

Greek has “according to the goal I pursue,” putting the emphasis upon “the goal.” What is the goal that Paul has in mind? Ultimately it surely is to hear the words of Yeshua, “well done, good and faithful servant” (cf. Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17).

This is the “prize of the upward call of God in Messiah Yeshua” which Paul describes in 1Cor 9:25.

Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then [do it] to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1Cor 9:25)

How easy it is to become distracted by all of the negative aspects of the world in which we live. And therefore how important it is that we regularly focus our minds and thoughts upon the race in which we are engaged, and the glorious prize that lays before us, even to be fully accepted by our risen and reigning Savior, and to dwell forever in the eternal joy and majesty where all sin and sorrow have been forever abolished and joy and happiness find their full abundance in giving glory to the One Who has redeemed us.

Such an uplifting aspect of our faith is enhanced and strengthened by fellowshiping together with other believers, and this is undoubtedly why the author of Hebrews wrote these inspired words:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging [one another]; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Heb 10:23–25)

**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;**

*Let us therefore, as many as are perfect* – It is clear from comparison to v. 12 in which Paul states regarding himself, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect...,” that he is not here seeking to address any of the believers in Philippi as though they were “perfect” in the sense of “having come to the point of spiritual maturity in which they never again would commit sin.” So how are we to understand Paul’s use of the word “perfect” in this verse? The Greek term translated “perfect” by the NASB is τέλειος (*teleios*), the noun-form of the verb

τελειόω (*teleioō*), “to be perfect,” which Paul uses in v. 12 in the expression “become perfect.” Given that Paul obviously is not addressing his remarks here to those believers in Philippi who had attained spiritual perfectionism (i.e., never to sin again), we are left with the question of what Paul means by using this language.

As noted above in the commentary on v. 12, the idea of “perfect” in this context is that to which all believers must strive but which will ultimately and finally be reached only in the world to come, when mortal puts on immortality. Given this fact, we should understand that the Greek term used here (*teleios*) can also mean “maturity,” that is, the life of the true believer in Yeshua which continues to progress in sanctification, i.e., to become more and more conformed to the likeness of Yeshua. Such progress may not be at the same pace for all, but all who are truly are born again will continue to win the battle against the sinful flesh and live a life that increasingly conforms to righteousness as God defines it in His word.

Thus, the NIV translates the first clause of our verse this way: “All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things.” Surely he uses the same word-group (τελειόω, *teleioō*) in v. 12 to describe the “eschatological consummation” of the believer’s final salvation, but it can also carry the meaning of “goal” or “aim” toward which someone is pointing.”<sup>1</sup>

But it would appear most likely that Paul is using this word to emphasize not a level of “maturity” that the Philippian believers have reached, a level that includes himself, but rather having the same primary goal in mind as one lives out their life of faith in Yeshua. This fits well with the footrace metaphor that Paul has been using. Even as a runner must continue to train in order to complete the race and to do so as one who strives to win the race, so Paul characterizes the believing community to which he is writing as comprised of those who have shown themselves to be genuine believers in Yeshua.

And what is the mark of such genuine faith in Yeshua? It is a steady progress in sanctification, having a life that more and more conforms to obeying God by becoming more and more like Yeshua in thought, word, and actions.

It is not as though there is a level of “maturity” that a believer reaches in which he or she no longer struggles against the flesh. Thus, even though the Greek term could be understood as meaning “to be mature,”

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1 See Hellerman, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Philippians* (Broadman & Holman Pub., 2015), p. 200–201.

the better picture that our text offers is that of a believer who continues to make progress by applying the means of grace: admitting where he or she has failed, seeking forgiveness from God and others, personal application of the Scriptures, and regularly engaging in prayer and life-to-life fellowship with other believers.

...*have this attitude* – The attitude (φρονέω, *phroēō*)<sup>1</sup> which Paul enjoins here is that which he has repeatedly emphasized in the previous context, namely, in using the metaphor of a race, what a true athlete does in the race: v. 12, “I press on so that I may lay hold...,” v. 13, “straining forward to what lies ahead,” v. 14, “I press on toward the goal.” This likewise must be the attitude of all who are truly born again by the Ruach HaKodesh through faith in Yeshua. To “win the race” means to persevere in becoming more and more what the Lord intends us to be.

... *and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you;* – Since Paul recognizes that very often a written message may be interpreted several ways by those who hear its message, Paul is sensitive to the fact that not all of them would be at the same level of spiritual maturity and thus may wonder if they were expected to have the same level of faith that Paul has and enjoins upon them in his letter. He does not want them to expect that he has a specific “time-frame” in which spiritual maturity and boldness must be achieved. His point is rather that spiritual growth and progress is the ultimate goal of all who are true believers, and some may attain a “faster pace” than others.

But the reality is that all who are truly born from above, and thus have the indwelling Spirit of God dwelling in them, will be led and urged by God Himself to continue “the race,” not “giving up,” and will, by God’s grace, finish “the race” to the glory and praise of God.

Indeed, the final phrase, “*God will reveal that also to you,*” can be understood to mean “God will reveal that fully to you” or “God will reveal that over and over again to you,” for the Greek ἀποκαλύπτω (*apokaluptō*) means “to be fully known, to make fully known”<sup>2</sup> and can imply repetition in revealing something to be grasped. All of this makes it clear that it is God’s full desire and plan that all those He has drawn to Himself will become more and more conformed to the

1 The majority of manuscripts have φρονῶμεν (plural, pres. active subj.), “to think.” One variant has φρονοῦμεν (⌘ L 326 1241; C1). But this variant most likely resulted either from an attempt of scribes to smooth out the Greek, or perhaps an error of sound or sight. (Cf. Hellerman, *Exegetical Guide...*, p. 207.

2 BDAG, “ἀποκαλύπτω,” p. 112.

righteousness which He desires, a conformity that eventuates in eternal righteousness. In emphasizing that spiritual growth is God's work in each believer's life as they submit to Him, Bruce notes regarding this final phrase of our verse:

If some of Paul's readers felt bound to admit that they could not express their ambition or attitude in Paul's terms, let them not despair or resign themselves to eking out a second-rate Christian existence. Let the matter be committed to God, and that too God will make clear to you. Paul will not scold them or express disappointment that they have made such poor progress. He aims rather to encourage them.<sup>1</sup>

**16 – however, let us keep living by that same *standard* to which we have attained.**

The opening “however” translates the Greek *πλὴν* (*plēn*) which is an adverbial conjunction indicating “only, in any case, on the other hand, but.”<sup>2</sup> Paul uses this, no doubt, to indicate to his readers that he is not expecting them all to view him as the standard or level of maturity to which they all should have already attained. Rather, he continues to point them to Yeshua Himself as well as to the standard for a life of faith laid down in the Scriptures of the Tanach. As Fee notes regarding this opening word “however” (*πλὴν, plēn*),

It therefore means, “under any circumstances,” whether you see all things fully my way or not, “all of us, you and me together, must behave in conformity to the same standard.”<sup>3</sup>

He therefore enjoins his readers and us, to “keep living by the same *standard*...,” i.e., to emulate in our own lives the truth by which we were brought to faith and having Yeshua Himself as the standard of faithfulness for which we are to strive. It should be understood that the English translation of the NASB, which includes the word “*standard*,” is actually not found in the Greek text itself. Note the ESV and NIV translations:

Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (ESV)

Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (NIV)

1 F. F. Bruce, *Philippians in Understanding the Bible Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2000), p. 125.

2 BDAG, “πλὴν,” p. 826.

3 Gordon Fee, “Philippians” in *NICNT* (Eerdmans, 1995), p. 360.

The issues in the grammar are these: What does Paul mean when he writes:

1. “by that to which we have attained”
2. to what “that same” refers, to which he is urging conformity,  
and
3. how these two relate to each other.

The phrase “to which we have attained” surely means “to which we have already attained.” And what was it to which they had already attained? It was an acceptance by faith of the gospel and thus an on-going commitment to live a life in conformity with the righteousness expressed in the gospel message and the life of faith taught by the Scriptures and by Yeshua’s Apostles. As Fee puts it:

Paul seems to be calling them to live in keeping with how they have already followed Christ, before they have received this letter... This is that to which he [Paul] and they have already attained, even if some are now slackening off in some way and for some reason.<sup>1</sup>

The words “that same” refer to the life of faith to which both Paul and the believers in Philippi were committed, a life exemplified by the gospel, centered as it is in the very person of Yeshua: His work of obtaining eternal salvation for all who are His, and His perfect life of obedience to the Father. Paul’s point in this phrase is that he is not teaching something “new” but rather his instructions are based upon the unmovable rock of the gospel, i.e., righteousness gained for every believer through the death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession of Yeshua.

How are these two phrases related? They are related as identifying the core truth of what identifies all true believers in Yeshua, namely, that having received the offer of eternal salvation by means of the gift of faith granted them, they will inevitably continue to grow in obedience to the gospel and thereby give glory and praise to the One Who has redeemed them.

Paul’s theological point is this: a genuine faith in Yeshua creates an “already/not yet” reality in the believer’s life. Their eternal salvation is as sure as though it has already begun even though the fulness of such eternal bliss has not yet been achieved. This hearkens back to the

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1 Ibid.

“Christ narrative” of 2:6–11 as well as what Paul has just written in vv. 4–14, namely, that the life and work of Yeshua the Messiah forms the paradigm for those who would be His followers. This brings true joy in serving Yeshua, for even as He has ascended on high as the Victor over sin and death, so even now, by faith, we possess that which we will fully experience in eternity, that is, having our sinful nature eradicated, and enabled forever, fully to bask in the glory of God as those He has made forever righteous in all aspects of life. As Fee notes:

...the power of the resurrection by which they now participate in His sufferings, thus being conformed to His death, is also the guarantee of their own sure future, toward which he [Paul] has just urged them to follow him in eager pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

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

Paul once again addresses the Philippian believers as “Brethren,” just as he did in vv. 1 and 13 of this chapter. He does so to emphasize that he is one with them in the family of God as those who have been brought near to Him through the redemption purchased by the death and life of Yeshua. The very fact that Paul begins this verse with “Brethren” helps us better to understand his admonition in the words “follow my example.”

It is true that in the Jewish world in which Paul lived, a teacher or mentor was to set a prime example for his students of what they were to emulate in terms of gaining knowledge and ability to live out that which they were taught at the feet of their teacher.

The Greek of the opening phrase utilizes the word *Συμμιμηταί* (*tzum-mimētai*), formed of the preposition “with” (*σύν*, “with, together with”) and *μιμέομαι* (*mimeomai*), “to imitate.” It is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. Paul uses it here to encourage the Philippian believers to “be imitators with him” which helps us understand his meaning, and it is this: even as Paul sought to imitate and emulate the very “walk of life” exemplified by Yeshua Himself, so he enjoins his readers (and us) to follow his example and seek to “walk in the footsteps of Messiah Yeshua,” that is, to see Him as the pattern of life we as His disciples are likewise to emulate. Thus, Paul is saying in this text: “follow me as you see me following Yeshua.”

1 Gordon Fee, “Philippians” in *NICNT* (Eerdmans, 1995), p. 361.

...observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. – Further, Paul does not set himself up as the only or even the primary example for his readers to follow but encourages them to see the same pattern of striving to live a life worthy of being called into God’s family by others who are leaders, teachers, and those who have gained a growing maturity in living out a genuine life of faith. They, like Paul, were proclaiming: “follow me as I follow Messiah Yeshua.”

This teaching of Paul makes it extremely clear that those who would strive to be leaders at any level in the local body of Messiah must have as one’s primary purpose to have a life that exemplifies true obedience and love for God and His word. That Paul could use the plural, “observe those who walk” surely indicates that he considered his position as an apostle of Yeshua not to have given him a higher requirement to follow Yeshua than is given to all believers. All who belong to Yeshua through faith in Him, are called to become what God intends them to be and are thus being transformed into living witnesses of Yeshua’s own life.

This perspective corresponds to Paul’s words to the Thessalonians:

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1Thess 1:6–7)

### **18 – For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Messiah,**

Once again, the biblical use of the verb “walk” (*περιπατέω, peripateō*) means “the manner in which one lives out one’s life.” That Paul states that “many walk” in a way that totally undermines their lip-service of being followers of Yeshua may uncover the fact that these were those who attached themselves to the “new religion” about Yeshua, perhaps expecting that this “new religion” would offer special power, prestige, or other things longed for by the sinful nature. Or perhaps they were just enamored with “something new” or “novel,” and “came along for the ride.”

But the reality was that their joining with those who confessed Yeshua not only was a sham but also weakened the community of true believers until and when they were dismissed from the community of faith for their unwillingness to repent and believe with genuine saving faith.

Paul’s words here are very strong! Rather than being those whose

lives exemplified the renewed life of the redeemed, they were “enemies of the cross of Messiah.” This means that in their self-centered lives, yet masquerading as true followers of Yeshua, they were projecting to the masses that being a “follower of Yeshua” was no different than those who worshiped false deities, just different “religious activities.”

Surely we are not exempt in our modern world of being charged with a similar indictment as Paul has given to the “false believers” of his day. How many churches and gatherings of people fit under the general label of “Christian” but are, in God’s eyes, enemies of the cross of Yeshua, for they teach that which is contrary to the gospel itself.

One commentator puts it this way:

Paul now switches back to a negative example presented by those whose lives do not conform to the cross. Who they might be is irrelevant to Paul’s argument. They are believers who simply serve as a foil. The enemies are not those on the outside but those on the inside—those who bear the name of Christian but who live no differently from unredeemed pagans.<sup>1</sup>

Here, once again, we are reminded that the fallen nature of mankind thinks that one can win favor with God through one’s own abilities, desires, and “religious practice.” It is not in the fallen human nature to humble oneself and admit that “I am entirely unable to win the favor of God or to do enough “good” to earn His power.” Playing “religion” is the bent of the sinful nature and a true change can come only when the Spirit of God quickens the mind to know that “in me, that is in my flesh, there dwells no good thing.” As Paul teaches us:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. (Rom 7:18)

Only when the Ruach HaKodesh brings true conviction and the gift of faith is fallen mankind enabled to serve Him in spirit and in truth.

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 4:24)

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1 Garland, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Philippians* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 247.