

June 18, 2023

## Overflow: 4-Straining To The Finish

**Pastor and author, John Beukema tells this story:** “I attended a community prayer breakfast and sat at a table with a group of men I didn't know. In the course of our conversation, the subject of retirement came up. The man sitting next to me, who appeared to be in his early fifties, was quite excited by the prospect. He said how much he was looking forward to the end of his career and related a conversation he had with his wife that morning.

He said, "My wife asked, 'What are you going to do when you retire?' I told her, 'I'm going to sit on the couch and watch TV all day every day.'"

The table was silent, but I couldn't keep quiet for long. "If you do that," I said, "you'll be dead in a year."

He looked at me, wide-eyed, and asked, “Why?”

I told him, "If the lack of purpose in your life doesn't kill you first, your wife will."

Today we are talking about “**Straining To The Finish.**”

That might seem like an odd title when last week we emphasized how we **cannot achieve salvation but only receive it by God's grace**. So, why after receiving what was fully paid for, and given as a gift does the Apostle Paul start talking about “**straining to the finish**” now? **Where does that fit into the picture?**

### I. **Following Jesus is LIKE RUNNING a RACE**

It's not a race. It's *like* a race.

Once grace is received, we have begun a race to the finish line. Paul repeatedly uses the race metaphor in his letters. Here is the key passage for today.

*Philippians 3:12–14 (NIV) Not that I have 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. <sup>13</sup> 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, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

**Forgetting what's behind:** Paul says to forget what is behind: In a race you don't look back. You strain forward.

*“Forgetting” in this context does not imply obliterating something from the mind, but refers to the constant necessity of pushing something out of the mind.*

How do you push something from your mind? You focus on something else. He tells us what to focus on.

It's a race for the PRIZE, but what is the prize? Paul's been describing it in earlier sentences. Let's back up and review a few.

*Philippians 3:8 (NIV) ... the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...*

Knowing Jesus is the prize.

*Philippians 3:9 (NIV) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own ..., but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

Knowing Jesus and finding in him a righteousness that is not our own is the prize.

*Philippians 3:10 (NIV) I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and ...becoming like him...*

Knowing Jesus and finding in him a righteousness that is not our own that is experienced through the power of his resurrection making us just like him, is the prize!

It's not a race where we are competing against each other.

We are all running the same prize. And there is one for each of us who runs "straining to the finish". Not because we earned it, but because we battled through it and stuck with the gift given to us.

This race is the hard work made possible by grace. We must...

## II. Run in the **GRACE** lane.

The GRACE LANE is like the HOV lane—you know—that lane to the far left that seems to be moving faster during traffic on the inner city freeways.

**Does anyone remember what HOV stands for? "HIGH OCCUPANCY VEHICLE."** Only the "HIGH OCCUPANCY VEHICLE" is allowed in the HOV lane. What's the High Occupancy Vehicle? On the freeway it means you have more than one person in the car.

But in this race, I'm a HIGH OCCUPANCY VEHICLE. I've been made this way by grace. My sins are atoned for, and Jesus gave me his SPIRIT to live inside of me and fill me with RESURRECTION POWER—the supernatural equipping to RUN this race, even though it is hard.

I am the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christ in me the hope of glory! I'm a High Occupancy Vehicle. And if you are saved by grace, you are too!

To run the GRACE RACE you have to be in the “with Jesus” lane. You can only run in this Grace Lane, with Jesus. It is both hard and easy. It feels hard, but relying on the Spirit makes it easy.

**It's HARD:** Sometimes it FEELS like **Michael Kunyuga's marathon finish:** A stumbling crawling strain to the finish line. It's Hard.

**It's EASY:** Although it FEELS like a battle, it LOOKS like this victory from heaven's vantage point!! Whether it feels hard or easy, there are two parties (God and You) in covenant with one another and working together. That is how God set it up. That's why we can REJOICE in the LORD ALWAYS.

*Philippians 1:6 (NIV) being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

O believer, Jesus has taken hold of you, but you must take a hold of him too.

Have the same *MINDSET* as that of Christ Jesus (chapter 2) and follow after him. Paul is showing us what that looks like. So we have a positive example to aim for—Jesus, and the prize of being like Jesus. Paul, next gives negative examples to AVOID.

### III. **Avoid the lanes that oppose the CROSS**

*Philippians 3:18–19 (NIV) For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.*

**Paul writes this to those who claim to be Christians.** He did not write, “Many are enemies of the cross of Christ”, he wrote that many live “as enemies of the cross of Christ.” **They live as if they are enemies, even though they consider themselves to be “believers” in Jesus and the cross!**

**Here are some of the lanes that enemies of the cross run in:**

- **The lane that REJECTS grace.**

That's the lane going in the opposite direction, rejecting Jesus...

- **The lane that DISAGREES with grace.**

That's the lane the Judaizing "CHRISTIANS" were running in. We talked about them last week. They say they believe in Jesus, but they are still trying to EARN the grace that is a gift. Get out of that lane, it is the lane of pride and self-righteousness.

- **The lane that ABUSES grace**

Abusers of grace think *"I believe in Jesus. I'm saved. I can do whatever I want and be forgiven."* Paul strongly confronts this thinking here, and in many places throughout his writings!

**On A Lighter Note:**

Roy Wehling won the annual Tour de Donut in Staunton, Illinois, some years ago, riding his bike 30 miles in 31 minutes. Well, sort of. In normal races that would mean averaging 60 MPH for 30 minutes on a bike. But this was not your normal race.

Contestants in the Tour de Donut get to take five minutes off their total time for every donut they eat during the race. Roy finished in a little more than two hours, but he wolfed down 18 donuts while he was at it!

Roy had eaten nine donuts in the race a year earlier. "This year," he said, "I tried to double my donuts and have a good road time."

"Strange World," Campus Life, Vol. 56, no. 9.

What a strange race. Seems like some Christians are running a strange race these days also. We want to race and have our donuts too!

Watch out for this.

- We are following the one who taught us to pray, *"Our Father... Your kingdom, Your will be done."*
- We are following the one who HIMSELF prayed, *"take this cup from me ... nevertheless, not my will but your will be done."* And went to the cross for you and me.
- We are following the one who said, *"if you want to follow me you must deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me!"*

**Are you trying to run the race and have your donuts too?**

Instead,

- Let's have Christ's mindset, doing our part to receive all the grace we need
- Let's do our part to be daily refreshed in Grace, and
- Let's do our part fueled by grace and straining forward to the finish.

#### **IV. It takes EFFORT to run straining to the finish**

In the "with Jesus GRACE race" we are at work, but God is at work too. Paul described it.

*Philippians 2:12–13 (NIV) . . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*

**Do you see the two working together here in the grace race?** God *works in* you to will and to act, (God “works in” the desire and the ability) but you must *work out* what he has *worked in*!

God gives us grace like the fuel we need during the hard race we endure, but in covenant, it is definitely a two party partnership. **Grace is not opposed to effort, grace is opposed to earning!**

Paul’s point is you don’t win the prize by taking it easy. It takes training in grace, it takes efforts fueled by grace, and it takes straining while you depend on God’s grace!

# Talk It Over

## SMALL TALK

1. Share a personal goal or aspiration that you have been pursuing recently. How has it challenged you?

## VIEWPOINT

2. **READ Philippians 3:12-21.** In verse 12, Paul mentions that he has not yet "arrived" but is "pressing on." What do you think he means by this?
3. According to 3:17, Paul urges the Philippians to join him in following his example. What specific qualities or actions does he want them to imitate? What clues were given in earlier portions of his letter?
4. Whereas Jewish legalistic thinking was one source of opposition to Christ, what kind of opposition is in view in 3:18-19?

## GETTING PERSONAL

5. How can we apply the concept of "pressing on toward the goal" (3:14) in our daily lives? What are some practical steps we can take to keep growing spiritually?
6. Comparing your spiritual life to a race, are you sitting it out due to lack of practice or an injury? Are you at the starting blocks? Going full-tilt? Ready to give up? Why? What "hurdles" seem especially high?

## MAKING PROGRESS (THIS WEEK)

7. What can you do to make the finish line as described in 3:20-21 more consistently your focus?