

Before You Try Harder: Living From Who You Are, Not Who You're Trying to Become

Part 3: Grow From Acceptance, Not Performance

Philippians 3:12-14

Summary: Growth isn't about perfection or performance, but about pursuing Jesus from a place of acceptance, freedom, and joy.

Main Ideas:

There's a real difference between "want to" work and "have to" work.

Many of us feel the pressure to follow Jesus the 'right' way.

real change flows from acceptance... not for it.

Knowing Jesus is infinitely better than perfection.

The pursuit of God is the pursuit of joy.

The point of following Jesus is Jesus.

We don't grow to be accepted; we grow because we already are.

We don't try harder to impress Jesus... we press on because Jesus already has us.

Invitation:

Once a day, pause and pray: "God, thank you for loving me... all of me."

And then ask, "What would it look like to enjoy you right now?"

Transcript:

IN: What's something you've chosen to work hard at

- Not because you had to, but simply because you wanted to?
- Maybe it was a project you believed in, a hobby that brought you joy, or a relationship you cherished.
- You willingly gave your time, your energy, maybe even your money... because you wanted to see it flourish.

Now, contrast that with something you only worked at because you had to

- Schoolwork, chores, filling out those cover sheets on the TPS reports.

There's a real difference between "want to" work and "have to" work.

For the past two weeks, we've been confronting a subtle but powerful lie:

- You have to work hard to be accepted.
- Your value is tied to your performance.
- God and everyone else will only care about you if you keep improving.

In the first week, we learned that your value is received, not achieved.

- You don't have to earn your place in God's family.
- If you belong to Jesus, you're already adopted: Chosen, sealed, secure.
- Nothing to prove. Nothing to earn. Nothing to lose.

Last week, we talked about the old stories of shame...

- The voices that whisper, "You'll never change. You're not enough. This is just who you are."

But in Jesus, those stories don't get the final word. Instead, your story is rewritten.

- He doesn't erase your past; He redeems it... turning brokenness into beauty.
- No more condemnation. No more chains.
- It's a new life, led by the Holy Spirit.

TENSION:

But here's the question: If I'm already loved... already new... already secure... what does growth look like now?

- Does following Jesus mean I can just coast and hope my life just magically changes?
- Or am I still stuck in a cycle of striving and performance... just with spiritual language and new goals?

Let's be honest: even the words "growth" and "discipline" can bring back the same old pressures.

- "Try harder. Do better. Don't mess this up."

Many of us feel the pressure to follow Jesus the 'right' way.

SOLUTION: The Apostle Paul talks about this tension in his letter to the ancient JF's in the city of Philippi.

And what he says doesn't just explain growth... it rescues it from becoming another performance trap.

Paul knew the pressure of trying to be "good enough" for God... keeping all the rules, always chasing approval.

But after meeting Jesus, everything changed.

He discovered that real change flows from acceptance... not for it.

Here's how he described it...

SOLUTION EXPLAINED: **Philippians 3:7-9 a NLT** *I once thought these things* [All his good deeds/religious effort of following all the right rules] *were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him.*

Paul realized that ... Knowing Jesus is infinitely better than perfection.

And Paul is honest... he's still in process...

Philippians 3:12 NLT *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*

What's this "perfection" Paul is talking about?

- It's not a spotless record or endless achievements.
- It's not moral superiority or spiritual bragging rights.

He's talking about a deeper, fuller experience of Jesus... real relationship, real transformation.

He's not describing a pressure to measure up.

- He's describing a pursuit of Jesus because Jesus already laid hold of him.

We grow, not for acceptance, but from acceptance.

But Paul says... "I press on to possess that perfection."

That still sounds like a lot of pressure, doesn't it?

- Always asking, "Where am I still not enough? What's missing in me? Is there something else I need to fix to keep God happy?"

But again, when Paul says "perfection," he isn't talking about being flawless.

- He means the kind of wholeness that only comes from an ongoing, unhindered life with Jesus... now, and even more fully in eternity.
- The pursuit of God is the pursuit of joy.

Think about your best relationship... a friend, spouse, or family member.

- You don't invest in that person to earn their love.
- You do it because you already know their love is yours, and you want to enjoy them more and more.

That's the heart of following Jesus.

- This isn't a "have to," it's a "get to"
- A joyful pursuit, not a religious chore.

Jesus is not just the means to an end.

- He is the beginning, the journey, and the destination.
- The point of following Jesus is Jesus.

Paul makes it clear: his motivation isn't pressure or anxiety...

- It's being anchored in the reality that Jesus took hold of him first.
- That's why he keeps moving forward, never defined by where he's been, but by this growing experience of God's love.

Not trying so hard doesn't mean not doing anything... it's not trying... it's pursuing God.

- It's like playing tag, chasing your kid, going on a beautiful Oregon hike.
- It's not a chore... it's a pursuit that brings happiness.

John Chrysostom: *For the soul that clings to God finds all its delight in Him and is evermore drawn, by its enjoyment, toward the inexhaustible source of pleasure.*

And in Paul's pursuit, he's not looking back on his past religious achievements or his failures...

- He's focusing ahead to when he will better know, enjoy, and experience God in eternity.

Philippians 3:13 NLT *No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.*

Paul had both religious accomplishments and deep regrets.

But, his focus is singular: move forward in knowing, loving, and experiencing Jesus

- Not growing for acceptance, but from acceptance.
- We don't grow to be accepted; we grow because we already are.

This doesn't mean the past doesn't matter... it just doesn't get to lead anymore.

- Once you know you're adopted, loved, and secure, not condemned anymore or ever again,
- You are finally free to throw off anything holding you back, whether shame or pride,
- And just enjoy pursuing God deeper.

We all have a past, but neither our failures nor our successes defines us.

- Our true identity is secure in Jesus, and knowing him more is the goal.

That's why there's so much freedom here!

- You're free to bring your questions, your doubts, and your wondering because it's not about getting it all right;
- It's about discovering more of God's love as you go.
- Even your mistakes become part of the journey toward joy in Jesus.

Like any journey, there are highs and lows... moments where you think you've arrived, and moments you feel lost.

- But this journey always leads to perfect joy with God

Philippians 3:14 NLT *I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*

WHAT NOW? So what does all this mean on Monday morning, when you wake up still imperfect, still with a past, and maybe still tempted to check some spiritual boxes?

First, none of this matters if there's no relationship with Jesus... it all starts there.

- Paul could let go of perfectionism and past baggage because he knew he'd been adopted into God's family.
- That offer is open to you, too.
- You can say, "Jesus, I want to be yours. I trust you to lead my life now and forever."

If you're not ready, that's ok.

- Just be honest about that.
- Ask, "Why not?" Explore, ask questions, seek him.
- God's love is patient.

And moving forward... let's all remember that every relationship is unique.

- Just like worrying about "supposed to's" can suck the fun/joy/life out of our human relationships...
- Doing things because you're supposed to with God can turn want to into have to.

Remember... Following Jesus is a joyful pursuit, not a burden to carry.

So here's a simple invitation for this week... just one thing.

- Once a day, pause and pray: "God, thank you for loving me... all of me."
- And then ask, "What would it look like to enjoy you right now?"

No pressure. No proving.

- Just pursuit.
- Not because you have to... but because you get to.

If you're a parent wrestling with guilt over mistakes, remember: God's love for you is unshakeable.

- Enjoy him this week, and let that give you peace with yourself and your kids.

If you're in a season of disappointment, ask God what it looks like to enjoy him right where you are, not just where you wish you could be.

If you're worried about your future, remember he's already loving you there, too.

WHAT IF WE DID THIS? What would change if, instead of trying harder this week... we simply pursued enjoying God?

What if we stopped asking... "Am I doing enough for God?"

- And started asking, "Am I enjoying God?"

What if growth stopped being something we measured... and became something we experienced?

Imagine being a community of people who aren't driven by guilt, not haunted by shame, not fueled by fear of failure...

- But anchored in love.

People who still press on, still grow, still pursue being like Jesus,

- Not because they're afraid of losing God...
- Because they know they already have him.

That kind of life changes everything.

You don't wake up thinking,

- "Don't mess this up."

You wake up thinking,

- "I wonder what God wants to show me today."

And you don't chase perfection.

- You chase Jesus.

Because the prize at the end of the race isn't a better version of you.

It's him.

We don't try harder to impress Jesus... we press on because Jesus already has us.