



### SETTING THE HEART

It must come naturally for us humans to rely on our own abilities and accomplishments rather than leaning on the power and presence of God. After all, so much of Scripture is devoted to helping us overcome this tendency. Often, we define our relationships with God in terms of our own experiences, abilities, and successes. We may even live spiritually disciplined lives for God—but as we'll see in Philippians 3, our efforts don't even begin to stack up with what God has done for us.

Ask the Holy Spirit to illumine the Scriptures as you study Philippians 3. Read the passage below, and allow the Lord to begin teaching you one of His favorite principles: as we decrease, He can increase!

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.*

—Galatians 6:14–16

### DIGGING IN

Paul had a lot to boast about—his natural Roman citizenship, his fast-track career in Judaism (he'd climbed much higher in the Jewish hierarchy than his peers), his “one-on-one with Christ” conversion experience, even his world travels. You'd be hard pressed to win an “I can top that” competition with Paul on any subject!

But in Philippians 3, Paul calls upon his many accomplishments to illustrate a key principle of the Christian faith. Read Philippians 3:1–11 using your Scripture sheets. As you read, do the following

- 1. Use one color to mark every mention of Paul, including pronouns like “I,” “we,” and “my.”**
- 2. Use another color to mark (perhaps with a cross) every mention of Jesus Christ.**

Now read the passage a second time, this time underlining any warnings from Paul. When you've finished, record Paul's warning on the following page.

**Warning:**

Jesus' death and resurrection ushered in a new era for those who desired a relationship with God. Before Jesus, a relationship with God was maintained by keeping the Law—a set of rigid external rules. But after Jesus, this relationship was (and is!) maintained through grace by faith in Christ—internal principles, written on the heart. Unfortunately, this transition from Law to grace was and is still difficult for God's people to grasp. How often we tend to gravitate toward external rules and accomplishments in order to define our relationship with Him. Let's spend a few moments looking at some additional teaching from Paul on this subject.

	<b>Instructions/Teaching</b>	<b>Warning</b>
<b>Galatians 5:3–6</b>		
<b>1 Corinthians 1:26–31</b>		

The first century (when Paul was writing) was a period of transition, in which believers in God were learning to turn from the old practice to the new. But some—especially certain Jewish Christians known as Judaizers—were slow to come around. The Judaizers taught that every new Gentile Christian needed to become a Jew first (through circumcision and observance of Jewish Law), before he could become a “complete” Christian.

This teaching was an abomination to grace and nullified the works of Jesus Christ! Reread Paul's warning in Philippians 3:2 (you recorded it at the top of this page). Do you notice Paul's strong language? Think for a moment about Paul's warning. Then rewrite it in your own words below.

In his letter to the Philippians, not wanting his readers to make the mistake of putting confidence in their human qualifications, Paul used the Jewish rite of circumcision to illustrate how believers foolishly try to use fleshly accomplishments to score points with God. Paul knew what a trap this could be. After all, he had more human qualifications than just about anyone!

Read over your Scripture sheet, looking for your marked references to Paul. List below all of Paul's potential qualifications in the flesh.

### **Paul's Fleshly Qualifications:**

Do you get the sense that Paul was being groomed for a brilliant career as an important Pharisee? Given his rapid rise through the ranks, Paul may have been on track to replace the great Gamaliel (see Acts 5:34 and Acts 22:3–5). As a Jew, his life was set! Yet he walked away from these accomplishments, considering them the antithesis of what a relationship with Christ is all about!

Look back over the references to Christ that you marked in Philippians 3:8–11. List below all the details that could describe what it means to “gain Christ.”

### **Gaining Christ:**

#### **TAKING IT INWARD**

If you haven't picked up on it yet, Paul is making several contrasts in this passage:  *Holding on to fleshly accomplishments versus gaining Christ. Fake righteousness versus true righteousness. Self-sufficiency versus the grace of God.*

Like oil and water, self-sufficiency and grace don't mix. In fact, any hint of self-sufficiency nullifies the work of grace. It's an all-or-nothing transaction. Do you really want to know Christ, as Paul did? Do you really desire a true righteousness that comes from God? Then you have to put aside your fleshly qualifications. Read Philippians 3:7–11 again, and you'll see how emphatically Paul makes this point.

For a minute, however, let's play Paul's game. If you were to give the reasons why you too could put confidence in your flesh, what would you list? Take a moment to write these reasons, including your family heritage, education, job experience, talents, strengths, abilities, positions of church leadership, and so forth.

### **Reasons I Could Put Confidence in the Flesh:**

**In what ways or to what extent do these things define your relationship with God?**

**What is jeopardized in your relationship with Christ when you rely—even slightly—on your flesh? (Refer back to your list under "Gaining Christ.")**

**To what extent do you find yourself relying on your flesh in ministry, whether you're a volunteer, a church staff member, or a student?**

**According to Scripture, what do you risk when you rely—even slightly—on your flesh in ministry?**

### **CROSS CHECKING**

Paul called his fleshly achievements "rubbish"—using one of the most colorful words in the Greek language: *skubalon*. First-century Greeks used this word to refer to foul-smelling street garbage, even excrement! The Bible translators were being polite when they used the word "rubbish"; dung would be more accurate. Paul's emphatic language makes it clear that believers can attain righteousness only through Christ—not through their works, which in comparison, amount to a pile of manure.

Let's follow Paul's lead and look at a couple of other occasions when he taught on this subject. You won't be covering these verses in the group session, but you may want to share your findings when you explain Paul's use of the word "rubbish." Be sure to check the context of these passages, then record your findings beneath the references.

**Romans 9:30–10:4**

**Galatians 5:1–6**

## DIGGING DEEPER

Paul continues on the theme of gaining Christ in Philippians 3:12–14. Read these verses using your Scripture sheets and mark every reference to Paul (don't forget the pronouns). Then list below everything you learn about Paul's spiritual life at this point in time.

### Paul's Spiritual Life:

Take another look at the phrase "all this" in verse 12. What is Paul referring to?

## TAKING IT INWARD

Paul candidly states that he hasn't attained "all this"—meaning all the wonderful things he's just described in verses 8–11. Where are you in the process with regard to "all this"? Take a few moments to pray about the information you've uncovered in Philippians 3. Use the following questions as a guide, and journal your prayers in the spaces provided.

**What is God asking me to do about my reliance on or confidence in the flesh?**

**What adjustments do I need to make in order to realize "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ through a righteousness from God that comes by faith"?**

Paul used phrases like "press on," "take hold," and "straining toward" to describe his passionate pursuit of "all this." Look at the list of descriptions below. Circle any that match your pursuit of all that life in Christ has to offer.

Casually observing

Committing-failing, committing-failing

Mildly involved

Pressing on

Apathetic

Straining toward

Going through the motions

Taking hold

Busy

Often our identities—even our spiritual identities—are wrapped up in our accomplishments. Look back at the list of reasons why you could put confidence in your flesh. If God removed from your life everything on that list—He has ways of doing that!—would you still have spiritual fulfillment? Would you be willing to walk away from all these things for the sake of gaining Christ? Be honest with Him. . . He already knows your heart.

### **PUTTING INTO PRACTICE**

God can never do His best work when our flesh (human pride, accomplishment, and self-sufficiency) is in the way. As we decrease, He increases (see John 3:30). You may want to pray this prayer every day between now and your session: *Less of me, more of You. None of me, all of You.* Pray that your group will be convicted by this fundamental truth. Before you close this book, be sure to select and review your Lead It Guide online at [www.inword.org](http://www.inword.org). Be sure to allow time for printing the guide and student pages.



### Philippians 3

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.
- <sup>3</sup> 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—

- <sup>4</sup> though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
- <sup>5</sup> 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;
- <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.
- <sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
- <sup>8</sup> 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
- <sup>9</sup> 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.
- <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,
- <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.
- <sup>12</sup> 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.
- <sup>13</sup> 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,
- <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
- <sup>15</sup> 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.
- <sup>16</sup> Only let us live up to what we have already attained.
- <sup>17</sup> Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.
- <sup>18</sup> For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.
- <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.
- <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,
- <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.