

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION? (Part-two of a four-part study)

The practical application follow-up to his struggle with sin, recorded in Romans 7:14-25, occurs in one of Paul's prison epistles, Philippians 3:12-16. In that passage, the apostle desires this fellowship of believers to know that he has not reached a state of sinless perfection. He admits to them and us, in v12, that he is anything but perfect. The word for "perfect" in the Greek is "teleoo." It occurs in the perfect passive and speaks of having reached a goal. In this case, it would be one of spiritual and moral perfection. Paul here steadfastly denies that the sanctification process has been completed in him. Instead, he views his personal spiritual growth as having plenty of room for improvement.

As a result, he uses the present tense of the verb "dioko" (to press on), in order to indicate his continued desire for further growth, in a manner similar to that of the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:18. Paul reveals the key practical factor which kept him engaged in such a high and holy pursuit, recorded in Philippians 3:13-14 –

“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Some have interpreted this to mean that we can't let our past sins, mistakes and failures discourage us from living the Christian life to the fullest extent possible. While that is certainly true, it is not the apostle's primary intent here. It is the very opposite! In spite of all his many accomplishments, Paul refused to rest on his laurels. He knew that such a mindset would cause a spirit of complacency to undermine his spiritual motivation.

In Philippians 3:15, with some measure of sarcasm, the apostle identifies the specific group of believers his words were targeting: those who had reached a certain level of spiritual maturity, and who thought they had "arrived." There, the word "perfect" is an adjective describing a present condition. In the context of vv13-14, Paul's admonition in v15 rejects any equivalence between spiritual maturity and sinless perfection. Simply put, spiritual maturity does not eliminate the need for further growth. Paul encourages the Philippians and us to embrace such a perspective. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming vulnerable to a spirit of complacency, or worse, an attitude of self-righteous pride, creeping into our relationship with God. Paul was also confident that if any of the Philippians would dare to think otherwise, that God would correct such a misguided mindset and restore them on that straight and narrow path of following our Savior every day.