

Fulfilling our potential in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks Rachel. Morning everyone. Good to see you. I don't know if you remember your school reports. Do you want to think about them or not?

What your teachers wrote about you? School reports these days seem to be a bit of a dying art and those that get written in school these days have to be very much focused on things like target grades and assessment objectives and all those sorts of kind of core skills. Back in the day when teachers wrote reports, basically they had free license to offend any child they didn't like that they were teaching. So as we get started this morning, let's guess whose teacher wrote these classic school reports. You get the first name. Stephen has glaring faults and they have certainly glared at us this term. Any ideas? Famous Stephen? Stephen Fry? Absolutely. Jilly has set herself an extremely low standard which she has failed to maintain. Jilly Cooper. Not many famous Jillys either. This is my personal favourite from the actor Richard Bryars. He's an older actor. He's died now. But this was written by his head teacher. It would seem that Bryars thinks he is running the school and not me.

If this attitude persists, one of us will have to leave. I don't know whether you've got any similar experiences to share from your own childhood. A lot of the reports we didn't want our parents to hear were the ones that sort of were phrased like this. Richard has great potential in this subject. However, you know if you hear the word potential in your report, it's not going to end well. And so as we come to look at this next section of Paul's letter to the Philippians, we see that he's writing about progress in the Christian life. He encourages the Christians in this town to press on, he says, and to strain towards words which we might see in a school report as they're words to do with effort. But these are not words designed to spur these Christians on to personal achievements.

If you were here last week, we heard that the gospel is not to do with achievements and they count for nothing. But he's spurring them on to maturity. That's a word he uses in verse 15. And Paul urges these Christians to push on and to mature in Christ by being clear about the goal. He talks about the goal. By drawing on the example of others. And perhaps most importantly, by growing from a place of security. Being clear about the goal. Being clear about the goal. Drawing on the example of others and being, or growing, sorry, from a place of security. So firstly, being clear about the goal.

[3 : 1 8] And what is the goal? How would you answer that question? What is the goal of being a Christian? Well, on first reading, it seems to be a little bit cryptic. In the passage we're looking at today specifically, which is verse 12 onwards, Paul uses terms like, all this, in verse 12. My goal, he says, in verse 13. Taking hold of it, he says, in verse 13 as well. So we need to kind of dip into last week's passage to get the answer. He says back there in verse 10, I want to know Christ. He doesn't say, I want to know about Christ. He says, I want to know Christ. And as we heard last week, that process starts with us ditching our achievements and confessing our wrongs and swapping them for Christ's righteousness achieved at the cross. Swapping our sin for his perfect life. And whilst that achieves our salvation, it doesn't end there. We have a new goal as Christians, and that is to know Christ better. Paul knows Christ, after all. He had a fairly dramatic encounter with him on the Damascus road. But he recognises that knowing Jesus is not based on a one-off salvation moment, however important that moment was. It's a process for us as followers of Jesus, like any important relationship.

Jesus himself says this. If you remember praying the night before he was crucified, he says in John 17, now this is eternal life, that they know you. The only true God and Jesus Christ whom you've sent.

But Paul doesn't imply that arriving at this goal is easy. Notice the language he uses. He says that he's pressing on. He's straining towards what is ahead. It's hard work. Looking back again at last

week's section, Paul says in verse 10, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so somehow attaining to the resurrection of the dead. Knowing Christ means we follow him. And the path Christ took was a difficult path and it was a painful path. It was a painful path. It was a path of rejection. It was a path of suffering. And the path that Paul has taken has been a path of trials too. Don't misunderstand this.

Paul is not seeking suffering, but in seeking to know Jesus and to honour him and to serve him, he has and he is and he will encounter suffering. But he's fuelled by the power of resurrection hope. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is the power that is working in him, pushing him onwards in his goal towards knowing his saviour better. And part of that, he says in verse 13, is forgetting what is behind. As Paul grows in maturity, what has helped him is to not only look ahead and focus on the goal of knowing Christ better, but to distance himself from his past. Even to forget it, he says. What's he referring to? Well, again, I think we need to dip back into last week's section when Paul explains what he was. When you look at verses four to six of chapter three, it reads like a game of Pharisee top trumps. He was of the people of Israel, an heir to God's covenant with Abraham. 100 points. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. That was the tribe which gave Israel its first king, Saul. 100 points. He was a Pharisee, noted for his devotion to the law. 100 points. [7 : 28] As far as the law was concerned, in his own words, he says, he was faultless. But did he know Jesus?

When he met him on the road to Damascus, his goal changed. Jesus just stopped him in his tracks, gave him a new heart and a new mission, which he's still pursuing as he writes this letter from jail. And all of his past life, he now considers, verse eight, garbage. I think in the original language, it's even stronger than the word rubbish, but we won't go there this morning. It can be helpful to look back on the past, particularly if we are reflecting on God's faithfulness to us, his mercies maybe over many, many years. But Paul's point is that if we, that we are to cast off anything from our past that essentially gets in the way of our present and future pursuit of Christ.

For Paul, it was self-righteous achievements. What about us? How can our past be a barrier to us pressing on and fulfilling our potential in Christ?

I think the past can be a bit of a tricky area to delve into, can't it, in each of our lives sometimes. Maybe it's a past event or a broken relationship, and the mistakes that you made there still dominate your thoughts. Maybe, like Paul, it's a past achievement or a status that you once had that you hold on to, and you know that it gave you a measure of your worth back in your heyday, and you need to reference it now to keep it alive. Or maybe it's holding a deeply buried grudge or feeling of resentment against a family member that's gripped you deeply for many years.

[9 : 29] I think to mention these things in passing, just simply in a short talk on a Sunday morning, doesn't do the depth and the pain of some of these things justice. But the principle remains, looking at the past often keeps us from what God has in store for us now and in the future.

In 1954, there were two runners, Roger Bannister, you might have heard of him, and John Landy, and they lined up for an event in Vancouver. And earlier that summer, they had both broken the four-minute miles. So the publicity around this meet was really, really high. Landy, he was an Australian runner, I think. He was leading the race, and as he came around the final bend, he checked to the left because he thought Bannister was going to be attacking him from that side in the final straight. And just as he did that, he passed him on the right. And that backward glance knocked him off his stride, and Bannister came through for victory. You can watch the footage on YouTube if you want. Paul wants you to fulfil your potential in and through Christ. So he says, let's press on. Forget what's behind and strain towards our goal, knowing Christ better.

And to help us with that, he asks us to draw on the example of others. Paul explains to these Christians that they don't need to pursue knowing Christ on their own.

He encourages them to look around and see the examples. People they know that aren't perfect, that they're full of flaws, but they're seeking the goal of knowing Christ. And it's shown in their characters and actions. We heard about the first two a couple of weeks ago. Timothy, remember him?

He was pressing on to know Christ better, and it was evident in his compassion for others. That's in chapter 2, verse 20. Epaphroditus was pressing on to know Christ better, and it was evident because he almost died in his service of Christ. That's chapter 2, verse 30. And in the passage today, Paul points to himself and other Philippian Christians that the Christians presumably knew.

[11 : 49] You might be thinking, imitate Paul? Really? I don't see too much connection between his life and mine.

His testimony of becoming a Christian was really different to mine. His mission is not my life story, and I've not been in prison for my faith. But Paul is very human. We've already seen that he wants to move on from the past, something that a lot of people can relate to. But he also knows he's far from perfect. He has not obtained his goal, verse 12. And he repeats that in verse 13. He says, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. Paul is a work in progress, and he knows it.

I find that really helpful. As we sometimes stumble and blunder our way through life as a Christian, here is Paul recognizing his very human struggles. But he says, I press on to know Christ more.

Let's take heart from those around us that have the same goal as Paul, but let's not fall into the unhelpful trap of comparing ourselves to them. I was talking to Lucy about this and about taking heart from those around us the other day. And without mentioning names, we talked about people we love and are inspired by who are pressing on to know Jesus better in this church.

Role models are a precious gift from God. Hearing about the work of Amir and Roshin this morning is another very helpful example. And these Christians needed role models because Paul is keen to throw into this part of the letter the opposite, whatever the word for that is. Because there are others in this town, maybe in the church at Philippi, who are modeling a very different way of life.

[13 : 56] Let's look at verses 18 and 19. For as I've told you before and now tell you again, even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross.

Their destiny is destruction. Their God is their stomach and their glory is their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. When I first read that, I presumed that these people were outside of the church, that they had no belief. But interestingly, most writers believe that these are professing Christians within the church, which might explain why Paul grieves for them.

And which might explain why we should take note. Whoever they are, the point is they're presented as a warning and as a contrast to what Paul has highlighted to this point. These people have lost sight of the goal. They don't desire to know Jesus better. In fact, it's worse.

Through pursuing their goals, they are effectively denying the power of the cross of Christ. They refuse to take up their cross and follow him. And it's seen by Paul through their priorities.

Their appetites dictate their lives. Their values and goals are all tied to creature comforts which belong to this world alone. We're not given specifics, but we do know that one of the biggest threats to us as Christians living in the West is that the enemy just loves to drip feed us comfort. The culture we're in is trying to make the present eternal, making our stomachs, our gods. And just to clarify, this is not about overeating at Christmas. It's about glorying in getting our hands on everything that makes our lives comfortable. At the expense of looking to, loving and learning from Jesus and following his path for our lives. And that's a path that we know that doesn't put self first. As one commentator puts it, Paul calls attention to the life he requires by contrasting it with the life he rejects. We must emulate those who are continuing to grow spiritually, not those who are stagnating. And lastly, to fulfill our potential, Paul encourages us to grow from a place of security. If you look at verse 12 with me, for I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

[16 : 44] There are two take holds in that sentence, and the order is important. Jesus didn't take hold of me after I tried to take hold of him. He took hold of me, and now I live to take hold of him.

If you're a Christian this morning, Christ has taken hold of you. He's invaded your life. As Jesus said, no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.

Were you drawn to Christ? I became a Christian in my mid-twenties, and I knew the gospel as a child, but I wasn't a Christian then. And by my early twenties, I was not seeking Christ. In fact, if anything, I was walking further and further and further away from him. But I was being pursued. Most days in my twenties, I knew God was calling me to him, but it was a voice I was actively fighting to block out until I couldn't anymore. He had taken hold of me. And we know when we've been taken hold of because we have a new desire to honor him and to honor the one who took hold of us, to recognize the forgiveness he offers and to take hold of him, to desire to know him better. And this is what we see Paul striving to do. Being taken hold of doesn't sound very attractive to many people today.

[18 : 21] You might be thinking that right now. We want our freedoms, don't we? But I think most people also want their security, and I think they also want hope, which normally can't be found in the pursuit of freedom through self-expression and individualism.

To be taken hold of by Christ gives us a security like no other, because we know how much it costs to achieve it. We're not taking hold of kind of tentatively or casually.

Jesus suffered the pain of the cross, the punishment for the sins of the world, the separation from God the Father so that he could say, I've got you securely in my hands.

Paul says in one of his other letters, And it's on this solid, steadfast, secure basis that we can push on in our pursuit of knowing our Saviour better and serving him.

We can step out and serve Jesus in a new way, despite our nerves, because he's taken hold of us. We can awkwardly bring Christ into a conversation with our neighbour and walk away feeling like we've explained the gospel all wrong, because he's taken hold of us.

[20 : 02] We can forget to pray for a period of time and not look back in guilt, because he's taken hold of us. Paul says, let's push on in our pursuit of knowing Christ better and fulfilling our potential in him, because he's taken hold of us.

And if you look at verse 16, we've already attained everything we'll ever need in Christ. That frees us to seek to know him better without guilt and without judgment.

And just a little word about individual circumstances. Sometimes we can read a passage like this and we can think, wow, this is all about motivation and inspiration to achieve what Paul did for the gospel.

What he did was incredible, but for us it can feel a little bit different. I was quite struck by the testimony that was in the latest community group series that we're doing. I don't know if you've got that far yet.

There's a guy called Martin who's an accountant, and he's looking forward to retirement with his wife and all the opportunities that brings them to serve God together until she becomes ill with Alzheimer's and deteriorates to the extent that she becomes, sorry, he becomes her carer.

[21 : 14] And their plans are shattered by his own admission. He loved to be seen, to be making a contribution, and here he was, hidden away, caring for her.

He hated being interrupted when he worked because he prided himself on his efficiency, and now he was being interrupted every few minutes to help her. And as Martin looked to Christ during that dark valley, he began to change.

His patience, his compassion, his empathy, and his love for others grew. Hidden away? Yeah. Held by Christ? Yeah.

Knowing Christ better? Yes. Look at verse 14. I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

God calls us into many different situations. Some are public, some are private, some are easy, many are tough. Paul says, press on, strain towards the goal of knowing Christ better.

[22 : 19] In those circumstances, whatever they are. And as we do that, it's as if Christ reaches down and pulls us towards him. And he's pulling us to himself.

Verse 20. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Pressing on to know Christ better is a call to invest in a relationship that will never end. We shall spend eternity getting to know Jesus better in glorious, resurrected bodies, it says.

As Paul says, knowing Christ does involve walking a difficult and challenging road at times, but we're held secure in our salvation and we're freed to press on and to fulfil our potential in anticipation of Christ's return when we will attain the prize.

Let me pray. Amen. Father God, thank you for all that you've done for us in Jesus Christ. Father, we do desire to push on and to know you better, but forgive us, Lord, when we get distracted from that goal.

[23 : 49] Father, help us to live for you. Help us to push on in the right way, but by loving you more and for living you more in the life that you've called us to.

Amen. Amen.