

I am a work in progress * Philippians 3:10-14

February 27, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

When I first started at Langford, I have to admit that I was a little nervous at first. Not because of you; you're all delightful and we felt welcome from the start. I remember - I think that the second week in, Ralph Hastings, who was on the board at the time, wore a Hawaiian shirt to church and I thought - 'Boy, I'll fit right in here.'

I was nervous though because I'd never pastored a church before. I didn't have the experience that a lot of other pastors would have; I was just transitioning over from worship ministry. And that created an interesting paradox. When I began here, I was your pastor, and yet, I was not yet all that I would be as your pastor. I am not the same as the pastor who stood up here seven years ago. And boy, I'm glad that you were patient at the beginning. Tim Keller used to say that your sermons don't get good until you've preached your first hundred - so good news - nowhere left to go but up ☺

But it's that tension of being something and yet not being completely that that I want to look at this morning. Because it's true not just of pastors; it's true of us as believers too. We are already all that we will be in Christ and yet, we are also not yet all that we will be in Him. We are works in progress.

In a sense, we are entirely 'who we are in Christ' - right now. When we put our faith in Jesus, in an instant, our sins are forgiven, our lives are made new and our eternal destiny is secured. That's set. Nothing can change that. We are children of God and citizens of the Kingdom, full stop.

But it's also true that we are becoming 'who we are in Christ,' more and more, every day. Just as (I hope) you've seen me grow as a pastor, day by day, I hope that you can see in yourself Christian growth, every day.

To show you why I say that, I want to take you to a favourite passage of mine - Philippians 3, starting in verse 10. Philippians 3:10. And as you're turning there, I'll say this - I want to ask two questions of this passage - 1. Are we really works in progress? And 2. If so, how do we make progress?

There are some Christians who would say that we are all that we will ever be in Christ the moment we believe and we should be perfect in every way from then on - is that true? Should we expect perfection from the start or is it natural to see gradual growth in a follower of Jesus? And 2, if we *are* works in progress, then how do we make progress? How do we move towards all that God has made us to be? Let's answer those questions by looking at our passage.

Philippians 3, verse 10, Paul says -

10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

This is Paul's most fervent desire. He wants nothing more than to be found in Christ, to know Him, to identify with Him in His suffering, and so to share with Him in resurrection. That's Paul's goal in life, what he wants to be - united with Christ. But look what he says next -

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect.

Now that's a striking thing for Paul to say. This is Paul we're talking about here. Paul, the apostle; Paul the super missionary; Paul the guy who wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else but Luke;ⁱ Paul says 'I am not all that I will be as a follower of Jesus.'

That's verse 12; he says it again in verse 13 -

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

If anybody could claim to be a perfect Christian, it was probably Paul. If anyone could claim that he had 'made it', Paul was the one. And yet he says over and over – I have not yet obtained it. I am not yet perfect. I have not yet taken hold of it. I am a work in progress.

Now that's something to think about, isn't it? If Paul hadn't 'made it,' then there's no way that we have. If Paul had not yet become all that there is to be as a child of God, there's no way that we have. And that will be a challenge for some of us and an encouragement to others.

Because for some of us, who think, 'oh I've made it as a Christian; I've gone as deep as there is to go in my Christian faith;' that just isn't true. You are a work in progress. God is still at work in you, making you more and more into the person that He's made you to be. There is always room for growth.

That's how this will strike some people; for others, others who are still struggling with sin and self-doubt, you need to hear this too – you're a work in progress. God doesn't expect you to be perfect. It's true - you're not all that you will be, but praise God, you're not what you used to be. And if your heart's desire is the same as Paul's – to know Christ and to follow in His footsteps – that you're on the right track, headed in the right direction.

We are works in progress. We are all becoming who we are in Christ. That's the answer to our first question – are we works in progress? Yes, we are. The Christian life is not – snap! – you're perfect; it's snap you're perfect in God's eyes and Jesus has already taken hold of you for all eternity, but you gotta grow into it like a kid growing into clothes that his mom bought a little too big so he could grow into them; like a pastor growing into the mission of being a pastor. We are works in progress.

So that answers the first question – yes, we ARE works in progress; what about the second? How then do we make progress? How do we grow as followers of Jesus? Well, let's look at Paul again.

Verse 12 -

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

13 Brothers, 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,

14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phi 3:13-14 NIV).

How do we make progress as followers of Jesus? We *press on* towards the goal to win the prize that God has promised. He says it twice, in verse 12 and verse 14 – I PRESS ON – I strive – I pursue.

You know on TV shows when the cops take off after the bad guys? Can you picture it in your head the effort they exert? They chase after them relentlessly, overcoming any obstacle, making every effort to take hold of their man.

That's this word – we grow as followers of Jesus by relentless pursuing maturity in Him. We make spending time with Jesus the number one, non-negotiable priority in our lives, because it helps us to grow in all the others aspects of our lives.

And I want to point out to you that there's a neat little turn of phrase in verse 12 - Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on **to take hold of that** for which **Christ Jesus took hold of me** (Phi 3:12 NIV).

In other words, because Christ has taken hold of me, I strive to take hold of maturity in Him.

I think that's important for us to hear. With all of this talk of pursuing, you might get the impression that it's possible to miss out on maturity. That it might somehow elude you and you won't be saved in the end. But verse 12 says no to that – you are safe and secure in Jesus' arms and nothing's going to change that. He has made you His own; now, Paul says, claim Him for yourself. Make grace your own.

In a way, it reminds me of 1 Peter 1 –

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you,
5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Did you catch that? As children of God, we have an inheritance that can never perish or spoil or fade, and it is secure in the presence of God. And not only that, WE are secure in the power of God, as He shields us and brings us that that inheritance in the end.

That's what Paul says here. Jesus has taken hold of us and so we strive to take hold of all He has secured for us – maturity, salvation, growth in love and peace and holiness. We make progress in faith by pursuing it relentlessly.

We are works in progress, pursuing the prize that God has promised.

That I think sums up what Paul says here in Philippians - We are works in progress, pursuing the prize that God has promised. Let me unpack that.

We are works in progress.

You are a work in progress. You are safe and secure in God's hands; He has taken hold of you and nothing will change that. You are His and He will not let you go. That being said, you are not yet all that you will be as a child of God. You've got some growing to do.

I like how Max Lucado puts it – ‘God loves you just the way you are but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus’ (subtitle of his book ‘Just like Jesus).

Now again, like I said before, that goes two ways – some of us are thinking ‘oh, we’ve made it as Christians, we’re just like Jesus, or ‘we’re enough like Jesus,’ we don’t need to invest in our relationship with Him’ – that’s just not true. There is always room for growth. To stop growing is like reaching the maturity of a teenager and then saying ‘that’s enough; I’ll stop here.’ What I thought was mature as a teenager was not mature; we’ve all got room to grow.

And for some of us, we’re beating ourselves up because we KNOW we’re NOT there yet. We slip in sin, we hit a dry spell spiritually, we think ‘I’ll never make it.’ I have to admit that I’m very much in that boat. The more I grow in relationship with Jesus, the more I realize just how much more I need to grow.

In light of that, I need to say to you and to myself - you’re a work in progress – that means inherently that you’re NOT going to be perfect. You’re going to slip; you’re going to stumble; you’re going to sit on your hands when you really should have done something. Don’t let that discourage you from growth in your relationship with Jesus but instead invite Him in to do the work from the inside out. Allow the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and rearrange the furniture and lead you into things that will help you to grow, while He leads you away from things that will hold you back.

We are works in progress... and so we pursue the prize.

Singlemindedly, without distraction, like a heat seeking missile,ⁱⁱ press on to take hold of the prize for which God has called you heavenward. Invest in your relationship with God, in prayer, in Bible study – remember? 7 minutes with God? I realize that we all have very busy lives, but we can’t let earthly pursuits distract us from the most important relationship we have as children of God – our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Put your phone down. Put the remote down. Chase after the Lord like a cop goes after a crook.

And know this, He is already at work in you. I love Colossians 1:29 – there Paul says - 29 To this end, (seeing people grow in Christ) I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (Col 1:29 NIV).

When we pursue the prize, we are doing so with the energy that God Himself gives and which itself is doing a work in me. We struggle with all His God-given energy; meanwhile, He’s powerfully at work too.

And I’ll say this too – sometimes stuff from my past will come up in my mind and try to distract me what I’m doing now. The dumb things I’ve done in my life will try to take my eyes off the person I am now. It’ll say ‘look what you’re done – a person like you can never grow.’

When that happens, I go straight to this verse – forgetting what is behind and looking forward to what is ahead, press on towards that prize that God has called you to. Whatever you used to be before, you’re not that any more. You are a child of God, a sinner SAVED by grace and there is nothing that can change that. Don’t dwell on what you used to be; instead, building on who you are now, pursue who you will be when Jesus comes again.

And know this – you are secure in that effort. As works in progress pursue the prize THAT GOD HAS PROMISED! That, I think, is the most important point. We can't lose. We have an inheritance that will never perish or spoil or fail and God Himself is making sure that we will get it. He who began a good work in you will bring it to complete at the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). Press on to take hold of all that God has made you to be because He has already taken hold of you. You can't lose. God is moving you towards perfection in eternity; take hold of it, invest in it, because God has already taken hold of you.

You are a work in progress, so pursue the prize that God has promised.

BENEDICTION

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

ⁱ <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-questions-and-answers/did-paul-write-most-of-the-new-testament>

ⁱⁱ From David Garland, "Philippians," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Commentary on vss 12-13).