

Philippians 3

Strive to gain Christ above all else

3:1-11

3:1 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.

3:2 Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.

Paul's admonition to rejoice is not a command to adopt a superficial cheerfulness, but a positive attitude that finds an outward expression in spite of adverse circumstances, trials and pressures that the Philippians were called to pass through. It includes the recognition that through circumstances God is working to fulfill His gracious purposes for us in Christ. As the One who began a good work in them, God can be relied upon to complete it (Phil. 1:6; O'Brien, 349).

Paul admits that elements of his letter are repetitive, but due to the existence of false teachers, he feels it's better to repeat himself than to let the danger be overlooked.

The false teachers he is referring to were no doubt Jews who attempted to impose the law upon Christians, either by insisting that one must become a Jew in order to be saved, or by teaching that one had to keep the law to obtain holiness. Both deny the salvation attained in Christ.

Paul uses three terms to describe these false teachers. They are first called dogs, which to the Jewish mind included ideas of impurity, shamelessness, greed, and cunning. It was a common word that the Jews applied to Gentiles who stood outside of God's covenant blessings. Jesus even referred to a Syrophenician woman as a dog in Mark 7:27.

"Evil workers" echoes the language of the Psalms where the expression, "workers of iniquity" often appears (Ps. 5:5; 6:8; 14:4; 36:12, etc.). They are called evil because they attempted to undermine Paul's efforts in reaching the Gentile world for Christ (II Cor. 1:22). They were in

league with Satan (II Cor. 11:14) though giving the appearance of being ministers of righteousness.

Lastly, Paul calls them mutilators of the flesh, referring to the emphasis they placed upon circumcision (Acts 15:1). In the OT, circumcision was an outward sign of the covenant that existed between Yahweh and the nation of Israel (Gen. 17:10-14; Exo. 4:25; 12:44, 48, etc.). It was also a term applied in an ethical sense to the heart (Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7), the lips (Exo. 6:12, 30), and the ears (Jer. 6:10) as a symbol of holiness. But outward observance of the law without any corresponding inward reality was nothing more than the "mutilation of the flesh" - an expression reminiscent of the pagan practice of cutting the flesh in the worship of their deities (Lev. 21:5).

Verse 3 gives the reason for the admonition and clarifies what Paul means by "mutilators of the flesh" in verse 2.

3:3 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—

The true "circumcision" are those who place their faith in Christ alone. They are characterized by (1) worshipping by the Spirit of God, (2) glorying in Christ Jesus, and (3) putting no confidence in the flesh.

There is great irony here. Those who placed themselves above the Gentile "dogs" were the dogs. Those who insisted that one had to keep the law to attain righteousness were the evildoers. Those who boasted in circumcision were really those outside the covenant community. The true circumcision were those who trusted in Christ apart from the law.

"The choice of *λατρεύω* [*latreuo*, i.e. "worship"] is deliberate, given that in the LXX it denoted the service rendered to God by Israel as His peculiar people" (O'Brien, 360). Just as believers are called the circumcision (the covenant community of God), now their service to God is said to be identical to that performed by believing Israel. But because the Spirit of God dwells within each believer (Rom. 8:8-9), Christians are able to please God in a way that those under the law could never do.

A believer places no confidence in the flesh. Paul has already made reference to circumcision and will do so again in verse 5. It is quite likely that "the flesh" is a passing illusion to circumcision, but it is clear that the meaning is much broader than that. It appears that "the flesh," as Paul uses it here, speaks of all that humans put their trust in, and for the Jews would include circumcision, physical descent for Abraham, and keeping of the law. The Christian, by contrast, doesn't place his hope in what he can do or who his ancestors are, but boasts in Christ alone who in His infinite grace provides all that is necessary to be saved.

Paul next clarifies what it means to place confidence in the flesh and he does so through personal testimony.

3:4 Although I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:

By demonstrating that he had all that the Jews boasted in before he became a Christian, the apostle can disarm their reasons for putting confidence in the flesh. "If orthodox pedigree and upbringing, followed by high personal attainment in the religious moral realm, assured a good standing in the presence of God . . . , Paul need fear no competition" (O'Brien, 366).

For an instant Paul places himself in the position of the Judaizers. Because of Paul's background and attainments, he had good reason to put confidence in the flesh. In fact, not only could he match the claims of the Jew, he could even outstrip them (O'Brien, 367).

He was:

3:5 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;

3:6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness under the law, faultless.

Paul was circumcised on the eighth day as the law required (Lev. 12:3) and was thus identified with the covenant community of God. He wasn't a proselyte but had direct descent with all its attending privileges (cf. Ro. 9:4-5). He came from the tribe of Benjamin, a highly regarded tribe within the nation (See discussion in O'Brien, 370-371). By calling himself a Hebrew, Paul identifies with those Jews who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic (instead of Greek) and avoided, as much as possible, assimilation into the Gentile world.

In regard to the law, Paul was a Pharisee, trained under the respected Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3). He bound himself to keep the 613 commandments of the Law of Moses as well as the hundreds of commandments the Pharisees thought to be equally authoritative. Because the focus wasn't on inner failures or sins but outward observance of the law, Paul could say that he kept the commandments flawlessly. He was so zealous in what he believed that he was a chief persecutor of the church (Gal. 1:13-14).

If others could place confidence in the flesh, surely Paul could as well. He had the racial pedigree, had attained a respected position among his peers and had lived a disciplined, orderly life. But Paul discovered that all his effort and discipline brought him no benefit for it kept his eyes from seeing Christ.

3:7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

3:8 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 that I may gain Christ

Paul continues his amazing testimony revealing the total reorientation of life that transpired from the moment he met Christ.

"Paul had once put his confidence in the flesh, having superlative grounds for boasting before God. His privileges and accomplishments (vv. 5-6) he had counted as real, not supposed or potential, gains. But a dramatic change occurred: Paul was wonderfully converted to Christ and he came to view the past "advantages" as positively harmful. Christ was the decisive difference and now became the center of Paul's life" (O'Brien, 383).

Using accounting terminology, Paul says that one by one he counted up all that he had done and was convinced that he would fare well when he stood before God. But when he met Christ he discovered that everything he had thought he had gained had profited him nothing. Spiritually, he was in the red. Whether it was his sense of ethnic superiority, his zeal, his discipline, his Roman citizenship, his great mind, or anything else that tempted him to trust in, it is flesh and Paul viewed it as an evil to be avoided, for all those things drew him away from attaining a more complete knowledge of Christ.

To know God meant to be in close personal relationship to Him and Paul considered knowing Christ as the only knowledge worth having. Everything else he considered as "rubbish," a word which could refer to anything from dung, muck, or food gone bad. Paul is saying in Jesus' words, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). His desire is to gain Christ in a day-by-day, ever-deepening relationship.

In essence, verses 9-11 explain what Paul means to gain Christ.

3:9 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.

3:10 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,

3:11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The reason that Paul abandoned all is described in two parallel thoughts: (1) that he may know Christ and (2) be found in Him. The manner in which Paul will be found in Christ is "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."

In other words, Paul no longer desires to stand before God with his own righteousness attained by keeping the law. He desires the righteousness that originates from God and is received by faith, not merit. He wants the righteousness whose basis is found in Christ. The righteousness derived from the law relates to higher moral achievement, but Paul is now thinking in terms of relationship. Righteousness is the status of being right and thus

acceptable to God. "The righteousness that comes from God is God's way of putting people right with Himself" (O'Brien, 396).

To know Christ is explained as knowing the power of His resurrection and sharing in His sufferings on a day-to-day basis. "As Paul participates in Christ's sufferings, the tribulations through which every Christian must pass, so he desires to understand and experience the life giving power of God, that power which he manifested in raising Christ from the dead, and which he now displays in the new life the Christian receives from the risen Christ and shares with him" (O'Brien, 400).

He also desires to be conformed to Christ in His death. Living for Christ and doing His will involves dying to self and our sinfulness. Paul exhorts the believer to put to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13) and all that belongs to our earthly nature (Col. 3:5). He speaks of us being crucified with Christ, and that we are no longer the one living, but Christ lives through us (Gal. 2:20). Jesus said, "'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.'" (Jn. 12:24).

Just as Paul desires to experience all that there is in Christ today, he also desires to experience the future resurrection. The fact that Paul says that he wants to *somehow* attain the resurrection does not imply that he had doubts that he would rise, but that the way or route that he would take to attain it was unclear. "Being conformed day by day to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, and especially to His death, is a process that will be completed for Paul at the resurrection of the dead, that is, at the time of the parousia [i.e. Christ's second coming]"

**Press toward the goal
3:12-16**

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.

3:13(a) Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.

Paul has already stated that his ultimate goal is to know Christ and experience the resurrection - the culmination of the Christian life. Now he clarifies that he has not attained it yet, nor has he been perfected (or, made complete). Those who opposed Paul had made claims of having been perfected through the law, but Paul describes knowing Christ as a strenuous attempt (emphasized by the present tense verb - "I continually keep pressing on") to reach the goal which is not yet within his grasp.

When Christ took hold of Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul was set in a new direction. He was no longer running just to run but was intent on completing the race that Jesus had called him to.

3:13 (b) But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

"One thing" suggests purpose and direction, and concentration of effort. "Paul permits nothing to divert him from his course. His aim is specific and clearly defined" (O'Brien, 427-428).

In verse 13 Paul describes the manner in which we are to run: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead." A runner in a race has one goal in mind - the finish. Though Paul has already finished part of the course that Christ had laid out for him, he does not look back, pondering what he has done, but looks forward to what yet needs to be run. Past achievements, or for that matter, past failures do not determine the outcome of the race. In a sense we could say that Paul forgets as he runs. Anything that draws our gaze from the goal only hinders the efficiency with which we can run.

Paul chooses a vivid word that describes the intensity with which he runs. "It pictures a runner with eyes fixed on the goal, his hand stretching out towards it, and his body bent forward as he enters the last and decisive stages of the race" (O'Brien, 429).

"Paul has described the manner of his running; he now speaks of the race itself and particularly the finish line towards which he runs and the prize he seeks to win" (O'Brien, 429).

3:14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The word "goal" refers to anything upon which someone fixes their gaze. It can be used of aiming at a target in archery or could be used of the focal point of life. In a foot race, the goal is the finish line. Paul's running is purposeful with a clear vision in mind.

In this analogy, the nature of the prize is not spelled out, but since the call of God which is found in Christ leads in a heavenward direction, the prize is most likely the blessing of eternal life.

This prize is something that Paul wants every believer to lay hold of.

In verse 15 he applies verses 12-14 to the readers' lives.

3:15 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.

Not all of those in Philippi held the same outlook on life as Paul, but he encourages them to do so if indeed they are mature in Christ. Although he realizes that some things may be difficult to understand or accept, he is confident that God will correct that which they do not understand.

Paul is not asserting that the things he is teaching can be judged as true or false depending upon how someone feels about it, nor is he saying that if they disagree God will straighten them out. Rather, he wants to encourage them and reminds them that the grace of God is at work in their lives, and God will help them know what is right.

3:16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

In this final sentence, Paul emphasizes what is most important in his current discussion, namely, that we live up to whatever truth we have already attained.

“To live up to” translates a verb that was originally a military term meaning to stand in line or march in line. In a figurative sense, it means to be in line with, or to hold or follow a particular standard. Acts 21:24 speaks of living a life regulated by the law. In the present verse it is an encouragement to keep in line with those things that have already been learned. It is a command to move from knowledge and orientation to practice.

Beware of true and false models**3:17-21**

In Philippians 2:5-11 Paul used Christ as the example for believers to imitate. He used himself as an example in 2:17, Timothy in 2:19-24 and Epaphroditus in 2:25-30. After admonishing the church to live up to a particular standard in 3:12-16, he now offers himself as a living illustration of what he means, knowing that they had had ample time to observe his behavior and attitude.

3:17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.

Paul wants others to desire to know Christ, His sufferings, and the power of His resurrection (3:10) and have the one goal of attaining the prize (3:12-14), just as he does.

Some have questioned whether Paul's attitude is in line with Christian humility. But Paul is not making an exclusive claim of his worthiness to be an example. He has already offered Christ as the supreme example (2:5-11) and has offered other examples of individuals who have Christ-like mindsets. He has also clearly stated that he realizes that he hasn't made it yet (3:12-14). In verse 17 he includes others as examples. But at the same time, his attitude and behavior, though not exclusively his, provide a good example of

what a believer should look like and form a strong contrast to those in the verses that follow.

3:18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.

3:19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

"For" introduces the reason why Paul is telling the Philippians to follow him. There are those who desire to influence them into deserting Christ. Instead of receiving the heavenly prize that awaits every believer (3:14), their destiny is eternal destruction. Instead of dying to themselves (3:10), they pursue fleshly impulses - their god is no higher than their stomachs. Instead of desiring to know Christ and the power of His resurrection (3:10), they place their minds on earthly things. Those who live and think in such ways are not simply identified as uncommitted Christians, but are called enemies of Christ Himself.

3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

3:21 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.

"The contrast between the heavenly and earthly spheres, begun in the preceding clause of v. 19, is now completed as Paul uses a striking phrase to assert that true believers have their commonwealth (and government) in heaven, where their Lord is now. This heavenly kingdom is a present reality and determines their ongoing existence as they live in the world. They eagerly await the Lord's return from there as Savior, and when He comes He will transform his people so that they have bodies like His own, fitted for entry into their heavenly heritage" (O'Brien, 458-459).

Although the NIV chooses "citizenship" to translate the Greek (*πολίτευμα politeuma*), it is one of the least attested meanings of the word in NT times. It most often refers to a "state" or "commonwealth." The church in Philippi was part of the Roman state and clearly understood its meaning in that context. But Paul tells them that as Christians their state is not Rome

but heaven and the laws by which they should abide are found there. Because heaven is a current reality, it affects the way we behave today.

Our future influences our present behavior and hopes as well. Someday our Savior will come from the heavenly "state" and extend His kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). At His coming He will transform our frail flesh (I Cor. 15:51-58; II Cor. 5:1-10) with its daily struggles with sin (see notes on Phil. 3:10) into the likeness of His glorified body - imperishable, spiritual, glorious, powerful (I Cor. 15:38-49). This is the resurrection body that Paul had anticipated earlier (3:11). "Once he experiences a resurrection transformation, man will know perennial rejuvenation, since he will have a perfect vehicle for God's deathless Spirit, a body that is invariably responsive to his transformed personality" (M.J. Harris, quoted by O'Brien, 465).