

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 10,

Podcast Audio Overview

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So, usually when we talk about building a life or, you know, building a resume, there's this underlying assumption that we're basically stacking bricks. Right. Yeah.

Like building a wall. Exactly. Right.

You go to a good school, you get a solid job, you volunteer, you keep your record clean. You just keep stacking these bricks of goodness and competence until you've built this impregnable fortress of your own worth. And you step back and look at the wall, and it tells you that you matter.

Yeah. It's tangible. Well, it is the fundamental human operating system, really.

I mean, we want things to be measurable. We want our value to be easily quantifiable so we can, like you said, step back, look at our stack of bricks and just have objective proof that we're doing okay. But then you step into the world of ancient texts.

Specifically, today we are taking a deep dive into a letter written a couple of thousand years ago, Philippians chapter 3, verses 1 through 14. Fascinating text. It really is.

And we're analyzing it through the lens of a lecture by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, focusing on Paul's Christ-like mindset. And in this text, that entire brick fortress we just talked about gets completely knocked over. Oh, utterly demolished.

Yeah. We're looking at a framework for human value that is entirely upside down. So the mission for this deep dive is to extract the ultimate aha moments about what a radical mindset shift actually looks like.

You know, what happens when you stop relying on your earthly credentials? Which, I mean, that requires a massive deconstruction of how we naturally operate. Right. And I actually want to speak directly to you, the listener, for a second.

Think about your own internal resume. And I don't mean your literal LinkedIn profile here. Right, no.

I mean your internal list of accomplishments, your background, or even just your track record of being a generally decent, moral human being. The stuff you secretly rely on to feel worthy. Because we all have one.

We all do. But the core tension we're unpacking today asks a rather dangerous question. What if the very things you are most proud of are actually holding you back? Yeah.

And to get to the bottom of that tension, we really have to look at the immediate context of how Paul opens this specific section of the letter. Because he starts with a command, but then he pivots instantly into this stark warning. Okay.

So walk us through that. What's the command? So the command itself is to rejoice in the Lord. Now, we often read that as a generic ancient religious greeting, right? Like just a polite suggestion to keep your chin up.

Right, like an ancient Hallmark card or something. Exactly. But Dr. Harmon's analysis points out the actual cognitive function of this joy.

It is positioned as a safeguard. Like a defense mechanism for the mind. Precisely.

You can't just command a fleeting emotion, but you can command a reorientation of your focus. Joy, in this context, is this deep-seated satisfaction in Christ that actually preserves the mind from external threats. Because if you're deeply satisfied, you aren't easily lured away.

Right, exactly. You aren't lured away by someone offering you cheap substitutes. And he clearly needs them to have that cognitive defense mechanism active.

Because the threat is standing right at the door. I mean, he abruptly shifts from this call for joy to a warning. And he uses a very aggressive, biting alliteration in the original Greek.

Yeah, the kappa words. Right. The words all start with the letter kappa.

And Harmon translates this into English to keep that alliterative effect. He warns the reader against the mutts, the malefactors, and the mutilators. The shift in tone there is severe.

And the historical context really gives it its teeth. When Paul warns against the dogs or the mutts, he's tapping into the ancient reality of street scavengers. Because dogs in antiquity weren't, you know, cute golden retrievers.

No, not at all. They weren't the domesticated pets we think of today. They were dangerous, unclean scavengers looking for scraps in the streets.

Wait, so Paul is basically comparing these false teachers to street scavengers trying to snatch away their spiritual joy. Yes. He's essentially saying these teachers are scavenging for followers, peddling an impure, dangerous theology.

And the core of their dangerous theology is tied up in that third kappa word, the mutilators. OK, let's drill down into the mechanics of that for a second, because the text connects this physical act, this mutilation, as Paul aggressively rebrands it, to the loss of spiritual joy. How does physical mutilation connect to losing joy? Well, these were the agitators insisting that physical circumcision was absolutely necessary for a person to be truly accepted by God.

It all comes down to control and reliance. So if you're standing with God is based on a physical mark or human ritual. If it's based on that, you bypass the need for an internal posture of dependence.

You can control a physical ritual. You can point to it and say, hey, look, I did the thing. I'm in the club.

You check a box. Exactly. But Paul is arguing for the concept of the true circumcision of the heart.

He's arguing that true believers worship by the spirit of God and put absolutely no confidence in the flesh, meaning they don't put their trust in external actions or inherited traits or earthly rituals to secure their value. Because the moment you rely on the physical marker, you are effectively taking the wheel back. You're back to stacking bricks.

Yeah. And that phrase, confidence in the flesh, is the linchpin for this entire philosophical shift. The false teachers were playing a very specific game of earthly status.

They were telling people that to be truly elite, you needed these specific fleshly credentials. Which sets up one of the most brilliant rhetorical traps in ancient literature, in my opinion. Because Paul doesn't just argue with them from an ivory tower.

He decides to step directly onto their playing field. Yeah. He realizes that if they want to play the confidence in the flesh game, he holds an unbeatable hand.

He systematically dismantles their argument by just completely outclassing them. Right. It sounds like Paul is pulling out his Ivy League degrees, his CEO titles, and a perfect credit score just to brag.

But I want to push back on this, or at least ask the question: if putting confidence in the flesh is bad, why is he flexing so hard right here? Well, that's the beauty of his setup. Let's walk through how he builds this resume. He starts with his inherited traits.

He says he was circumcised on the eighth day, meaning he didn't convert into this. His parents follow the rules flawlessly from his birth. He was born into the elite.

Exactly. He is of the people of Israel and specifically the tribe of Benjamin. And for an audience familiar with the history, Benjamin is a massive flex because when the nation of Israel split, the 10 northern tribes eventually fell into apostasy and assimilated.

Right. They lost their identity. But Judah and Benjamin were the loyalists.

They stayed relatively faithful, and they were the ones who returned after the exile to rebuild the nation. So he's claiming this bloodline of pure historical loyalty. And he adds that he is a Hebrew of Hebrews, which points out that his family maintained the pure language and customs while the broader Jewish diaspora was, you know, heavily assimilating into Hellenistic Greek culture.

So on the inherited side of the ledger, his pedigree is flawless, is untouchable. Yeah. But then he moves to his personal achievements, his career and his zeal.

Right. He states he was a Pharisee. And it's really important to remember the scale of what that actually meant back then.

He didn't just keep the basic Mosaic law. No, not at all. He lived inside that massive, complex fence of oral traditions that the Pharisees built around the law to ensure they never even came close to crossing a line.

The discipline required for that is staggering. And his zeal was so intense that he was a persecutor of the church. Which is a really fascinating psychological detail to include because we look at that today as a horrific moral failing.

But in the context of his resume, he is listing it as a positive credential. Right. Because his motivation was a strict, burning desire to preserve the purity of his faith.

He thought he was defending God. He was the ultimate zealot doing what he genuinely believed was necessary to protect his community. Wow.

And he caps the entire list by saying, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. He had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He was a rising star.

By every single observable, quantifiable, outward measure of his society, he was perfect. So he builds the ultimate fortress of bricks. He has the perfect pedigree, the perfect education, the perfect execution of all the rules.

But the twist is he doesn't build this fortress to live in it. He builds it just to show them how completely useless it actually is. Because once he establishes that he has essentially won their game, he initiates this massive accounting shift.

OK, break that down for us. Well, the language he uses here is strict double-entry bookkeeping from antiquity. He imagines a ledger on one side of the game column and on the other is the loss column.

And he takes that entire flawless resume. The pure bloodline, the elite education, the spotless moral record. All of it.

And he manually moves all of it from the game column to the loss column for the quote, surpassing the worth of knowing Christ. And he doesn't just quietly file it away. The terminology he uses is actually quite shocking.

He calls his past accomplishments rubbish. Yeah, the Greek word there is skubalon. And it doesn't just mean clutter or, you know, swept-up dirt.

It translates more accurately to the garbage meant for the ancient sewers. It's excrement. It is highly visceral, repulsive language.

Wait, let me stop you there and clarify this. I think it's really easy to misunderstand. Throwing his history as a persecutor into the sewer makes total sense.

That's a bad thing. But being loyal to your culture, having a faithful family, and executing disciplined rule following. Those are objectively good things.

Right. Yeah. Is he saying his whole life was evil, or is this like throwing away an Olympic gold medal because you just realized the medal is actually made of chocolate? Oh, I love that analogy.

Yes. Harman's lecture highlights this beautifully. Paul isn't saying that his dedication or his family's faithfulness were inherently evil.

They were good things. But the gap between earthly pedigree and the reality of knowing Christ is so astronomically vast that by comparison, even the best human achievements look like sewer garbage. It's like a drowning person clinging to a life preserver after they've already been pulled onto dry land.

A life preserver is an objectively good tool when you're in the water. But if you insist on wearing it while trying to hike up a mountain, it's no longer a tool. It's a heavy, awkward burden that is actively preventing you from moving forward.

Yeah. The resume was his life preserver. But once he found solid ground in Christ, clinging to the resume actually became a thing that makes so much sense.

The reliance on the good things was keeping him from the ultimate thing. Exactly. And knowing Christ deeply in this context means experiencing two distinct realities.

Harman breaks it down as involving his resurrection power. Meaning bringing life from death. Right.

That power operating within the believer. And crucially, sharing in his sufferings, identifying with Christ. And the suffering part is where I think most people want to opt out.

But it's vital to the mechanism, isn't it? Because suffering acts as the ultimate stripping agent. It burns away the remaining dependencies on the flesh. Yeah.

You don't suffer to earn favor. You suffer because it forces you to drop the life preserver and rely entirely on the resurrection power. Wow.

So once the ledger is cleared, once the greatest human achievements are moved to the loss column, the obvious question becomes, how do you actually move forward? Well, to explain this, Paul's metaphors in the text shift from accounting to athletics. The runner's focus. Yes.

Paul states his one thing: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. He is pressing on toward the resurrection from the dead. Which introduces this classic theological tension, right? The already not yet dynamic.

Believers possess a taste of this resurrection power now, but the ultimate physical reality of it is still ahead. Right. So it requires relentless forward momentum.

Harmon uses a really brilliant analogy from his own experience as a cross-country coach to explain the physiology of this mindset. Of the target fixation principle. Exactly.

If you're running and you lock your gaze on a runner 10 yards ahead of you, your body naturally and gradually opens up its stride to catch them. Your kinematics actually align with your focus. But if you constantly turn to look backward over your shoulder, your form breaks down.

You either slow down, your stride shortens, or you just trip and crash. You run toward what you are looking at. Yeah.

But we have to talk about this instruction to, quote unquote, forget what lies behind because it requires some serious nuance. I'm glad you brought that up because I need to push back here. Modern psychology tells us that we absolutely have to process our past.

We can't just repress our history or pretend our traumas didn't happen. Yeah. Is Paul telling the listener to induce spiritual amnesia here? Because that sounds dangerous.

Yeah. And Harmon makes a vital distinction here to prevent exactly that misunderstanding. Paul is not advocating for wiping your memory clean.

Your past shapes you. There is no denying the reality of your history. But the key is that your past must not determine you.

Forgetting in the biblical sense isn't about failing to remember facts. It is about a conscious recategorization of the data. It means stripping the past of its power to dictate your present identity.

You take away its authority. Exactly. And Harmon points out that we can actually be held hostage by our past in two completely different ways.

The obvious one is being held hostage by a bad past. Right. Like crippling guilt over old sins or massive failures.

We look backward. We see our mistakes, and we just stop running. Right.

But the far more subtle trap and the one Paul is specifically targeting with his resume is being held hostage by a good past. Oh, wow. Coasting on your spiritual laurels.

Yes. Relying on a pedigree. Thinking, well, I served overseas for two years in my 20s or, you know, I grew up in a really faithful household.

You look backward at your own highlight reel, and you lose your forward momentum. Because you're essentially trying to run a race while staring lovingly at a trophy you won 10 years ago. You're going to crash.

You're definitely going to crash. So forgetting means neutralizing the leverage that your history has over you. The bad things don't get to condemn you, and the good things don't get to justify you.

They are just facts on a timeline. They aren't the source of your standing. Which brings us perfectly to the immediate practical application for the listener today.

Because, you know, we don't live in the ancient Greco-Roman world. And I'm guessing most of our listeners aren't tempted to rely on their status as an ancient Pharisee. Probably not, no.

But the human operating system hasn't changed. The trap of putting confidence in the flesh is just as prevalent right now. It just wears different clothes.

Oh, absolutely. We are bombarded with distractions claiming to bring happiness. So we have to resolutely conclude that knowing Christ is worth more than all of it.

Harmon describes the modern version of this fleshly confidence as a subtle arrogance regarding our weekly spiritual performance. So it's the belief that God's love for us fluctuates based on how well we executed our personal moral checklist. Exactly.

And we all do it. I want to turn to the listener again. Think about your own week.

When you have a highly productive, morally perfect week, you know, you read the books you were supposed to read, you were patient in traffic, you donated to a charity. Do you secretly feel like you've earned extra points with God? That right there is confidence in the flesh. It is.

Because subconsciously you think, God is probably pretty impressed with me right now. I've earned some extra favor. And the reverse is equally true.

You mess up, you lose your temper, you fail at a habit you were trying to build, and you immediately feel like you've been demoted. You feel like God is distant because your performance dropped. Which is an emotional roller coaster.

And it's the exact definition of putting your confidence in the flesh. You are substituting your performance for the free gift of righteousness. So how do we break out of this cycle? Harmon mentioned some practical advice, right? He does.

He suggests paying close attention to what he calls seasoned saints. These are the older believers, men and women, who have walked in this faith for decades without burning out and without becoming cynical. But how do they actually do it? It's one thing to say they keep their desire for Christ fresh.

But what is the actual mechanism? How do you avoid relying on a 40-year spiritual resume? They do it by constantly auditing their ledger. The seasoned saints are the ones who wake up every single day and manually move yesterday's spiritual successes into the lost column. Oh, that's good.

They don't let yesterday's obedience become today's confidence. Exactly. They maintain a single-minded pursuit because they recognize that the moment they start trusting their track record, they have stopped trusting Christ.

They practice that accounting shift every single day. Wow. So identifying those safety nets, the things we personally put on our flesh resume, that's really the first crucial step.

You can't dismantle the brick fortress until you admit you've been building it. Right. It requires brutal honesty with yourself about where you actually source your worth.

Well, we have covered a massive amount of ground today. We started with the concept of joy functioning as a cognitive safeguard against the scavengers, those mutts who want us to

rely on physical markers. We watched Paul lay out an unbeatable ancient resume, you know, a fortress of religious perfection, only to realize it was just a rhetorical trap.

Right. He moved his greatest human achievements into the lost column, treating his virtues as sewer garbage compared to the reality of knowing Christ. And then we unpack the runner's focus, the psychological necessity of neutralizing our past so we aren't held hostage by our failures or our successes.

It really is a complete and total dismantling of the human operating system. It is. So I want to leave you, the listener, with the final provocative thought to mull over today.

Think back to that internal resume we talked about at the very beginning, the bricks you've been stacking to prove your worth to yourself and to the world. Yeah. If you successfully learn to completely, quote unquote, forget your past, refusing to let your worst failures define you, but equally refusing to let your greatest triumphs elevate you.

What happens to your sense of identity today? That's a huge question. Does stripping away your resume and that exhausting need to constantly prove yourself actually make you completely fearless in how you live right now? That is a profound paradigm shift to walk away with. It really is.

Thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive. Keep questioning, keep digging, and we will catch you next time.