

THE COMPASS
Worth Striving For
Postcards From Paul, Part 5

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What are you **striving** for?

What are you reaching out to get hold of?

What's important to you?

Maybe we can find the answer if we head to the Mediterranean Sea — to beautiful Greece.

If we sail along the coast of Greece, all the way up to the northernmost point of the Aegean Sea, we come to the region of Greece known as Macedonia.

And then, if we travel inland 9 or 10 miles, we find the historic city of Philippi — named for Philip II, who was the father of Alexander the Great.

If you remember your Shakespeare, Mark Antony catches up to Brutus at Philippi, and kills him.

Now, Philippi was an unusual place for the apostle Paul to visit.

Paul was Jewish; he focused a lot of his ministry on Jewish people. (It was the apostle Peter who focused on the Gentiles.)

But there were very few Jewish people in Philippi. In fact, there were so few Jews that Philippi had no synagogue.

So under normal circumstances, we wouldn't expect Paul to head for Philippi at all. Paul didn't even have Macedonia in mind: he was **striving** to get into the province of Asia, or Asia Minor — but he kept getting turned back.

Then he figured, if he couldn't get into Asia Minor, he would go into Mysia or Bithynia, in the north of Turkey.

But the book of Acts tells us that he couldn't get in there either.

So he's running out of places to go!

Just about the only place left is the city of Troas, on the northwest coast of Turkey.

So he heads down there; maybe he thought he'd hang out and do some ministry there for a while.

But there he is, his first night, in the Troas Holiday Inn ... Paul is snoring away ... and the Bible says,

Acts 16:

9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

I don't think there's any other way Paul would have gotten the idea to go into such a Gentile area.

But after such a dramatic word from God, Paul and his team got ready immediately, and set sail on the Aegean Sea, and landed in the first major city inside Macedonia: Philippi.

Now, their first Sabbath in town, Paul and his team, as good Jewish Christians, of course look for a place of worship.

There's no synagogue, so they can't go that route.

So the Bible says they went outside the city gate, to the river, where they thought someone might have set up a place of prayer. You know, a quiet, peaceful setting.

And sure enough, there are some women there — so they strike up a conversation. One of the women is named Lydia. She's not from around there. Where is she from? Asia Minor. She's from the area that Paul had a longing to reach, but somehow couldn't reach.

Lydia is a businesswoman. In her hometown of Thyatira, in Asia Minor, they make fabulous purple dye and exotic purple fabrics — so she buys this stuff from the Thyatirans, brings it to Philippi, and sells it to the Greeks.

But she's not primarily about **striving** for wealth. She's **striving** for a connection to God.

Lydia is a seeker. She has a hunger in her heart to connect with God, but she really has no idea how.

The only thing she has figured out so far is to worship the way Jewish people worship, because they seem to have a connection to God.

So here she is, in a city with no synagogue, not a drop of Jewish blood in her, **striving** to be a good Jew, just so she can love God well.

Well, when Paul shared the Gospel with her — when he told her about Jesus, and the sacrifice that Jesus had made for her, and the fact that she could be saved by faith alone, because of this amazing gift of grace — Lydia was sold. She was thrilled.

The Bible says she and her household were baptized, to signal to all their friends that they were committed to Christ.

And then she said to Paul, Hey look, you're going to need a place to stay. Stay at my place.

So the team moved in, and they began doing ministry in Philippi.

Lydia went down in history as the first convert to Christ on European soil. She was the first Christian baptized on European soil.

And with Paul and the team, she founded the first Christian church on European soil.

Unfortunately, things didn't go well after that.

One day on their way to the place of prayer down by the river, they were met by a slave girl.

Not just an ordinary slave girl. A slave girl possessed by a demon.

Not just an ordinary demon. A demon that predicted the future.

The demon would predict the future, the slave girl would act as a fortune-teller, and her owner would pocket the fortune-telling fee.

And he loved this, because he was all about getting rich. His life was a constant **striving** for wealth.

But the demon was nervous, because now these Christians were living in town.

So he drove the girl to start following Paul and the team around, day after day, shouting and calling attention to them.

She wasn't telling lies; she was telling the truth — she would shout, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

But after days and days of this, Paul got fed up — turned around — cast the demon

out of her in Jesus' name.

Well — there goes the fortune-telling business.

So the slave girl's owner has Paul and Silas dragged into the marketplace in front of the authorities, charged with the crime of being Jews — also with “throwing the city into an uproar” and “advocating unlawful customs.”

The crowd joined in on the attack — and the magistrates ordered the two men to be stripped, severely flogged, and thrown into prison overnight.

The historical account in the Bible — you can read it for yourself, in **Acts 16** — says **“the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully,”** so the jailer, who is **striving** to follow orders, doesn't just put them in any old part of the jail: he puts them in the inner cell and fastens their feet in stocks.

Now it's midnight. Paul and Silas have been flogged severely. They are in pain beyond anything you or I can imagine.

And what are they doing? I would be plotting my escape — or at the very least, plotting my court appeal.

But that's not where Paul and Silas's heads were at. What were they **striving** for? **Acts 16:25** says at the midnight hour, they were **“praying and singing hymns to God.”**

They were still about Thing 1 — loving God well — as the first and most important thing in life.

And the Bible says **“the other prisoners were listening to them.”**

I mean, they had to be saying to themselves, what's up with this?

Loving God well makes an impression on people.

But then God intervenes miraculously.

He causes a violent earthquake. Not just any earthquake: an earthquake that shakes the foundations of the prison — and makes all the prison doors fly open, and all the prisoners' chains come loose.

It was, I think, kind of a *Pirates of the Caribbean* moment.

So the jailer — who had a room right there in the prison — of course wakes up.

And when he sees that not only are these new guys on the loose — after he had specific orders to watch them closely — but all the other prisoners are free too, the jailer just freaks out.

He pulls his sword, he's going to commit suicide.

But Paul shouts at him, tells him to stop. Look, he says, we're all still here. Nobody has escaped.

The jailer is stunned.

Acts 16 says:

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

30 He then brought them out [of their cell] and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

31 They replied, [“Apologize!” — No, that's not right. They replied, “Try really, really hard to be a good boy the whole rest of your life!” — No, that's not right either. They actually replied, in the simplest possible terms:] “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your household.”

32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.

33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.

34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God — he and his whole family.

No more **striving**. No more anxiety. God was with him — and he finally knew it.

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Years go by. Paul puts a lot of miles on his body.

Can't seem to stay out of trouble, winds up in jail — eventually he's in prison in Rome; this is big-time trouble.

He's going to be tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

They're going to behead him.

During the two-year legal process, he sits in prison and writes.

Some of what he writes is inspired by the Spirit of God. It winds up in our New Testament.

One of these letters is what we call the book of Philippians.

It's a short, warm-hearted, loving letter to Lydia, to the jailer and his family, to the Christians he left behind in that little church by the river.

I could read it to you, start to finish, in about 15 minutes.

But here's the heart of it.

Paul writes to his friends at Philippi about *epektasis*. **Striving**.

Sometimes *epektasis* is translated *reaching*, or *reaching out*, or *reaching forth unto*. *Stretching out* or *stretching forward*.

Straining toward, or *straining ahead*.

Maybe as Paul writes to his old friends at Philippi, he's remembering how he strove to get into Asia Minor, then strove to make his second choice, Bithynia. *Epektasis*.

Or maybe it's more likely that he's fondly remembering meeting Lydia for the first time, hearing her story, how she strove for a connection with God, strove in all her Gentile-ness to be a good Jew. *Epektasis*.

He could probably remember the slave girl's owner, and the compulsion for wealth that drove him to get Paul and Silas arrested: *epektasis*.

And the jailer's fixation on following orders: *epektasis*.

And then the freedom the jailer experienced, when he came to understand that God loved him.

Epektasis is what a watchman does, from the watchtower: he peers into the distance, maybe he narrows his eyes; he's looking out, seeing as far as he can, as if by squinting he can see further.

In the Old Testament, in the Song of Solomon, we get a sense of *epektasis* when the girl gets a whiff of the guy's cologne, and she's drawn to him, her heart reaches out to him, she starts fantasizing about running away with him.

It's a yearning. It's a pressure.

What's the focus of your *epektasis*?

Paul says don't waste that energy.

Focus it on something that's worthwhile.

What are you **striving** for?

Don't waste your life **striving** for position, for power, for stuff that won't matter in eternity.

Philippians 2:

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

What should my approach to life be, then?

Paul says, based on his own lifetime of experience: If you're going to strive, strive to be like Jesus. Love God, love people.

Philippians 2:

5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

You can strive and strive and strive, you can push and pull and prod, you can scramble for wealth and maneuver for position and connive to get what you want — you can pursue pleasure and comfort with every fiber of your being — but even Jesus, who could have had anything he wanted, took a radically different approach.

Some people drink themselves to death, or eat themselves to death.

Some party themselves to death.

Some spend their lives searching for the perfect marriage partner or the most fabulous sexual experience.

Some people work themselves to death.

But Jesus was "obedient to death."

He "obeyed himself" right out of a life — and let God raise him up, lift him up, exalt him.

Jesus just loved people — and let God take care of him.

He was our perfect example.

He demonstrated how to channel our **striving** wisely.

He made himself the gold standard of intelligent *epektasis*.

Jesus called us to love God by loving people, and he showed us how it's done.

He made himself the one and only valid model to pursue.

A lot of people try to achieve excellence by other means.

They strive for righteousness by some seemingly worthwhile strategy.

Paul himself tried it. He didn't start out understanding what was important.

In fact, he was awesome at **striving** for righteousness in ways that looked really right in his circumstances.

He goes on to remind his friends at Philippi:

Philippians 3:

**4 ...If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
5 circumcised on the eighth day [observing every detail of the law of Moses], of the
people of Israel [God's chosen nation], of the tribe of Benjamin [this is the
group that produced King David — and Jesus himself], a Hebrew of Hebrews;
in regard to the law, a Pharisee [the strictest of the strict, religiously speaking];
6 as for zeal, persecuting the church [he didn't just follow the rules, he worked to
stamp out the rule breakers]; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.
7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.**

Then what's important, Paul? What's worth my *epektasis*? What's worth **striving** for?
Here's what he says, in the very next line:

**8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing
greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all
things. I consider them rubbish [the word, literally, I can't say in polite
company; but it's often translated "dung"], that I may gain Christ
9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the
law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes
from God and is by faith.**

Knowing Christ — following his example — giving my life to loving God by loving
people — that's what's worth **striving** for.

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Am I there yet?

Was Paul there yet, by the time he was old?

He had done ministry all over the known world, he was the Billy Graham of his day, he
wrote more books of the New Testament than any other guy.

And yet, he knew, it's a process — and as long as we're trapped in these physical
bodies, living in this earthly realm, the process will continue.

He says to his friends at Philippi:

Philippians 3:

**12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I
press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.**

[It's a picture of *epektasis*. Of **striving**.]

**13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. [I am still in the
process.] But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind [not dragged down by
the memory of my sins and failures in the past] and straining toward what is
ahead, [there's the actual word — *epektasis*]**

**14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me
heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

Hm. "Forgetting what is behind."

You know, I'm embarrassed to remember how I treated someone before — but I'm
letting go of "what is behind" and instead focusing my *epektasis* on Jesus.

When I hire a worker to fix my plumbing and he blows the schedule and doesn't act like he cares and I'm in my fourth week without a kitchen sink, I am going to respond to him differently today than I would have before — if I know what I'm really **striving** for.

When my Chrysler waits till the day before our family vacation to start spewing a foul-smelling black smoke, I am going to respond differently today than I would have before — before I got my *epektasis* straight.

When someone I trusted betrays me ... when someone I love falls dangerously ill ... when my company sells out to a larger corporation and my job is suddenly in jeopardy...

These are all situations where the focus of my *epektasis* will make a very practical difference.

I'm **striving** to be filled with his Spirit ... as fully surrendered to his influence as I can ... and in spite of how I might fail today, I'm going to get up again tomorrow morning and re-surrender.

I'm going to focus my *epektasis* on Jesus all over again.