

Philippians Chapter 5 the Christian Temper, Aggressive and Progressive

by A.B. Simpson

A.B. Simpson's sermon emphasizes the importance of striving for spiritual growth through self-awareness, aspiration, and reliance on God's support.

Scripture: Philippians 3:12

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Cooperation"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the importance of a Christian's aggressive and progressive spirit in pursuing spiritual growth, as illustrated in Philippians 3:12-14. He argues that true strength lies in a combination of gentleness and forcefulness, urging believers to forget past achievements and press forward toward the heavenly prize. Simpson highlights the necessity of self-dissatisfaction, heavenly aspiration, and divine cooperation in the Christian race, encouraging the congregation to strive for spiritual maturity and to rely on God's strength. He reassures that God is actively involved in our journey, revealing visions of glory and holding us up as we pursue our calling in Christ.

Transcript

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14).

It might be supposed that a spirit of sweetness would necessarily be a spirit of weakness, and that a yielded and gentle disposition is lacking in the spirit of forceful aggressiveness and manly energy. This is not always true. The bravest soldier is often the gentlest man. The quiet forces of nature are the most irresistible and overwhelming, and the strength of God is often hidden behind His gentleness.

And so this passage proves that the man who could be most yielding, tender and affectionate, could stand like adamant or sweep like the cyclone. This fine passage has about it something that reminds us of the clarion call of the trumpet summoning to arms and to victory; something that suggests the atmosphere of the arena where men struggle for the mastery and where crowns are dearly won.

The spirit of our age is marked by physical culture. Our young men are taught in universities and colleges to train for athletic skill and physical manhood. This is perhaps carried to an extreme degree as it was in the luxurious days of ancient Rome which preceded the final catastrophe. At least, it expresses a longing in the soul for manly energy, and may well stimulate us to the higher pursuit of spiritual manhood and aggressive forcefulness. If the flower of our manhood is contending in the athletic arena or on the field of battle for the prizes of victory, how much more should we strive for a crown that is incorruptible and a glory which fadeth not.

This is the picture of our text. It is the spectacle of a man pressing forward in the race-course with muscles strained to their utmost tension, with nerves alert and senses all alive to every advantage of the fray, and with his whole being intensely absorbed in the struggle for a prize which is flashing before his kindling eye from the open heavens where the great Umpire stands beckoning him on and holding out the glorious diadem.

There are three important features in the picture, full of precious lessons for us who with Him are also in the race.

I. A SPIRIT OF SELF-DISSATISFACTION

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect." "I count not myself to have apprehended." There is nothing that so deadens the spiritual activities and aspirations as an overwhelming self-complacency. If we look at mere human standards, or even our own ideals, we shall easily be satisfied. The story of the artist who turned away from his perfect and finished workmanship with a cry of despair, "I have surpassed myself; henceforth there is nothing left for my ambition," is a true glimpse of the paralyzing power of a too easy self-content. It needs the sense of our own shortcomings to incite us to nobler endeavors. There is a discouraging way of looking at your faults and failures which takes all the heart out of you. But there is a wholesome mean between conceit and self-condemnation, which is the fruitful soil of new endeavor and loftier aspiration.

In two respects Paul felt that he had up to this time failed to reach the full ideal. First, he had not yet obtained the prize or made sure of it. This word translated 'attained' ought to be rendered obtained. He is not referring to character but to reward. A little later he felt he had secured it, and in writing to Timothy he could say, "I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness."

Next, however, he adds, "either were already perfect." This should be translated perfected, and it refers to personal character and attainment. What then does the Apostle mean when later in the paragraph he adds, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded." How can he be perfect if he is not yet perfect? The answer will be plain if we paraphrase his statement in a very simple form. We are perfect but not perfected. We are complete but not completed. "Ye are complete in him," says the Apostle to the Colossians, and yet in the same epistle he adds, "that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God." There is a sense, a true sense in which we may accept the righteousness and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and count it real and sufficient, and dare to say, "He is made unto me sanctification," and "I am complete in Him." As far as our faith goes, as far as our light goes, we are fully saved. We are all there in Christ just as fully as the newborn babe is complete in all its parts. But it is not yet full-grown. It has all the organs its father has, but they are yet immature. It is complete but not completed. It is perfect but not perfected. And so the consecrated soul that has taken Christ in His fullness has Him in His fullness, but

yet there is to be a deeper revelation and larger fullness step by step and day by day, until at last He shall reach the "measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Do not let us, therefore, depreciate ourselves too much or fail to recognize our glorious standing and our heavenly place in Christ Jesus our Lord. But do not let us, at the same time, forget how much there still remains to be possessed, and standing midway between the confidence of faith and the aspiration of hope, let us press on from strength to strength, from faith to faith, from grace to glory.

II. A SPIRIT OF HEAVENLY ASPIRATION AND HOLY AGGRESSIVENESS

Along with this sense of shortcoming there comes to the Apostle the deep, intense desire to press on to all that yet remains in His inheritance of grace. The picture is an intense one. It flashes with the light of the arena; it rings with the bugle notes of battle and triumph. It sweeps on with the celerity of the cavalry charge and the triumphal march. There is something about its phrases that stirs our very hearts, and makes every drop of blood to throb with strange intensity. It is a soul in earnest. It is a heart aflame. It is a life all aglow with divine enthusiasm and superhuman strength. It is no soft sentimentalism, but it is spiritual manhood in the glory of its mightiest strength. It is the athlete in the arena. It is the conqueror on the field of victory.

There are several expressions here that are full in instruction and inspiration:

1. "Forgetting the things that are behind." There is much behind and it is not to be despised, but it is not to be a pillow of soft and indolent repose to stifle and satisfy our higher ambition. Compared with all that is yet before us it is only a foundation. And the larger that foundation is the mightier must be the superstructure that is to crown it. Suppose that you were to point me to a massive pile of brick and stone on some splendid site no higher than the foundation walls of some great building, and tell me with exultant pride of the deep excavations, the costly carvings, and the splendid building you had erected. I would laugh in your face as I looked at the cellars flooded with the storm, the walls crumbling under the destroying elements, the rubbish accumulating on the terraces, and the very creatures of the wilderness finding a lair and hiding-place amid the rubbish. I would say to you, "The very grandeur of your foundation calls for a still grander superstructure. It is ridiculous for you to boast of what you have already done until these walls have been reared at least a dozen stories higher, and the roof has enclosed these spaces, and the chambers are divided and adorned in a manner worthy of your costly beginnings." And so the more God has done for you already, the more need there is that you should look well to it, "that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward."

2. A right conception of the future. "Reaching forth unto those things which are before." Man differs from the lower orders of creation in this, that while like them his past is limited by the little space of time since his existence, unlike them his future is illimitable; his lifetime is eternity. He is endowed with the divine gift of an immortal future. He has the ages upon ages yet to come in which to expand and develop forever more.

When Alexander the Great divided his old dominion among his faithful followers he kept nothing for himself. They asked him in surprise about his portion. "What have you kept for yourself?" they said, and he pointed into the distance and simply said, "Hope." The future was his inheritance, and before many months had passed that future had brought him an empire vaster than all he had given away, and mightier than the world ever knew.

And so God is teaching us to live in the imperial realm of hope. There are souls who have no eyes for the future. They cannot see over the heads of the things that immediately surround them. They live in the present, and they are baffled by their immediate difficulties, toils and troubles. Life for them is enclosed by the boundaries of the setting sun. But there are other souls who see into life's tomorrow, and over the head of difficulty, disaster, and even death itself. They see evermore the eternal morning, and they sing, "It is better farther on." The things that are not are to them more real than the things that are. Faith and hope create a world yet unrevealed and yet most real, which satisfies and stimulates their triumphant spirits as they press on to the things that are before.

Beloved, ask God to give you a sanctified imagination, a quickened vision of the unseen, a power to see what others cannot see, and to hear what others do not hear. May He put eternity in your heart and make your life as large as the immeasurable years on which God has projected the orbit of your being.

3. Following after. Having turned from the past and caught the vision of the future he now presses on to meet it. The figure is that of the hunter pursuing the coveted game. There is a strange fascination in this. Men will follow a trail for days and weeks to get a single moose, up in the woods of Maine, and after exposure, toil and suffering will feel amply repaid by a single specimen of the splendid quarry. Mile after mile the snow-covered forest is traversed over windfalls, morasses, pitfalls and perils which they would not think of encountering in the sober business of life. But it is nothing to them as they pursue their prey with a fascination that takes away all sense of toil or computation of time. So, when God has given the glowing vision of His highest will, nothing is hard or long in its attainment. Step by step through toil and trial the soul presses on for the crown incorruptible and the heavenly goal.

Beloved, are you as much in earnest about the best things as you are for your pleasures, recreations or your earthly gain. Let this lofty standard measure our individual lives.

4. "I press toward the mark." The language is intense. It is the expression of the most profound earnestness of which a human soul is capable. It is no child's play. It is no sentimental dream. It is no incidental mood. It is no mere occasional fit of transient enthusiasm. It is the habit of the life. It is the sweep of the volcano down the mountain side which carries everything in its course and transforms everything into its fiery torrent. Beloved, it is a life in earnest. Is it yours?

5. Singleness of purpose is the secret of this successful and intensely earnest life. "This one thing I do." The grandeur of his great purpose eclipses all other aims and excludes all competing interests. Our life is too short and too small to be scattered in a dozen directions. We can only be our best as we let God compact us and press us with all His power, and all the strenuousness of our strength, in one direction, and that, of course, the highest and the best. Beloved, is this the single purpose of your life? You have but one life. God help you to give it all to Him and gain it all from Him in its glorious outcome.

III. THE DIVINE COOPERATION

There is more than the figure of the spiritual athlete pressing on for the prize. There is another form in this picture that is standing behind him and helping him on. Or, to change the metaphor, the glorious Umpire yonder at the heavenly goal is not an indifferent spectator, coolly waiting to give the crowns to the conquering ones without any personal interest as to who shall overcome. Nay, He is an interested partner in the race. He is bending from His throne and beckoning to the racer as he runs, and with encouraging smile and gesture of inspiration is calling to him: "Be of good cheer, press on. Thou shalt overcome. I am holding thine hand as well as holding out thy crown. I have overcome for thee and thou shalt overcome

through Me." This is the finest part of the picture. Paul is not alone with his struggle; his Master is with him, and he is only apprehending that for which he has been also apprehended of Christ Jesus. In three respects Christ cooperates with His people's heavenly aspirations.

1. It is He who reveals the vision of the glory and the prize. A little later in the passage we read, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you." Perhaps this glowing picture has not appealed to all your hearts. Perhaps there are some simple commonplace lives who have said, "I have no imagination, I have no opportunity for these glorious things. My task is one of lowly toil and ceaseless drudgery. I try to do my duty as best I can, but I don't understand the exalted feelings of which you have been telling me. This is not for me." Beloved, "If in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you." There was a time when it was nothing to Paul but a light in his heart above the brightness of the sunshine. Then God revealed to him another world of reality, and gave him the spiritual senses to discern it and dwell in it. The same revelation will come to you if you humbly ask for it and wait for it.

A lady in London once called upon Dr. Boardman and complained to him that she had no spiritual feeling. The good doctor turned to Ephesians 3: 20: "Now unto him that is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." He told her to go home and pray over that one verse until God made it fully real to her, and then come back and tell him when her experience measured up to it. She went away and continued for many days to pray that one prayer, not expecting much from it at first. But one day she came back to see the good minister with eyes moist with tears, and lips trembling with holy gladness, to tell him that no language could describe, no prayer could express, no thought could compass, the unutterable fullness of joy which the Holy Spirit had poured into her heart. God had revealed even this unto her.

The writer had a brother once on earth, now in heaven, who was very rigid and conservative in his ideas of religious experience. He looked upon all demonstrations of feeling as sentimental and unscriptural. He was much disgusted with many of the manifestations of spiritual power and earnestness connected with the early days of our own work. At length his health broke down, and he was manifestly drawing near to a great crisis. The writer endeavored in vain to bring him to that place of tender spiritual feeling where he could take Christ as his Healer or even as his Comforter. But it only met with recoil. Then the case was committed to God in believing prayer; and he waited. One day several months later, a letter came from that brother telling of a marvelous change. The day before while reading a verse in his Bible a flood of light had burst into his soul, and for hours he could only praise and pray and wonder. Yes, he, too, had become a fanatic, if this were fanaticism, and God had done exceeding abundantly above all that he could ask or think. His cold intellectual nature was submerged in a baptism of love which never ceased to pour its fullness through his being, until a few weeks later he swept through the gates of glory shouting the praises of his Redeemer.

Beloved, would you have the vision? "If in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you."

2. He calls us to the prize. "The high calling of God in Christ Jesus" is translated better in the revised version, "the upward calling," or, better still in another version, "the prize to which he has called us from on high." God called Abraham in Mesopotamia, and he left all and followed. He called Moses in the desert, and he gave up everything to obey. He called Elisha from his plow, and he quickly responded. He called the disciples from their fishing nets, and they went with the Master. He called Paul, and he was "not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." Beloved, He is calling thee. Do not miss the call and the crown.

3. He is holding the hand of the competitor for the prize, and upholding him in the conflict. This expression, "apprehended," literally means "grasped," and the Apostle says that he is grasping that for which Christ has grasped him. There is a hand underneath. There is a power behind. There is a loving pressure that will not let him go. God loves us better than we love ourselves. In spite of ourselves, He is saving us to the uttermost and carrying us through to the fullness of His uttermost salvation. We are not alone. He will not let us fail.

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