



Philippians

RBS
Philippians 3:2-11

Lesson 5: The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:10).

Doctrinal Focus: *The greatest accomplishments or qualifications that anyone can achieve apart from Christ are useless when we stand before God the Judge. Only his free gift of righteousness in Christ, received by humble faith, can assure his approval of us; so knowing Christ and sharing the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings is our greatest treasure.*

Read Philippians 3:2-11.

At this point Paul’s tone shifted sharply. After his call to rejoice in the Lord, he suddenly, shockingly, issued a harsh warning against a group of false teachers whose doctrine would deprive the Philippian believers of that very joy by turning their trust away from Christ and toward their own efforts. Paul’s call to rejoice (Philippians 3:1) had closed the previous discussion of Paul’s joy in suffering and his friends’ joy in the restoration of Epaphroditus; but he also said that his repetition of themes was “*safe*” for his readers, hinting at the presence of a danger that could put their joy and salvation itself at risk (Philippians 3:1).

The danger came from Judaizers, like those who had threatened the churches of Galatia, by insisting that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and try to keep the entire law of Moses. The labels that Paul attached to them, his assertion that believers in Jesus are the real “circumcision,” and his own autobiographical sketch of his previous credentials in Judaism, which he discarded for Christ’s sake, all confirm this identification.

Although Philippi had only a small Jewish community and no synagogue, it was not far from Thessalonica, where the gospel met a hostile

reception from most of the Jews (Acts 17:1-9). When Paul and Silas moved on to preach in nearby Berea, some Thessalonian Jews followed them to cause trouble (Acts 17:13), so it is plausible that some backtracked to Philippi, the earlier stop on Paul’s itinerary. It is also possible that in the dozen years since the Philippian church was planted, Jewish Christians had traveled from Galatia to spread their message that trust in Jesus must be combined with compliance with Israel’s law.

Paul responded to the spiritual danger posed by these Judaizers with a threefold argument: (1) he contrasted their self-perception to the reality of their standing before God and to the gospel’s definition of the people of God (Philippians 3:2-3); (2) he showed his own credentials in Judaism excelled those in which they were boasting (Philippians 3:4-6); and finally (3) he asserted that Christ and his gifts were infinitely better than even Paul’s stellar accomplishments under Israel’s law, explaining why he gladly discarded as worthless all those “qualifications” for the sake of the greater treasure “*of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*” (Philippians 3:7-11).

Paul bluntly contradicted the Judaizers’ self image

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with his threefold warning to look out for “*the dogs*,” “*the evildoers*,” and (literally) the mutilation (Philippians 3:2). In Jewish minds each of these titles carried connotations of polluted paganism. In the ancient world, as in Africa today, dogs were not usually house pets but street scavengers, feeding on decaying garbage and disease-bearing carcasses (see 1 Kings 21:23; 2 Kings 9:30-37; 2 Peter 2:22; Matthew 7:6). Jews called Gentiles “*dogs*” since they, like the animals, participated freely in food that was defiling, according to God’s law. No doubt the false teachers were scrupulous to eat only kosher food, but Paul’s first label for them pronounced them unclean. Though they saw themselves as doing good in strenuously keeping God’s commandments, Paul called them workers of evil. And their trust in the rite of circumcision had so twisted that covenant sign from its original significance (see Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 4:11) that in their system it functioned like the self-mutilation practiced by blatant idolaters.¹ The Judaizers’ fixation on diet and doing and circumcision had the opposite result from the outcome they expected: though their lifestyles seemed disciplined, they were far from God.

Paul then showed the reason that their strivings had excluded them from God’s favor. The “*real circumcision*” are those “*who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh*” (Philippians 3:3). Their achievements were worse than useless because their efforts proceeded from self-reliance rather than trust in the Messiah Jesus. The radical purification of heart that physical circumcision symbolized (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4) could only be performed by God’s Holy Spirit (Romans 2:28-29). His life-giving surgery produces faith in Jesus, replacing trust in oneself with boasting in Christ, whose death consecrates believers of every racial and religious background as the people of God (Colossians 2:11-12).

The second step in Paul’s argument was to show that, if “*boasting in the flesh*” in reliance on human privileges and performance apart from Christ meant anything, he himself had credentials that exceeded those of the Judaizers. His qualifications fell into two groups, those arranged by God’s providence through Paul’s birth and family and those achieved

by Paul through zealous self-discipline.

Among the provisions of God’s providence were Paul’s circumcision and his birth into Israel, into the tribe of Benjamin, and into a family that maintained fluency in Hebrew (Philippians 3:5). Each of these was a significant advantage, if favor with God rested on human resources. Obviously, Paul was circumcised *after* his birth, but he put it first in this list because it was the issue on which Judaizers pressured Gentile believers (Philippians 3:2-3; Gal. 5:2; 6:12). Paul had been circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, just as the law required (Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3). As an Israelite, Paul belonged to the covenant people by birth as a lineal descendant of Abraham, not merely by conversion as a proselyte. When the northern tribes rebelled against David’s grandson Rehoboam, the tribe of Benjamin stayed loyal to the dynasty of David (1 Kings 12:21). Therefore Paul’s tribe connected him to God’s promises to restore his kingdom under David’s heir (Ezekiel 34). Although his family lived in Tarsus, among the Jewish Dispersion outside the Promised Land, his parents spoke Hebrew, the language of the Scriptures. Of course Paul had not personally taken initiative in these qualifications, but they were advantages that placed him into covenant relationship with God and provided grounds for “*confidence in the flesh*”—that is, for resting in credentials *apart from* the gracious, life-giving touch of the Spirit of God (Philippians 3:3).

To the religious advantages bestowed by his birth Paul himself added his rigorous allegiance to the law as a Pharisee, his violent zeal, and his “*blameless*” adherence to God’s commands (Philippians 3:5-6). Among the religious groups in first-century Judaism, the Pharisees were respected for their strict and exhaustive application of the law’s commands (and possible implications of the commands), as Paul noted elsewhere (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5). Paul’s zeal “*for the traditions of my fathers*” (Galatians 1:14), was revealed in his persecution of Jesus’ followers, whom he considered traitors to Judaism (Acts 26:9-11). Although he would later see this violence as evidence that he was the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:12-16), before the risen Christ confronted him en route to Damascus, Saul saw

his pursuit of Christians as proof of his devotion to God. Finally, Paul claimed that apart from Christ he had achieved the goal that he and his fellow-Pharisees sought: “*as to righteousness, under the law blameless.*” Paul was not claiming that he had flawlessly kept all the law’s 613 commands (as the rabbis counted them) without a single slip. Though Pharisees acknowledged that they, like others, sometimes violated God’s commands, they expected that offering sacrifices and recommitting themselves to diligent obedience would secure God’s forgiveness and favor, restoring their status as “blameless.” Whatever claims the Judaizers were making for themselves as keepers of God’s covenant, they could not match Paul’s religious résumé: he had capitalized on the advantages of his heritage and birth, pursuing right standing with God by zeal and rigorous self-discipline. But again, his achievements were in “the flesh,” apart from the heart-transforming power of God’s Spirit.

The climactic conclusion to Paul’s argument (Philippians 3:7-11) would shock the Judaizers. He used accounting terminology to register his surprising discovery that those assets in which he had trusted were worse than worthless: they were losses, placing him in a deficit condition before God’s righteous audit. Not only were his heritage and efforts incapable of expunging the debt of his sins. Those achievements “in the flesh” *increased* the depth of his spiritual bankruptcy. Modifying his metaphor, Paul categorized all the aspects of birth and upbringing and strenuous obedience that he once considered attractive (to God as well as to Saul) as repugnant “rubbish.” The Greek term rendered “rubbish” was contracted from a phrase meaning “thrown to the dogs.” It could refer both to decaying food and to excrement (KJV: “dung”). To Paul it suggested both a repellent stench and religious defilement. His list of credentials in Judaism were the items that attracted the “dogs” he was warning the Philippians against; but such pride in family, race, and accomplishments Paul now found disgusting (and, he now knew, God too was revolted).

Paul had indeed “lost” all that he once considered gain: he was in Roman custody because his own people and their leaders sought to kill him as an apostate from the faith of their fathers (Acts 21 –

26). But he could look back without regret on all the “assets” that he now saw as liabilities, for he had received an infinitely greater treasure: “*the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*” (Philippians 3:8). For Paul to “*gain Christ and be found in him*” brought more than forgiveness of sins and God’s approval as righteous, as we shall see. But the contrast between Paul’s pre-Christian life and his life in Christ did focus on contrasting types of righteousness, and the source and means of each. The Greek structure² of 3:9 shows this, for Paul ordered corresponding words in a series of “envelopes,” one inside the other, with the most important information tucked into the center of the sentence. By making our English word order follow the Greek, we can see Paul’s point:

“not having
my own
righteousness
from law
but the [righteousness] through
faith in Christ
from God
righteousness
that depends on faith.”

So Paul set over against each other two types of righteousness, “*my own*” versus that which comes by *faith*, righteousness from law versus righteousness from God. At the heart of this contrast is his fullest explanation of the righteousness he had come to value, and had received through God’s grace: the perfect, truly blameless standing before God that comes “*through faith in Christ.*” The weight of his confidence had shifted from himself to Jesus: his obedient life, sacrificial death, and vindicating resurrection (see Romans 4:25). This single verse beautifully sums up Paul’s gospel of justification by grace alone, received through faith alone, on the grounds of Christ’s righteousness—the gospel that he expounded fully in Galatians and Romans and summarized in Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 3:4-7, and elsewhere (see Acts 13:38-39).

Paul and his fellow-believers in Philippi were right with God because Jesus had lived and died for them, and the Spirit had given them faith to trust their Savior (Philippians 1:29).

That gift, which freed them forever from the fear of God’s condemnation (Romans 5:1; 8:1), spurred

Paul on to know Christ more fully and deeply. In the present life, Paul wanted to participate more and more in “the power of his resurrection” and to share in Christ’s sufferings. He knew that Christ’s life-transforming strength was displayed most fully when Paul was weak and afflicted (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). Although Christ’s sacrifice on the cross had accomplished once-for-all the complete legal ground for their forgiveness (Hebrews 10:1-10), Paul knew that to be “found in Christ” still meant that believers must suffer as they lived and spoke God’s truth in a darkened and hostile world (Philippians 2:15-16; see Acts 14:22). Paul knew, and wanted his friends in Philippi to know, that as “*our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day*” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Paul also wanted his friend to be assured that their present experience of Christ’s resurrection power through his indwelling Spirit held the promise that

even their “outer nature” would one day experience the reversal of its present decay in “*the resurrection of the dead.*” This was Paul’s great goal and hope, as it is of every believer whose citizenship is in heaven, for “*we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*” (Philippians 3:20-21).

With such an assurance of right standing before God through faith in Christ and such a hope of resurrection and reunion with the Savior who lived, died, and rose for them, the Philippians must not be misled by those who would lure them to put “confidence in the flesh” rather than resting their faith, wholly and immovably, in Christ himself. As Paul had shown from the example of his own life story, compared to knowing Christ, receiving the gift of his righteousness, and sharing his suffering and resurrection power, “all other ground is sinking sand.”

Notes

1. The noun that the ESV paraphrases “those who mutilate the flesh” (Greek *katatom*) is derived from the verb that was used in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament translation) to describe the desperate rituals of the prophets of Baal, who, to strengthen their pleas for Baal to send lightning from heaven, “*cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them*” (1 Kings 18:28).
2. Students of ancient literary conventions call this form “chiasm,” from the Greek letter *chi*, shaped like our English X. As two lines intersect to form X, one line starting to the left and ending to the right and the other beginning on the right at the top and ending to the left on the bottom, so ancient Hebrews and Greeks aligned words and themes—first theme “a,” then “b,” then “c,” and (often) a midpoint at “d,” and then a return to “c,” to “b,” and finally to “a.” When such chiastic constructions had a midpoint, readers knew that it was the most significant component that the author sought to express. Another biblical example of chiasm (without a single center point) is Isa. 6:10 (quoted in Matthew 13:15), where the dulling of (a) heart, (b) ears, and (c) eyes result in the disability of (c) eyes, (b) ears, and (a) hearts.

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



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Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 3:2-11.

1. In Philippians 1:15-18 Paul said he rejoiced when Christ was preached, even when some preachers were doing so out of envy and rivalry. On the other hand, he opened this lesson's text (Philippians 3:2) by labeling a group of preachers with three insulting names that were highly offensive in Jewish ears. Why the difference in Paul's attitude and tone toward these two groups?
2. Gentile Christians today do not face pressure from Jewish followers of Jesus to submit to circumcision and other aspects of the Law of Moses, as a number of the congregations planted by Paul encountered such pressure. Are there other forms of "putting confidence in the flesh" that tempt believers in our day? What are they? What makes it so easy to believe that God's favor toward us is contingent on our strenuous obedience?
3. What three activities characterize the *real* circumcision, according to Philippians 3:3? How do they differ from the activities of those who "put confidence in the flesh," as shown in Paul's own pre-Christian life story?
4. What were the two categories of "credentials" about which Paul could have boasted, if he were inclined to put confidence in "the flesh?" Although Paul had no control over the race or family into which he was born, these factors certainly molded who he became. How has your family background influenced the person you are today, for good or ill? How has the grace of Christ modified these influences?
5. If Paul was "blameless" with respect to righteousness in the law, why did he need Jesus? Read Romans 7:7-13. What do these verses reveal about Paul's internal struggle with sin, even as his outward behavior looked very good to those around him?

6. In Romans 7 Paul called the law “*holy and righteous and good*,” yet in Philippians 3 he dismissed his strenuous efforts to keep the law as worthless, repugnant rubbish. Was it obedience to God’s commands that Paul was dismissing so strongly, or the pursuit of obedience with a certain attitude? What was that attitude? Can it also infect Christians?
7. What was the source of the righteousness that Paul now counted loss? What was the source of the righteousness that Paul had now gained? By what means did Paul seek to acquire the “old” righteousness, and by what means had he now received the “new,” true righteousness?
8. (Personal) Paul’s doctrine of justification is not an impersonal theological theory. Paul makes it very personal when he speaks of knowing “Christ Jesus, *my Lord*.” Read Galatians 2:20. How do you, how can you cultivate in your own heart a deeper sense of your personal relationship to the Christ who gave himself for you?
9. Paul had “suffered the loss of all things”—that is, all the advantage in relation to God that he thought he had obtained through the qualifications in verses 5-6. What have you, lost in the process of gaining Christ? Have you parted with those things without regret, as Paul did? How can you cultivate a greater appreciation for the *completely superior worth* of knowing Jesus, so that you can gladly endure the daily costs of discipleship in a joyful confidence that he is the “pearl of great price,” worth selling everything to obtain?
10. Were you disappointed as you read this text, when Paul stated his positive goals of knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection, but then included the negative desire to “share in his sufferings?” Must we share in Christ’s sufferings in order to know him better and experience the power of his resurrection? What are the various forms that sharing in his sufferings may take?
11. Paul’s autobiographical presentation of the gospel in this text was intended not only to keep the Philippian Christians “*safe*” (Philippians 3:1) from a Judaizing heresy, but also to call their attention to the grace of God that could make them gracious toward each other, rather than self-centered and competitive (Philippians 2:1-4). How does a deeper grasp of the fact that the righteousness we need is God’s free gift in Christ free us to love others humbly and compassionately?