

*Philippians 3:1–16 (The Message)*

And that's about it, friends. Be glad in God!

I don't mind repeating what I have written in earlier letters, and I hope you don't mind hearing it again. Better safe than sorry—so here goes.

Steer clear of the barking dogs, those religious busybodies, all bark and no bite. All they're interested in is appearances—knife-happy circumcisers, I call them. The real believers are the ones the Spirit of God leads to work away at this ministry, filling the air with Christ's praise as we do it. We couldn't carry this off by our own efforts, and we know it—even though we can list what many might think are impressive credentials. You know my pedigree: a legitimate birth, circumcised on the eighth day; an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting the church; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God's law Book.

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash—along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant—dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ—God's righteousness.

I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.

I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it.

*1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (The Message)*

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

*Are you running the race? Have you trained for it?*

Warning. Sports metaphors lie ahead . . .

Poking fun at men's fondness for comparing life to football, baseball, golf, and every other sport has become standard Hollywood fare in recent years. But even 2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul couldn't help himself. It isn't hard to find the catchy sports metaphor in Paul's letters. We don't know if Paul was an athlete himself or if he was fond of athletics or if he simply understood their importance in the Greco-Roman world. But Paul did know that there is much that we can learn about life, the Christian life, from the games we play. He writes, you've got to keep your "eye on the goal," stay "on the right track," make "a total commitment," "run the race," "run hard," stay in "top condition," and "train hard."

*Running from*

Today's passage from Philippians begins a new section of Paul's letter. He turns his attention to those whom he hopes these new believers will run *from*. Today, we often refer to them as the "Judaizers." They were well-meaning Jews who embraced Jesus but asserted that since Jesus kept the Law of Moses, so must all those who claim to have placed their

faith in Jesus; i.e., all believers. If they were right, this would have meant that all Christians would have to keep the Sabbath, obey the food laws, and be circumcised if they were male.

But here and elsewhere in his New Testament correspondence, Paul makes it clear that these “Judaizers” are completely wrong, clinging to an understanding of the Law that has outlived its usefulness. Like a nanny, the food laws and such were needed for a time, but that time has passed. Now, the believers in Christ must resist all attempts to take them back to the demands of the nanny. In Christ, they have outgrown the need for such a disciplinarian and overseer. They are no longer marked as God’s by their law-keeping but by their faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul makes these points in very strong terms. He has seen the damage the Judaizers (the knife-happy circumcision crowd) did in Galatia, and he does not want the Philippians to go through the same turmoil and confusion. After all, the Judaizers have a very attractive message – if it was good enough for Jesus, it ought to be good enough for us. Beguiling but misguided, undercutting the gospel of grace.

Paul uses his own story to drive home the point. If the Good News was all about keeping the demands of the Law, then no one would have more to boast about than Paul. He was a zealous defender of the Law and a Pharisee, a “super-Jew.” In the annals of law-keeping Jews, Paul would have been right up there with the best of them.

But, he says, all that was mere rubbish (Paul is quite crude here). All that zealous Law-keeping was nothing and gained him nothing. In fact, it was all one big loss, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. Paul has gained Christ, gladly losing all that he once valued so highly. He is at peace with God. N. T. Wright writes:

Paul draws out the contrast, the same contrast he’s been talking about throughout the passage, between those who are regarded as members of God’s covenant people because they possess, and try to keep, the Jewish law, the Torah, and those who are regarded as members of God’s covenant family because of what the Messiah has done. In 2:8 he described the Messiah’s achievement as his ‘obedience, even unto death’; here he describes it as his ‘faithfulness’; but the two mean substantially the same thing. And the way we share in ‘the Messiah’s faithfulness’ is by our ‘faith’. Our belief that the crucified and risen Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord of the world, and our loyalty to him, are the sign and badge that we have a credit balance consisting simply of him, over against all the debits we could ever have from anywhere else. This is Paul’s famous doctrine of ‘justification by faith’, which continues to be a comfort and a challenge to millions around the world.

‘Justification’ isn’t just about how someone becomes a Christian. It is about the status that they possess, and continue to possess, as full members of God’s people, no matter who their parents were or what their moral, cultural or religious background may have been. And, as verses 10 and 11 indicate, the faith which reaches out and embraces Jesus as Messiah embraces, in him, the way of suffering and death which marked him out. If you want to get to the resurrection of the dead, this is the only way to go.

Whatever that means for us today—and for some it will mean literal and physical persecution, while for others it may be more hidden and secret—we should never forget that with all this the account still stays in credit. Better to have the Messiah, and to follow him through the cross to the resurrection, than to have anything and anyone else in the world.<sup>1</sup>

### *Running toward*

In verse 12 Paul turns his attention from the dangers of the Judaizers to the prize we all seek – true and genuine reconciliation with God. Paul draws on the metaphor of a competitive foot race, which were common and very popular in ancient Greece. But there is something a bit odd here. When you read verses 12-14, it is hard not to get the idea that the prize he seeks is something he can attain by running a good race – as if we haven’t been made right with God by Jesus’ faithfulness but by our own good works. But, surely this isn’t what he means. Fred Craddock helps us here:

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2004). Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (120–121). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

In verses 12–14 Paul is again the runner (2:16). The metaphor is familiar but is it a contradiction of his strong declaration only a few verses earlier, that righteousness is by faith and not by works? No, not in Paul's mind. Faith for him involved running, wrestling, striving, and fighting, none of which would end until the day of Christ. We must remember that for Paul all that effort was not for merit but was rather the activity of one who had abandoned all claim to merit. Trust in God's grace did not make Paul less active than the Judaizers but rather set him free now to run without watching his feet, without counting his steps, without competing with other servants of Christ. His goal is clear: to be with Christ in the resurrection. To that end he can seek, because he has been found; he can know because he has been known; he can apprehend because he has been apprehended. In a word, Paul sought to lay hold of him who had already laid hold of Paul. If the Judaizers were offering "Jesus plus Moses equals perfection of faith and total assurance," then the Philippians need to know that Paul is not offering that. The work begun among them will not end until God brings it to completion (perfection) in the day of Christ (1:6). Lest any miss that point, Paul portrays himself in the least relaxed, most demanding posture he knows: as a runner in a race. His language is vivid, tense, repetitious: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls. One's first impression is that Paul may be describing a life so demanding that the Philippians may turn from him to the Judaizers who, even with a gospel of works, offer an easier path; but Paul must be honest. Beyond that, however, he probably knows that smiling presentations of the gospel as the way to be healthy, wealthy, and wise are finally insulting to those who wish to be taken more seriously than that.<sup>2</sup>

The race Paul runs, this journey of faith, is one that requires training, not mere effort. This is something a lot of Christians don't want to hear, but we need to. Those in our congregation who've run marathons didn't just roll out of bed and run 26.2 miles. They trained for it. I once taught people to fly jet airplanes. There again, effort was essential, but it took a year of hard training to create an Air Force pilot. Nobody flies a jet by effort alone the first time they try, or the second, or the tenth. They train.

So it is with all the great endeavors of our lives. It takes learning and training and discipline. And what could be a greater endeavor than becoming the person God has created each of us to be, a loving disciple of Jesus with the power, as Dallas Willard puts, "to work the works of the kingdom." When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Greece, he was training hard in the things of God. He knew that without training, our resolve to be trusting and obedient disciples dissolves into unkept resolutions.

#### *Training for the fruit*

Of course, it is one thing to say that we are going to train ourselves to be a mature disciple of Jesus, but it's another to know how. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells the Christians that those who are led by the Spirit will bear the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." But how do you train yourself to be gentle or to be joyful? I can try to be patient (boy, have I tried . . . and failed), but how do I *train* myself to be patient? I know that I suffer from what John Ortberg calls "hurry-up sickness." For example, when I make a simple trip to the grocery store, I make a careful and complex calculation as I arrive with my basket at the grocery store checkout. I scan the lines, estimate the speed of the checkers, note which lines have a dedicated bagger, and, after factoring in estimated tender times (how many check writers), I choose my line and then, too often, end up enormously frustrated because my "competition" (the person standing in my "place" in the line I didn't choose) gets out faster than I do. Yes, it is a sickness. After all, what do I really do with those five minutes I might save? Surely less than I imagine. How do I possibly learn patience? How do I learn to slow down and catch my breath? Ortberg has tried picking the longest checkout line on purpose, hoping he'd learn to like it. I haven't yet worked up the strength of will to emulate his training method. But I do know that if I don't actually train myself to be more patient, I won't ever get there. Yes, God helps me in this, but I must still learn to be patient.

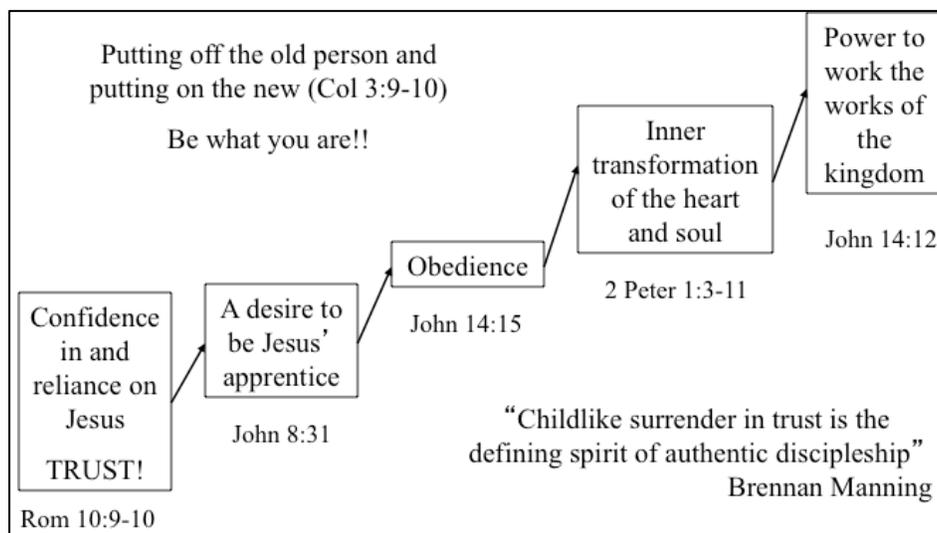
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<sup>2</sup> Craddock, F. B. (1985). *Philippians. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (61–62). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

## Doing v. Being

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard helps us to see that this training is not about so much about doing as it is about being. Our goal is to be evermore Christlike. In our training and our trying, our aim is not just to control our behavior, but to be transformed. My goal is to *be* a patient person, not just to behave patiently. We want to *be* joyful. We want to *be* loving. We want to *be* kind. It is transformation we seek, not merely better performance. We can never live Sermon-on-the-Mount lives by reducing Jesus' teachings to a list of rules. The life we seek is a transformed life; we need a metamorphosis.

This chart by Dallas Willard illustrates the way we progress from one dimension in our life with God to another and then to another. As we grow from one level to the next we are growing in Christlikeness, we are becoming the persons God created us to be. Spiritual disciplines are practices that change the inner-self, that help us toward the inner transformation of heart and soul. Thus, these disciplines are the training tools that Christians have found to be necessary: the disciplines of celebration, prayer, Bible study, servanthood, confession, and more. There are many different lists of disciplines, but they all share a commitment to training for God's kingdom, not merely striving. They are the practices that create the life we seek.



## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In VBS this summer, our children will learn about the discipline of scripture memorization – another of their FaithSkills. Have you ever tried to memorize Scripture passages. If so, how did you go about it? What was the biggest problem you encountered? How far did you get? Did you consider it to be worthwhile? How can this spiritual discipline or others help us to, as Paul puts it, “press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ”?
2. Ortberg writes that a “disciplined person” is “someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way and with the right spirit.” Do you consider yourself to be a disciplined person? How would your own definition differ from Ortberg’s? What is missing from the definition? How about “rigid” and “organized”? What is the danger in thinking about “disciplined” in that way?
3. Ortberg defines a “disciplined follower of Jesus” as “someone who discerns when laughter, gentleness, silence, healing words, or prophetic indignation is called for and offers it promptly, effectively, and lovingly.” What do you make of this definition? How would you put it in your own words? Is there anything you think Ortberg should have included in his definition? Note that he does not define a disciple as someone who has mastered a lot spiritual practices. Look at the diagram in the study. How would progression through those dimensions of living lead us toward Ortberg’s definition of a disciple of Jesus? Would you use the word “Christlike” to describe someone who meets Ortberg’s definition of a disciple of Jesus? Why?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Romans 12:3-21</b> Humble service in the body of Christ is love in action.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15</b> Barely escaping through the flames?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15</b> Christians are to practice generosity</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Galatians 5:13-26</b> Our life in the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit</p>
<p><b>Friday, Galatian 6</b> Do good to all and be careful of those Judaizers!</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

