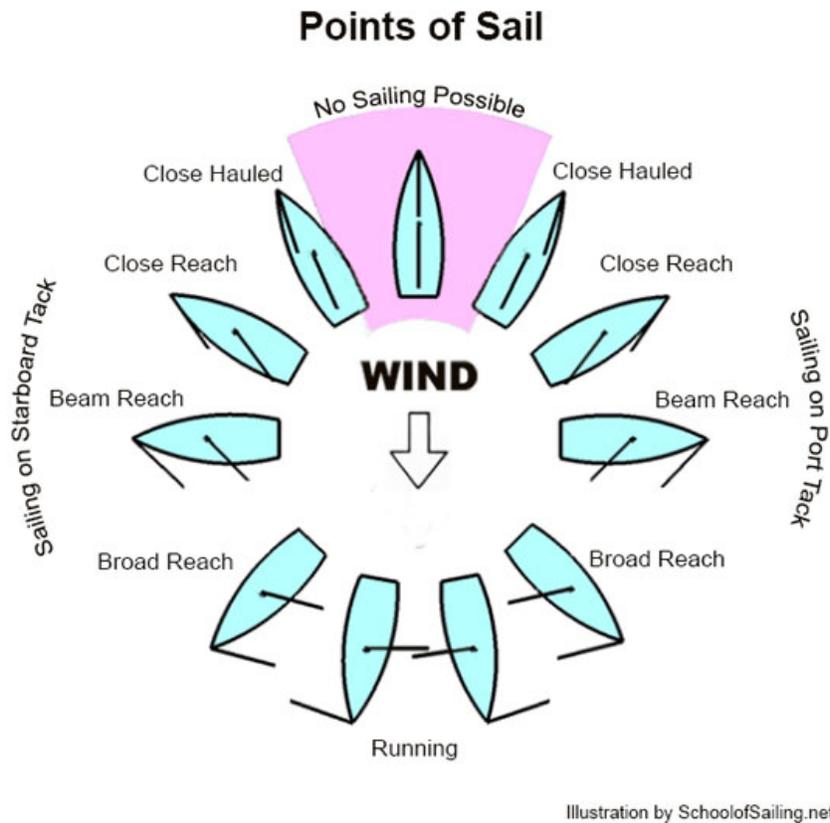


Observations on the Holy Spirit from a Sailor

Any sailor learns in the first lesson that the only way to make progress in a sailboat is to properly align the boat, the wind, and the sails, in a harmony that is constantly changing as the boat makes progress to its intended destination. To discern the wind direction, a ribbon or pennant is affixed to the main mast head (top). The skipper must remain constantly aware of the wind direction to sail successfully. To do this, eyes must often be pointed up at the mast head, where the directional indicator is placed.

If the skipper takes eyes off the indicator long enough, the boat's progress will slow. At some points of sail, taking eyes off the wind for just a moment can stop the boat's progress altogether.



No Christian can anticipate sufficient progress in a walk with Christ without eyes up, discerning the Spirit's leading. A Christian walk without the leading of the Spirit is akin to a walk in the woods without a trail or compass. It covers ground but can lead us in dangerous – even life-threatening – directions.

Progress is defined as "forward movement toward a destination." This definition changes neither for sailing nor for living out our faith as Christians. Discerning how to make progress toward the destination is step one. For a sailor, it requires reading the wind. For a Christian, it requires quiet listening to the Spirit.

Close Hauled



An invigorating angle of sailing (point of sail) into the wind called “close hauled.” This is the point of sail often depicted in sailing scenes with water spraying off the bow as it rapidly cuts through the water, the boat heeling over at an extreme angle as it fights the wind to remain upright.

This point of sail, to me, creates the most exciting moments sailing. The wind seems twice as

strong as it really is, because the boat travels at a tight angle into it. The perceived wind velocity on the boat is nearly the actual wind speed plus the speed of the boat. It’s really blowing!

The water is splashing off the bow not because the boat’s actual speed in the water is so high, but because 1) the wind is blowing waves directly into the bow, and 2) the bow is leaning at an angle its designers did not intend for it to cut through the water. The artificially high wind across the boat blows the spray back onto its occupants. The splashing of the bow in the water lays down an exhilarating sound track. It feels fast, it sounds fast, and it’s a thrill. It’s getting you wet and you don’t even seem to notice.

When you’re close hauled, it means you’re trying your level best to use the wind against itself. It wants to blow you south, but you want to travel north, so you’re close hauled. You also have to tack back and forth, left for a while, then right for a while, and so on, for your boat to make your progress into the wind.

We often live our Christian lives close hauled to the Spirit. We’re paying attention Him, but we deceive ourselves when His leading seems twice as strong as it really is. He is directing our lives, some, but it’s mostly us driving our lives in the thrilling direction where we want it to go. Being close hauled to the Spirit can be exciting indeed from an earthly viewpoint, but we fail to see how close we are to making a mistake that will stop us in our tracks, and we fail to notice that we’re getting wet. And cold. We tend to miss the messages the Spirit is giving us, because we are forcing our lives in our direction, not His.

In Irons

When the boat bears more tightly than about 20 degrees into the wind, no sailing is possible. This is an impactful sailing mistake that most often occurs when the skipper has a boat close hauled.

When in irons, the boat quickly comes to a halt in the water. The sails luff (flap) loudly – even violently in a strong wind – protesting with loud, slapping noises as they are thrashed about. The boat has no momentum, and the flapping-sail-noise frightens first-timers. This fear announces that something has gone very wrong, and they’re in a predicament.

When a boat is in irons, it can begin to drift slowly and helplessly backwards. Regaining forward momentum is difficult. The skipper can see the wind direction from the ribbon atop the mainmast, but with no water flowing against the rudder, so he cannot steer the boat to put wind in the sails. In irons, the skipper can feel trapped, unable to get back underway while his sails are beaten by the wind; helpless.

In all but the smallest sailboats, it takes the patient help of the mate – someone besides the skipper (who is on the helm, and therefore physically unable to manipulate the boom) – to hold the boom far out to one side, forcing air across the sail, with the hope that it rotates the bow slightly. Only when this (or some other) effort rotates the bow of the boat a few degrees away from the wind direction can the skipper re-trim the sails and once again get underway.

The spiritual parallels here are striking:

- I'm fascinated that the sailing term for this situation, usually brought about by the skipper's inattention to the orientation of the boat in the wind, is "in irons". The skipper averts attention for only a moment, and the results can be shocking. So many Christian lives are affected the same way. Attention drifts away from the guiding of the Spirit, and folks find themselves shackled, in spiritual hand- and leg-irons, placed there quite purposely by the evil one.
- When this happens, their life's forward progress stops. Events in their lives usher in fear and a false notion of helplessness as the evil one whispers to them, "There is no hope."
- The "irony" here is that the drift is only "backwards" from the perspective of those in the boat. It is actually drifting in the direction the wind wishes it to go, but in the state of hopelessness and fear that comes with being in irons, that truth is lost on the victim.
- The change happens when a Christ-follower "mate" offers presence, prayer, discussion, and physical intervention, to gently nudge this person's boom back into the wind of the Spirit. As in sailing, progress and recovery begin with only a few degrees of change.
- For the one who stumbled, when their eye returns to Christ through the Spirit, He can gently guide the one who drifted, and the forward progress of life can gradually return.

Running



The point of sail with the wind at your back is – ironically enough – called "running." This is the point of sail often depicted in sailing scenes with the big, brightly-colored spinnaker to one side at the front of the boat catching the wind, and the mainsail to the other side of the boat. It's a beautiful sight, full of grace and peace.

This is the only point of sail where the beautiful spinnaker can be safely run. At any other angle to the wind, only the smaller jib sail can be used. That beautiful spinnaker must be stowed.

While running, there is a peaceful calm on the boat. The perceived wind speed on the boat can be perfectly calm, as

the wind is at your back and the boat is travelling nearly as fast as the wind itself. There is no spray blowing into the boat. The wind is blowing waves away from you, and the boat remains upright in the water so the bow can work as designed to

deflect water away from the boat's occupants. There's no splashing sound, nor is the wind whistling past your ears. The peace and calm are stunning.

The irony is that when you're running, you are making the best possible progress toward your downwind destination. Sailors are often surprised when they're running and they look to the rear of the boat to see the wake made by the boat as it pushes through the water. It hardly seems possible that such a state of calm and peace can generate the kind of power that moves even a large boat through the water at good speed.

There is no need to tack (or come about) back and forth; progress is straight and sure. Boat speed is actually higher at other pints of sail (when running, the sails act more as parachute than airfoil), but without the need to go back and forth, the more modest running speed carries the boat straight to its destination. Often running is done with one sail to the left side, and one sail to the right side, each catching the wind on its side of the boat; this technique is called "running wing in wing." In a life perfectly aligned with the Spirit, God "has our back" and propels us along the path He intends for us. We are running with the Spirit of the living God. When this alignment with the Spirit occurs:

- We are running the race (Hebrews 12:1) He intends for us.
- We place the beauty God infused in us on display for the world to see – the spinnaker of the Spirit billows beautifully before us.
- We experience peace and grace as we do at no other time; even if we're in danger, there is a calm that is surprisingly difficult to describe.
- Our path is aligned with the direction the Spirit is guiding us. Our progress may not seem rapid, but it is His progress. The power of the Spirit is moving us through the water; sometimes we just need to look back and observe the wake.
- This spiritual image of running wing in wing, when viewed from the top (God's view) paints a beautiful metaphor of arms open to the Spirit, to catch its power and its direction in our lives.

Amen.

By David H. Hogg

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