

*Philippians 3:12-21* Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us hold true to what we have attained. <sup>17</sup> Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

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Do you know Jesus perfectly? Do understand fully the power of His resurrection in your life? Are you perfected in your walk with Christ? In our text for this morning, the apostle Paul, great man of faith that he is, readily answers “no” to all of these questions. And just a cursory search through each of our own lives would surely lead us to the same answer. In fact, searching through our lives would likely give us more “nos” that we know what to do with.

Yes, Paul knew that the answer to these three simple questions in his life also was “no,” but surprisingly, our text gives evidence that those “nos” in Paul’s life were not his focus. And this truth should lead us back to thinking about ourselves and our lives. Are the “nos” in our life the focus of our spiritual walk? Or like Paul do we recognize the “nos” in our life sincerely, and yet refuse to live in them, to let them be our daily focus.

Perhaps all too often the “nos” are our focus. We, as Lutherans, at times, I think are so focused on the “nos” that our sinful flesh presses upon us that we have forgotten the “yesses” that our new life in Christ has given to us.

Do we know Jesus perfectly? No. But, do we know Him by faith as Savior? Yes. Do we have His Word in order that we might grow in our knowledge of Him? Yes.

Do we fully understand the power of Jesus’ resurrection in our daily life? No. But has that power been given to us through the gift of the Holy Ghost received in our Baptism? Yes! Can we even now defeat the temptations of the devil and say no to sin? Yes!

Is our walk with God ever perfect while living in this world? No. But, will we be perfect someday in heaven? Yes! Have we already been give the ability to press toward that which is ahead? Yes!

So, all of that being said, where does God want our focus to be? Does He want us to sit around and bemoan our imperfections, our “nos,” without ceasing? Or would He rather that we spent our time pressing on towards perfection, the “yesses” of God, with the power that He alone has given to us to do so?

Well, I believe that our texts deal with exactly that question. First, Paul’s words indeed remind us that we are to be realistic and ponder our imperfections, our “nos,” long enough to confess them to God. But once they are forgiven, they are to be left behind in the past. They are forgiven and removed from God’s memory and we too are to forget them. In the figurative language of racing that Paul employs in our text, he says that we are to forget what is behind in the race in order that we might press forward to what is ahead. If we continue to sit around bemoaning all of our imperfections after they have been forgiven, we simply allow those imperfections to hold us back in the race of faith.

Instead, having our past, ours “nos,” forgiven by Christ, we are to focus on the “yesses” of God we have through faith in Christ. We are to focus on the fact that Christ has freed us from the tyranny of sin in our life. We are to focus on the “yesses” of God!

And what exactly are those yesses based on? They are based on a present given grace to each of us and a future promised grace guaranteed to each of us by our gracious God.

The present given grace is that we have been seized or apprehended by Christ through Baptism. We are His and all the blessings of being his child are ours now by grace through faith. We have been washed and sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have been taken out of darkness into Christ’s marvelous light. Our old self has been crucified with Christ. We no longer live with a spirit of fear and timidity but a spirit of power. We are no longer slaves to sin but rather are now free to be servants of righteousness. We were dead to sin, but are now alive to Christ.

These are the “yesses” of God that we have in Christ Jesus and these things are to be our focus. They are the very things which enable us to press towards the goal of perfect knowledge of Christ, perfect understanding of the power of his resurrection, understanding of, and perfect likeness to Christ. And the fact that all of this is possible for us as children of God is Gospel to us, good news for us right now.

And best of all, rejoicing in these “yesses” brings our God his due glory. For Paul makes it explicitly clear that he could not attain any level perfection by himself. Only armed with the promises of God was he able to run with endurance towards that which was to come. He was only able run after the prize because he had been seized or apprehended by Christ’ glorious mercy and was now filled with His triumphant victory. We too confess these same glorious things. We too confess that all of this is possible for us because of God’s “yesses” which we are blessed to possess by His grace.

Possession of these gifts indeed means that we should never be satisfied with where we are in terms of our sanctification or holiness. Being satisfied with sin in our lives is simply not consistent with being people who have died to sin with Christ and have been raised to newness of life.

No instead, we stop long enough to confess our faults to God so that they may be forgiven and forgotten, but then we press on towards that which is ahead.

No, we will never completely reach this goal in this life. But that truth does not stop us from running towards that goal, from trying to seize it as Paul puts it. Attaining that goal of perfection is our aim as one in whom Christ lives right now. And why is it our aim? Because we know one day we will attain that goal. Here on earth? No! But one day in the future we will be perfect, with new perfect body, perfect souls, living on a perfect new earth.

Yes, heaven is the future promised grace that will bring to completion everything that is already given to us in our Baptisms. There we will fully know Christ for we will see Him as He is. There we will fully understand the power of His resurrection for we too will have been raised from our graves. There we will finally be perfect because everything evil will have been separated from us for all eternity.

Are you satisfied with the “nos” in your life. Are you satisfied with the sins that remain in your life? Don’t be! That is not who you are. God has much more in mind for you. He has made it possible for you to run away from the sinfulness of your “nos” into the perfection of his “yesses!”

That is who you were made to be when God seized you for Himself on the day of your baptism. That is who you will be on that last day when He comes to seize you again to be with Him for all eternity. And yes, it is who you are now while living between those two realities.

God has made that sure as well. Not only has God given you His grace on your day of your Baptism, and not only will He seal that grace one day in the perfection of heaven, but He gives you that grace again this day. Grace to forgive that which is behind and grace to enable you to press toward what is ahead. Grace to forgive your past and give you a taste of your future. Grace given to you this day at His table, in bread and wine, giving to you His forgiving and strengthening body and blood. We do well to leave His table this day forgetting what is behind and pressing towards what is ahead.

This was the attitude of Paul who knew the grace given to him as he was baptized, who trusted the promise of a future promised perfection, and who lived in the grace given daily in the Word and the Supper of Christ, his Lord. It should be ours as well.

Not that we have already obtained this or are already perfect, but we press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. Brothers and sisters, we do not consider that we have made it our own. But one thing we do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.