

"Not that I have already attained, or am already made perfect; but I pursue (press on) if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I (for myself) do not yet consider myself to have laid hold: but one thing (I do) forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I pursue (Press on) towards the goal unto the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus." Phillipians 3:12-14

I want to direct your attention for a little while to the most remarkable Christian of the centuries, namely the Apostle Paul. He was, and is, the greatest single credential that Christ's Gospel has ever produced. One day, in writing to his favorite church, he lets us into the secret of his marvelous life. In Phillipians three, verses eight to eleven, Paul has set before his readers the guiding purpose of his Christian life, the commanding motive that explains his renunciation of all things. In these verses he informs his readers that his passion was, to get more knowledge of Christ by experience, to triumph over sin, and to have fellowship with Christ in suffering. Then with striking abruptness Paul declares that the mark at which he aims has not yet been reached by him, nor has he been able to achieve his purpose. He asserts that he has not yet attained even as far as it is attainable in this life all that is involved in the experience he has just described. Our text is a marvelously courageous passage and one which gives us the secret of his great life. According to our text, the secret of his great life was four-fold. It may be stated as follows:----

I. HE WAS DISSATISFIED WITH HIS ATTAINMENTS

He refers to that historic event which took place as he was on the road to Damascus. He says that Jesus Christ "laid hold of" and "grasped" him. His strong loving grasp had gripped Paul in the midst of his career of persecution, and all that Paul had done was to yield to that grasp. The hand of Christ was laid upon Paul for a purpose. On that Damascus road Christ grasped Paul and drew him to Himself in order that he might have the sense of the removal of guilt, the forgiveness of sins, and acceptance with God. Also, that He might divert the great ability of Paul into the right channels and make a great missionary out of him. That very day Paul realized that Christ had laid hold of him for a definite purpose, but he also knew that the purpose

Christ had in mind would not be accomplished without Paul's own life-long effort. Therefore, he determined to know nothing among men "save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." With a polished education and great intellectual qualifications, he gave himself whole-heartedly to the work of the Gospel ministry. As a result of his labors in this capacity, his influence spread extensively large cities were permeated with Christian truth, flourishing churches looked to him as their founder, and many valuable Epistles were given to the world by him. He had bravely endured persecution many times and had achieved great and wonderful things for the Lord as His Apostle. But now, that many years had passed and his career is almost ended, and he is thinking of his past he tells his readers that he is dissatisfied with what he has done for his Lord who had done so much for him. He frankly states that his aims have not been reached. His words reveal the fact that he is keenly conscious of a possible misunderstanding of his language. To guard against a misunderstanding, Paul pointedly denies that he has reached the state of perfection. He says that neither when he became Christ's nor up to the time when he wrote these words had he been perfected. Such an estimate, which he makes of himself after a process of deliberate reasoning, is in strong contrast with the self-righteousness and religious conceit of those who maintain that they have arrived at moral and spiritual perfection in Christ. In the days when he was a young, proud Pharisee the rising hope of his party, petted, praised, and flattered for his zeal and cleverness, he had regarded himself well-nigh faultless. But after Christ had entered his heart and life and he had made great progress in Christ-likeness, he plainly said that he had not yet reached the goal of perfection but that it was still lying before him. There are some enthusiasts who through a

sheer intoxication of excitement believe that they do not sin and are consequently satisfied with what they are what they had done. But Paul tells us that he was dissatisfied with his spiritual attainments and had an eager longing for loftier heights.

II. HE WAS DESIROUS OF SPIRITUAL ACHIEVEMENT

The most eminent Christian who ever lived on the earth was fully conscious of his own imperfection. Still, though he has not yet attained the experience for which he yearns, he is striving to achieve it. His ruling passion is to get nearer to Jesus Christ, to grow in His grace and knowledge, to be more like Christ and to do better and more work for Jesus Christ. The goal is still ahead of him. The chase is not over. He had no delusions about that. He does not count himself at the end of his course. He has not yet reached the top of the mountain. He is pressing on as Christ leads him on and up towards full manhood in Jesus Christ. He desires to fulfill the ideal that Christ had for him when he stopped his course and turning him right about.

In his desire for greater spiritual achievement he forgets what he has already attained. Paul does not lull himself to ease and relaxation of effort because of these attainments in the past. They are simply to serve as a stimulus to greater endeavor for Jesus. Among his attainments were, patience, courage, zeal, self-denying love, readiness to bear the cross, and an untiring faith manifested in weariness and watching, in hunger and thirst, and in cold and nakedness. Now these attainments in grace were not things to dwell on and meditate over but were only stages to be left behind. This expression, "Forgetting the things which are behind," is not to be understood as if Paul was ashamed of what lay behind him in his Christian career, or as if he did not emphasize it as exhibiting the grace of God. Rather it means that he does not use the memory of what God has wrought in him and through him to encourage self-satisfaction and relaxation of effort. He is stimulated by the past to desire greater spiritual achievements and to renewed energy in Christian self-development and in the building of Christ's Church. Many a person goes through life and never comes to the highest and best in spiritual achievement because of an inability to forget certain things that ought to be forgotten. In our desire for greater spiritual achievement we ought to cultivate a wise forgetfulness of past sorrows, of past sins, of past failures, of past losses, of past joys, of past successes, and of past achievements, in so far as these might limit the audacity of our hopes and the energy of our efforts to that end.

III. HE WAS DEVOTED TO A SINGLE AIM

"I would lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus." So then he took God's purpose in calling, and Christ's purpose in redeeming him, as being his great object or aim in life. He says, "But one thing" and that one thing worth while for Paul was to win the ideal set up for him by Christ. Paul would not be diverted to anything else. He would not run off on side-issues like a dog that jumps every trails and holds to none, starting with a fox and ending the day barking at a rat hole. He had no time for lesser interests. He knew how prone men were to dissipate their powers and to fritter away their energy in frivolous, futile activities. So he urged men to get an object in life, and having found out what it was that was best in life then concentrate all of life's energies on that one thing. Many a person has failed in life, not from lack of ability, but because of a lack of a single aim and this element of concentration. No life can be very great, or very happy, or very useful, without a single aim and a strong devotion to that aim. From Paul we learn that concentration is the secret of strength in politics, in war, in trade, and in the management of all human affairs. Every one of us should have an aim which is both definite and high and then should strive to accomplish that aim. Our aims should be identical with the aims which God has for us. What, then, is the aim that God has for us? It is the production in us of God-pleasing character and service. A man of one idea and aim is the

formidable and the successful man. Numerous men who have lived in the past bear testimony to this fact, Noah was a man of one idea and aim. His idea was to build an ark. And though he did other things, yet the one great thought of his life was something would float upon stormy and shoreless seas. And this one thing he did--he built the ark.

Abraham was in the same class. His one idea was a city. He, too, did other things; he trained his servants and commanded his household etc. But amidst his fairest dreams by the ancestral waters, a great voice out of heaven spake to him of "a city which hath foundations, whose builder was God." And ever afterwards he journeyed towards that city.

A singleness of aim and effort have always been and always will be the secret of all noble human accomplishment.

Napoleon was the most efficient man of his time, not because he was gifted above his fellow-men, either physically or intellectually, but because universal empire was his single aim. He lived only to conquer.

Demosthenes was the prince of all earth's orators, not because God gave him a splendid voice, and exquisite grace of motion, but because eloquence was his one idea and aim. He lived only to sweep over all the Aeolian sympathies of the human heart.

Newton was the king of astronomers, not because his eye was keener as it scanned the heavens, nor because God gave him mighty wings to sweep through the empyrean, but because of a singleness of aim and concentration of effort. That was a grand action of old Jerome when he laid all his pressing engagements aside to achieve a purpose to which he felt a call from heaven. He had a large congregation but he said to his people, "Now, it is of necessity that the New Testament must be made; I am bound for the wilderness, and shall not return till my task is finished." Away he went with his manuscripts, and prayed and laboured, and produced a work--The Latin Vulgate--which no doubt will last as long as the world stands.

IV. HE WAS DILIGENT IN STRENUOUS ACTIVITY

The figure of a race is in the mind of Paul as he writes these words, and he knows that distractions in a race are fatal. As he is running, he has no time or inclination to look backward. Nor does he turn aside to look at anything else. He strains and stretches towards the object he is so eager to reach, as if he were trying to touch it from his present position. He stretches every nerve to reach the goal. The chase is not over for him and so he runs his very best in order that he may win the prize. He presses on to grasp the crown, with the animating thought that Christ, in the hour of conversion, grasped him with the express purpose in view, that he, through the path of faith and obedience, might be glorified at last. Stretching out his head, hands and body toward the goal he is bearing down upon the goal with strenuous and unceasing activity. He is thinking of the prize which he hopes to attain as a reward for his strenuous activity. He like all other great idealists saw the unattained burning ever so clearly before him that all the attained seemed as nothing in his eyes. Being dissatisfied with his attainments, desirous of greater spiritual achievement, devoted to a single aim and diligent in strenuous activity, he generated the greatest personality and did the greatest deeds of any Christian of the centuries. In this brief passage of Scripture, he has told us how he came to be the sort of Christian man he was. From his own story of it we can readily see how we too may live great lives of consecration and service if we will only follow his example and meet the conditions of spiritual progress as he met them.