



GOALS

As students experience Philippians 3, they will:

- see that God cannot use us if we're wrapped up in our own accomplishments (spiritual or otherwise).
- grapple with the fact that what we want to do for God can actually keep us from experiencing what He wants to do in and for us.
- evaluate whether or not they're pursuing Christ with a passion similar to Paul's.

MATERIALS: Group

- Colored pencils (at least three colors per student)
- Whiteboard
- Optional: A prize for the student who correctly answers the "Bonus" review question.

MATERIALS: Each Student

- A Bible
- A pen
- Student pages for Session 6
- Scripture sheet for Philippians 3

SESSION INTRO

Prayer

When your group has gathered, spend a few minutes in prayer. Ask that the freshness of God's Spirit replace the staleness of the day and its concerns. Remind the group that God has something to say to them in every verse of Scripture; pray that their hearts will be soft to what He wants to show them in this session.

Review

Help your students stay connected to the big themes of Philippians by asking:

From our last session, what were the two big instructions we saw in Philippians 2?

Did your mind go to Philippians 2:14 when you found yourself complaining or arguing this past week? How did this impact what you said or did?

Bonus Question: According to the Scriptures we looked at last time, what are at least two good things that happen when God's people obey His Word?

Open

Begin by asking the group to brainstorm on the following question:

What are some things you know of that don't mix—or that even repel each other?

Oil and water; fire and ice/water; like charges of a magnet; some animals, like cats and dogs; certain people (No naming names! Stick with personality types here.)

Tell the group that they're going to uncover a spiritual principle in Philippians 3 that's a lot like oil and water, in that it deals with two things that are completely incompatible.

DIGGING IN

Have your group members read Philippians 3:1–11 a couple of times, using their Scripture sheets. As they read, they should use three different colors or symbols to mark:

1. Every mention of Paul (including pronouns like “I” and “my”).
2. Every mention of Christ (again, the pronoun thing).
3. Any warning Paul gives (underline this).

Since they’ll need to read the passage more than once, this will take some time. When most have finished (it’s okay if not all have), ask them to tell you the warning Paul gave. Write this at the top of the board.

Warning: *Watch out for those dogs (evildoers, mutilators of the flesh)!*

Naturally, you’ll want to ask the group whether Paul was talking about real dogs here (the four-legged kind). Encourage them to look a little closer at verses 2–3 to see what kind of people Paul was referring to. If the right answer doesn’t emerge, you’ll need to explain these people and what they were about:

The “mutilators of the flesh” were Jewish/Christian people who insisted that new believers in Christ had to be circumcised as Jews before they could become Christians. Circumcision is a surgical procedure that was required of Jewish males by Old Testament law.

Ask the group:

Judging by the words he used, how do you think Paul felt about these people?

-He couldn’t stand what they were doing. He thought they were evil, mutilators of people, and he compared them with dogs.

Can you tell why?

-They were putting confidence in the flesh (i.e., putting their confidence in a physical act to prove how “spiritual” they were.)

What’s so wrong with that? Why would Paul call that evil?

-Evidently, God doesn’t want us to put confidence in the flesh!

What else did Paul say about putting confidence in the flesh?

-He said that if anyone could put confidence in the flesh, he could have! But he didn’t.

Now divide the board into two columns. Write “Confidence in the Flesh” at the top of the left column and “Gaining Christ” at the top of the right column. Ask the students to look at what they marked about Paul on their Scripture sheets, and have them tell you what they learn about Paul’s spiritual history. These are the things Paul could have been confident (smug) about. Record their observations in the “flesh” column on the board and invite students to note these in the space provided on their journal pages.

Confidence in the Flesh:

Paul was:

-circumcised on the eighth day (v. 5)

-an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin (v. 5)

-a Hebrew of Hebrews (v. 5)

-a member of the strictest sect, an elite group called the Pharisees, who obeyed the law perfectly (v. 5)

-super-zealous (proved it by persecuting Christians) (v. 6)

-faultless in his legalistic righteousness—i.e., he never blew it spiritually! (v. 6)

After the facts of the passage are on the board, ask the group:

So what can you conclude about Paul’s background?

-He had great bloodlines and a prominent family history.

- He had impressive accomplishments.
- He had good reason to boast.
- He was probably on track to becoming a major Jewish leader.

But what did Paul conclude about his spiritual background? (Point them back to verses 7–8.)

He considered it all “rubbish.” (You’ll want to explain that the Greek word translated “rubbish” means “dung” or “manure.”)

Why in the world would Paul call all his accomplishments “manure”?

He was looking for something better—namely, He wanted to “gain Christ.”

So what does it mean to “gain Christ”? Have your students look again at their marked Scripture sheets, specifically at the places where they marked Christ in verses 8–11. Paul told about several ways for us to “gain” Christ. Ask your students to find these ways and tell them to you. Record these in the right-hand column on the board. Your students should also write these in the space provided on their journal pages. The information will look something like this:

Gaining Christ:

- to be found in Him with a righteousness from God by faith (not from the law) (v. 9)
- to know Christ (v. 10) and...
 - the power of His resurrection
 - the fellowship of sharing in His suffering
 - becoming like Him in His death
 - to somehow attain the resurrection from the dead

By now, you should have two sets of information in the columns on the board. Looking at these columns, discuss the following as a group:

These two columns describe two different ways of trying to have a relationship with God. What differences do you see?

- The first column deals with Paul trying to “get righteous” on his own. The second column deals with becoming righteous by getting closer to Christ.
- The first column focuses on Paul. The second column focuses on Jesus.
- The first column can make Paul egotistical—a spiritual snob. The second column can make Paul humble.

Paul said that in order to gain Christ, he had to consider his personal accomplishments as rubbish (dung)! Clearly, boasting in your own accomplishments and gaining Christ are incompatible, like oil and water. In what ways are the things in these two columns NOT compatible?

- If people can get righteous on their own, then they don’t need Christ!
- If you’re boasting in yourself, then you’re probably not boasting in what Jesus did for you.

TAKING IT INWARD—WHAT ARE YOU RELYING ON?

Christians today don’t have to deal with the issue of observing Jewish law (circumcision) to achieve righteousness. But we have other ways of putting confidence in our flesh! Ask your group to list, just as Paul did, reasons why they could put confidence in their flesh. Space is provided for this on their journal pages. Remind them that in this case, “flesh” refers to their personal background, intelligence, talents, accomplishments, and possessions—anything that might make them self-sufficient or inclined to boast in themselves, not Christ. You may need to give an example or two from your Prep It.

After a few minutes, ask volunteers to share some of the reasons why they could put confidence in the flesh. Then discuss the following:

- Based on what Paul said, what do we risk missing out on when we rely on our own accomplishments to get to God?**
- We miss the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ!

Think about us as a group. Are there ways in which we’re putting confidence in the flesh as we try to minister to our surroundings?

Some examples:

- We're proud of our size, our programs, our events, our facilities.
- We know we can attract a crowd, but is the crowd attracted to us or to Christ?
- We may be more interested in making sure people have fun rather than making sure people are introduced to Christ.
- We have a smooth-running program; it's easy to forget to depend on prayer.

What do we need to do, as individuals and as a group, to rely less on ourselves and more on Christ?

DIGGING DEEPER

Back to Philippians 3! Share with your students that they're not the only ones who struggle with these things. In the next set of verses, they'll see that Paul wasn't perfect; in fact, he struggled too. Ask your group members to read Philippians 3:12–14 using their Scripture sheets. As they read, they should continue using a special color or symbol to mark every mention of Paul (including pronouns like "I" and "my").

When they've finished, ask them to look at what they marked, and tell you what they learned about Paul's spiritual life. Record their observations on the board.

Paul's Spiritual Life:

- He hasn't already attained "all this." (v. 12)
- He hasn't been made perfect. (v. 12)
- He's pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of him. (v. 12)
- He doesn't consider himself yet to have taken hold of it. (v. 13)
- He's forgetting the past and "straining" toward the future. (v. 13)
- He presses on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called him. (v. 14)

TAKING IT INWARD—PURSUING CHRIST

In your discussion of these verses, be sure to elicit what Paul meant by "all this" in verse 12. "All this" likely refers to the list of things Paul said he wanted to know in verses 10 and 11. Though he admits he hasn't yet attained these things, Paul leaves no doubt about his life's pursuit!

Ask your students to think for a moment about their own quest to know Christ. Printed on their journal pages (and on the following page) are some phrases that can describe this; Paul's phrases are included. Have them circle the phrases that best describe how they're pursuing Christ right now.

<i>Casually observing</i>	<i>Committing-failing, committing-failing</i>
<i>Mildly involved</i>	<i>Pressing on</i>
<i>Apathetic</i>	<i>Straining toward</i>
<i>Going through the motions</i>	<i>Taking hold</i>
<i>Busy</i>	

Ask any volunteers to share their responses, then discuss these questions:

In having a close relationship with Christ, why is it important to "forget what's behind"?

Do you think remembering what's behind might keep you from going forward with God? If so, how?

What does it mean to "strain" toward what's ahead? What level of energy or commitment is involved?

If you were to "strain" toward the things God has in store for you, what are some things you'd be doing?

If you find yourself in that "casual observer" category, what needs to change in order for you to become someone who "presses toward the goal to win the prize"?

PUTTING INTO PRACTICE

Share with the group the prayer you learned in your Prep It:

Less of me, more of You. . . none of me, all of You.

In closing, give students a few minutes to pray this prayer. On their journal pages, there is space (under “Putting Into Practice”) for them to jot ways in which they can make less of themselves and more of Jesus in their daily lives. After they’ve made a few notes, they can pray silently about these specific things—or practice saying the prayer above as a “breath” prayer (mentally repeating the phrases as follows: “Less of me” [exhale], “more of You” [inhale], “none of me” [exhale], “all of You” [inhale]). Praying this way will help them make humility a natural part of their lives—as natural as breathing.

Finally, have students think about what they’ve learned in this session about Jesus Christ. As always, they should boil their thoughts down to a brief phrase— something that will help them remember this session in Philippians. Have them record this in the space under “What I Learned about Following Christ.”