



The Excellent Way: Pressing Onward

Philippians 3: 1-14

By Pastor Ken Patterson

Introduction: Paul wrote about a number of critical issues in Philippians 3. One of the concerns he addressed was the way we continue to grow in Christ Jesus. Within this chapter, Paul identifies the inadequacy of rituals and laws to grant us righteousness. He traces his own history and suggests that even as a Pharisee, his position provided nothing and in reality put him at risk of destruction. Paul realized that the knowledge he needed was a knowledge of Christ. Paul showed that we grow through an ongoing efforts to know more of Christ and become more like Christ. The following lesson is intended to help readers understand that our personal qualities, our backgrounds, our wealth, and our outward examples of holiness do not give us access to salvation. Salvation is found in Jesus; therefore, we must first accept Him by faith and then we align our lives to His example. By the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify areas of growth they need to address so that they can be working towards the calling that the Lord has in their life.

Key Passages: Philippians 3

Paul's testimony verse 1-11

The beginning of chapter 3 is a warning against those who would suggest that strict adherence to the Mosaic Law provides righteousness. Verses one through four suggests that the ones Paul calls dogs, evil doers, and mutilators of the flesh were Jews. The clue is in the term mutilators of the flesh. This was a reference to those who circumcised themselves as an outward sign of obedience. Paul then explains to his readers that he was once one of the Jews who believed that one's good standing with God was based on what someone did rather than what someone believed. His ethnic background was that of a Jew. Within the Jewish community, his family was from the tribe of Benjamin. Within the group, he was trained as a Pharisee. As a Pharisee, he was serious about persecuting anyone who would claim that the Messiah had come.

And finally, he adhered to the Mosaic Law precisely as written. If one were to evaluate Paul's life they would have said he was a perfect Jew and therefore God should be happy with him. However, Paul continued by making the startling statement. He declares in verse 7 that none of his background counted because it did not provide the relationship with God that comes through Christ.

When we understand that salvation comes by faith, it changes our approach to God. In previous lessons, students have learned that faith in Christ eliminates the ability of anyone to brag about their good works (Ephesians 2: 8-9). Faith comes first. Behavioral changes come second. This is a difficult concept for many people to accept because we often look for people who are Christians to have a specific dress, conversation style, worship style, prayer type, attitude, etc. Yes, the people of God should mature as followers of Christ and take on His demeanor, but salvation and behavior are two different issues. Salvation comes through faith that Jesus is the Christ. Behavior changes come as one grows to understand what it means to be a follower of Christ. Paul reminds his readers that one's behavior or circumcision or anything before faith is worthless and garbage (Philippians 3: 9).

Questions to consider: How does your understanding of faith change the way you view your so-called good deeds?

How can you determine if a person is saved if behavior is not necessarily an indicator of a Christian? (Trick question!)

Learn This! Verses 12-14

In verse 10, Paul begins to describe the knowledge that we should seek. In previous verses he explained that what he knew from his upbringing meant little in terms of bringing him closer to God. Neither his education (Pharisee training) nor his tribal affiliation (Benjamin) created the spiritual connection he supposed. However, an ever-increasing knowledge of Christ would bring him to salvation.

Paul was so adamant about knowing Jesus that he described it as wanting to participate in more than the result of Jesus' resurrection (power of resurrection). He wanted to experience all of what Jesus went through so that he could attain the same reward as Jesus. Paul was a man that was all in when it came to his beliefs. This does not mean that Paul was asking for a cross to die on and the weight of the world's sins to be on his shoulders. He was implying that he wanted to be a perfect follower of Christ and that he was serious about his commitment to following Jesus in the same way he had been committed to following the Mosaic Law before he accepted Christ.

Paul's desire was to learn everything he could from Christ and about what it meant to be a follower of Christ. His ministry approach was to try and align every area of his life to Jesus' model so that he could in turn lead people to the salvation of Jesus. This is what is meant by Paul when he wrote "I press towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (verse 14). The relentless pursuit to attain a standard of excellence which Jesus expects is nothing short of devoted work on a daily basis. When one becomes serious to the point where they will pursue Jesus' expectations daily they are considered to be "pressing towards the mark."

We achieve God's standard by realizing that we are a work in progress and we have to continue to try. If we fail one day, we try the next. We never give up. We never stop trying.

Questions to consider: How often are you working to become more like Christ? Can you track your identify areas where you are better and where you need to improve? What steps will you take to continue to "press towards the mark" which Jesus has called you to attain?

BIG QUESTION: If you do not work towards becoming more like Christ, what will be the outcome?