

What Matters Most | Philippians Bruce's Final Series

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This past summer, many of us watched the Olympics. We saw athletes from all around the world striving for a gold medal. Every athlete represented untold sacrifices of time, money, and effort. These sacrifices weren't just made by the athletes, but by their coaches, parents, family, and friends. Every person on the podium likely had dozens of people standing behind them. All these people united together for a singular goal — winning the Olympic games.

In our study of Philippians, we've seen Paul declare that the cause of Christ is worth everything. It is certainly worth uniting around. Together, our aim should be to advance the gospel so that more and more people find and follow Christ. As we'll see this week, we don't want to put our confidence in anything but Jesus as we strive for what matters most.

Day 1

We're deep into the heart of Paul's message to the Philippians which, by extension, is to all of us. In our passage for this week, Paul speaks with urgency and passion, urging believers to reject a misplaced confidence in religious achievement or ethnic heritage and focus solely on the surpassing value of knowing Christ. Paul's language here is rich with imagery—from financial accounting to athletic metaphors—each used to emphasize the life-altering importance of gaining Christ and pressing forward in faith.

Read the entire passage so you get a sense of Paul's argument, and we'll break it down into shorter segments the rest of the week.

Read

Philippians 3:1–16 (NIV)

*3 Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—
⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.*

*If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Reflect

- What stands out most in this passage from Philippians? Meditate on that verse(s) this week and ask the Spirit for greater insight as you work through the study. Praise God for the gift of his word and the opportunity to grow in your knowledge of it.

Bruce's Challenge

Bruce has challenged us to read the entire letter to the Philippians every week. You can [use this link](#) to do that now.

Day 2

Have you ever put your confidence in the wrong thing? Maybe the wrong person? It's like sitting in a chair with a cracked leg. It might hold you up for a little while, but eventually, you're going to end up on the floor!

In our verses for today, Paul warns the Philippians against some false teaching that will collapse if they try to rest in it.

Read

Philippians 3:1–3 (NIV)

3 Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

Think About

In the first section of Philippians 3, Paul warns believers about the dangers of placing confidence in the wrong things. He begins by urging them to “rejoice in the Lord,” a theme we’ve noticed before in the letter. This call to rejoice “underpins a key, foundational conviction woven into the fabric of this book: the ‘choice to rejoice’ is made possible as the Philippians embrace sound Christian thinking in the context of a unified Christian community.”¹ This joy is not based on circumstances but on their identity in Christ, and it becomes their safeguard against the influences of false teachers.

¹ George H. Guthrie, [Philippians](#), ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 223–224.

Paul then delivers a stinging critique of these teachers, referring to them as “dogs” and “mutilators of the flesh” (v. 2). This harsh language reflects his deep frustration with those who would distort the gospel by insisting that circumcision is necessary for inclusion into God’s family. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant God made with Israel, and in the first century, Gentile believers were being pressured to perform the rite before they would be accepted into the community.

Paul insists that Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—are the true circumcision, not through a physical mark but through a spiritual transformation. This represents Paul’s understanding of how the new covenant in Christ fulfills the deepest intentions of the old-covenant Scriptures.

In verse 3, Paul emphasizes that true believers “worship by the Spirit of God,” “glory in Christ Jesus,” and “put no confidence in the flesh.” He contrasts this with the false teachers who trust in their Jewish heritage. The focus of the Christian life, Paul insists, is not on external markers of identity but on an inward transformation of the heart. This spiritual circumcision makes believers, both Jew and Gentile, the true “Israel of God” (see Galatians 6:16).²

This passage challenges us to examine where we place our confidence. Paul’s warning is a call to reject any reliance on ethnic heritage, status, or external rituals as markers of faith. Instead, we are invited to rejoice in the sufficiency of Christ and the inward work of the Spirit, which unites people of all cultures and backgrounds into the family of God. It doesn’t matter how outwardly religious *you* are, but how faithful *Jesus* is.

Reflect

- Paul warns against putting confidence in “the flesh.” What are some modern-day equivalents of the false securities Paul warns about? Pray the Spirit will guide you to recognize any areas in your life where you might be relying on the “flesh” rather than on the Spirit, and ask for the strength to trust Christ completely.

² D. A. Carson, [*Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 82.

Day 3

Yesterday in our passage, Paul issued a strong takedown of teachers who were trying to infiltrate the Philippian church with false ideas. They were insisting that Gentile Christians needed to undergo the Jewish rite of circumcision to be fully included in the family of God.

Paul says to the Philippians, true believers do not put their confidence in the “flesh” — not their Jewish heritage or their religious observance. A Christian’s only boast is in Christ. Notice how he defends this point with his own story.

Read

Philippians 3:4–9 (NIV)

⁴ *though I myself have reasons for such confidence.*

*If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*

⁷ *But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

Think About

Imagine a group of teenage basketball players taunting each other and bragging about their “game.” LeBron James walks up. There would be no comparison. Paul is the LeBron James of Judaism.

Paul begins by listing his impressive credentials, which would have garnered great respect in Jewish circles. In the ancient world, such lineage and religious adherence were seen as markers of spiritual superiority. Paul once viewed these impressive accomplishments as advantages. Now he

sees them as “garbage,” a translation of the crude Greek word *skybala*, to emphasize the stark contrast between earthly achievements and the treasure of knowing Christ.³

Paul’s dramatic shift in perspective comes “for the sake of Christ.” His encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus reshaped his entire worldview, prompting a reevaluation of what truly matters. Paul looks back at how Christ changed him, and also forward to what he hopes to gain—deeper fellowship with Jesus. This relationship with Christ suffuses, empowers, and motivates all that Paul is and does, making everything else seem insignificant by comparison.

In Philippians 3:9, Paul transitions from active pursuit—“gaining Christ”—to passive reception—“being found in him.” This subtle shift emphasizes that Paul’s righteousness does not come from his own efforts to follow the law, but from a righteousness that is “from God on the basis of trust.”⁴ This righteousness is not a result of adhering to the Jewish law but is rooted in the faithfulness of Christ. The emphasis is on God’s work and the relationship Paul has with Christ, not on anything else.

Paul’s message is clear: the things the world values—whether heritage, religious observance, or personal achievements—are fleeting and ultimately insignificant in the light of the eternal value of knowing Christ. Our challenge is to adopt the same mindset as Paul.

Paul has undergone a radical transformation, where everything that once gave him a sense of identity and pride is now considered “loss.” Have we done the same?

Reflect

- In verse 8, Paul speaks of the “surpassing worth” of knowing Christ. How does this perspective challenge your current priorities, especially in areas like work, reputation, or personal goals? Thank God for the privilege of knowing Christ and ask for a deeper, more intimate relationship with him.

³ George H. Guthrie, *Philippians*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 239.

⁴ Guthrie, 240.

Day 4

What goals are you striving for — in your family, career, or personal growth? Maybe you're working hard to help your child who's struggling with an issue. Maybe you're striving for a promotion or to lose ten pounds. You've probably had to accept that there is a certain amount of suffering required to meet your goal, but it will be worth it.

The Apostle Paul knew that well.

Read

Philippians 3:10–16 (NIV)

¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Think About

In Philippians 3:10-16, Paul emphasizes his desire to know Christ more deeply, especially through experiencing both the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. What is striking is that Paul, even after many years of faith, continues to express a deep hunger to know Christ more intimately. This reveals the infinite depth of relationship that we can have with Jesus. Knowing Christ isn't a static state but a continual pursuit that leads us into a more profound experience of our Savior. Paul is not seeking mere knowledge about Jesus but the personal, relational knowledge that shapes every part of life.

Paul uses the language of striving and compares his pursuit to an athlete running a race. This metaphor captures the intensity and focus we need to fully live out the Christian life. Paul admits he has not "arrived" yet—he is still pressing forward. He encourages the Philippians to adopt this same mindset of perseverance, focusing on what lies ahead rather than dwelling on past successes or failures. Paul makes it clear that "true maturity...means knowing that you haven't arrived, and that you must still keep pressing on forwards toward the goal."⁵ The goal, ultimately, is resurrection life—a full experience of God's promised future.

Paul's desire to share in Christ's sufferings can sound daunting. However, this isn't a form of spiritual masochism. It is a recognition that knowing Christ involves sharing in both his glory and his pain. Suffering for Christ's sake becomes a form of intimacy, a way of understanding more deeply what Jesus endured for us. This perspective radically shifts how we view hardships—far from signs of abandonment, they are moments of deep connection with Christ.⁶ Imagine how it could help you in times of trouble to see hardship in this way.

The end goal, as Paul outlines, is resurrection from the dead, the ultimate hope for all believers. Paul's language in verse 11—"somehow, to attain to the resurrection"—is aspirational, not expressing doubt but rather emphasizing the extraordinary nature of this future hope. Paul's longing for resurrection shapes his present life, propelling him to strain forward to reach the finish line.

This passage challenges us to reframe our understanding of spiritual maturity. Instead of seeing it as an endpoint we reach, Paul shows us that maturity means continual striving, always seeking to know Christ more, and living in light of the future hope of resurrection. By focusing on the goal ahead, we resist the temptation to grow complacent. Paul's example encourages us to embrace a life of ongoing transformation, grounded in a deep relationship with Christ.

⁵ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 122–123.

⁶ Jeannine K. Brown, [*Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 11, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: IVP, 2022), 183.

Reflect

- Paul speaks about knowing Christ in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings. How does this help you in your spiritual journey, especially when it involves suffering or sacrifice? Ask God to help you understand the depth of his resurrection power in your life and to give you strength and courage.

Day 5

It's Friday! Take time today to slow down and reflect on what you're learning. Invite the Spirit to guide you to apply his Word.

Reflect on what you've learned

Read through [Philippians 3:1-16](#) once more.

What concerns does Paul express? Where does Paul want Christians to place their confidence?

What is Paul striving for? What matters most to Paul?

Respond

Our passage for this week reminds us once again of Paul's relentless pursuit of Christ. He viewed all his previous accomplishments, accolades, and religious achievements as "loss" compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. This passage invites us to consider what we're holding tightly to in our own lives and whether we are willing to count it all as loss for the sake of a deeper relationship with Jesus.

History offers us some wonderful examples of Christians who have followed Paul's example, including Lilas Trotter. I recently discovered Lilas' story and have been inspired by it! In the 19th century, it was challenging for women artists to get recognition, yet because of her exceptional talent and friendship with a renowned art critic, Lilas had the potential for great fame in the art world. Although she was drawn to pursue a life in art, in May 1879, she ultimately decided that she could not give herself "to painting and continue still to 'seek first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.'"

At first, she worked at her local YMCA, something society considered acceptable for a young lady from a wealthy family. But Lilas felt called to missionary work in non-Christian lands, and

eventually moved to North Africa, where she hoped to introduce Christ to Muslim communities. Trotter and her small team of women met with obstacles and adversity but were eventually able to make inroads with the women of the community by befriending their children. The work was hard and slow, but people came to know Christ because of their efforts. She never regretted her decision to center her life on what mattered most.

Lilas Trotter's decision to leave a comfortable upper-class life and potential fame as an artist reflects the same heart Paul expresses in Philippians: a willingness to forsake worldly gain for the sake of knowing Christ and sharing his love with others. Her life, like Paul's, was marked by a deep desire to "press on toward the goal" of Christ's calling, even when it meant suffering and sacrifice.

Consider what God may be calling you to surrender in order to know Christ more fully and advance his gospel in our world. Are there ambitions, accomplishments, or comforts that keep you from pursuing Jesus with all your heart? Let Paul's words inspire us to press on, not looking back, but fixing our eyes on the goal of knowing Christ, the source of true and lasting joy.

What's Your Next Step?

- Where are you tempted to place your confidence—in external achievements, your heritage, or your religious practices? How does Paul's emphasis on "rejoicing in the Lord" challenge you to shift your focus?
- Paul lists his impressive credentials but considers them "loss" compared to knowing Christ. Are there "gains" in your life that might distract you from fully knowing Christ? How can you reevaluate their true value? Pray for the grace to let go of worldly achievements or status symbols that hinder your pursuit of Christ, and for the ability to count all things as loss in comparison to knowing him.
- Paul presses forward toward the goal of knowing Christ fully. What does it look like for you to "press on" in your spiritual journey? What habits do you need to cultivate? Are there things in your past that are weighing you down? Do you need support of accountability from trusted friends? Is there an area where God is calling you to serve? Pray through your answers and invite the Spirit to guide you.