

Finding Middle “C”

Philippians 3:15-17

Aiming Higher, Part 5

In my collection of books on the attributes of God, one author tells the story of a man traveling in the country one afternoon and he drove past a beautiful farmhouse and just nearby, their large barn. He noticed something really unusual. There were a half-dozen arrows sticking out of the side of that barn – and each arrow was right in the middle of brightly painted bullseyes.

This traveler had begun recently using a bow for hunting and he was so impressed with this marksmanship that he pulled into the farmer’s driveway and up to the yard where the farmer was working.

He got out and pointed to the barn, “Are you the same person who shot these arrows?” The farmer rather humbly replied, “Yes sir that would be me.” The visitor said, “You are an amazing shot – every single arrow is dead-center in the middle of each bullseye . . . how long did it take to develop this kind of skill?”

The farmer smiled and said, “Well, I did this for fun, really – you see I shot the arrows into the side of the barn first, and then I painted bullseyes . . . around each arrow.”ⁱ

Frankly, that’s a great picture of the way most people live. They fire off in one direction or another and then assume they’ve found the center of life as it should be.

They shoot for riches and then draw the purpose of life around it. They shoot for education or power or status or possessions and then draw the meaning of life around it. That way they can say to everyone, “Look, I hit a bullseye . . . my life is right on target . . . and I never miss.”

Through the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul has delivered to the believer some

lessons on aiming their lives in the right direction – aiming higher, so to speak.

In our last discussion, we began exploring a number of very practical encouragements from the Apostle Paul.

One of them was to get *real*. Paul writes in *verse 12. Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect.*

In other words, Paul writes, I haven’t arrived.

However, Paul quickly adds, I’m going to keep moving forward – Paul adds, ***but I press on – he’ll explain later, toward the prize of living with Christ.***

Then we discovered that Paul wasn’t narrow minded, he was single minded – ***verse 13, the middle part – this one thing I do.***

In other words, he encouraged the Philippian believers to stay focused. Paul didn’t dabble at a dozen things, he focused everything on one thing – and that was living for Christ.

Then he informed the church that he was moving past his past – in other words, it’s a good idea to lose some baggage – further in ***verse 13 – forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead.***

If you drive your car by looking in the rear view mirror it’s gonna be one accident after another. The windshield in front of you is where you look and Paul effectively says he’s looking ahead – in fact, all the way ahead to that moment when God calls him home to be with His Savior.

Everything about life was aimed in this direction. The bullseye was seeing Christ one day and in the meantime, living life in such a way that Christ would be honored.

I mentioned in our last study that victorious athletes would be called up to the judge's stand and given their prizes. They would have included 500 pieces of money and front row seats at any theater or sporting event.

Those are nice perks in life . . . but they are not the purpose of life . . . that isn't the bullseye toward which you aim your life.

Now with that brief review, Paul moves on to give several more encouragements that effectively tell the believer where to aim.

Steven Runge writes in his linguistic commentary that *verse 15* is actually a new section where Paul begins to answer the "so what" question.ⁱⁱ

In other words, how are we supposed to live a life that effectively aims higher, for the glory of God?

Let me give you four practical statements that summarize the next few verses – and the first one is this basic challenge from Paul – here it is:

1. Continually adjust your attitude

Paul writes in *verse 15*, ***Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude . . .***

I've heard it said that 10% of your life is made up of things that happen to you and 90% of your life is in your attitude toward what just happened to you.

In other words, life isn't so much what happens to you, but your attitude after it happens; so life is a constant adjustment of attitude toward the constant stream of events.

And you might be wondering, "Man, is it ever gonna get easier to have the right attitude?"

With that question on your mind, don't miss the way Paul begins here in *verse 15*. ***He writes, 'Let us therefore . . .'*** Note that word, *us*.

Runge writes that Paul is using the Greek equivalent of "Let's all do this."ⁱⁱⁱ

How encouraging . . . Paul is saying, we're all in this together. But he's the inspired Apostle – he could have easily said, "Alright, all of *you* Philippian believers, get *your* attitude where it oughtta be."

Instead, he effectively – and graciously – implies, "I'm much older in Christ than most of you, but I still need to do the same thing – every single day . . . adjust my attitude. I am still in this process of spiritual growth too." Now that might sound contradictory to what he writes next – notice; ***Let us***

therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude.

Maybe you're thinking at this point, "I knew it! No wonder Paul said "us" to include himself – he *was* perfect after all – *All us perfect people have this attitude!*

But that can't be what Paul means; in fact, look back at *verse 12* again – ***not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect.***

Paul uses the same expression for *perfect*. Now we're all confused. In *verse 12* Paul says he *isn't* perfect and in *verse 15* he says he *is*.

Let me suggest you go back to *verse 12* and circle the word ***perfect*** and write into the margin the words, completely mature.

The word for ***perfect*** is *teleios*, which means fully or completely mature. It's used to contrast a child with an adult.^{iv}

Now go down to *verse 15* and circle the word *perfect* again, but write in the margin the words, evidencing maturity. You can understand Paul to be writing, As many of us who are *evidencing maturity* have this attitude.

And the evidence of maturity in a maturing believers life is what, Paul? Having the right attitude.

He writes in *verse 15*, ***have this attitude***; literally – continually think this way.^v

Now that we understand better the word Paul uses for "perfect", what initially looks like a contradiction turns out to be a wonderful insight into the way maturing believers think about, and talk about themselves.

Paul is effectively saying, "I am maturing, but I am not yet completely mature; I am growing up, but I'm not fully grown up yet. I am being perfected in the image of Christ, but I'm not perfect!"

How refreshing – especially coming from an older Christian.

The truth is, genuinely maturing believers don't talk about how they've arrived. Those who are truly growing in Christ will never give you the impression that they're perfect.

In fact, older Christians have come to the realization that the only person to have ever lived the perfect Christian life was Jesus Christ!

Kent Hughes writes, "Those who are [truly] mature refuse themselves even a satisfied glance back at some spiritual attainment; they run the race rather than imagine it is over."^{vi}

How the church needs to mirror this kind of humble attitude. I'm growing . . . but I haven't arrived.

I'm reminded of one author who wrote about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village in England one afternoon and they walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. One tourist asked him, "Were any great men born in this village?" And the old man responded, "Nope . . . only babies."^{vii}

That's Paul's spirit of encouragement here for all spiritual ages –as if to say, "Look, I am not completely mature, but I am pressing on toward greater maturity . . . why don't you come along and let's do this together.

How encouraging it is in your life and in mine when someone older in the faith comes along and effectively says, "We can do this . . . let's aim higher, together.

Let's have this attitude The word Paul selects for *attitude* is the same word he used all the way back in *chapter 2* where he wrote in *verse 5*, "***Have this attitude in you which was also in Christ Jesus***" – where Paul described the remarkable humility of Christ.

So the believer who is evidencing maturity is continually adjusting his attitude daily, moment by moment, toward humility.

Andrew Murray wrote in practical terms, "the insignificances of daily life are the tests that prove our [attitude]; it is in our most unguarded moments that we show who we are; to know how the humble person behaves, you must follow them in the common course of daily life." What does this mean practically – give in to your mate next time you disagree; be eager to take the blame for mistakes; quickly seek reconciliation with others.^{viii}

Hitting the bullseye in your Christian walk not only means you continually adjust your attitude; secondly, it means that you:

2. Always remain teachable

Notice the last part of *verse 15*; ***and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you.***

What Paul is doing here is handing over the ultimate responsibility to God for adjusting our thinking.

In other words, if our thinking is flawed in some regard, Paul is confident that God's Spirit will take

the truth of His revelation and convict and challenge and ultimately change all of them.

Paul is effectively saying, "I am entrusting you to the Spirit of God who is you're ultimate teacher."

Which raises the question in my mind – and perhaps yours at this moment – how do you know when the Spirit of God is teaching you?

How can you know if the Spirit of God is leading you? Let me give you 6 signs of His leading:

- The Spirit of God will always be consistent with what the word of God reveals (John 16:13);
- The Spirit of God will always lead you act like the character of God – who is pure, honest and gracious (Romans 1:4);
- The Spirit of God will never encourage you to give up or live in fear (2 Timothy 1:7);
- The Spirit of God will always lead you to reject sin instead of defending or hiding it (Galatians 5:17);
- The Spirit of God will always lead you out of guilt and despair through repentance and forgiveness and renewed hope (Titus 3:5)
- The Spirit of God will lead you to take action instead of giving up in defeat (Ephesians 6:18).

The Apostle Paul wrote almost every one of the texts I just referenced – he knew that a teachable believer had within him the greatest teacher of all – by whom the ***spiritually minded individual receives the things of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).***

By adjusting your attitude and remaining teachable – the arrow of your life will be aiming higher – heading toward the target of Christ-likeness. Thirdly, while you're at it;

3. Refuse to slip into neutral

Paul writes in *verse 16*. ***However, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.***

In other words, don't let up . . . if Paul is thinking in military terms, which some linguists think he was,

he would have been telling them to keep in step . . . don't break ranks.

If he were thinking in athletic terms, he would be telling them to stay in the race – to keep to their lane . . . to stay on the track.

If we were to change this to a musical metaphor, Paul would have been telling them to play at the right tempo – to practice what they know and stay at it.

Paul knew that every believer in the church at Philippi was at a different level . . . he didn't tell them all to walk at the same pace, to run with the same speed or to play an instrument with the same skill . . . he's telling them to not drop behind with whatever they'd learned thus far.

How many of you took piano lessons at some point in your life? Look at all the concert pianists in here. Well, probably not, right? And that's because we didn't retain what we'd learned – we slacked off.

While I was in seminary, Marsha worked full time to put me through 5 years and two master's degrees. I worked a variety of odd jobs in order to make a little money – most of it was used to buy books. I was a janitor in one seminary; a courier at another; a piano tuner – and for a while – which brought in the most money in the least amount of time, I had a half-dozen students whom I taught piano.

Most often, their parents would find out in the church we attended that I was teaching piano. And they would tell me that their child was a budding protégé!

So I would eventually seat some 5th grader at my piano bench to begin lessons. Typically I'd ask him if he knew how to play anything. And, typically, he'd respond enthusiastically and start banging out chopsticks – or Body and Soul.

This kid wasn't a protégé, he was a project! Eventually, I'd slip onto the bench next to him and begin to introduce this incredible instrument; an instrument with 88 keys; 52 white keys and 36 black keys.

I'd introduce him to the very first key, by name – the foundational note on the piano where he was to literally center his body when he sat down – Middle C. I'd show him where it was and have him play it.

I'd explain that you needed to know where Middle C was on the keyboard. And then I'd tell him that eventually he would learn how to play scales, beginning with Middle C.

And then eventually there would be chords to learn – first in the key of C. Then eventually we would move to arpeggios in the key of C – and finally songs, typically in the key of C.

Now with this metaphor in mind, the Apostle Paul would be encouraging the church with the fact that all of us were able to play at different stages. Some of us are hammering out Chopsticks and some are wrestling through the scales and some have advanced to chords and then on to arpeggios. Some are advanced enough to play concertos.

But the point is, don't lose what you've learned . . . don't go backward. Don't slack off or slip your spiritual life into neutral – don't digress from what you've learned thus far.

That would be like learning to play a concerto and going back to chopsticks. Frankly, it's one thing to forget how to play the piano, it's another thing to forget the purpose in life.

Along this same thought, Christ happens to be Middle C. Christ is the center of your life – Christ is foundational to everything you will ever learn about Christianity and the way to please the Lord. He is the key note to all the events and all the chords that play into your life. Christ is your Middle C.

So center everything in life on Christ. Pursue Christ in everything and never slack up or slip into neutral.

One author wrote in commentary to this verse to the Philippians, "If after years of Christian living, you think a time has come when your knowledge of Christ has advanced far enough; that you can ease up – you're wrong. We are to pursue Christ and His character and His attitude and His glory in the spring, the summer, the autumn, and in the dead of winter."^{ix}

Don't slip from where you are and what you know into neutral . . . you will always coast *down* – never up – but down, the hill you've climbed.

I'm not talking about salvation – I'm talking about spiritual strength and growth.

I think of Solomon, the son of David; a man with incredible skill and industry and discernment – from poetry to botany; from engineering to architecture.

Amazing – God-given talent – he really was a child protégé. His father David planned it, but Solomon was chosen by God to build it – one of the wonders of the ancient world – stunning architecture, brilliant design, gorgeous down to the very last detail – much of it covered in solid gold; it

was Solomon's greatest achievement – it was the Temple of God.

I find it tragically ironic that near the end of his life, in a rather private journal we call the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon reflects on how far he had digressed. And he rattles off one accomplishment after another – one skill after another – one project after another – but near the end of his life, Solomon never mentions the temple, not even once. Why?

Perhaps haunted by other designs on the hill of shame nearby where his wives worshipped their false gods . . . perhaps it didn't matter anymore to him in the end. That's how far he'd gotten off the track . . . that's how much of the music he'd long forgotten to play.

Paul effectively says, "Take what you have and what you know and keep moving . . . keep learning . . . don't slip into neutral."

One more word of encouragement from this text follows next.

4. Imitate people worth following

Paul writes, Brethren, join in following my example (verse 17a). The word *example* here refers to a blueprint to follow in constructing a life worth living.^x

Paul obviously carries an apostolic prerogative. He adds in another letter to the Corinthians that they were to *follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (I Corinthians 11:1)*.

And instead of throwing his weight around alone, notice how includes other believers as potential patterns – notice he writes further in *verse 17, observe those* – from *skopew* – to literally – scope out those *who walk according to the pattern you have in us*.

These believers would have known well Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul even throws the doors of the church assembly open as well – included in this encouragement would be to find examples and patterns of godly living within the local body and model after them.

It happens to be a part of human nature to be followers. We are, by nature, imitators.

Car manufacturers and clothing designers and every other retailer bank on that fact.

It's our nature. And that can be good and that can be bad. And parents are always trying to refocus the attention of their kids on to the right people.

Has it ever occurred to you that the Spirit of God through Paul never tells us to stop following people – but He does tell us to make sure we're following the right people.

Find godly people and imitate them. Follow holy people.

Without a doubt, the world at large is watching each other. They're taking their cues from their heroes.

I was so disappointed to watch two quarterbacks following the big game; one of them walked off the set like a kid who didn't get his way – he showed a generation of young people how to lose without dignity; the winning quarterback was worse, in my opinion.

couple of times, this quarterback said that following this great victory he planned to kiss his wife and kids and then drink a lot of beer – effectively telling a generation of kids who idolized him that the way to celebrate a great victory as a real family man was to kiss your wife and kids and then go get smashed.

And then he added – and this was most unfortunate – "I'm going to offer a prayer to the man upstairs . . ."

Beloved, there is no man upstairs. There is only our majestic, sovereign, gracious, holy, magnificent Lord of Lords and King of Kings before whom we bow in reverence and awe.

Now I realize I'm speaking to believers . . . I understand the world gets it wrong. But to my point – I couldn't help but think of all the young people who would be watching their heroes, influenced by this pattern and thus get it wrong, too.

But here's the more important issue for us as believers: your world is watching you; in here and out there.

What kind of follower would a Christian become if he or she were to imitate us?^{xi}

Would we hold out much hope for genuine progress? If some younger believer in our midst chose to copy the pattern of your life, is there anything you'd rather they didn't see? Or scope out?

This ultimately swings back around to us by implication and application . . . this isn't just an exhortation to find someone holy to imitate, it is to become holy so that someone can imitate us.

So let's help each other . . . let's help our world . . . let's set an example so that others can also find

Middle C . . . and join us in centering their lives on Christ.

Let's aim higher together. Let's make sure we're aiming at the right target, living lives worth imitating.

Let's make Jesus Christ our Middle C. How?

- By adjusting our attitude
- By choosing to stay teachable
- By refusing to slip into neutral
- By imitating people worth following and becoming a person worth imitating.

For the glory and honor – not of ourselves – but of Jesus Christ, who is in the center of our lives . . . our Savior and Lord!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/14/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Adapted from Anthony Evans, Our God is Awesome (Moody Press, 1994), p. 21

ⁱⁱ Adapted from Steven E. Runge, Philippians: A Visual and Textual Guide (Lexham Press, 2014), p. 89

ⁱⁱⁱ Runge, p. 89

^{iv} William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 65

^v John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 249

^{vi} R. Kent Hughes, Philippians (Crossway, 2007), p. 150

^{vii} Leonard Ravenhill, Last Days Newsletter (1/09/2006)

^{viii} Revive, Volume 46; Issue 2, Cultivating Humility (Life Action Ministries, 2015), p. 17

^{ix} Adapted from Hughes, p. 150

^x Life Application Bible Commentary: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon, Grant Osborne, General Editor (Tyndale House, 1995), p. 98

^{xi} Adapted from Life Application Bible Commentary: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon, p. 99