**Perfection – A Work In Progress**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

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Michael J. Fox, a famous actor, once said, “I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence, I can reach for; perfection is God's business.”

Perfection is to be without failure or flaw. It means to be always right while never making a mistake. It means to be without blemish. In church, it means to be without sin. Perfection is not something that we as humans can achieve. The only example of perfection we have is Christ Jesus. Christ, because He is God, was perfection on earth. Ephesians 5:1 tells us to “be imitators of God.” Though we cannot ever achieve perfection, we must continually work toward the unattainable goal of Christ’s perfection in our discipleship.

Burk Hudson, a songwriter, once wrote, “Perfection is a road, not a destination.” This morning, let’s consider “Perfection – A Work In Progress,” as a theme for our spiritual journey in the new year.

In our text, Paul urged Philippians to reach for perfection in Christ by following his example. He told the church in Philippi to always look ahead and keep the focus on Christ. Even though Paul knew that he would never obtain perfection, it didn’t stop him from striving for that goal. Therefore, we must also follow Paul’s example. Though we know that we’ll never reach the goal of perfection this side of heaven, we must strive to obtain it by forgetting about the past, straining toward what is ahead and daring to be an example for others around us.

The past is in the past. There is nothing that we can do to change the past, good or bad. Therefore, as Paul told the Philippians, we should forget about the past. I don’t believe that Paul meant to wipe the past from our memories. I believe that Paul was encouraging everyone to simply not dwell on it.

If there’s a great accomplishment in the past, celebrating that accomplishment over and over again can cause complacency. Success can go to our heads and cause us to relax and lose focus.

After college, I spent my first three years as a high school teacher. During those years, I also coached several sports, which was something I had always wanted to do. I dabbled in coaching football and soccer, but my true passion was coaching basketball. All three years, I coached JV boy’s basketball with moderate success. In a few cases when the team got off to a great start and built a big lead in the first half, I remember encouraging, and sometimes begging, the players to forget about the first half. I remember giving halftime speeches like “Forget about the score. Play the second half as if the score was 0-0 again.” Most of the time, the team didn’t take the words to heart and didn’t play nearly as well in the second half as they did in the first.

The mind is a powerful thing and when we experience success, it is hard to force the mind to keep pushing and moving forward.

Not only should we not dwell on our successes, we shouldn’t dwell on our failures either. Failures are a part of life. Because we are not perfect, mistakes are made and losses occur. Everyone experiences failure. Just as Paul encouraged the Philippians to not dwell on past successes, he also encourages them to forget about past failures.

James 1:4 says, “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

Learn from the failures and grow from the experience. Do what is needed to correct the mistake, but don’t let the failures derail you from working toward the goal of perfection. Let go of your past failures. Cut it loose so that you can press forward.

Not only should we forget about the past, Paul reminds us to strain toward what is ahead. In verse 14 of our text, Paul said, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul understood that the ultimate prize for Christians did not lie in the present. Paul held onto the truth of eternal life that believers have in heaven.

Our spiritual life is a journey. When we first believe in the love of Christ and begin in a personal relationship, it is not the final destination. It is only the beginning. It is the start of a love relationship that requires work in order for it to grow. It requires time spent in studying of Scripture, time in prayer, time in service and time in building relationships with other believers.

Our spiritual journey is a lot like this fictional story of Walt. You may find it familiar.

Walt bought an old home, a fixer-upper, a year ago. It was all that he could afford. The budget was tight, but he was able to manage the mortgage payments with a small amount left over for some upgrades around the house. Over time, Walt worked hard to remodel and refurbish the home. He put a fresh coat of paint on the outside and inside of the house. He put new cabinets in the kitchen. He was even able to put down new carpet. It made the old home feel new with all of the cosmetic changes. Walt was pleased with all the changes he was able to make on a tight budget.

As Walt was saving up for his next improvement, he had a small setback. The kitchen stove decided to go out, causing Walt to spend his home improvement savings to replace the stove. A few weeks later, the washer stopped running. Walt had to spend more of his savings to replace the washer. Walt was getting a little discouraged but knew that it was all a part of owning his own home.

Just as Walt was building up his savings again, his car needed a new transmission. It took everything in his savings to replace the transmission but he had to have the car to go to work and keep his job.

By this point, Walt was extremely frustrated. He felt that if he took two steps forward, something would happen to force him to take three steps back. He didn’t think he would ever get ahead.

Do you ever feel like Walt in your spiritual journey? This journey will take steps forward and a few steps back. The key to the journey is to take more steps toward God than steps away from God.

Go forward; look ahead; persevere and keep your eyes focused on the prize that we have in Jesus. The journey is worth whatever obstacles we face.

If we forget about the past and strain toward what is ahead, then we can take it to the next level: to be an example for others. Dare to be an example for others to follow.

Paul did not back away from such a task. “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” (vs. 17) Paul took his role as a leader and a role model seriously.

He then urged the Philippians to not live like those that are “enemies of the cross.” “Enemies of the cross” referred to those professing Christians during that time that did not live as Christ did. Their actions and words did not match up. It brought much grief and sadness to Paul to see Christians live like the rest of the world. He said that their mind was on earthly things rather than on heavenly things.

If we are truthful with ourselves, how many of us today fit the description given by Paul in verse 19? “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” The world teaches us to look out for number one and live for the moment. The world sells us instant gratification is the only way to live. We must look a certain way, have a certain amount of money and drive certain cars to be successful. In order to reach these goals, we must do whatever it takes, which sometimes include cheating, lying, stealing and taking advantage of others.

Paul says don’t be an “enemy of the cross.” Don’t do more harm to the Christian faith by professing Christ and then live like the rest of the world. Be a Kingdom builder. Dare to be different. Be an example for others to follow. Inspire others to follow the path of Christ. Make those around you better. Be the salt and light in the world.

Failure is part of life along with success. We must leave the past in the past and always strain forward to what lies ahead. We must continually work toward the perfection that we have in Christ Jesus in our spiritual journey. While on that journey, we must dare to be an example for others, inspiring them to follow Christ in all things.

CBS News anchor Dan Rather admits he was always fascinated by the sport of boxing, even though he was never good at it. "In boxing, you're on your own; there's no place to hide," he says. "At the end of the match, only one boxer has his hand up. That's it. He has no one to credit or to blame except himself." Dan Rather, who boxed in high school, says his coach's ultimate goal was to teach his boxers that they absolutely, positively, without question, had to be "get up" fighters. He said, "If you're in a ring just once in your life--completely on your own--and you get knocked down but you get back up again, it's an never-to-be-forgotten experience. Your sense of achievement is distinct and unique. And sometimes the only thing making you get up is someone in your corner yelling."

New Year’s Day signifies a new beginning, a fresh start. What happened in 2016 is in the past. We look forward to what will happen in 2017 with much anticipation. There will be many triumphs and successes to celebrate. Enjoy the blessings and remember to give God the glory. On the other hand, to be sure, there will be some knockdowns, but I pray that you will be able to get up and go another round and be a “get-up”fighter. The First Baptist family is in your corner and will are cheering you on. I pray you’ll be able to go the distance in your spiritual journey, all the while, inspiring others to do the same.