of to describe this was early on in my career as a driver.

It's been a tenuous career, I assure you. But nonetheless, early on it was worse than it is now. And there was a few easy fixes that came with this.

When I first began driving, maybe some of you can relate, I got behind the wheel of the car. And most of my time was spent looking just past the hood ornament. Yes, I started driving like most of us when there was still hood ornaments.

[16 : 01] Some of you now don't get that. Because they've been stolen. But I spent most of my time looking just off the hood of the car.

The time that I didn't spend looking just off the hood of the car, I spent looking in my rear and side view mirrors. Making sure no one around me was coming too close or going to hit me. Right?

It's a great theory. It was wonderful. No one ever got close to me coming from behind. The problem was, is what was going on in front of me. Right? I was going left to right, side to side.

Very rarely staying in my lane. Why? Because as my driving instructor was very quick to tell me, no, don't use your mirrors to drive forward.

Don't use your hood ornament as your focal point. Look out. Look in the distance. Let that be your guide. As soon as I did that, I was able to stay in my lane.

[17 : 03] I also quit worrying more about what was going on around and behind me. So, Paul says, look ahead. Focus on Christ. Don't let the things going on around or behind you distract you.

And if maturity is the goal of our lives, then we must submit all of those things to him. We need to let go of this seemingly compulsive need that resides in all of us.

We all have our own way in which it manifests itself. For me, I'll tell you that. This compulsive need exists in me to fix first and pray later. Maybe you can relate to this.

Whenever I see something happen, whenever there's crisis going on or disaster, my hands are most likely the first to get dirty. That seems okay, right?

The problem is that also often means there's some of the last hands to be folded in prayer. Because my first objective is to solve what's going on.

[18 : 11] My second objective is to seek what God's will is in the situation. My focus is on what's around me more than it is on Christ. All right? So, if you're anything like me, this is one of the most difficult parts of spiritual growth.

Thinking less about what's going on around you and behind you and more about what Christ is drawing you to and leading you to. As we think this way, it should bring a couple of changes.

It should change the way we pray. Think about the Lord's Prayer that we'll say in a little while together. Right? We start with addressing not ourselves, but our Father.

Our Father who art in heaven. It's to Him we pray. The first thing you ask for when we say the Lord's Prayer as Christ teaches us is, for Thy will to be done.

Now think about that in actuality in maybe your daily prayer life. For myself, I know that not often does it always follow that pattern. Prayer happens to often go something like, God, there's a lot going on right now.

[19 : 20] Could you fix X, Y, or Z? Could you step in and handle this for me? Work is really hard right now and I'm not sure what to do about it. Could you take care of that? Praying for the kingdom changes the way we see our place here on earth, here in this community, and also our place in relationship with God.

So we should pray differently. We should also live differently and work differently. Right? What if we start working for God's sake, not our own?

What if we start working in a way that we value and love our coworkers more than ourselves or that boss that we don't like? What if we start working as though we are working for God, not Him?

Right? I know some of us have that as a reality in our lives. Thank God I don't. Tommy's a great boss. But I know some of us do.

And I feel for you. And Paul feels for you. And he says, that's okay because He's not your real boss. It's the Father in Heaven that you work for. Right? Where is your focus? Is it on Christ?

[20 : 34] Then, knowing where we come from, or where we're starting, knowing where we're going, Paul says one last thing you need to do in order to grow spiritually well. He says you need to know how to get there.

You need to have a game plan. And he gives us a few examples of this, a few ideas here in the rest of this passage to get us going. The first thing he says, it's not the first or last time he said it, but he says it again here, he says, imitate me.

Right? He's not doing this self-righteously. He's not doing this pridefully. He's saying, friends, brothers and sisters, my whole life is striving for this.

Don't be me. See the things I do, and try and do them the best way you know how. The best way you can. Right? It's kind of like if we had a little prodigy in here that was a runner, and we had the option to tell them to imitate Josh, or imitate Usain Bolt.

I pray to God that you would not choose Josh as the one they imitated in their running career. Right? It's the same way in our spiritual growth life. We need to find those people like Paul, that we can say, okay, this person is further than me in the journey.

[21 : 52] They have some practices, some rhythms established, that I can put to practice in my own life. And he says, two of these things that I do, I implore you to do.

He says, be disciplined in your growth. He calls us to set boundaries, guidelines. For those who are in Philippi, it meant living like Romans in a Greek area.

Right? It was Greek country, yet it was a Roman colony. And he uses the citizenship language of verse 19 and 20 to draw them back to that.

He says, live as citizens. Instantly, instantly, friends, they would have known this means my job, my responsibility is not to go to Rome.

Rome was, it was overpopulated. There was no job opportunity. Living conditions would have been poor. The role of the people in Philippi as Roman citizens was to bring Rome to Philippi.

[22 : 57] It was to bring Roman culture, Roman worldview, Roman lifestyle to the colony in which they lived. And it took discipline. It meant not living life like the Greeks lived.

It meant not living life like they previously had. There was something different. Right? In the same way for a runner, in training, there's discipline required to grow.

Right? For Usain Bolt, as he mapped his journey from being a 400-meter prodigy to a 100-meter world record holder, there was five things that he did.

As a 400 runner, he never had to be very good at starting because he could make up for it. As a 100 runner, it was essential. So he perfected his starts. He had to perfect his form because natural ability couldn't win a short race.

He had to maximize his speed and his endurance for the journey on which he was about to embark. He had to discipline his eating and his sleeping in ways that he never had to before.

[24 : 04] And lastly, he had to lift weights in a regiment specifically designed to maximize his gift. In the same way, Paul encourages us to discipline ourselves in growth.

He says develop a growth plan. Work on the weaknesses. Strengthen the strengths. Right? I think if he were here, he would implore you to establish some spiritual disciplines in your life.

Rhythms, practices, guidelines to keep you moving in the right direction. Right? As a driver stays within his lanes focusing on a point at the end. As a runner stays between his white lines with the finish line in sight.

So we too need these practices and guidelines to keep us within the boundaries of our spiritual growth. Some of these practices include prayer, fasting, worship, Bible reading, devotions, the things that we asked earlier to set our baseline.

These are the types of practices that we need to develop. If we're going to grow spiritually. Right? If you're praying once a week now, great. Strive for twice a week next month.

[25 : 16] Three times a week the month after that. Build, grow, train yourself. If you're reading the Bible once a week right now, same thing. Strive for twice.

Not twice a day. That might be too much for you right now. Twice a month is a good start. Build from there. Second thing, be in community. It will help you grow spiritually and it will set the accountability guidelines that we need as broken people.

Here at Advent, there's three primary ways you can do this. Join a core group. Communities in which you can read the word and pray together.

Form a triad. A slightly closer knit circle. Possibly a little bit more vulnerable. A place that can really hold you accountable in all of life.

And third, spiritual formation classes. Things like essentials and distinctives. Things like gospel foundations. Use these opportunities.

[26 : 24] Take them. Let yourself live in them and bathe in those moments where you can learn more about faith and grow deeper in your roots. And Paul says to make all this stick, press on.

If there's ever a man that's lived the Christian faith and can tell us where we sit today to press on, to keep striving, it would be Paul. A man who's been declared legally dead by stoning.

Imprisoned multiple times. Never sure where his life was going to end. He leaves us by saying press on. Keep striving. When life feels impossible, press even harder into Christ and even harder into those communities that you're a part.

Because those are the places where spiritual growth happens. Those are the places where it goes from surface level to deep roots. So Paul has told us it's a gift.

It's a gift that you need to develop by asking the question, where am I now? Knowing where you're going and realizing what it takes to get there.

[27 : 40] But to what end? To what end? What for? What's the purpose of all this for Paul talking to the Philippians and for us today? Well, friends, as you prepare to celebrate July 4th tomorrow as citizens of America, remember your citizenship is not primarily here.

It's primarily in heaven. Let your kingdom's citizenship be your focus. Let it shape you. Your role primarily, our role primarily, is to bring the kingdom right here in Washington, D.C., in and through and by our daily lives, wherever that takes us.

And, this is only possible through growing to maturity in Christ, by establishing our spiritual baseline, by focusing our lives on Christ, and developing a spiritual growth plan.

All this so that we might be His image bearers in a world that desperately, desperately needs more of Him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father God, we thank You wholeheartedly for the gift, the gift of faith, the gift of salvation, the gift of Your Son.

God, we recognize, as Paul did, that this gift comes with a call, with a call to grow in faith, to mature in our faith, to perfect that faith, to take that gift and develop it.

[29 : 12] Heavenly Father God, as we walk out of this building tonight, walk back into our daily lives, let that be our focus, to become more and more like You, that You might be our prize, our goal, and our focus.

In Your name we pray. Amen.