

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 10, Examples of Christlike Mindset, Part 2: Paul Himself, Philippians 3:1-14, 6-Min. Video Overview

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To understand the theological conflict at the heart of the Book of Philippians, we have to look to the ancient Greco-Roman world. The believers in Philippi were navigating a high-stakes religious landscape, defined by competing claims of authority. In the third chapter of his letter to this church, the Apostle Paul issues a blunt, repeating command.

He tells the Philippians, Rejoice in the Lord. Paul describes this joy as a safeguard, a protective measure, intended to preserve the church from specific external threats. In his view, joy functions as a form of security for the believers' mindset.

The immediate threat comes from a group of false teachers. These individuals are actively insisting that physical circumcision is a mandatory prerequisite for covenant membership and salvation. Paul attacks these opponents using a biting rhetorical flourish.

In the original Greek, he uses a deliberate, three-part alliteration to warn the church. Look out for the kunas, the dogs. Look out for the kakoas ergatas, the evildoers.

Look out for the katatomen, the mutilators. By calling them mutilators, Paul takes their most sacred requirement, the physical mark of circumcision, and reduces it to a senseless disfigurement of the flesh. This is a direct strike against those demanding physical markers as proof of a relationship with God.

To dismantle their argument, Paul uses his own biography as a weapon. He offers up his own flawless religious resume to prove that even the highest human credentials cannot satisfy God's requirements. Defeating a doctrine of works requires demonstrating that even the most elite pedigree is spiritually bankrupt.

This sets up Paul's systematic deconstruction of what he calls confidence in the flesh. Having confidence in the flesh means relying on human actions, ethnic heritage, or religious performance to generate a right standing with God. To illustrate this, Paul uses the language of an accounting ledger.

He begins by itemizing the credentials he once placed in the gain column, the assets he believed made him right with God. He was circumcised on the eighth day, representing perfect parental obedience to the Mosaic law. He was of the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, denoting an elite covenantal birthright.

He calls himself a Hebrew of Hebrews, maintaining pure cultural retention. As a Pharisee, he practiced rigorous adherence to the written law and oral traditions. As to zeal, he was a persecutor of the church, demonstrating an uncompromising commitment to Jewish purity.

Finally, regarding righteousness under the law, he was blameless, holding perfect standing within the covenantal system. These seven data points represented the absolute peak of cultural and religious success. Before he encountered Christ, Paul was the ultimate spiritual elite.

In verses seven through nine, Paul introduces a massive shift in how he evaluates his entire life's work. Paul executes a total accounting reversal. Every item previously listed as an asset is now recategorized as a loss.

Paul labels these former credentials as *skubalon*, a word for rubbish, garbage, or the sewage flowing in the streets. The motivation for this reclassification is the surpassing, incomparable worth of knowing Christ Jesus. This reversal marks a change in Paul's theological framework.

He is abandoning the pursuit of a self-generated righteousness derived from keeping the law. He replaces his old resume with a new paradigm, a gifted righteousness received entirely through faith in Christ. Paul's conclusion is that relying on human pedigree for salvation devalues the work of Christ.

Compared to knowing him, the most impressive human resumes become an absolute loss. This dual-axis graph visualizes Paul's definition of knowing Christ, a reality that pairs the experience of resurrection power with the necessity of shared suffering. First, Paul describes experiencing the active power of the resurrection in daily life, the power that brings life from death to overcome sin.

Simultaneously, knowing Christ involves willingly sharing in his sufferings as a necessary mark of identification with him. This creates an already-not-yet tension. Paul experiences resurrection power now, but the ultimate goal, the bodily resurrection from the dead, is still a future event.

A Christ-like mindset requires embracing this tension, accepting that suffering is a present-day component of pursuing a future, perfected resurrection. To maintain this mindset, Paul moves from the language of accounting to the imagery of a single-minded runner on a track. In cross-country running, a runner whose gaze is locked on a forward target naturally accelerates toward it.

As the runner moves, past events fall away outside the edges of their vision. They are no longer the focus. When Paul speaks of forgetting what lies behind, he is describing a deliberate refusal to allow past realities to dictate his current trajectory.

This prevents the two most common forms of spiritual paralysis—guilt over past sins and an arrogant reliance on past spiritual pedigrees. Paul contrasts this backward-looking focus with the upward call of God, which demands constant, straining forward momentum toward Christ. The ultimate anatomy of the Christ-like mindset is the conviction that confidence in the flesh profits nothing.

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runner on a track. A runner with their gaze locked on a forward target naturally accelerates toward it.

Looking backward guarantees a stumble. As they move, past events fall away outside their vision. When Paul speaks of forgetting what lies behind, he is describing a deliberate refusal to allow past realities to dictate his current trajectory.

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