

Pressing On

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Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0 : 00] Philippians chapter 3 and verse 10. We're going to read just a short passage this morning, verses 10 to verse 14. This is the apostle Paul writes to the ancient church in Philippi.

And he says these words. He says, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all of this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it.

But one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this together. Our gracious God, your word is truth.

[1 : 12] It is our sustenance. And so we come to you this morning asking to be fed. That you would feed us with spiritual food that we can't get anywhere else.

Lord, show us your son Jesus Christ. Show us his love and change and transform us by what we see. Let your spirit be at work in us as we study. And we ask this for Christ's sake and for his glory.

Amen. Amen. Amen. So as I mentioned earlier, I've been overseas for the last few weeks.

And one of the benefits of being in different churches, being in different ministries, being exposed to different ministries, is as a pastor, I sit and I've got all these ideas clicking through my head because now all of a sudden I've been lifted out of our normal Sunday to Sunday context.

And I'm sitting there and I'm watching what other people do, how they do things in different parts of the world. And why they choose to do this in their service, why they choose to do that, why they have this ministry, why they have that ministry.

[2 : 19] I was a bit envious that most of the church buildings I went to didn't have holes in the roof where the water was falling through in the middle of winter. But besides that, it was really fun to just dream and not have to do anything in the worship service, just to sit and look at things and try and understand things.

And so I always tend to come back from these sorts of trips with ideas. Thinking about what should we be doing next? Where should we be going next? Where is an area we can press into a little bit more as a church?

And so I tend to come away a little bit inspired and motivated. And so this morning, I just want to, I want to do something of that for you. I want to just push us all to keep pressing on in this journey that we're on together as a local church here in the city center of Cape Town.

To keep pressing on. Pressing on in our faith as a church and then pressing on as individuals in your own faith because you are all on personal journeys as you are growing in your faith. And I want to encourage you to keep pressing on.

Now when I think of our development and growth as a church over the last 12 years since we planted the original Hope City 12 years ago that then became the Union Chapel, I often think of Pinocchio.

[3 : 32] You know Pinocchio, right? The puppet who becomes a boy, a real boy. There's a classic scene in Shrek 2 where the evil fairy godmother waves her wand at the puppet Pinocchio and then in the middle of the air he turns into a real boy and he's like, I'm a real boy!

And then she turns him back into a puppet after that. But I've had several moments of that in our church life where I'm like, we're a real church. Like we're legit, we're a real church.

So in 2013 when we moved out of our apartment in Greenpoint, the 16 people and we started actually having services on a Sunday, there was a, we're a real church moment. When we constituted a few years later and we got our first elders and deacons then it was like, now we're a real church.

Then a few years ago we merged with the congregational church and we inherited this beautiful building and we're in our own church building. We're a real church. And it can sometimes look like, well we've done it.

We've ticked all the boxes now. We've done it. We've established a community of people worshipping God here in the city from scratch. We've done it. And those of you who are more spiritually aware will kind of stop me at that point and say, no Stephen, we haven't done it.

[4 : 51] God has done it. We just kind of make up the numbers. God has done His good work here. And you are completely right to say that. God has done something here.

He's done something at the Union Chapel. He certainly used us but He has done something here. And what I want to say to you this morning though, and what I want us to keep in front of our minds always, is that we're not there yet.

Don't ever kind of pull out the deck chair, say, well, it's all done. Look, we've got our friends and our community here.

It's all done. We're not yet there. And you as an individual, you're not yet there. What I mean by that is that until Jesus comes back, there is always more for us to engage in.

There's always more growth. There's always more development. There's always more opportunities for us to chase down. We talk about growth in Christianity and when we talk about growth, we talk mainly in aspirational terms.

[5 : 56] So we talk about trajectories. We talk about progress. One of the most comforting things in the Bible is when Paul says to Timothy, a young minister, let your progress be evident to all.

He doesn't say let your perfection be evident to all. He says let your progress be evident to all. So we talk about these aspirations, these trajectories, these growth trajectories. All of that is always ongoing.

No matter how big this church gets, no matter how many elders or deacons or pastors we have, no matter how many spiritually mature, theologically astute people sit here on a Sunday, it's always ongoing.

Growth is always ongoing, qualitatively and quantitatively. Numbers in depth of quality. And Christian growth is often tricky. It's a tricky thing to sort of monitor and plot.

It often refuses to follow a very neat trajectory, like a nice 45 degree angle on the chart where you're getting sort of maybe, I don't know, 25% better every year as a Christian.

[7 : 00] Sometimes it seems to go backwards. Sometimes it seems to stagnate. Sometimes it seems to accelerate very quickly and for all sorts of different reasons. But I think the hope and the goal as we look at the whole of Scripture together, I think the hope and the goal is that over the longer term, well, it's going forward.

The path is sometimes rough and a little bit disconcerting, but it's going forward. It's going in the right direction. And so I want to talk about that this morning, that pressing on in growth. I want to talk about our expectations in growth because I think this is really important and it's where I think a lot of us get tripped up.

Two things I want to say. Don't be surprised by the different ways in which you grow. But then secondly, don't be content with the lack of growth.

So don't be surprised in the different ways in which you grow or seem to not grow at times, but then don't be content with lack of growth. So here's the first one. Don't be surprised. If you go to that passage, chapter 4, verse 10, Paul says, I want to know Christ, yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I've already obtained all this or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. So he says, look, I want to know Christ and it seems like there are two components there, some sort of intimate knowledge of Christ and then some sort of conforming behavior that is produced by the knowledge that He has of Christ.

[8 : 39] I want my heart and my mind to be intertwined with the reality of Jesus Christ and then I want my behavior to change as a result of me knowing and understanding who He is and what He's done for me.

That's Christian growth. But then surprisingly, this kind of hero of the Christian faith who's talking about His growth tells us in verse 12, not that I have already obtained all of this or have already arrived at my goal.

You see that? He's admitting there something very important. He's admitting that this sort of growth is not just instantaneous or mechanical like I believe in Jesus Christ and voila, tomorrow morning I'm just this well-rounded person full of character and maturity.

It's difficult. There's a journey and it doesn't always go in neat lines. And so I think the first thing that we can say as we look at this passage is that sometimes even failure and occasional backsliding, occasional stagnation in your Christian growth shouldn't come as this massive surprise that sort of knocks you off the horse and you go like, what is going on here?

This wasn't supposed to happen. Lack of growth is quite a disconcerting and disturbing experience for a lot of people in their faith. In fact, for some people it even causes them to step away from faith altogether, from professing faith altogether.

[10:09] And that's just when we perceive lack of growth in our own lives, when we see lack of growth or obedience really, when we see lack of obedience in other people who profess to be Christians, that can be equally disconcerting as we see that happening.

We see other Christians behaving badly it's very discouraging. And then it makes us doubt the validity of this entire faith project that we're involved in. I was looking at some data recently on people who once professed Christianity and then walked away from the faith.

This came out of Australia. And they asked them for their top ten reasons for walking away from the faith and then they compiled a list of the top ten reasons that people gave for why these people who once professed faith were no longer professing faith.

Number two on the list was other Christians not living out their beliefs or looking the same as their neighbors. Basically, I can't see any difference between the Christian and the person next to him. Number five on the list was feelings of despair at lack of personal change.

So that's two of the top ten reasons, two of the top five reasons why people turn away from the faith is that they see other Christians behaving badly and they look at their own hearts and then they go, well, I haven't really changed much either.

[11:29] Now we look at passages like this where the Apostle Paul admits that change is not instantaneous, it's not mechanical and I think what that firstly should communicate to us is that we shouldn't be surprised to observe a level of fluctuation in our growth if you're thinking about it in terms of like a graph or something like that.

Part of that problem though is we forget what Christianity is first and foremost and this is why our expectations are a little bit muddled in this area. Many people think that Christianity is basically a moral rejuvenation project.

Just keep all your religious laws, be good, pious people, be good people, that's what it is and hence then the church does and in some ways should take a lot of heat when Christians do stupid and bad things.

Now listen to me very very clearly because what I'm going to say next is in no way to excuse Christians behaving badly. It is right for the church to come into criticism when Christians behave badly but I do think that we do need to get our categories right and thereby set our expectations. So two things to say here. Number one, I think we need to be a bit circumspect about just exactly how we judge Christianity's ability to morally transform people.

[12:50] So the sort of popular consensus out there is that being religious really doesn't make much of a difference to whether or not a person is moral. You'll hear that in popular rhetoric and to that I want to say well that's actually a bit tricky to objectively investigate.

first of all I think we need to get over the idea that many Christians sometimes almost pick up by just growing up in Christian culture that non-Christians cannot live and I use the word purposefully here relatively good moral lives because it's incredibly damaging to your faith if you grow up believing that sort of a reductionistic formula that goes something like this Christians are good moral people they're the good guys and they're better than non-Christians who are bad and immoral because the minute you meet some kind generous warm hearted non-Christian or a person from another religion your whole paradigm then breaks down and you go what on earth is going on?

What my parents told me and what my church told me is not true this doesn't make sense they're supposed to be evil dangerous people and I'm the good person and the problem there is the formula wasn't right in the first place the formula wasn't in the Bible in the first place it's more sort of

like a Christian folklore rather than biblical theology and so your expectations were incorrectly set at the beginning but then coming back from that I think I also want to challenge something of the notion that Christians are so bad or so kind of worldly that there's never really a marked difference between the Christian community and the rest of the world out there that we aren't actually making some progress on some of the collective vices of our culture so for example I've seen studies and there are up to date studies these are actually older ones but there are up to date studies from the UK from Australia from the US that all provide pretty conclusive evidence that Christians are significantly more charitable than non-religious people David Putnam is a public policy professor at Harvard and his partner

David Campbell a professor of political science at the University of as we would say in South Africa Notre Dame but as they say Notre Dame they wrote a book in 2010 called American Grace How Religion Divides and Unites Us and one of their overall findings in their research that they looked at was that religious Americans are actually significantly more charitable than secular or non-religious Americans so they summed up their research in the Wall Street Journal this way of the most secular fifth of Americans two thirds said they gave money to charity in the previous year that's an impressive number but it pales next to the 94% of the most religious fifth who reported making a charitable donation we find the same pattern when we examine how much people give on average those in the most religious fifth donate \$3,000 to charity annually those in the most secular fifth give approximately \$1,000 the story is the same when we consider charitable giving as a fraction of household income by this measure religious Americans are four times as generous as their secular neighbors even as they are a little less affluent than secular Americans and another really interesting part of the studies that they did was that the more religious that a person was as in the more involved they were in church attendance and consciously practicing their faith on a weekly basis the more they actually gave the number goes up think about divorce divorce is another area that's often sort of bandied about in the popular media the popular line goes like this and I actually remember this when I was at seminary they talked a lot about this the popular line goes the divorce rates are as high amongst evangelical Christians in America as they are amongst the rest of America even though the Bible largely forbids divorce except for one or two minor exceptions and so see look how hypocritical these Christians are their religion hasn't made a difference to their behavior a number of years ago even some studies came out that seemed to suggest that conservative

Protestants were perhaps even more likely to divorce than your average non-religious American it's pretty damning when you read that sort of stuff and go okay what's going on here and those studies went on unchallenged put in popular opinion pieces and newspapers and that they got unchallenged for quite some time but several groups of social scientists got together in recent years challenged those findings mainly arguing that the definitions of what constitutes a religious person in those original studies were far more tied up with religious identity rather than actual practice and participation in other words these are people who identify as religious but probably don't know what the inside of a church building looks like if you conduct exactly the same studies but you make religious participation the defining characteristic then divorce rates drop dramatically among conservative

[18:11] Protestants and become way way way lower than the average non-religious American so Scott Stanley who's a research professor at the University of Denver who specializes in researching marriage and romantic relationships he wrote this in a study several years ago he said whether young or old male or female low income or not those who said that they were more religious reported higher average levels of commitment to their partners higher levels of marital satisfaction less thinking and talking about divorce and lower levels of negative interaction these patterns held true when controlling for such important variables as income education and age at first marriage now I'm not putting all of these things in front of you to go wow look Christians are so much better I think social science research has its limits but what I do think these examples do is they temper the idea that religious commitment does very little to alter a person's moral behavior and attitude towards this world

I just don't think that's true and I think science actually says that's not true and so it means we need to take some of these popular claims with a fairly large pinch of salt so that's the first thing I want to say is be circumspect as you think about this but then secondly I think we should resist the culture's desire to define Christianity primarily as a moral rejuvenation project why well because that's not

what the Bible says it is and you even see that in our passage so Paul says look I haven't taken hold of all of the stuff yet in other words I'm not where I'd like to be yet in terms of my Christian maturity and my Christian growth but he says I press hold press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me so he says I haven't arrived!

yet and then what he doesn't do is he say so look I'm going to try better at this Christian thing he does say that later on but he doesn't say that first what he does first is he qualifies and he says I'm going to try and take hold of this deeper Christianity because Christ has already taken hold of me you see that he says the same thing in verse 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heaven with that's something God has already done all of Paul's trying harder all of his striving that we're going to talk about in a second comes off of the basis that Jesus has already taken hold of him and what does he mean by that he's talking about the gospel he's talking about the center of the Christian faith that Jesus has saved him from his sin that Jesus has justified him before his heavenly father that Jesus has rescued him it's all about what God has done in Jesus first and foremost long before it gets to what we as Christians now should be doing in response Christianity is not primarily a moral rejuvenation movement it is fundamentally a rescue effort by God to save us to save us from ourselves really in some ways to save us from his divine judgment but save us from ourselves and it is Christ who is the rescuer it is not us who are the rescuers it's Jesus and so you have to then judge the faith on its own terms you have to judge it on that basis before you begin to consider questions of whether or not there is moral rejuvenation in the lives of its followers and so I say all this to say to you don't be surprised when your growth does stutter at times when it stagnates maybe sometimes temporarily it goes backwards a little bit don't be surprised you're not the only one experiencing that and if you are in that place if you are in that place where your failures your inconsistencies are starting to beat you down they're starting to wear you down clouding out your faith destroying your confidence don't let that pull the rug out from underneath you because you need to remember that the rug underneath you the firm ground underneath you is not ultimately your performance the ground underneath you is Christ if you trust in him if you place your faith in him he will take hold of you he will be your consistency he will be your confidence he will atone for your failure and so that's where you need to go that's what you need to preach to yourself you need to go there if your lack of progress is strangling the faith out of you that's where you need to go you're sort of trapped in a dungeon of despair at your own sinful failings and you need to hear these sorts of words that come from Charles Wesley's famous hymn long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature's night thine eye diffused a quickening ray I woke the dungeon flamed with light my chains fell off my heart was free I rose went forth and followed thee that's the foundation so don't be surprised when things stutter go back to the foundation cling to that hold on to that now and here's the proviso don't necessarily be surprised at lack of growth but don't be content don't be content with lack of growth so here's the second point look at verse 12

[24 : 02] Paul says not that I have already obtained all of this or have already arrived at my goal but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me brothers and sisters I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it but one thing I do forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus you see all of that pressing on language there in Paul I press on verse 12 I strain towards what is ahead verse 13 I press on towards verse 14 Paul is saying I'm not there yet but boy am I straining to get there he's not content he's not content with the level of spirituality and obedience that he has he wants more more knowing of Christ more conforming of his life to the patterns of Christ that idea of straining forward to get the prize in verse 13 and 14 there's a picture of an athlete training vigorously to improve their fitness and their performances disciplined!

Conditioning work! Hard work! And so I point this out to say friends there's a sense in which you live in la-la land if you think being a Christian and growing in a Christian is not demanding work you just cannot escape this in the New Testament it is all over Paul the sort of straining language it is hard work it will require a lot from you it will require significant time from you significant mental emotion possibly even physical effort from you and energy from you it is an all of life commitment it is not something that you can sort of just do on the side along with all the other things that you give your life to so you can't be like well you know I go to a book club I go to a mom's group I go I'm part of a cycling group oh and I go to church it doesn't work like that the faith demands your all and

I would suggest that the Bible suggests that you will actually get more out of it scripture says you reap what you sow growing in Christian maturity growing in godliness is hard work you need to strain forward you need to press on when your metaphorical legs are done I mentioned this before but I hate endurance sport and I know some of you are very keen endurance sport people we got people who do crazy things in this church like run up mountains in the dark and cycle super long ways I have tried those things and I never derive any pleasure from them there is no pleasure I think you guys are lying to me when you say you get these runners highs or whatever they are I think it's a big conspiracy it's not true but the one thing endurance sport does is it teaches you about straining forward it teaches you about keeping going when those legs have gone in and you are just now relying on your mental ability to keep going there's something of that to the

Christian faith Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German minister who was executed by the Nazis for his involvement in an attempt to assassinate Hitler he gave his life to Christ formed resistance against injustice and in his book the cost of discipleship he writes this one very striking line he says when Christ calls a man he bids him come and die and so we are fooling ourselves if we think that the call to Christianity is anything less than a call to struggle and die and so don't be content then don't be content with half-hearted growth and spirituality resist the apathy and strain strain forward for more I suspect that Christ who has already died for you will mysteriously and miraculously meet you in that moment of straining and struggle as you seek to die for him so don't be content now let me close with this when

Paul uses that phrase press on in verse 12 it's actually one word in the original language there and has these connotations of sort of a determined ruthless pursuit of something in fact it's a word used in other parts of the New Testament to describe the way that Paul under his previous name Saul before he was a Christian ruthlessly pursued and persecuted the early Christians almost has this idea of an animal pursuing its prey Paul says he pursues godliness that way no matter how hard the struggle no matter how much the cost he ruthlessly He pursues being like Christ that way now why why the effort why the determined pursuit well it's because he knows that Christ ruthlessly pursued him in the midst of his deathly pursuit of the early Christians Christ pursued him and stopped him dead in his tracks in

[29 : 48] Damascus drew him into his forgiving love despite the horrendous things that he had done in his life up until that point Christ pursued him and brought him in Christ hounded him hunted him down and hounded him there's a famous poem by Francis Thompson called The Hound of Heaven was first published in 1893 it's a very long and complex poem with a lot of archaic English words that I even need to take a dictionary and look up what these words mean but it's regarded by many as one of the greatest Christian poems ever written it was very influential on J.R.R.

Tolkien it was very influential on G.K. Chesterton and Francis Thompson himself struggled throughout his life with poverty with poor health addiction to opium but in the poem he describes Christ as this menacing hound who tracks him down no matter which dark alleyways he hides in the hound of heaven tracks him down the poem starts with these words I fled him down the nights and down the days I fled him down the arches of the years I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind and in the midst of tears I hid from him and under running laughter abvisted hopes I sped and shot precipitated a down titanic glooms of chasmed fears from those strong feet that followed followed after but with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace deliberate speed majestic instancy they beat and a voice beat more instant than the feet all things betray thee who betray me the poem goes on in detail and captures his struggle with his own sin and how he keeps trying to avoid Christ and then it ends with this now of that long pursuit comes on at hand the brute the voice is round me like a bursting sea and then a few lines later he writes in the first person now as the hound of heaven coming upon this beggarly sinner and human love needs human meriting how has thou merited of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot alack thou knowest not how little worthy of any love thou art whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee save me save only me see Francis Thompson he felt that in his heart as he looked at his life and he looked at what he's done he's going who could love me who could love ignoble me the dingiest clot he describes himself save only

Christ the hound of heaven who relentlessly pursues him in his love you see Paul must have looked back at his conversion and thought the same thing so many times so many many times he would have lived with family members of people he had helped put to death who could love me I murdered I tore families apart I destroyed lives who could love ignoble me the dingiest clot save only Christ

who relentlessly pursued me with his love friends when your failure is in your face when your lack of progress dominates you and causes you to despair when you feel like you don't have the strength to pursue Jesus Christ and godliness when you ask yourself that very question who could love ignoble me the dingiest clot remember

Christ the hound of heaven who relentlessly pursues you with his love he will chase you down he will chase you down the darkest alleyways he will chase you down into the deepest pits he will hound you down and he will envelop you with his love he will give his life for you on a wooden cross he does that in pursuit of you and when you know that when you know that he would do that for you!

[34 : 44] you just cannot you cannot be content with apathy you cannot be content with half heartedness you must press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of you I'm more convinced than ever that the hound of heaven is chasing people down in our city right now with his unrelenting love and I want to be there throughout that chase and at the end of that chase when people come to faith I want to be there I want to be able to welcome them into God's family that's why we planted this church 12 years ago that's why we are pressing on that is why today is still only the beginning of all that we are going to do!

God we! we thank you that you pursue us we thank you for your love to us in Jesus we thank you for his death that is our saving hope we thank you that you have taken hold of us Lord won't you shake us out of apathy out of spiritual stagnation and won't you give us supernatural strength to press on to grow in our knowledge of

Christ to know to grow in our transformation of life growth in character growth in holiness growth in sharing the gospel that we might see more people come and be enveloped in the love of Christ Father I pray for any person who is sitting here this morning who maybe has not known the love of Christ who still feels like they're trapped in that dark alleyway and there is no love in sight I pray that they would repent of their sin and turn to Jesus Christ this morning and you would bring them into the kingdom Father as a church take us to this next step help us to keep going help us to keep pressing on help us to keep looking for opportunities to friends we're going to respond to the teaching of God's word by saying a prayer of confession together it's going to be on the screen and we will say it out loud together we confess our sins not as people trapped in the despair of never being able to see our sins taken away from us we confess our sins knowing that

God is faithful and kind and merciful and will remove them because he has made that commitment to us and our Lord Jesus Christ and so I invite you to confess your sins before almighty God almighty and merciful God we open our hearts up to you trusting that your love and goodness is stronger than all of our shortcomings we have been afraid to trust you and we have forgotten the assurance of your unending presence we have sacrificed our convictions quieted our voices given in to distractions and looked out for ourselves above all else we have thought about giving up when the task before us seems too great forgive us fill us with new life and renewed hope strengthen our faith and our obedience that our lives may show forth your praise in Christ's name we ask it Amen