

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Mature Citizenship...in Jesus' Kingdom

(Philippians 3:12-21)

Study #7

Sermon series: It's All About Jesus

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Philippians)

Introduction: Pushing past quitting points...

A bunch of years ago, I used to run a lot. Even when nobody was chasing me, I ran. I got caught up in the long-distance running scene and ran in three marathons in 1994, 1995, and 1996.

And, yes, there is a reason for my saying "ran in" rather than "ran" or "completed" three marathons. In two of the three marathons I began, I quit shortly before crossing the finish line at mile 26.2.

There are stories associated with both of my DNF (Did Not Finish) runs, but they're not that interesting.

You don't really want to hear about how I quit the Dallas White Rock Marathon at mile 24.5 on Swiss Avenue, right across from my alma mater, Dallas Seminary due to terminal leg cramps.¹

And you sure don't want to hear about how I started seeing visions NOT from God under the bridge on Guilbeau Road one mile away from the finish line at the church on another attempt.

I had trained sufficiently for both of these runs, and there are ~~excuses~~ reasons for my quitting (the sun was in my eyes; it was hot that day; the route was uphill all the way), but the bottom line is, I quit.

To this day, I regret quitting. I have long wished that I had finished those runs, even if it had been with a limp.

I don't know if you've ever faced the temptation to call it quits early. But if, like me, you can recall times when you didn't finish what you set out to finish, you, like me, may have regrets. You may wonder what you missed out on by quitting?⁰

What strength of character might have been built by staying the course? What might you have experienced along the way, good or bad?

We who have quit wonder what would it have felt like to have been welcomed by friends at the end of the run? How rewarding would it have been to have heard our boss' applaud us for sticking with a tough work assignment? What a treat to have heard our teacher affirm us for diligence on a challenging school project?

Any of us who start out on a mission do so with a hope of a great adventure and a strong finish.

I mean, we wouldn't ever start something if we didn't think that the rewards outweighed the risks, that the process was worth the product, and that the gain was worth the pain.

But there are risks and costs associated with every great venture, and the temptation to quit is common to most of us.

So, I'll ask: Do you have a wish list, like I have? A list of things you wish you hadn't quit? Think about it...

This morning, we are going to peer into the heart of a guy who knew something about perseverance and stick-to-it-ive-ness.

Paul, a "one-thing" kind of guy...

The Apostle Paul was not somebody who dabbled in a dozen things. He was a *one thing* kind of man and he refused to quit in his pursuit of that *one thing*.

¹ I have never liked the "optics" of quitting in front of my seminary.

Today we'll see what that *one thing* was to which he had given himself. And we'll hear him give us a "*Why*" that provides motivation to us to keep on joyfully keeping on for Jesus.

You'll remember from last Sunday that Jeff pointed out that prior to coming to faith in Christ, Paul (then, Saul of Tarsus) was counting on the purity of his Jewish pedigree and his morality to commend him to God.

Then, after his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, he came to understand that all of that wasn't worth *skubala*.² He started relying on Jesus' achievements rather than on his own (what he calls, "*putting confidence in the flesh*").

Once he started following Jesus, Paul's life goals changed from being all about doing all he could to win favor from God. He began to be all about:

- trusting God only. ("*having...a righteousness based on faith*")
- knowing Christ intimately. ("*that I may know Him*")
- experiencing resurrection power ("*that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead*").³

These three elements defined Paul's life goals. They expressed where he wanted his life to go. So, how was he doing with his goals?

Works in Progress (vv. 12-15)

Not Arrived, but Pressing On (v. 12)

Based on what we know about Paul from the book of Acts and from his own letters, I would say he was doing great.

In fact, if there has ever been a Christian who epitomizes spiritual maturity, it would be Paul.

When he sat down to write this letter to the Philippians, he had been a Christian for about thirty very full and active years.

Paul's story

His life in Jesus began when he was intercepted by Jesus while on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians.

Jesus temporarily blinded him - and then Paul came to see that the Jesus he had opposed was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

He believed in Jesus, began preaching in Damascus, was quickly opposed, and was then rescued by the very Christians he had gone to Damascus to arrest!

That was Paul's first taste of persecution - but not his last.

He traveled from Damascus to Jerusalem to meet Simon Peter and other church leaders, and from there went to the deserts of Arabia to "retrofit" his knowledge of Scripture with his new insight that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.⁴

Soon, he was invited by Barnabas - the son of encouragement - to come to serve Jesus in the church in the Syrian city of Antioch. He said "Yes" to that invitation, and, at the end of a year of serving there, he and Barnabas were commissioned to take the Gospel to people in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) who had never heard of Jesus.

They led people to Christ, planted churches, suffered persecutions, and helped new Christians grow.

When they returned to Antioch, they learned about a false teaching that was taking root in the churches concerning the gospel of grace.

So, off went Paul and Barnabas to give testimony at the Jerusalem Council. It was their testimony that ultimately kept Christianity from becoming just another sect of Judaism.

² "Rubbish" as the NASB translates it; or, more precisely, "dung".

³ See Philippians 3:8-11.

⁴ Some scholars suggest that Paul was personally disciplined by Christ during his time in the desert. While possible (we do know that Paul had some ecstatic experiences and revelations from the Lord), there is no hard evidence.

Paul then left, with Timothy and Silas, on another missionary journey. As on the first trip, they established new churches and new believers in the faith. And this was followed by a brief rest and then a third journey to spread the Christian message.

There was lots of productivity and Gospel progress. And none of the gains came without a price.⁵

The persecutor becomes the persecuted

Paul was repeatedly beaten by both Jews and Gentiles. He was stoned nearly to death at least once, spent several stints in prison, suffered shipwreck on the high seas and was in constant danger from enemies of the Christian message - and we could go on.

Suffice it to say that of all the people we might nominate for a Spiritual Maturity award, Paul would probably head up the list.

And yet, here in Philippians chapter 3, he says that he has NOT at all “arrived.” He’s justified, redeemed, and reconciled to God, but he still has miles to go in the race he is running toward maturity.

Paul’s honesty (v. 12)

[12] Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.⁶

In the eyes of the Philippians - and in my eyes, too! - Paul was a spiritual giant. But Paul knew Paul well. And Paul wasn’t all that impressed with Paul.

He did not score maturity based on his conformity to a list of do’s and don’ts.

⁵ As he said on one occasion, Paul bore in his body the brandmarks of Jesus (Galatians 6:17).

⁶ Phillips’ version renders the phrase, “Grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me.”

He measured maturity on the basis of whether he was:

- trusting God fully.
- knowing the Lord intimately.
- experiencing Christ’s resurrection power.

And in each of these metrics, Paul saw his need for growth. The more Paul matured, the more he recognized the need for maturity.

Sure, he was making progress.

But he longed to trust God more fully, know Jesus better, and experience more resurrection power for living and loving.

Notice his transparency, his authenticity. He felt no need to claim that he had “arrived.” He would have no problem opening a meeting with, “Hi. I’m Paul and I’m a sinner.” (thanks, AA!)

He wasn’t troubled or discouraged by seeing that he had miles to go in his walk with God. And you and I don’t need to be paralyzed or derailed because we may have been Christians for months, years, or decades and STILL haven’t arrived.

No! We can join Paul, admit how far we still have to go, and choose to press on.

Not Arrived, but Reaching Forward (vv. 13-14)

Leaving the past in the past (vv. 13a)

[13] Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind..

He is going to live in the light of forgiveness and not with his eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror.

He isn’t going to dwell on the atrocities he committed against Jesus’ followers when he was chief persecutor of the church. (see vv. 5-6) He’s been forgiven, so he won’t take a guilt trip.

He isn't going to let his past achievements turn him into an arrogant, prideful man.

And he isn't going to open the door to bitterness by focusing on all the sufferings he has endured for following Jesus.

No, he's going to leave the past in the past. But traveling the road to Christian maturity involves more than leaving the past behind. The journey into maturity is all about moving ahead, full speed.

Extending our grasp (vv. 13-14)

[13] 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, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul might continue to live in a Roman half-way house chained to a soldier, night and day. He might be freed to go and do what he wished. Whatever.

In whatever situation he finds himself, he can always learn to trust Christ more fully, to know Christ more intimately, and to walk more lovingly in resurrection power.

No matter what the future held, he would enjoy the prize of rich fellowship with Jesus now - a life of abundance - PLUS the **"prize"** that will come to him in glory from the Master.

This mindset - to be all about faith, the knowledge of God, and the power of the resurrection - is Paul's definition of maturity. Today, he calls each of us to strive for the same thing.

Mature and Maturing (vv. 15-16)

[15] Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; [16] however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Defining maturity (v. 15a)

By the word, "Perfect" Paul doesn't mean, "I've arrived."⁷ "Perfect" means "I know that I have not arrived AND I'm pressing on."

Maturity sees that there is always more progress to be made toward maturity.

Let's all face it. This side of eternity there never will be a time when we'll arrive at perfect maturity. "Getting it all together" is what Heaven is all about. In this life, we never get to a place where we raise our hands in final victory, and shout, "I did it!"

God will reveal what needs to be changed (v. 15b)

And, when we ask God with an open, receptive heart, He will happily reveal to us what needs to be changed.

I mean, we'll agree that there's room for a little fine tuning here and there, right?

For instance, I know that I need to do better at organizing my desk. My scheduling skills could improve. And, I could do better at taking responsibility for a couple of things at home. Essentially, though, I'm doing pretty well.

Really?

What if I start asking myself about the level of trust in God I bring to my walk through a normal day? Or how am I doing in my intimate walk with Christ? Or what is my experience of Jesus' resurrection power as it impacts how I live and love others?

None of this is "tweaky" stuff. I need more than a little "fine tuning."⁸ We all do.

⁷ If you think you have spiritually arrived, you are a sophomore - the word being made up of two Greek words that together mean "a wise fool".

⁸ Trusting reliance on God is the one thing that pleases Him (Hebrews 11:6). To recognize a need to make progress in the arena of faith is to admit a pretty significant hole in progress toward spiritual maturity.

So, let's say it out loud. The initial battles a Christian fights are the easier ones. The early victories over some obvious sins are a piece of cake compared to the challenge of stuff like pride and greed and lust and selfishness.⁹

I have found that winning one skirmish on the road to maturity opens the door to a more insidious evil.

So, as I have gotten older, I am increasingly inclined to joyfully admit that I don't have life in Jesus all wired.

And I'm fine with that because my older brother, Paul, tells me that I'm mature when I realize that I have a long way to go in the things that really count AND I commit to pressing on.

That's maturity, friends. That's the posture we are each to assume. and my prayer today is that all of us decide before God to "press on" from wherever we are to maturity in Jesus.

And for some helpful advice about pressing on to maturity, what Paul says next is really helpful.

He tells us to notice how others navigate life and follow those who point the way to the maturity we want for ourselves.

A Tale of Two Paths (vv. 17-19)

Follow (v. 17)

[17] Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.

When you see someone who is all about Jesus and is walking by faith in Jesus, follow.

When you see someone who speaks about Jesus in personal and in intimate ways, indicating a rich walk with their Savior, follow.

⁹ C.S. Lewis spoke of this in his masterpiece, The Screwtape Letters.

When you see someone who loves really well, even when they aren't being treated well, follow them into resurrection power.

You'll find these people at church or at work, at school and (if you look closely) and in your home.

They are models who will point you to maturity. Get to know them. Seek them out and learn from them. Leverage their experience with Jesus. (If as I just described these models, someone appeared in your mind's eye, why not give them a call this afternoon and ask for help?)

And notice, too, those who don't take eternity into account and who don't value maturity in Jesus. un-Follow them.¹⁰

un-Follow (vv. 18-19)

[18] For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, [19] whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

I'm not saying to un-Friend these people. By all means, be-Friend those who aren't on the path you're on to spiritual maturity.

Just don't follow them. Paul mentions them because there is a risk that we might follow them. Don't go there.

Don't let yourself be ruled by the appetites of life - food, alcohol and drugs, sex, sleep, popularity, power.¹¹ Don't buy into the idea that the only real things are the things that can be seen, heard, smelled, felt, and tasted. Don't believe that this life is all there is.

That kind of life leads to destruction.

¹⁰ Most commentators (including Thomas Constable) believe that unbelievers are in view here. I fundamentally agree, but also believe that Paul is issuing a warning to the believers in Philippi to not follow them, implying that a believer in Jesus might be guilty of the things mentioned in verses 18-19.

¹¹ A similar thought is found in Romans 16:17-18.

Don't join them. Weep for them. That's what Paul did.

Weep

Weep for those whose end is destruction, who don't know the Jesus we know. Weep for those who are shackled by appetites that are destroying them. Weep for those who think only of time on earth and disregard eternity and heaven.

Don't get angry at those who haven't yet come to know the amazing grace of God. No, weep for them - and tell them the Good News that will change everything.

Tell them that Jesus lived and died and rose again so that they would have peace with God. Tell them that eternal life is theirs for the taking when they believe in Jesus.

There is no life like the life of following Jesus into spiritual maturity. It is the abundant life He promised (John 10). It's a life of purpose and it's a life marked by the beautiful fruit of the Spirit.

But if any question remains in our minds as to "Why?" we should "press on", Paul answers by reminding us "Who" we now are.

First, though, a word about who we have always been.

The Great "Why?" of Pressing on to Maturity

Citizenship, 101

Most of you to whom I am speaking are citizens. American citizens, mainly, although in Encuentro there are Mexicans and Chilenos, Peruvians and Brazilians. If you aren't an American citizen, you are a citizen of some nation-state. Maybe even a dual citizen.

Speaking personally, I was born to American parents in Dallas, TX, and I was, thus, born an American. My US citizenship is not due to any effort or to any merit on my part.

Others become American citizens by a process called naturalization which involves learning about America, gaining a certain level of fluency in English, taking a challenging written test about America and how it works, and pledging allegiance to America.

All American citizens are subject to the laws here, benefit from the freedoms available here, and are obliged to carry out certain citizenly responsibilities.

At all times and no matter what I am doing, I am an American citizen. There are certain moments when I feel the reality of my American citizenship most deeply.

When I write one of my elected representatives a letter about some issue, I do so as a citizen. When standing in line to vote or when serving on a jury downtown at the courthouse, I feel the gravity of my citizenship.

And when I've been in other countries, I have felt my American-ness.

When in Chile or Uruguay, India or Kenya, I want to be a good representative of America, avoid being the "ugly American, watch out for ethno-centrism, and represent the USA with distinction.

Back in the early 2000's, when I went to Russia a few times, I remember being keenly aware of being a foreigner there and a citizen of another country when passing through the Immigration line (the RED line).

Citizenship in any country has its privileges, and in the first century, Roman citizenship was a definite status symbol.

Much like American citizenship, it was bestowed on natural-born residents of Roman cities, like Philippi. Or, at significant cost, it could be purchased.

We have every reason to believe that the Philippians to whom Paul was writing were proud of their Roman citizenship and grateful for the privileges it brought them.

Rome was their empire, Asia Minor their subculture. Their laws were Roman, their holidays Roman, their political system Roman.

But Paul has news for them and news for us.

After calling all who have believed in Jesus to a life of “pressing on” to maturity in Jesus, he tells us that who we are now supersedes who we have always been.

We are now subjects of a kingdom that now can only be seen by faith, citizens of a country we’ve not yet visited.

Heavenly Citizenship, 101 (vv. 20-21)

[20] For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; [21] who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.¹²

The future of a heavenly citizen

We gain citizenship in an earthly nation-state through birth. We gain heavenly citizenship through re-birth.

It is through faith alone in Christ alone, who died for our sins and now offers us eternal life as a gift that we become citizens of heaven.

Our king, Jesus, will rescue us from this land (earth) and take us to our eternal home, either at death or when He comes for us at an event we refer to as the Rapture.¹³

When we get there, we’ll be transformed to “fit” our heavenly home with a rehabbed, glorified body.¹⁴

¹² Here, Paul describes our present physical condition as “*the body of our humble state.*” Yep, I’ll admit that on my many days, these days, I feel the “*humble state*” of my physical body.

¹³ See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

Our greatest hope is for the life beyond this life. God will do what Paul says He will do.

Jesus, our King, doesn’t only offer us life and purpose and freedom and meaning and abundance here and now, during this earthly life. He also offers us victory and hope beyond the grave, life forever with God in a new body fit for eternity.

THAT is what citizens of heaven have to look forward to.¹⁵

But - in case you haven’t noticed - we are not yet in heaven. We are living in the meantime, between two worlds.¹⁶

Before we go home (to heaven), we’re here. And while we are here - not there - there are certain things that are true about our current reality that will not be true of our eventual reality.

The heavenly citizen’s current reality

One, our earthly citizenship binds us to a flawed country. That is true of every nation that exists or has ever existed. Our heavenly citizenship binds us to a perfect kingdom.

Two, every earthly realm is ruled by fatally flawed leaders. Our heavenly country is ruled by a perfect Benevolent Sovereign.

Three, the USA - and Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Russia and all other nations - will one day fall and fail. Heaven will never fail.

¹⁴ The Bible doesn’t teach that the physical human body is a prison for the soul or that it is inherently bad. The biblical view is that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit now. In heaven, our body will be our dwelling place throughout eternity. God is not going to *eradicate* the body. He is going to *transform* the body.

¹⁵ See these passages on eager anticipation of heaven: Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Heb. 9:28.

¹⁶ Some writers have expressed the Christian’s citizenship situation as being akin to someone who has “dual citizenship” in two nations. I think it would be better to see it as a primary and a secondary citizenship. For the Christian, obligations to an earthly realm are always secondary to obligations to God and His realm.

Four, our earthly citizenship will end. It is temporal and temporary. Our heavenly citizenship is eternal and will never end.

Given all of this, our chief allegiance is due to our heavenly king and kingdom.

Pledging allegiance

It is always a pressing matter to “press on” to spiritual maturity. It may be especially pressing that we see the priority of pressing on for Jesus in days like these.

Might it be that we could gauge our alignment with our heavenly citizenship by considering the following?

You who believe in Jesus...

...do you realize that you have been commissioned as a representative (*ambassador*) who is to do all you can to live in this country in ways that advertise your king’s love and grace? (Is your life increasingly aimed toward love and grace?)

...about which kingdom are you most concerned, earth or heaven? Over which kingdom do you lose the most sleep? (Are you more concerned about the way the government spends your tax dollars or how you can invest in God’s kingdom work?)

...about which kingdom’s advance do you react most strongly? (Are you more interested in the potential impacts of an upcoming election or the stunning revival currently happening in Iran?)

...about which kingdom’s activities do you talk most frequently? Pray most fervently? (The topics of our talk and of our prayers speak volumes about our priorities.)

Setting our minds on the priorities of the eternal kingdom of God will move us to see the high calling of pressing on to maturity in Jesus.