

Lesson 10

Nov. 9, 2025

Focus on the Goal

Christians should be motivated by divine values, not secular values.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

In Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, he focuses on his relationship with Christ and his ministry for Christ. Paul's motivating desire was to know Christ fully, regardless of what it cost him. Despite his achievements before coming to faith in Christ, Paul says no one should put any confidence in the flesh regardless of their credentials, skills, or accomplishments. Instead, Paul invites others to follow his example and press toward the goal of knowing Jesus as deeply and profoundly as possible. As such, Paul viewed the generosity of the Philippian church (providing for his needs while in prison) as an extension of Christ's care.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Philippians is one of four letters written by Paul that are collectively known as the "Prison Epistles." The other three letters are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul wrote these letters during his first confinement in Rome. This occurred between AD 60 and 62 and is depicted in Acts 28 as a house arrest where Paul was able to receive visitors and was "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ," v. 31. However, this was a "hired house," v. 30, meaning it was rented, so the resources the Philippians sent to Paul would have been helpful and very much appreciated by him.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH CHRIST ALONE: Philippians 3:1-11.

- A. No Confidence in the Flesh (1-3)
- B. Full Confidence in Christ (4-11)

2. THE HEAVENLY PRIZE: Philippians 3:12-21.

- A. Pressing on Toward the Goal (12-16)
- B. Paul's Example (17-21)

3. CONTENTMENT AND GIVING: Philippians 4:10-20.

- A. The Secret of Contentment (10-13)
- B. Abundant Generosity (14-20)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH CHRIST ALONE: Philippians 3:1-11.

A. No Confidence in the Flesh Philippians 3:1-3

Paul's initial comments in Philippians 3 provide insight into at least one of the challenges the church at Philippi was facing – false teachers. Paul warned the Philippians to watch out for a specific group of people he called “those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh,” (v. 2 NIV). Much like those whom Paul confronted in Galatia (Galatians 3:1-5), this appears to have been a group of people trying to convince the Christians in Philippi that it was necessary for them to submit to specific Jewish laws and regulations to be genuinely saved. Of particular importance to this group was the practice of circumcision. Paul countered their emphasis on physical circumcision by declaring that those who served God by His Spirit and boasted in Christ rather than in the flesh were of “the [true] circumcision” Phil. 3:3.

This aligns with Paul's teaching in the letter to the church at Colossae, to whom he said, “You are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands” (Colossians 2:11). Through faith in Jesus Christ circumcision becomes symbolic of having the old sinful nature removed by faith and replaced with a new nature, (2 Corinthians 5:17). The physical act of circumcision no longer has any spiritual relevance. Paul affirmed, “For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3 NKJV). Rather than seeking salvation through external laws and regulations, true believers are led by the Holy Spirit, who “bears witness [testifies together] with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Romans 8:16). The redeemed have put off the old self, ruled by the sinful nature, and have put on the new self, which is governed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (v. 14).

B. Full Confidence in Christ Philippians 3:4-11

Paul builds on his warning to reject those trying to get the Philippian believers to trust in external works of the Law rather than trusting Christ alone for their salvation. Paul presented his life as an example of how easy it could be to fall into the trap of relying on one's accomplishments to please God and earn salvation. To illustrate this point, Paul listed some of his impressive achievements within Judaism – a list that would have been the envy of most devout Jewish men. He had been circumcised when he was eight days old, and he was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews...a Pharisee” (v. 5), zealous and “blameless” (v. 6). However, when compared with knowing Christ, he counted all of these things as nothing more than “dung” (v. 8), meaning waste or garbage.

Paul then focused on the issue of true righteousness, contrasting it with outward righteousness, “which is of the law” (v.9) and based on one's personal efforts. Paul asserted true righteousness results from a relationship with God through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He desired true righteousness in his life, which moved him, above all else, to seek to know Christ as fully as possible. He expressed this desire in verse 10, saying, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings” (v. 10). The power associated with Christ's resurrection was attractive, but Paul's passion to know Christ drove him further. He understood there were depths of knowing Christ that were only experienced through suffering. Indeed, Paul was willing to face death if it meant he could “attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (v. 11). Paul knew eternal life in Christ is the believer's ultimate reward.

We live in a world that prioritizes personal achievement and success; therefore, much of life is focused on this pursuit. Paul, however, presented a different perspective. He understood all human achievements pale in significance to the most important goal of knowing Christ. It is

important to consider these words of Paul and measure our own lives against this Biblical perspective. Do we give more time and attention to knowing Christ or seeking personal success? Ultimately, our relationship with Jesus is what “is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17 NKJV).

2. THE HEAVENLY PRIZE: Philippians 3:12-21

A. Pressing on Toward the Goal Philippians 3:12-16

Having expressed his desire to know Christ, Paul admitted this goal, which would culminate in his resurrection, was ahead of him. He explained, however, that Christ had “apprehended [taken hold of]” him (v. 12). This was not only about Paul’s desire to achieve his goal; it was also about Christ’s work within Paul’s life, pulling him forward in his pursuit. Rather than looking back at the past and the accomplishments he had achieved, Paul said he was “reaching forth unto those things which are before” (v. 13). The term translated as “reaching forth unto those things which are before” (v. 13). The term translated as “reaching forth” depicts Paul as exerting extraordinary personal effort in his pursuit to know Christ. He was not satisfied with merely reflecting on his accomplishments; he focused instead on what lay ahead. Paul’s forward momentum came both from Christ’s pull and Paul’s “press toward the mark” (v. 14). Here, to press does not imply struggle, for salvation comes by faith, not through human effort. We better understand Paul’s statement when we realize he was urging a singleness of ambition, a made-up mind: “This one thing I do” (v. 13).

To guard against the Philippian Christians thinking this pursuit was only a goal for Paul and other leaders, he said this was a view to be held not only by leaders, but it was to be the desire of all who were “perfect [mature]” (v. 15). Paul wanted this same longing – to know Christ and desire to press forward toward that goal – to be embraced by all believers. It was not something relegated to a select few prominent people in the church, but it should be the goal of every Christian. Knowing not everyone would embrace what he was saying, Paul encouraged those who disagreed to seek the Lord on this matter. Paul was confident the Lord would reveal how they should live while they remained faithful to what they had already received and believed regarding their lives in Christ.

B. Paul’s Example Philippians 3:17-21

In verses 17 through 21, Paul continued to offer his life as an example for the Christians in Philippi to follow. However, given that Paul was under house arrest at the time he wrote and not currently with them, he pointed to others in the church who were also living exemplary lives. Paul encouraged the Philippian Christians to observe those worthy examples of Christian faith and commitment (v. 17). However, Paul warned there were some among them who were “the enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18) - people who desired to undermine the faith and teaching of the church. Paul urged the Christians to avoid these bad actors who had only “destruction” (v. 19) awaiting them.

Paul then contrasted the enemies of Christ, people who set their minds on “earthly things” (v. 19), with those who had embraced their heavenly “citizenship” (v. 20 NKJV) and were eagerly awaiting the Lord’s return. One of the most explicit expressions of this in Paul’s own life is found in 2 Corinthians 4:18, where he described his attitude: “We look not at the things which are seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Paul recognized the things having to do with this earthly life will one day be gone, giving way to things

that cannot be seen with physical eyes. These unseen things will last throughout eternity, even though we see them now only in faith.

Paul's plea for the Philippian Christians to know Christ is a universal petition for all genuine Christians. By knowing Christ, Paul meant much more than knowing about Him. Even atheists can learn facts about Jesus. Instead, coming from the Hebrew concept of yada, "knowing Jesus" means having a relationship with Him so we can follow His example. In this way, we can recognize Christ in others, which protects us from following anyone who would try to lead us through the wide gate and down the broad path to eternal destruction.

3. CONTENTMENT AND GIVING Philippians 4:10-20

A. The Secret of Contentment Philippians 4:10-13

Paul concluded his letter with expressions of gratitude that he felt for the renewed support he received from the church in Philippi. For reasons Paul did not disclose, they could not send support for a while. He wanted them to know that his gratitude was not the result of desperation or a great need on his part. It genuinely came from a desire to express his thanks.

Paul then said he "learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (v. 11). Despite being in Roman custody, Paul maintained his trust and security in the Lord. Even while facing adversity, Paul experienced peace and contentment. He said adversity was not new for him because, while he knew what it was "to abound," he also knew what it was "to be abased [in need]" (v. 12). Paul was no stranger to suffering. He had learned to find contentment in any situation because he had been through many good and bad situations while serving as God's apostle to the Gentiles. Perhaps the greatest of all lessons he learned in response to the adversity he experienced was that he could face anything that came his way because of the strength Christ provided (v. 13).

B. Blessed Genealogy Philippians 4:14-20

In addition to the gift sent to him in Rome, Paul applauded the faithfulness of the Philippian church for their care of him early in his ministry. Paul first went to Philippi on his second missionary journey, guided by a vision from the Lord (Acts 16:9-10). While in Philippi, Paul was beaten and imprisoned before eventually being released (vv. 16-40). After leaving Philippi, he experienced additional attacks in the next three cities: Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. The Philippians' support for Paul during those difficult times meant much to him, and he expressed his gratitude for the abundant generosity they showed, even when no other churches supported him (Philippians 4:15).

During Paul's current confinement, the Philippians again displayed their generosity with gifts sent to him through Epaphroditus. Paul expressed his gratitude for their generosity, stating that because of their gifts, he had more than enough to meet his needs (v. 18). It is important to note the church in Philippi was probably not wealthy. On the contrary, some Bible scholars believe they may have been economically challenged. The lapse in their support for Paul mentioned earlier is thought by some to have been because they had nothing to share (v. 10). Their financial situation may also be why Paul mentioned God would meet all their needs (v. 19). It is likely the Philippians gave sacrificially, so Paul wanted to both thank them for what they gave and assure them God would reward their generosity.

Some believe that contentment, or lack thereof, is based primarily on external factors: the problems we face, the difficulties we experience, or the good things that happen to us. Paul clarifies that contentment has little to do with what is happening to us externally, but everything to do with what is happening spiritually within us. The presence of Christ in Paul's life and the strength He provided allowed Paul to experience tremendous peace and contentment despite his incredible suffering. We must also learn to draw upon the inner strength Christ provides when we are confronted with adversity in life.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Like Paul, our confidence should always be in Christ rather than ourselves or our achievements. Growing in faith, therefore, gives us more confidence to do God's will.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

We should recognize that self-confidence apart from Christ is deceptive and potentially destructive. It is only "through Christ" that we can "do all things" (Philippians 4:13).

WORKSHEET

Paul and the Macedonian Christians

On a Map of the Mediterranean World in New Testament times, the Roman province called Macedonia is a small territory, now the northern part of Greece, but this was a very important place to the Apostle Paul. He and his ministry colleagues (Silas, Luke, and Timothy) proclaimed the Gospel in Macedonia in obedience to a vision God revealed to Paul (Acts 16:9-10).

According to the Book of Acts, Paul and his ministry colleagues sought to establish Christian congregations in three cities in Macedonia: Philippi (16:11-12); Thessalonica (17:1-2); and Berea (17:10).

Paul and company Succeeded in Establishing Lasting Churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, as evidenced by his two letters to the Thessalonians, his one letter to the Philippians, and other references to them in the New Testament.

In Contrast to Philippi and Thessalonica, it is not known if a lasting church was established in Berea. Paul and Silas were well received by the Jews and Greeks in Berea (17:10-12), and it is said “many of them believed” (v. 12). However, Jews from Thessalonica, who had opposed Paul, came to Berea and stirred up such opposition to Paul, the Berean believers sent him away to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea for a while (vv. 13-15).

The Passage in Acts 17:10-15 Is the Only Place in the New Testament where anything is said about Berea. The beginning of a church in Berea may have been extinguished by intense persecution. Paul never mentioned Berea in any of his writings. One passage, in Acts 20:4, mentions “Sopater of Berea” being among those who accompanied Paul on his trip to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missionary journey (spring AD 58).

Paul’s Ministry in Macedonia was successful, resulting in strong, lasting churches being established in Philippi and Thessalonica.

Lights in a Dark World: Philippians 2

1. What various phrases did Paul use to describe unity (v. 2) and what is their significance?
2. What problems can “selfish ambition or conceit” cause in a church, and what is the antidote (vv. 3-4)?
3. Describe the “mindset” (v. 5 NIV) of Christ Jesus (vv. 7-8).
4. Why is Jesus’ name “exalted...above every [other] name” (v. 9)?
5. As Christians, what is our correct posture (v. 10) and confession (v. 11)?
6. What must we not do (v. 14) and what must we do (v. 16) to “Shine as lights in the World” (v. 15)?