

**Philippians 3**  
**August 4, 2024**

**Open with Prayer**

**HOOK:**

Q: What does it take for an athlete to win at a world-class level, like the Olympics? [Let people engage]

**Transition:** Like all of the Olympic athletes, Paul is going to strongly encourage us to press on for the finish line. It is effortless to become complacent, especially for those of us who have been Christians for a long time. We get into the groove of living the Christian life by habit. Going to church, reading the Bible, and even praying may become second nature. When we do all these things, it's easy to start thinking that we have "arrived," that we are "good Christians."

But Paul will teach that the key to living a holy life is to understand that we haven't arrived yet. There is always room for growth in every single area of our lives. If we pridefully think that we are "pretty good" or get into the habit of comparing ourselves with others, then we will not grow. And from this passage, we see that every believer needs to continually push forward to grow more like Christ each day. Let's read the text.

**BOOK:**

**No Confidence in the Flesh**

**3** Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

<sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—<sup>4</sup> though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

<sup>7</sup> But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> 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, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

*Pressing on Toward the Goal*

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward

what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

<sup>17</sup> Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. <sup>18</sup> For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

### **Process Observations/Questions:**

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

### **LOOK:**

Too many Christians are shackled by regrets of the past. They are trying to run the race by looking backward! No wonder they stumble and fall and get in the way of other Christians! Some Christian runners are being distracted by the *successes* of the past, not the failures; and this is just as bad. “The things which are behind” must be set aside and “the things which are before” must take their place.

The believer should be future-oriented, “forgetting those things which are behind.” So, “forgetting those things which are behind” does not suggest an impossible feat of mental and psychological gymnastics by which we try to erase the sins and mistakes of the past. *It simply means that we break the power of the past by living for the future.* We cannot change the past, but we can change the *meaning* of the past. There were things in Paul's past that could have been weights to hold him back (1 Tim. 1:12–17), but they became inspirations to speed him ahead. The events did not change, but his understanding of them changed.

### **Close in Prayer**

### **Commentaries for Today's Lesson:**

**Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 2, pp. 83-94). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.***

Circumstances and people can rob us of joy, but so can *things*; and it is this “thief” that Paul deals with in Philippians 3. It is important to see the total message of this chapter before examining it in detail, so perhaps the following outline will be helpful.

Vv. 1–11	Vv. 12–16	Vv. 17–21
Paul's past	Paul's present	Paul's future
the accountant	the athlete	the alien
“I count” new values	“I press” new vigor	“I look” new vision

What Paul is describing is the “spiritual mind.” In Philippians 3:18–19, he describes professed Christians who “mind earthly things,” but then in Philippians 3:20 he describes the believer with the spiritual mind, who “minds heavenly things.” You will recall that the city of Philippi was actually a Roman colony—a “Rome away from Rome.” In the same sense, the people of God are a colony of heaven on earth. “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20, NASB), and we look at earth from heaven's point of view. This is the spiritual mind.

It is easy for us to get wrapped up in “things,” not only the tangible things that we can see, but also the intangibles such as reputation, fame, achievement. Paul writes about “what things were gain” to him (Phil. 3:7); he also mentions “things which are behind” and “things which are before” (Phil. 3:13). In Paul's case, some of these “things” were intangible, such as religious achievements (Gal. 1:14), a feeling of self-satisfaction, morality. We today can be snared both by tangibles and intangibles, and as a result lose our joy.

But even the tangible things are not in themselves sinful. God made things, and the Bible declares that these things are good (Gen. 1:31). God knows that we need certain things in order to live (Matt. 6:31–34). In fact, He “giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). But Jesus warns us that our lives do not consist in the abundance of the things that we possess (Luke 12:15). Quantity is no assurance of quality. Many people who have the things money can buy have lost the things that money cannot buy.

The key word in Philippians 3:1–11 is *count* (Phil. 3:7–8, 13). In the Greek, two different words are used, but the basic idea is the same: to evaluate, to assess. “The unexamined life is not worth living,” said Socrates. Yet, few people sit down to weigh seriously the values that control their decisions and directions. Many people today are the slaves of “things,” and as a result do not experience real Christian joy.

In Paul's case, the “things” he was living for before he knew Christ seemed to be very commendable: a righteous life, obedience to the Law, the defense of the religion of his fathers. But none of these things satisfied him or gave him acceptance with God.

Like most “religious” people today, Paul had enough morality to keep him out of trouble, but not enough righteousness to get him into heaven! It was not bad things that kept Paul away from Jesus—it was good things! He had to lose his “religion” to find salvation.

One day, Saul of Tarsus, the rabbi, met Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and on that day Saul’s values changed (read Acts 9:1–31). When Saul opened his books to evaluate his wealth, he discovered that apart from Jesus Christ, everything he lived for was only refuse. He explains in this section that there are only two kinds of righteousness (or spiritual wealth)—works righteousness and faith righteousness—and only faith righteousness is acceptable to God.

### **Works Righteousness (Phil. 3:1–6)**

*The exhortation (vv. 1–3).* “Finally” at this point does not mean Paul is about to close the letter, because he keeps on going. The word means “For the rest,” and introduces the new section. Paul’s “finally” at Philippians 4:18 is the one that means “I am about to close.” Paul has warned the believers at Philippi before, but now he warns them again. “Look out for dogs! Look out for the workers of evil! Look out for the mutilation!” To whom is he referring in this triple warning? The answer takes us back into the early history of the church.

From the very beginning, the Gospel came “to the Jew first” (see Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16), so that the first seven chapters of Acts deal only with Jewish believers or with Gentiles who were Jewish proselytes (Acts 2:10). In Acts 8:5–25, the message went to the Samaritans, but this did not cause too much of an upheaval since the Samaritans were at least partly Jewish. But when Peter went to the Gentiles in Acts 10, this created an uproar. Peter was called on the carpet to explain his activities (Acts 11). After all, the Gentiles in Acts 10 had become Christians *without first becoming Jews*, and this was a whole new thing for the church. Peter explained that it was God who had directed him to preach to the Gentiles, and the matter seemed to be settled.

But it was not settled for long. Paul was sent out by the Holy Spirit to minister especially to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1–3; 22:21). Peter had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles in Acts 10, and Paul followed his example on his first missionary journey (see Acts 14:26–28). It did not take long for the strict Jewish believers to oppose Paul’s ministry and come to Antioch teaching that it was necessary for the Gentiles to submit to Jewish rules before they could be saved (Acts 15:1). This disagreement led to the Conference at Jerusalem that is described in Acts 15. The result of the conference was an approval of Paul’s ministry and a victory for the Gospel of the grace of God. Gentiles did *not* have to become Jewish proselytes in order to become Christians!

But the dissenters were not content. Having failed in their opposition to Paul at Antioch and Jerusalem, they followed him wherever he went and tried to steal his converts and his churches. Bible students call this group of false teachers who try to mix Law and grace “Judaizers.” The Epistle to the Galatians was written primarily to combat this false teaching. It is this group of “Judaizers” that Paul is referring to in Philippians 3:1–2. He uses three terms to describe them.

“*Dogs.*” The orthodox Jew would call the Gentile a “dog,” but here Paul calls orthodox Jews “dogs”! Paul is not just using names; he is comparing these false teachers to the dirty scavengers so contemptible to decent people. Like those dogs, these Judaizers snapped at Paul’s heels and followed him from place to place “barking” their false doctrines. They were troublemakers and carriers of dangerous infection.

“*Evil workers.*” These men taught that the sinner was saved by faith *plus* good works, especially the works of the Law. But Paul states that their “good works” are really *evil* works because they are performed by the flesh (old nature) and not the Spirit, and they glorify the workers and not Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8–10 and Titus 3:3–7 make it clear that nobody can be

saved by doing good works, even religious works. A Christian's good works are the result of his faith, not the basis for his salvation.

*"The mutilation."* Here Paul uses a pun on the word "circumcision." The word translated "circumcision" literally means "a mutilation." The Judaizers taught that circumcision was essential to salvation (Acts 15:1; Gal. 6:12–18); but Paul states that circumcision of *itself* is only a mutilation! The true Christian has experienced a spiritual circumcision in Christ (Col. 2:11), and does not need any fleshly operations. Circumcision, baptism, the Lord's Supper, tithing, or any other religious practice cannot save a person from his sins. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do that.

In contrast to the false Christians, Paul describes the true Christians, the "true circumcision" (see Rom. 2:25–29 for a parallel).

*He worships God in the Spirit.* He does not depend on his own good works which are only of the flesh (see John 4:19–24).

*He boasts in Jesus Christ.* People who depend on religion are usually boasting about what they have done. The true Christian has nothing of which to boast (Eph. 2:8–10). His boast is only in Christ! In Luke 18:9–14, Jesus gives a parable that describes these two opposite attitudes.

*He has no confidence in the flesh.* The popular religious philosophy of today is, "The Lord helps those who help themselves." It was also popular in Paul's day, and it is just as wrong today as it was then. (By "the flesh" Paul means "the old nature" that we received at birth.) The Bible has nothing good to say about "flesh," and yet most people today depend entirely on what they themselves can do to please God. Flesh only corrupts God's way on earth (Gen. 6:12). It profits nothing as far as spiritual life is concerned (John 6:63). It has nothing good in it (Rom. 7:18). No wonder we should put no confidence in the flesh!

A lady was arguing with her pastor about this matter of faith and works. "I think that getting to heaven is like rowing a boat," she said. "One oar is faith, and the other is works. If you use both, you get there. If you use only one, you go around in circles."

"There is only one thing wrong with your illustration," replied the pastor. "Nobody is going to heaven *in a rowboat!*"

There is only one "good work" that takes the sinner to heaven: the finished work of Christ on the cross (John 17:1–4; 19:30; Heb. 10:11–14).

***The example (vv. 4–6).*** Paul was not speaking from an ivory tower; he personally *knew* the futility of trying to attain salvation by means of good works. As a young student, he had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the great rabbi (Acts 22:3). His career as a Jewish religious leader was a promising one (Gal. 1:13–14); and yet Paul gave it all up—to become a hated member of the "Christian sect" and a preacher of the Gospel! Actually, the Judaizers were compromising in order to avoid persecution (Gal. 6:12–13), while Paul was being true to Christ's message of grace and as a result was suffering persecution.

In this intensely autobiographical section, Paul examines his own life. He becomes an "auditor" who opens the books to see what wealth he has, and he discovers that *he is bankrupt!*

*Paul's relationship to the nation.* He was born into a pure Hebrew family and entered into a covenantal relationship when he was circumcised. He was not a proselyte, nor was he descended from Ishmael (Abraham's other son) or Esau (Isaac's other son). The Judaizers would understand Paul's reference to the tribe of Benjamin, because Benjamin and Joseph were Jacob's favorite sons. They were born to Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Israel's first king came from Benjamin, and this little tribe was faithful to David during the rebellion under Absalom. Paul's human

heritage was something to be proud of! When measured by this standard, he passed with flying colors.

*Paul's relationship to the Law.* "As touching the Law, a Pharisee ... touching the righteousness which is in the Law, blameless" (Phil. 3:5–6). To the Jews of Paul's day, a Pharisee had reached the very summit of religious experience, the highest ideal a Jew could ever hope to attain. If anybody was going to heaven, it was the Pharisee! He held to orthodox doctrine (see Acts 23:6–9) and tried to fulfill the religious duties faithfully (Luke 18:10–14). While we today are accustomed to use the word "Pharisee" as the equivalent of "hypocrite," this usage was not prevalent in Paul's day. Measured by the righteousness of the Law, Paul was blameless. He kept the Law and the traditions perfectly.

*Paul's relationship to Israel's enemies.* But it is not enough to believe the truth; a man must also oppose lies. Paul defended his orthodox faith by persecuting the followers of "that pretender," Jesus (Matt. 27:62–66). He assisted at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60), and after that he led the attack against the church in general (Acts 8:1–3). Even in later years, Paul admitted his role in persecuting the church (Acts 22:1–5; 26:1–11; see also 1 Tim. 1:12–16). Every Jew could boast of his own blood heritage (though he certainly could not take any credit for it). Some Jews could boast of their faithfulness to the Jewish religion. But Paul could boast of those things *plus* his zeal in persecuting the church.

At this point we might ask: "How could a sincere man like Saul of Tarsus be so wrong?" The answer is: *he was using the wrong measuring stick!* Like the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17–22) and the Pharisee in Christ's parable (Luke 18:10–14), Saul of Tarsus was looking at the *outside* and not the *inside*. He was comparing himself with standards set by men, not by God. As far as obeying *outwardly* the demands of the Law, Paul was a success, but he did not stop to consider the *inward sins* he was committing. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that there are sinful *attitudes* and *appetites* as well as sinful *actions* (Matt. 5:21–48).

When he looked at himself or looked at others, Saul of Tarsus considered himself to be righteous. But one day he saw himself as compared with Jesus Christ! It was then that he changed his evaluations and values, and abandoned "works righteousness" for the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

### **Faith Righteousness (Phil. 3:7–11)**

When Paul met Jesus Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9), he trusted Him and became a child of God. It was an instantaneous miracle of the grace of God, the kind that still takes place today whenever sinners will admit their need and turn to the Saviour by faith. When Paul met Christ, he realized how futile were his good works and how sinful were his claims of righteousness. A wonderful transaction took place. Paul lost some things, but he gained much more than he lost!

*Paul's losses (v. 7).* To begin with, he lost whatever was *gain to him personally apart from God*. Certainly Paul had a great reputation as a scholar (Acts 26:24) and a religious leader. He was proud of his Jewish heritage and his religious achievements. All of these things were valuable to him; he could profit from them. He certainly had many friends who admired his zeal. But he measured these "treasures" against what Jesus Christ had to offer, and he realized that all he held dear was really nothing but "refuse" compared to what he had in Christ. His own "treasures" brought glory to him personally, but they did not bring glory to God. They were "gain" to him only, and as such, were selfish.

This does not mean that Paul repudiated his rich heritage as an orthodox Jew. As you read his letters and follow his ministry in the Book of Acts, you see how he valued both his Jewish blood

and his Roman citizenship. Becoming a Christian did not make him *less* a Jew. In fact, it made him a *completed* Jew, a true child of Abraham both spiritually and physically (Gal. 3:6–9). Nor did he lower his standards of morality because he saw the shallowness of pharisaical religion. He accepted the *higher* standard of living—conformity to Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1–2). When a person becomes a Christian, God takes away the bad, but He also takes the good and makes it better.

***Paul's gains (vv. 8–11).*** Again we are reminded of Jim Elliot's words: "He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." This is what Paul experienced: he lost his religion and his reputation, but he gained far more than he lost.

*The knowledge of Christ (v. 8).* This means much more than knowledge *about* Christ, because Paul had that kind of historical information before he was saved. To "know Christ" means to have a personal relationship with Him through faith. It is this experience that Jesus mentions in John 17:3. You and I know *about* many people, even people who lived centuries ago, but we know personally very few. "Christianity *is* Christ." Salvation is knowing Him in a personal way.

*The righteousness of Christ (v. 9).* Righteousness was the great goal of Paul's life when he was a Pharisee, but it was a self-righteousness, a works righteousness, that he never really could attain. But when Paul trusted Christ, he lost his own self-righteousness and gained the righteousness of Christ. The technical word for this transaction is *imputation* (read Rom. 4:1–8 carefully). It means "to put to one's account." Paul looked at his own record and discovered that he was spiritually bankrupt. He looked at Christ's record and saw that He was perfect. When Paul trusted Christ, he saw God put Christ's righteousness *to his own account!* More than that, Paul discovered that his sins had been put on Christ's account on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). And God promised Paul that He would never write his sins against him anymore. What a fantastic experience of God's grace!

Romans 9:30–10:13 is a parallel passage and you ought to read it carefully. What Paul says about the nation Israel was true in his own life before he was saved. And it is true in the lives of many religious people today; they refuse to abandon their own righteousness that they might receive the free gift of the righteousness of Christ. Many religious people will not even admit they *need* any righteousness. Like Saul of Tarsus, they are measuring themselves by themselves, or by the standards of the Ten Commandments, and they fail to see the *inwardness* of sin. Paul had to give up his religion to receive righteousness, but he did not consider it a sacrifice.

*The fellowship of Christ (vv. 10–11).* When he became a Christian, it was not the *end* for Paul, but the *beginning*. His experience with Christ was so tremendous that it transformed his life. And this experience continued in the years to follow. It was a *personal* experience ("That I may know Him") as Paul walked with Christ, prayed, obeyed His will, and sought to glorify His name. When he was living under Law, all Paul had was a set of rules. But now he had a Friend, a Master, a constant Companion! It was also a *powerful* experience ("and the power of His resurrection"), as the resurrection power of Christ went to work in Paul's life. "Christ liveth in me!" (Gal. 2:20) Read Ephesians 1:15–23 and 3:13–21 for Paul's estimate of the resurrection power of Christ and what it can do in your life.

It was also a *painful* experience ("and the fellowship of His sufferings"). Paul knew that it was a privilege to suffer for Christ (Phil. 1:29–30). In fact, suffering had been a part of his experience from the very beginning (Acts 9:16). As we grow in our knowledge of Christ and our experience of His power, we come under the attack of the enemy. Paul had been a persecutor at one time, but he learned what it means to be persecuted. But it was worth it! For walking with

Christ was also a *practical* experience (“being made conformable unto His death”). Paul lived for Christ because he died to self (Rom. 6 explains this); he took up his cross daily and followed Him. The result of this death was a spiritual resurrection (Phil. 3:11) that caused Paul to walk “in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). Paul summarizes this whole experience in Galatians 2:20, so take time to read it.

Yes, Paul gained far more than he lost. In fact, the gains were so thrilling that Paul considered all other “things” nothing but garbage in comparison! No wonder he had joy—his life did not depend on the cheap “things” of the world but on the eternal values found in Christ. Paul had the “spiritual mind” and looked at the “things” of earth from heaven’s point of view. People who live for “things” are never really happy, because they must constantly protect their treasures and worry lest they lose their value. Not so the believer with the spiritual mind; his treasures in Christ can never be stolen and they never lose their value.

Maybe now is a good time for you to become an accountant and evaluate in your life the “things” that matter most to you.

## **LET’S WIN THE RACE!**

### *Philippians 3:12–16*

Most people read biographies to satisfy their curiosity about great people, hoping also that they may discover the “secret” that made them great. I recall sitting in a grade school assembly program many years ago, listening to an aged doctor who promised to tell us the secret of his long, healthy life. (At one time he was a physician to the President of the United States. I’ve forgotten which one, but at that stage in my life, it seemed it must have been Washington or Jefferson.) All of us sat there with great expectation, hoping to learn the secret of a long life. At the climax of his address, the doctor told us, “Drink eight glasses of water a day!”

In Philippians 3, Paul is giving us his spiritual biography, his past (Phil. 3:1–11), his present (Phil. 3:12–16), and his future (Phil. 3:17–21). We have already met Paul “the accountant” who discovered new values when he met Jesus Christ. In this section we meet Paul “the athlete” with his spiritual vigor, pressing toward the finish line in the Christian race. In the final section we will see Paul “the alien,” having his citizenship in heaven and looking for the coming of Jesus Christ. In each of these experiences, Paul is exercising the *spiritual mind*; he is looking at things on earth from God’s point of view. As a result, he is not upset by things behind him, around him, or before him—*things* do not rob him of his joy!

In his letters, Paul uses many illustrations from the world to communicate truth about the Christian life. Four are prominent: the military (“Put on the whole armor of God”), architecture (“You are the temple of God”), agriculture (“Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap”), and athletics. In this paragraph, it is Paul the athlete. Bible students are not agreed as to the exact sport Paul is describing, whether the footrace or the chariot race. Either one will do, but my own preference is the chariot race. The Greek chariot, used in the Olympic Games and other events, was really only a small platform with a wheel on each side. The driver had very little to hold on to as he raced around the course. He had to lean forward and strain every nerve and muscle to maintain balance and control the horses. The verb “reaching forth” in Philippians 3:13 literally means “stretching as in a race.”

It is important to note that Paul is not telling us how to be saved. If he were, it would be a picture of salvation by works or self-effort, and this would contradict what he wrote in the first eleven verses of Philippians 3. In order to participate in the Greek games, the athlete had to be a



citizen. He did not run the race to gain his citizenship. In Philippians 3:20, Paul reminds us that “our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven.” Because we are already the children of God through faith in Christ, we have the responsibility of “running the race” and achieving the goals God has set for us. This is a graphic picture of Philippians 2:12–13: “Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God which worketh in you.” Each believer is on the track; each has a special lane in which to run; and each has a goal to achieve. If we reach the goal the way God has planned, then we receive a reward. If we fail, we lose the reward, but we do not lose our citizenship. (Read 1 Cor. 3:11–15 for the same idea, only using architecture as the symbol.)

All of us want to be “winning Christians” and fulfill the purposes for which we have been saved. What are the essentials for winning the race and one day receiving the reward that is promised?

### **Dissatisfaction (Phil. 3:12–13a)**

“Not as though I had already attained!” This is the statement of a great Christian who never permitted himself to be satisfied with his spiritual attainments. Obviously, Paul was satisfied with Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:10), but he was not satisfied with his Christian life. A sanctified dissatisfaction is the first essential to progress in the Christian race.

Harry came out of the manager’s office with a look on his face dismal enough to wilt the roses on the secretary’s desk.

“You didn’t get fired?” she asked.

“No, it’s not that bad. But he sure did lay into me about my sales record. I can’t figure it out; for the past month I’ve been bringing in plenty of orders. I thought he’d compliment me, but instead he told me to get with it.”

Later in the day, the secretary talked to her boss about Harry. The boss chuckled. “Harry is one of our best salesmen and I’d hate to lose him. But he has a tendency to rest on his laurels and be satisfied with his performance. If I didn’t get him mad at me once a month, he’d never produce!”

Many Christians are self-satisfied because they compare their “running” with that of other Christians, usually those who are not making much progress. Had Paul compared himself with others, he would have been tempted to be proud and perhaps to let up a bit. After all, there were not too many believers in Paul’s day who had experienced all that he had! But Paul did not compare himself with others; he compared himself *with himself* and with *Jesus Christ!* The dual use of the word “perfect” in Philippians 3:12 and 15 explains his thinking. He has not arrived yet at perfection (Phil. 3:12), but he is “perfect” [mature] (Phil. 3:15), and one mark of this maturity is the knowledge that he is *not* perfect! The mature Christian honestly evaluates himself and strives to do better.

Often in the Bible we are warned against a false estimate of our spiritual condition. The church at Sardis had “a name that thou livest, and art dead” (Rev. 3:1). They had reputation without reality. The church at Laodicea boasted that it was rich, when in God’s sight it was “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). In contrast to the Laodicean church, the believers at Smyrna thought they were poor when they were really rich! (Rev. 2:9) Samson thought he still had his old power, but in reality it had departed from him (Judg. 16:20).

Self-evaluation can be a dangerous thing, because we can err in two directions: (1) making ourselves *better* than we are, or (2) making ourselves *worse* than we really are. Paul had no illusions about himself; he still had to keep “pressing forward” in order to “lay hold of that for

which Christ laid hold” of him. A divine dissatisfaction is essential for spiritual progress. “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1–2).

### **Devotion (Phil. 3:13b)**

“One thing” is a phrase that is important to the Christian life. “One thing thou lackest,” said Jesus to the self-righteous rich young ruler (Mark 10:21). “One thing is needful,” He explained to busy Martha when she criticized her sister (Luke 10:42). “One thing I know!” exclaimed the man who had received his sight by the power of Christ (John 9:25). “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after!” testified the psalmist (Ps. 27:4). Too many Christians are too involved in “many things,” when the secret of progress is to concentrate on “one thing.” It was this decision that was a turning point in D.L. Moody’s life. Before the tragedy of the Chicago fire in 1871, Mr. Moody was involved in Sunday School promotion, Y.M.C.A. work, evangelistic meetings, and many other activities; but after the fire, he determined to devote himself exclusively to evangelism. “This one thing I do!” became a reality to him. As a result, millions of people heard the Gospel.

The believer must devote himself to “running the Christian race.” No athlete succeeds by doing everything; he succeeds by *specializing*. There are those few athletes who seem proficient in many sports, but they are the exception. The winners are those who concentrate, who keep their eyes on the goal and let nothing distract them. They are devoted entirely to their calling. Like Nehemiah the wall-building governor, they reply to the distracting invitations, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down!” (Neh. 6:3) “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). Concentration is the secret of power. If a river is allowed to overflow its banks, the area around it becomes a swamp. But if that river is dammed and controlled, it becomes a source of power. It is wholly a matter of values and priorities, living for that which matters most.

### **Direction (Phil. 3:13c)**

The unsaved person is controlled by the past, but the Christian running the race looks toward the future. Imagine what would happen on the race course if the charioteers (or the runners) started looking behind them! It is bad enough for a plowman to look back (Luke 9:62), but for a charioteer to do so means a possible collision and serious injury.

We are accustomed to saying “past, present, future,” but we should view time as flowing from the *future* into the *present* and then into the *past*. At least, the believer should be future-oriented, “forgetting those things which are behind.” Please keep in mind that in Bible terminology, “to forget” does not mean “to fail to remember.” Apart from senility, hypnosis, or a brain malfunction, no mature person can forget what has happened in the past. We may wish that we could erase certain bad memories, but we cannot. “To forget” in the Bible means “no longer to be influenced by or affected by.” When God promises, “And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 10:17), He is not suggesting that He will conveniently have a bad memory! This is impossible with God. What God is saying is, “I will no longer hold their sins against them. Their sins can no longer affect their standing with Me or influence My attitude toward them.”

So, “forgetting those things which are behind” does not suggest an impossible feat of mental and psychological gymnastics by which we try to erase the sins and mistakes of the past. *It*

*simply means that we break the power of the past by living for the future.* We cannot change the past, but we can change the *meaning* of the past. There were things in Paul's past that could have been weights to hold him back (1 Tim. 1:12–17), but they became inspirations to speed him ahead. The events did not change, but his understanding of them changed.

A good example of this principle is Joseph (Gen. 45:1–15). When he met his brothers the second time and revealed himself to them, he held no grudge against them. To be sure, they had mistreated him, but he saw the past from God's point of view. As a result he was unable to hold anything against his brothers. Joseph knew that God had a plan for his life—a race for him to run—and in fulfilling that plan and looking ahead, he broke the power of the past.

Too many Christians are shackled by regrets of the past. They are trying to run the race by looking backward! No wonder they stumble and fall and get in the way of other Christians! Some Christian runners are being distracted by the *successes* of the past, not the failures; and this is just as bad. “The things which are behind” must be set aside and “the things which are before” must take their place.

It is possible to have dissatisfaction, devotion, and direction, and still lose the race and the reward. There is a fourth essential.

### **Determination (Phil. 3:14)**

“I press!” This same verb is translated “I follow after” in Philippians 3:12, and it carries the idea of intense endeavor. The Greeks used it to describe a hunter eagerly pursuing his prey. A man does not become a winning athlete by listening to lectures, watching movies, reading books, or cheering at the games. He becomes a winning athlete by getting into the game and determining to win! The same zeal that Paul employed when he persecuted the church (Phil. 3:6), he displayed in serving Christ. Come to think of it, wouldn't it be wonderful if Christians put as much determination into their spiritual life as they do their golfing, fishing, or bowling?

There are two extremes to avoid here: (1) “*I* must do it all” and (2) “*God* must do it all!” The first describes the activist, the second the quietist, and both are heading for failure. “Let go and let God!” is a clever slogan, but it does not fully describe the process of Christian living. What quarterback would say to his team, “OK, men, just let go and let the coach do it all!” On the other hand, no quarterback would say, “Listen to me and forget what the coach says!” Both extremes are wrong.

The Christian runner with the spiritual mind realizes that God must work *in* him if he is going to win the race (Phil. 2:12–13). “Without Me ye can do nothing” (John 15:5). God works *in* us that He might work *through* us. As we apply ourselves to the things of the spiritual life, God is able to mature us and strengthen us for the race. “Exercise thyself rather unto godliness!” (1 Tim. 4:7–8) Some Christians are so busy “dying to self” that they never come back to life again to run the race! And others are so sure they can make it on their own that they never stop to read the Word, pray, or ask for the power of the Lord.

Toward what goal is the runner pressing with such spiritual determination? “The prize of the high [upward] calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). When he reaches the goal he will receive the reward! Again, Paul is not suggesting that we attain to heaven by our own efforts. He is simply saying that just as the athlete is rewarded for his performance, so the faithful believer will be crowned when Jesus Christ returns. (See 1 Cor. 9:24–27 for a parallel, and note that while only *one* athlete may receive a prize, *all* Christians may receive the reward. Furthermore, the laurel wreath of the Olympic Games will fade, but the crown Christ gives will never fade.) The important thing is that we reach the goal He has established for us. No matter how successful we

may be in the eyes of men, we cannot be rewarded unless we “take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of [us]” (Phil. 3:12, NIV).

### **Discipline (Phil. 3:15–16)**

It is not enough to run hard and win the race; the runner must also obey the rules. In the Greek games, the judges were very strict about this. Any infringement of the rules disqualified the athlete. He did not lose his citizenship (though he disgraced it), but he did lose his privilege to participate and win a prize. In Philippians 3:15–16, Paul emphasizes the importance of the Christian remembering the “spiritual rules” laid down in the Word.

One of the greatest athletes ever to come out of the United States was Jim Thorpe. At the 1912 Olympics at Stockholm, he won the pentathlon and the decathlon, and was undoubtedly the hero of the games. But the next year officials found that Thorpe had played semiprofessional baseball and therefore had forfeited his amateur standing. This meant that he had to return his gold medals and his trophy, and that his Olympic achievements were erased from the records. It was a high price to pay for breaking the rules. (Thorpe’s medals were reinstated in 1985 by the Olympic Committee.)

This is what Paul has in mind in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27. “Any man who enters an athletic contest practices rigid self-control in training” (Phil. 3:14, WMS). If the athlete breaks training, he is disqualified; if he breaks the rules of the game, he is disqualified. “No contestant in the games is crowned, unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim. 2:5, WMS). The issue is not what *he* thinks or what the *spectators* think but what the judges say. One day each Christian will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10–12). The Greek word for “judgment seat” is *bema*, the very same word used to describe the place where the Olympic judges gave out the prizes! If we have disciplined ourselves to obey the rules, we shall receive a prize.

Bible history is filled with people who began the race with great success but failed at the end because they disregarded God’s rules. They did not lose their salvation, but they did lose their rewards (1 Cor. 3:15). It happened to Lot (Gen. 19), Samson (Judg. 16), Saul (1 Sam. 28; 31), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). And it can happen to us! It is an exciting experience to run the race daily, “looking unto Jesus” (Heb. 12:1–2). It will be even more exciting when we experience that “upward calling” and Jesus returns to take us to heaven! Then we will stand before the *bema* to receive our rewards! It was this future prospect that motivated Paul, and it can also motivate us.

### **LIVING IN THE FUTURE TENSE**

#### *Philippians 3:17–21*

How strange in a letter filled with joy to find Paul *weeping!* Perhaps he is weeping over himself and his difficult situation! No, he is a man with a *single mind*, and his circumstances do not discourage him. Is he weeping because of what some of the Roman Christians are doing to him? No, he has the *submissive mind* and will not permit people to rob him of his joy. These tears are not for himself at all; they are shed because of others. Because Paul has the *spiritual mind*, he is heartbroken over the way some professed Christians are living, people who “mind earthly things.”

While we cannot be sure, it is likely that Philippians 3:18–19 describe the Judaizers and their followers. Certainly Paul is writing about professed Christians and not people outside the church. The Judaizers were the “enemies of the cross of Christ” in that they added the Law of Moses to the work of redemption that Christ wrought on the cross. Their obedience to the Old Testament dietary laws would make a “god” out of the belly (see Col. 2:20–23); and their emphasis on circumcision would amount to glorying in that about which they ought to be ashamed (see Gal. 6:12–15). These men were not spiritually minded; they were earthly minded. They were holding on to earthly rituals and beliefs that God had given to Israel, and they were opposing the heavenly blessings that the Christian has in Christ (Eph. 1:3; 2:6; Col. 3:1–3).

The word “spiritual” has suffered as much abuse as the word “fellowship.” Too many people think that a “spiritual Christian” is mystical, dreamy, impractical, and distant. When he prays, he shifts his voice into a sepulchral tone *in tremolo* and goes to great lengths to inform God of the things He already knows. Unfortunately, this kind of unctuous piety is a poor example of true spirituality. To be spiritually minded does not require one to be impractical and mystical. Quite the contrary, the spiritual mind makes the believer think more clearly and get things done more efficiently.

To be “spiritually minded” simply means to look at earth from heaven’s point of view. “Give your heart to the heavenly things, not to the passing things of earth” (Col. 3:2). “Practice occupying your minds with the things above, not with the things on earth” (Col. 3:2, WMS). D.L. Moody used to scold Christians for being “so heavenly minded they were no earthly good,” and that exhortation still needs to be heeded. Christians have a dual citizenship—on earth and in heaven—and our citizenship in heaven ought to make us better people here on earth. The spiritually minded believer is not attracted by the “things” of this world. He makes his decisions on the basis of eternal values and not the passing fads of society. Lot chose the well-watered plain of Jordan because his values were worldly, and ultimately he lost everything. Moses refused the pleasures and treasures of Egypt because he had something infinitely more wonderful to live for (Heb. 11:24–26). “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

“For our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20, NASB). The Greek word translated “conversation” or “citizenship” is the word from which we get the English word “politics.” It has to do with one’s behavior as a citizen of a nation. Paul is encouraging us to have the spiritual mind, and he does this by pointing out the characteristics of the Christian whose citizenship is in heaven. Just as Philippi was a colony of Rome on foreign soil, so the church is a “colony of heaven” on earth.

### **Our Names Are on Heaven’s Record**

The citizens of Philippi were privileged to be Roman citizens away from Rome. When a baby was born in Philippi, it was important that its name be registered on the legal records. When the lost sinner trusts Christ and becomes a citizen of heaven, his name is written in “the Book of Life” (Phil. 4:3).

Citizenship is important. When you travel to another country, it is essential that you have a passport that proves your citizenship. None of us wants to suffer the fate of Philip Nolan in the classic tale *The Man Without a Country*. Because he cursed the name of his country, Nolan was sentenced to live aboard ship and never again see his native land or even hear its name or news about its progress. For fifty-six years he was on an endless journey from ship to ship and sea to sea, and finally was buried at sea. He was a “man without a country.”

The Christian's name is written in "the Book of Life," and this is what determines his final entrance into the heavenly country (Rev. 20:15). When you confess Christ on earth, He confesses your name in heaven (Matt. 10:32–33). Your name is written down in heaven (Luke 10:20) and it stands written forever. (The Greek verb "written" in Luke 10:20 is in the perfect tense: "it is once-for-all written and stands written.")

A friend in Washington, D.C., arranged for my oldest son and me to tour the White House. She told us to be at a certain gate at 8 o'clock in the morning and to be prepared to show evidence of who we were. David and I walked up to the gate, and the guard politely asked our names. We told him, showing our credentials. He said, "Yes, sir! Mr. Warren Wiersbe and David! You may enter!" We got into the White House because our names were written down on the proper list, and our names got on that list through the intercession of another. So it is with our entrance into heaven: because we have trusted Christ, our names are written down, and we will enter glory on His merits and intercession alone.

### **We Speak Heaven's Language**

Those who "mind earthly things" *talk* about earthly things. After all, what comes out of the mouth reveals what is in the heart (Matt. 12:34–37). The unsaved person does not understand the things of God's Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14–16), so how can he talk about them intelligently? The citizens of heaven understand spiritual things and enjoy discussing them and sharing them with one another.

"They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:5–6).

But speaking heaven's language not only involves what we say, but also the way we say it. The spiritually minded Christian doesn't go around quoting Bible verses all day! But he is careful to speak in a manner that glorifies God. "Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man" (Col. 4:6). No believer ought ever to say, "Now take this with a grain of salt!" *Put the salt into your speech!* Salt prevents corruption. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Eph. 4:29).

### **We Obey Heaven's Laws**

The citizens of Philippi were governed by Roman law, not Greek law, even though they were located hundreds of miles away from Rome. In fact, it was this policy that put Paul into jail when he first visited Philippi (Acts 16:16–24). Paul himself used his Roman citizenship to guarantee his protection under Roman law (Acts 16:35–40; 21:33–40; 22:24–30).

In Philippians 3:17, Paul warns the Philippian believers against imitating the wrong kind of citizens. "Be followers together of me." Of course, Paul was a follower of Christ, so his admonition is not egotistical! (1 Cor. 11:1) Paul knew himself to be an "alien" in this world, a "pilgrim and a stranger" (see 1 Peter 2:11). His life was governed by heaven's laws, and this is what made him different. He was concerned about others, not himself. He was interested in giving, not getting. His motive was love (2 Cor. 5:14), not hatred. By faith, Paul obeyed the Word of God, knowing that one day he would be rewarded. Men might oppose him and persecute him now, but in that final day of reckoning, he would be the winner.

Sad to say, there are those today, like the Judaizers in Paul's day, who profess to be citizens of heaven, but whose lives do not show it. They may be zealous in their religious activities and even austere in their disciplines, but there is no evidence of the control of the Spirit of God in their lives. All that they do is energized by the flesh, and they get all the glory. It is bad enough that they are going astray, but they also lead other people astray. No wonder Paul wept over them.

### **He Is Loyal to Heaven's Cause**

The Cross of Jesus Christ is the theme of the Bible, the heart of the Gospel, and the chief source of praise in heaven (Rev. 5:8–10). The Cross is the proof of God's love for sinners (Rom. 5:8) and God's hatred for sin. The Cross condemns what the world values. It judges mankind and pronounces the true verdict: *Guilty!*

In what sense were the Judaizers the "enemies of the Cross of Christ"? For one thing, the Cross ended the Old Testament religion. When the veil of the temple was torn in two, God was announcing that the way to God was open through Christ (Heb. 10:19–25). When Jesus shouted, "It is finished!" He made one sacrifice for sins, and thus ended the whole sacrificial system (Heb. 10:1–14). By His death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished a "spiritual circumcision" that made ritual circumcision unnecessary (Col. 2:10–13). Everything that the Judaizers advocated had been eliminated by the death of Christ on the cross!

Furthermore, everything that they lived for was condemned by the Cross. Jesus had broken down the wall that stood between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14–16), and the Judaizers were rebuilding that wall! They were obeying "carnal [fleshly] ordinances" (Heb. 9:10), regulations that appealed to the flesh and were not directed by the Spirit. But the true believer crucifies the flesh (Gal. 5:24). He also crucifies the world (Gal. 6:14). Yet the Judaizers were minding "earthly things." It is the Cross that is central in the life of the believer. He does not glory in men, in religion, or in his own achievements; he glories in the Cross (Gal. 6:14).

Paul weeps because he knows the future of these men: "whose end is destruction" (Phil. 3:19). This word carries with it the idea of waste and "lostness." (It is translated "waste" in Mark 14:4.) Judas is called "the son of perdition," and this is the word used (John 17:12). A wasted life and an eternity of waste! In contrast, the true child of God, whose citizenship is in heaven, has a bright future.

### **We Are Looking for Heaven's Lord**

The Judaizers were living in the past tense, trying to get the Philippian believers to go back to Moses and the Law; but true Christians live in the future tense, anticipating the return of their Saviour (Phil. 3:20–21). As the *accountant* in Philippians 3:1–11, Paul discovered new *values*. As the *athlete* in Philippians 3:12–16, he displayed new *vigor*. Now as the *alien*, he experiences a new *vision*: "We look for the Saviour!" It is this anticipation of the coming of Christ that motivates the believer with the spiritual mind.

There is tremendous energy in the present power of a future hope. Because Abraham looked for a city, he was content to live in a tent (Heb. 11:13–16). Because Moses looked for the rewards of heaven, he was willing to forsake the treasures of earth (Heb. 11:24–26). Because of the "joy that was set before Him" (Heb. 12:2), Jesus was willing to endure the cross. The fact that Jesus Christ is returning is a powerful motive for dedicated living and devoted service *today*.

“And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure” (read 1 John 2:28–3:3).

The citizen of heaven, living on earth, is never discouraged because he knows that his Lord is one day going to return. He faithfully keeps on doing his job lest his Lord return and find him disobedient (Luke 12:40–48). The spiritually minded believer does not live for the things of this world; he anticipates the blessings of the world to come. This does not mean that he ignores or neglects his daily obligations; but it does mean that what he does today is governed by what Christ will do in the future.

Paul mentions particularly that the believer will receive a glorified body, like the body of Christ. Today we live in a “body of humiliation” (which is the meaning of the word translated “vile” in Phil. 3:21); but when we see Christ, we will receive a body of glory. It will happen in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye! (1 Cor. 15:42–53) At that moment, all the things of this world will be worthless to us—just as they ought to be, relatively, today! If we are living in the future tense, then we will be exercising the spiritual mind and living for the things that really matter.

When Jesus returns, He will “subdue all things unto Himself” (Phil. 3:21b). That word “subdue” means “to arrange in ranks.” Isn’t that our problem today? *We do not arrange “things” in their proper order.* Our values are twisted. Consequently, our vigor is wasted on useless activities, and our vision is clouded so that the return of Christ is not a real motivating power in our lives. Living in the future tense means letting Christ arrange the “things” in life according to the proper rank. It means living “with eternity’s values in view,” and daring to believe God’s promise that “he that doeth the will of God abideth forever” (1 John 2:17).

***Lightner, R. P. (1985). Philippians. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, pp. 658-663) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books***

### III. Exhortations for Living the Christian Life (3:1–21)

In chapter 1 Paul encouraged the saints at Philippi to go on living the Christian life. In chapter 2 Paul set forth Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself as examples of how to please God. Exhortations necessary for those who would lead such a life followed in chapter 3.

#### A. *Believers are to have no confidence in the flesh (3:1–14).*

##### 1. THE EXHORTATION INTRODUCED (3:1)

3:1. Before stressing the serious danger of placing confidence in the flesh, the apostle called for a spirit of rejoicing in the Lord. His word **finally** was used to introduce a new subject as well as a clue that he had begun to conclude the letter. He used the same phrase again in 4:8. So some feel that chapter 3 is a digression from the author’s main theme.

Paul called on believers to **rejoice in the Lord**. The word “rejoice” appears several times in the epistle (1:18 [twice]; 2:17–18 [twice]; 3:1; 4:4 [twice], 10). It seems from this repeated emphasis that the Philippian Christians needed this word. Most of God’s people need this challenge often. It is easy for believers to let circumstances discourage them. The cure for discouragement is to rivet one’s attention on the Lord and rejoice in Him.



It is significant too that a Roman prisoner would beseech people who were free to be joyful in their Savior. It seems that it should be the other way around. Paul learned what every child of God needs to learn—there can be rejoicing in the Lord even when outward circumstances are contrary to a spirit of rejoicing.

Repetition is a vital part of learning. Either orally or in writing (perhaps in 1:27–30) the apostle had given the same truth to the Philippians before. He made no apology for repeating the instruction by writing **the same things to you again**. It was **no trouble** for him to review the essentials again. He felt constrained to do so for their benefit. The instruction was a **safeguard** for them.

## 2. THE EXAMPLE TO BE AVOIDED (3:2–3)

One particular group in Paul's day was especially guilty of putting confidence in the flesh. These were the Judaizers. They plagued Paul and his converts constantly. Confused about the gospel, they added works of the law to faith in Christ, both for salvation and for Christian living. The Old Testament rite of circumcision was of special concern to them. They insisted that it was necessary for salvation. They did not omit faith in Christ but added works of the flesh. Paul called such men "deceitful workmen" (2 Cor. 11:13).

3:2. Paul also called the Judaizers **dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh**. He considered their work dangerous and not of God. The saints were not to follow these people, but to beware of them, to **watch out** for them.

It was common for some Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs, which were considered unclean animals. Paul used the term to describe those Jews who mutilated the gospel by insisting on the need to mutilate the flesh in order to be rightly related to God. What they did was actually evil, even though they may have had good intentions.

3:3. The Old Testament rite of physical circumcision was not only a sign of covenant relationship, but it was also intended to be related to spiritual circumcision of the heart (cf. Deut. 10:6). Writing to Gentiles, Paul made it clear that he and they were the true **circumcision**. This was because they had **no confidence in the flesh** and instead worshiped **by the Spirit of God** and gloried **in Christ Jesus** alone.

Instead of boasting in human accomplishments, as the Judaizers and Jews did, a child of God should glory in Christ Jesus alone. The word **glory** (*kauchōmenoi*) used here means "boast" or "exult" (cf. 1:26; 2:16; 2 Cor. 10:17).

## 3. THE EXAMPLE TO BE FOLLOWED (3:4–14)

Paul gave some interesting autobiographical facts in these verses. On the surface it appears he was boasting. However, closer examination reveals that this was precisely what he tried to avoid and warn against. To be sure, there was a time when the apostle had confidence in the flesh. But this was no longer true. To stress that he used to have great boldness and pride in his own achievements, Paul reviewed his past for the Philippians. After this he told about his crisis conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

3:4–6. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that Paul did not place any **confidence in the flesh**. He had gained victory over that temptation of the devil. His presentation in these verses was intended to review for the Philippians the things in which he could have placed confidence if he had wanted to. In fact the list included things in which he did place great value and trust

before he met Christ. His intention was to show that in the flesh he had more in which he could have boasted than did any of the Judaizers.

The **anyone else** (v. 4) referred to all who place confidence in the flesh. Paul wrote as though he were challenging the Judaizers to a showdown. His preliminary conclusion before he even got specific was that no matter what advantage was brought forth by his opponents, his advantages exceeded theirs (cf. Gal. 1:14).

Seven advantages listed in Philippians 3:5–6 demonstrate what Paul used to have in the flesh but what he later counted as loss for Christ. Two kinds of advantages are enumerated. First are those things which the apostle had by birth, apart from his choice. Four of these are listed—circumcision, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents. Next he named those privileges which he voluntarily chose—being a Pharisee, being a persecutor of the church, and having a flawless external record of **legalistic righteousness**.

Circumcision was named first probably because it was a big issue with the Judaizers. Paul's specific time, **the eighth day**, stressed that he was not a proselyte or an Ishmaelite but a pure-blooded Jew. Proselytes were circumcised later in life and Ishmaelites after age 13 (cf. Gen. 17:25–26).

Paul was **of the people of Israel**, which describes his heritage. His parents were both true Jews, unlike some of the Judaizers. He could trace his family lineage all the way back to Abraham. He was a true member of the covenant people (cf. 2 Cor. 11:22).

He was also a Benjamite, from which tribe came Israel's first king (1 Sam. 9:1–2). This tribe had a special place of honor and was viewed with great esteem. Even after the kingdom was disrupted the tribe of Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David.

Hebrew was Paul's native tongue. Unlike some of the Israelites, he did not adopt Greek customs. He knew thoroughly both the language and customs of the people of God. He was a Hebrew son of Hebrew parents.

In regard to the Law, Paul was **a Pharisee**, a member of the strictest sect among his people. In addition to the Law of Moses the Pharisees added their own regulations which in time were interpreted as equal to the Law.

What greater **zeal** for the Jewish religion could anyone boast of than that he persecuted **the church**? Paul did this relentlessly before his conversion to Christ (Acts 9:1–2). No Judaizer could match such zeal.

In "legalistic righteousness" Paul also excelled. In fact in his own eyes he was **faultless** (*amemptos*; the same word is used in Phil. 2:15 where it is rendered "blameless").

3:7–9. Any of those who troubled the saints at Philippi would have loved to have been able to list to his credit those things Paul did. On the human side these were reasons to have religious self-confidence. But all those things enumerated in verses 5–6 the apostle considered **loss for the sake of Christ** (v. 7).

**Consider** means to "think through or reflect on." After reflection he considered them loss. This he did at a point in time in the past and that decision was still in effect when he wrote, as connoted by the use of the Greek perfect tense. Doubtless Paul considered his life-transforming conversion on the Damascus Road as the time when he switched from confidence in the flesh to confidence in Christ alone.

It would be hard to find a more forceful refutation of human effort to please God than what Paul presented here (v. 8). Four Greek particles (*alla menoun ge kai*) are translated **what is more** and introduce the strong statements of verse 8. Paul considered as **loss** not only the things

already listed (vv. 5–6), but **everything** (v. 8). In exchange for confidence in the flesh Paul gained the **surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus** personally. Christ was now his **Lord**.

His former “gains” (*kerdē*, v. 7) he considered “rubbish” (which can mean food scraps or dung) so that he might **gain** (*kerdēsō*) **Christ**. Nothing else really mattered to him any longer. Having Christ as his Savior and Lord so far surpassed anything he had in Judaism.

Those who “gain Christ” (v. 8) are those **found in Him** (v. 9). Christ is in the believer and the believer is in Christ. Paul wanted his life to demonstrate these truths. Being in Christ, he was not clinging to any **righteousness** of his own doing associated with Law-keeping. Such a righteousness is viewed by God as no righteousness at all but rather as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). The righteousness which saves and in which Paul rested is **through** (*dia*) **faith in Christ**. This is the only kind which **comes from God and is by** (*epi*) **faith**. When a believing sinner responds in faith to the Spirit’s work in his heart, he is clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Rom. 3:24–26). In this position he is “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6, KJV). Thus robed, the believing sinner stands complete in Christ.

3:10–11. These verses contain an open and honest confession to the Philippians. Paul already knew Christ as his Savior. But he wanted to know Him more intimately as his Lord. **To know** (v. 10) means “to know by experience” (*gnōnai*). The noun (*gnōseōs*) is used in verse 8. The “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ” is now elaborated in verses 10–11. This is how Paul wanted to know Him. More of what he desired in his Christian life follows.

To experience **the power of His resurrection** was also the apostle’s goal. The power which brought Christ forth from the dead now operates in believers’ lives since they have been “raised with Christ” (Col. 3:1). “Power” (*dynamis*, also used in Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:16) means ability to overcome resistance. By setting forth his own goals and ambitions Paul gave the Philippians an example to follow. His example was, of course, in stark contrast to the Judaizers whose example they were not to follow.

Paul also longed to share in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and in so doing to become **like Him in His death** (Phil. 3:10). These sufferings were not Christ’s substitutionary sufferings on the cross. Paul knew that those could not be shared. But he did desire to participate with Christ, since he was one of His, in suffering for the sake of righteousness (cf. 1:29). God had used Ananias to tell Paul that this is precisely what he would do as a servant of Christ (Acts 9:16). The apostle did indeed suffer for Christ because he represented Him so openly and truly (cf. Rom. 8:36; 2 Cor. 4:10).

The words “becoming like Him” translate *symmorphizomenos*, which means “being conformed inwardly in one’s experience to something” (cf. Phil. 3:21), in this case, to Christ’s death. As Christ died *for* sin, so a believer has died *to* sin (Rom. 6:2, 6–7; Col. 3:3). He should exhibit that cutting off from his former sinful way by daily being set apart from sin (Rom. 6:1–4, 11–14) and living a new life by means of Christ’s resurrection power (Rom. 6:4).

“Resurrection” (Phil. 3:11) is the translation of *exanastasin*, a Greek word used nowhere else in the New Testament. It means a partial resurrection out from among other corpses, literally an “out-resurrection.” But why did Paul say he wanted **somehow, to attain to the** (out-) **resurrection from the dead**? Did he doubt he would be raised from the dead? Hardly. Perhaps he was using this word to refer to the Rapture, thus expressing the hope that the Lord would return during his lifetime.

3:12–14. Though Paul was a spiritual giant in the eyes of the Philippian saints, he wanted them to know that he had not yet attained the goals stated in verse 10. He was still actively pressing on toward them. He had by no means reached the final stage of his sanctification.

Paul's salvation experience had taken place about 30 years before he wrote to the Philippians. He had won many spiritual battles in that time. He had grown much in those years, but he candidly confessed he had not **obtained all this**, nor was he yet **made perfect** (v. 12). He still had more spiritual heights to climb. This testimony of the apostle reminded the saints at Philippi—and it serves to remind believers today—that there must never be a stalemate in their spiritual growth or a plateau beyond which they cannot climb.

Paul pursued Christlikeness with the enthusiasm and persistence of a runner in the Greek games. Unlike the Judaizers, whose influence was prevalent among the Philippians, the apostle did not claim to have attained spiritual maturity. He was still pressing on, pursuing **that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him**. Nor had he yet **taken hold of it**, that is, he had not yet attained perfection or ultimate conformity to Christ. But he was determined that he would forget the past and, like a runner, press on toward the goal. Paul refused to be controlled or absorbed by his past heritage (vv. 5–7) or his attainments (v. 8).

Vigorously and with concentration Paul sought **to win the prize** to which God had **called him heavenward** (v. 14). Again the Greek games must have been on his mind as he wrote of the prize. The winner in those games was called to the place where the judge sat in order to receive his prize. Paul may have referred to ultimate salvation in God's presence, or to receiving rewards at "the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).

## *B. Believers are to have a walk that pleases God (3:15–21).*

### 1. A WALK OF MATURITY (3:15–16)

The second great exhortation in chapter 3 has a positive ring to it—Paul urged Christians to walk, or live lives, pleasing to God (3:15–21). This should first be a mature walk (vv. 15–16).

3:15–16. The apostle called his readers to share with him the pursuit of Christlikeness. What he wanted for himself he also wanted for them. **All of us who are mature should take such a view of things** (v. 15). What view of things? The one he had expressed regarding persistently pressing on toward the goal. One mark of spiritual maturity is a desire to go on with Christ. Paul's appeal here was to maturing believers who shared his ambitions. He trusted God to **make things clear** to those who disagreed with him.

No doubt the greatest need among God's people is to live up to what they already have in Christ. Most live far below their exalted position in Christ. Paul's plea to the Philippians was that they **live up to what** they had **already attained**, namely a righteous position in Christ.

### 2. A WALK OF WATCHFULNESS (3:17–19)

Paul again called on his readers to follow his own example and not that of the Judaizers.

3:17. Having set forth his life ambition to be more Christlike, Paul did not hesitate to tell the Philippians to follow his **example**. He wanted them to imitate him. Surely he did not mean that they should imitate every single area of his life, for he had just stated that he was not sinlessly perfect. But in the matter of relentlessly pursuing after Christlikeness, he did set himself up as an example. Those Philippians who followed him would **join with others** who were already doing so.

3:18–19. These verses give the reasons for the exhortations in verse 17: **many live as enemies of the cross of Christ**. Believers should be able to determine truth from error (cf. 1 John 4:6). Paul was so concerned about the Philippians’ spiritual welfare that he warned them often and wept as he did so.

As enemies of God these false teachers were destined for **destruction**. Those Paul warned against were perhaps profligates in incipient Gnosticism who trusted in their own attainments and not in the sufficiency of Christ alone. All who do so are not children of God, so they await destruction. This word (*apōleia*) does not mean annihilation but rather ruination by separation from the presence of God in eternal judgment.

Three further descriptions of these false teachers follow. First, **their god is their stomach**. They had in mind only their own physical desires and unrestrained gluttony (cf. Rom. 16:18).

Second, **their glory is in their shame**. Instead of giving glory to God these teachers heaped praise on themselves. Ironically they prided themselves in the things they should have been ashamed of.

Third, **their mind is on earthly things**. It is certainly not wrong for God’s people to care about their earthly affairs. But those Paul warned against here were depending on earthly things to gain merit with God. The apostle frequently alerted the people of God against such a lifestyle (cf. Gal. 4:3, 9–11; Col. 2:21–22).

### 3. A WALK COMPLETED (3:20–21)

3:20–21. The people of Philippi were living there as colonists while their citizenship was in Rome. Similarly Christians, while living on earth, have their **citizenship** elsewhere—in **heaven**. This contrasts with those in verse 19 whose minds are exclusively on earthly things.

The believer looks with keen anticipation for his Savior’s return from heaven. **Eagerly await** translates a word (*apekdechometha*) that suggests a tiptoe anticipation and longing. This word is also used in Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Corinthians 1:7; Galatians 5:5; Hebrews 9:28.

At the Rapture of the church, Christ **will transform** (*metaschēmatisēi*, “change the outward form of”) **our lowly bodies so that they will be like** (*symmorphon*, “identical in essential character”; cf. the participle *symmorphizomenos* in Phil. 3:10) **His glorious body**. Then every child of God will be made like the Son of God (1 John 3:2), that is, all Christians will receive glorified bodies like His. No more will they have the limitations they now experience in their “lowly” bodies, which are humbled by disease and sin. Their resurrected bodies will be like Christ’s, and their sanctification will be completed.

**Dockery, D. S. (1998). *The Pauline Letters* In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (pp. 584-585). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.**

### SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS (3:1–11)

Paul warned of the dangers of turning aside to depend on legalistic standards rather than on the grace of God in Christ. Paul labeled these false teachers “dogs, those who do evil, mutilators of the flesh.” The church must have been aware of these false teachers, Judaizers, who followed Paul everywhere, insisting that Gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the ceremonial law in order to be saved. Instead, Paul taught that true circumcision involved faith in Christ. He offered himself as an example of one who in his past trusted in human achievement instead of

the justifying grace of God and the all-sufficiency of Christ. (See the article “Justification by Faith”.)

The object of joy, of concentration, indeed of all of life is Christ. Paul’s purpose in life was to know Christ experientially, becoming like Him in His death and attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

### **CHRISTIAN MATURITY (3:12–4:1)**

Like an athlete who does not waste time looking around or looking back, Paul exerted his all-out effort to reach the finish line of Christian maturity. He did not presume to have attained perfection and therefore fully pursued the goal of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus. He likewise called for the Philippians to move forward in their Christian lives.

Simultaneously in this exhortation he strongly denounced the false teachings of careless living, on the one hand, and spiritual perfectionism on the other. He appealed for unity and maturity by reminding them that they were citizens of heaven. Because the Philippians were intensely proud of their Roman citizenship, they would have quickly grasped all that Paul meant. Finally, he reminded them that they would be transformed at the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

***Fields, W. C. (1972). Philippians. In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), The Teacher’s Bible Commentary (p. 751). Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers.***

### **Warnings (Phil. 3:1–21)**

The “Finally, my brethren” (3:1), seems to indicate that he is about to conclude the letter. Something, however, prompts him to launch into a warning about the contentious Judaizers. He says, Forgive me for referring to this subject again, but it is very important! The tension in this section is in contrast to the other parts of the letter. Beware of these people! They would divert you from truth and freedom!

Paul reminds them of his credentials as a Hebrew of the Hebrews (vv. 4–6). This family heritage, however, he considers worthless without Christ (vv. 7–9). Christ has become the great new center for his life (vv. 10–14). This is the one worthy ambition for him now, to follow Jesus. There is a new direction to his life. Not backward, but forward!

Here, from his prison cell, the veteran missionary leader sets down some conclusions from his years of vigorous service. (1) “I count not myself to have apprehended.” The battle-scarred apostle is still seeking, acquiring, trying to apprehend the greatness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. He is still the disciple, still the student, still pursuing truth wherever it will lead him. (2) Further, he has learned to forget “those things which are behind.” Past successes or failures are incidental to what God is doing now. (3) I reach forth, he says, “unto those things which are before.” The set of his face is onward. The brightness of new victories is in his eyes. He refuses to rest among his souvenirs. There is more that I must see. There is more that I must do. There is more that I must be! (4) Rounding it out, he asserts, “I press toward the mark.” Here is the divine discontent that propelled him into world history. And others like him! His relationship to Christ had not leveled off. He was responding to a still higher calling, an unending pilgrimage of faith and service.

Paul had earned the right to challenge the church members at Philippi to a vigorous witness. He drives home the point (vv. 15–19). Be thus minded! Have the same attitude! Don't give in to the enemies of the cross!

*Special point*—In 3:20 he alludes once more to their special status as citizens in the Roman colony of Philippi. We Christians, he says, “are citizens of heaven” (TEV). The believer’s relationship to Christ gives a new significance to the Roman political law even as it does to Jewish religious law! Here is the ultimate focus of all of life, “the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

**The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). Philippians 3. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.**

© 2024 Lee Ann Penick