

* The Heights Baptist Church * Series: Change *
* Topic: Paul: A Change of Confidence * Philippians 3 * 1/12/25 *

MAIN POINT

When Paul met Jesus, his life completely changed. One of the big changes was in where Paul placed his confidence. As Christians, our confidence should no longer be based on ourselves or in our circumstances. Our confidence now comes from Christ.

INTRODUCTION

In what things do people in America place their confidence? How does this compare to where Christians place their confidence? How should this affect how we live our lives as Christians?

Our confidence as Christians should be in Christ, not in ourselves or our circumstances. And our highest priorities should no longer be focused on improving our circumstances or status in life. It now needs to be to know Christ better and make disciples of all nations.

Note to study leader: Last week's lesson introduced the current sermon series titled "Change." We started by looking at how God supernaturally intervened in Paul's life to lead him to Christ. Today's lesson continues by looking at how Christ affected where Paul placed his confidence in life. We will be considering this by looking at a chapter from the book of Philippians. Paul wrote this letter while under house arrest around AD 60. He didn't write this book due to a crisis going on in the church, but rather to express his love and appreciation for this church and give them further guidance as Christians.

UNDERSTANDING

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ PHILIPPIANS 1:12-13 AND 3:1-6

Paul was in chains when he wrote this letter (Philippians 1:13). How would Paul's own personal circumstances support his charge to the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord"?

Who were the Philippian believers warned to look out for? Based on verse 1, why is it important to be on the lookout for these kinds of people?

Paul was referring specifically to the Judaizers here, who taught that one must obey the Law of Moses—including circumcision—to be saved. Paul called them dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of the flesh. Interestingly, Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs because dogs were considered unclean animals.

What would be some modern-day parallels to the Judaizers at the time of Paul?

How much confidence does Paul say we should have in our own flesh? Why?

What are some things Paul warned the Philippians about that could steal their joy in the Lord?

Paul considered his relationship with Jesus Christ to be the source of his meaning in life. That's why he could rejoice while sitting in a prison cell! We too must be rejoicing in the Lord.

What does it mean to "boast in Christ Jesus", rather than put confidence in ourselves?

Paul describes Christians as those who worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. We cannot boast in our good works because our salvation is a gift from God that was accomplished totally by Jesus Christ. And He is where we should place our boasting and confidence.

What does Paul list about things he had previously placed his confidence in (vv. 4-6)?

Paul said, “If anyone else thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” But he now realized these were useless in gaining righteousness before God.

Can good things you have accomplished while serving Christ hinder your relationship with God?

Focusing our ourselves rather than Christ actually hinders our walk with Him.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ PHILIPPIANS 3:7-14

Why do you think coming to know Christ so radically changed where Paul received his confidence?

Paul refers to His past achievements as loss. He considers them “filth” (v. 8). He now had a righteousness that He could be confident in because it was not a righteousness of His own.

What do these verses tell us about how the gospel should radically change where we are to find our confidence as Christians?

What was Paul’s greatest desire? How can we apply this?

From that description, what pursuits are you emphasizing in your life that are actually “dung”?

As a Pharisee, Paul’s past accomplishments and pedigree were a source of boasting. As a Christian, however, he realized these things are completely worthless in gaining a good standing before God.

It may not be possible to completely forget our pasts. In what sense does God want us to “forget” our past actions, good and bad?

“Forget” in the Bible doesn’t mean we get complete amnesia about our pasts. This is clear since Paul was able to recount his past accomplishments to the Philippian believers. To forget means “to no longer be influenced, affected, or controlled by” our pasts. We are to live confidently in God, knowing that our sins are forgiven, and that God accepts us based entirely on His grace, not on our works, good or bad.

What five things does Paul say he wants in verse 10? What do these things reveal about where Paul placed his confidence in as a Christian?

Paul wants 1) To know Christ (Phil. 3:8). 2) To know the power of Christ’s resurrection (Eph. 1:19-20). 3) To participate in Christ’s sufferings (Phil. 1:29-30). 4) To become like Christ in His death (Gal. 2:20). 5) To attain to the resurrection of the dead (1 Peter 1:8-9)

Why do you think Paul includes being persecuted as a Christian in this list?

Paul now considers it an honor to be allowed to participate in suffering for Christ. This shows us how completely the source of Paul’s confidence had changed as a Christian.

Paul mentioned both “forgetting” and “reaching forward.” How do these two work together?

We can let go of the past when it’s forgiven in Christ. Paul had persecuted Christians—some even to death (see Acts 22:4-5). But he was forgiven. He accepted that his salvation was fully based on what Christ had done for him, and also that in Christ, he was completely forgiven. But not only that, we are to eagerly look forward to the return of Christ, and also to grow in Christlikeness in the present. Sanctification involves growing in Christlikeness. Each day as we follow Jesus, we have the opportunity to become more and more like Him—a process that will reach its completion when Christ appears.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ PHILIPPIANS 3:15–4:1

What perspective is Paul referring to in verse 15?

Paul points out that spiritually mature believers will recognize that we can't earn our good standing before God, and that we haven't had already arrived at a desired level of maturity in our walk with Christ.

In these verses, Paul again refers to people who are not looking to Christ for their confidence in life. How are the people he mentions in verses 18 and 19 similar to the people described earlier in verses 2-3, and how do they appear to be different?

Both of these groups of people are not placing their confidence in Christ. But rather than by trying to earn righteousness by works, this second group appears to be trying to find fulfillment in life by chasing sin.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ ACTS 17:11 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 11:1

Considering these verses, and Philippians 3:17, why is it so important is it for us to surround ourselves with growing Christians that we can learn from and imitate?

Here we see the importance of having other Christians help us in our walk with Christ. Sadly, there are many people who don't live with the perspective presented in Philippians chapter 3.

ASK VOLUNTEERS TO READ PROVERBS 13:20 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 15:33

What caution should we have in place as we look to mature Christians to imitate?

Any person other than Christ has the potential to let us down. Our ultimate confidence needs to come from Christ, not from any other person.

What does the statement that “our citizenship is in heaven” mean? How should this impact our life?

As we grow in spiritual maturity, we realize that this world is not our home—and that we won't reach our full maturity until we reach heaven. We belong to Christ. Our values and lives as Christians should point to heaven. Our lives here on earth should point others to Christ.

APPLICATION

What accomplishments and/or failures do you need to forget to focus on Jesus? How can doing so help you better serve Him?

Do you view sharing in Christ's sufferings as something God grants to us rather than something awful that we must avoid at all costs? What can we do to help gain this perspective?

How can you keep your confidence in your relationship with Christ and your sure hope in heaven at the forefront of your mind this week?

PRAYER

Pray that God would help us not to define ourselves by our past failures or successes. Ask God to help us boast in Christ in all that we do so that we might live victoriously for His kingdom in the present. Thank Him for the joy that comes in the pursuit of knowing Him more. Ask Him to help you be aware of religious people whose attitudes and actions threaten to steal your joy in Christ and help us not to place worldly pleasures ahead of Him. Finally, pray that He would help us live worthy of our destiny in Him.

COMMENTARY

Philippians 3

3:1. Paul marked a transition point in his letter with a term that can mean “finally” but often indicates something like “well, then, or furthermore” (v. 1). He is only halfway through his letter at this point. In spite of Paul’s difficult circumstances, his relationship with Christ provided him with joy. He encourages us to “rejoice in the Lord.” This spirit or attitude of joy permeates this entire letter. Joy comes, however, only as one lives in the Lord. He is joy’s only source.

3:2-3. As a father protects his children, Paul wanted to keep his spiritual children from harm (v. 2). He warned them in strong language of opponents who would tempt them to false doctrine. These men were unclean “dogs,” not qualified to enter into spiritual worship. A group of Jews in Paul’s day attempted to distort the gospel by adding the requirement of circumcision plus faith in Christ as necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1). Their false way of salvation was evil, as it could cause great confusion to the true message of Christ. They misunderstood the teachings of the Old Testament on circumcision and the Christian gospel of salvation by grace through faith. They wanted to preserve the Jewish heritage at any cost.

In disagreement with the teachings of his opponents, Paul took over their claims as belonging to the church and not to the Jews (v. 3). The opponents claimed to be the true Israel, circumcised in the flesh, being the truly spiritual ones, and glorying in their worship and goodness as measured by obedience to the law. Paul turned the tables. Believers in Christ are the true circumcision (Rom. 9:24-26; Gal. 6:16), having their hearts circumcised. Christians put no confidence in the flesh, neither in the ritual of circumcision, nor in the practice of obeying a law. This stands radically opposed to the false teachers who said Gentiles had to be circumcised to be acceptable to God. The Philippians and modern readers must make the choice—glory in Christ or in human religious achievement. Genuine believers have their complete hope or confidence in Christ’s finished work on our behalf on the cross rather than anything done by them for God or in God’s name. Trusting in anyone or anything besides the true Messiah is foolishness.

3:4-6. If anyone had bragging rights about their status and achievement, Paul did (vv. 4-6), but Jesus showed him that just being Jewish did not make him righteous before God.

3:7-8. While these credentials and accomplishments are impressive, Paul placed no “stock” or confidence in them (vv. 7-8). His relationship with Christ was far superior to his Jewish background. The things of the world—all human accomplishments—are viewed as rubbish or garbage in comparison to gaining Christ. Paul’s focus changed completely. No longer did personal religious ritual and obedient religious acts occupy center stage. All eyes were on Christ and on him alone.

3:9-10. Paul wanted to know Christ in the sense of experiencing an ever-deepening relationship with Him. In that intimate relationship, Paul wanted to have the power of His resurrection. He wanted his life and service infused with the same power that raised Christ from the dead. Resurrection power would enable him (and all believers) to be victorious over sin, to grow spiritually, and to minister effectively. In union with Christ, Paul wanted to experience the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul viewed his hardships as Christ’s emissary to be an extension of Christ’s sufferings; he readily shared those sufferings, albeit to a lesser degree than his Lord. Part of Paul’s goal was to be conformed to Christ’s death. As did Jesus (see 2:7), Paul wanted to pour himself out in service to others. Paul wanted the same kind of obedience, selflessness, and self-sacrifice Christ demonstrated. This attitude involved Paul’s death to sin and self in order to live for God and others.

3:11. Paul was not expressing doubt that he would experience believers' resurrection from among the dead. Rather, his words expressed humility. They also may have reflected his uncertainty about his trial's outcome. He might die, or he might be allowed to live. Either way, sooner or later, he would experience resurrection to eternal life. Continually developing our relationship with Christ reflects the reality of heaven and is one of the highest goals we can have. Thus deepening our relationship with Him is to be a daily priority.

3:12. Paul's description of his desires pointed forward to a goal. Not yet mature, he was still very much in the race of the Christian life. The perfection he would have at the future resurrection was not yet attained. He still had to deal with what in Romans 7 he calls "the flesh," an innate pull to sin. He had to deal with his sinful body and was only too aware of the need for further spiritual growth. He purposes to press on as he had not attained the intense personal knowledge of Christ that he desired and had not become all that Christ wanted him to be. Paul always held God up as the source of every part of the salvation experience.

3:13. Paul underlines his denial of personal power or attainment and his single-minded focus. To describe that focus, he employs the image of a runner in a race who hopes to win the prize. He cannot look back. He cannot cloud his mind with past memories. He strains every muscle in his body to achieve forward motion, keeping his eyes on the finish line. Paul forgets the guilt of persecuting the church. He forgets the pain of prison and physical punishment. He forgets the frustration of disobedient church members and false teachers. He looks ahead to see the resurrection, where he will meet Jesus, face to face.

3:14. With this focus he pursues his goal intently (v. 14). His goal is to win the prize for which God had called him in Christ Jesus. He wants to hear God call his name and summon him to the victory stand, where he will meet Jesus face to face and know Him in perfect intimacy. Earthly prizes do not last. Eternal prizes do. The goal can never be realized on earth. It is a goal that pulls us heavenward. Note 1 Corinthians 9:25: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." While Paul was not spiritually where he thought he would ultimately be, he intended not to be distracted by anything as he pursued his goal (Heb. 12:1-2). Both discipline and determination are required to accomplish this objective.

3:15-16. Paul believed that all spiritually mature Christians would agree with or would share his philosophy toward life (v. 15). "Mature" translates the same Greek term as did "perfect" in verse 12. Paul pointed to a difference of opinion as to the meaning of perfection. His opponents thought they had obeyed the law and achieved perfection in this life. Paul knew he would never obtain perfection. The only persons who could claim to be part of the "perfect ones" were those who knew that running the race and seeking the goal was the only mark of perfection possible on earth. If they thought differently, Paul was confident God could cause them to change their minds, since Paul's human arguments could not. Paul was content to shed some light on the subject.

3:17. Paul urged his brothers in Christ to join in imitating him. He was not bragging or holding himself up as the perfect model; yet he was the best example of Christ's follower they had. He urged the Philippian believers to fix their attention on believers who were following his example. The Philippian Christians were to pattern their lifestyles after Paul and other believers who imitated him—all of whom were following Christ's model.

3:18-19. With deep emotion, Paul warned against enemies of the cross of Christ. Paul described these enemies as unbelievers and wept because of their tragic condition and their negative effect on others in the church. They were enemies of the cross because their lifestyles contradicted their professed commitment to Christ. Paul declared that these pseudo-Christians were headed for destruction—that is, eternal separation from God. Though they professed to worship God, they had made an idol of their stomach, a term for the wide range of their sensual (bodily) appetites. Their self-indulgence contrasted sharply to Christ's sacrificial self-giving. The professing Christians were focused on earthly (material) things. The Greek term translated as "focused on" means "to set the mind on," or "to be intent on," and conveys continuous action. They consistently pursued material things as their priority.

3:20. In contrast, genuine believers' citizenship is in heaven. Paul maintained that Christians were (and are) members of two realms. They were citizens of the Roman Empire and should be exemplary citizens. More important, they were citizens of God's kingdom and owed their primary loyalty to God. Their heavenly citizenship governed their earthly lives. Paul emphasized the creative tension in which believers lived: they eagerly awaited the return of Christ their Savior. Paul's emphasis may have been on the fulfillment or culmination of Christians' salvation at that time or their being delivered from persecution.

3:21. Christ has supernatural power to subject everything to Himself. He is sovereign. With such unlimited effective energy, Christ will transform believers' bodies when He returns. The Greek word translated transform has the idea of changing something so it conforms to something else. The body of our humble condition is the physical body. The phrase His glorious body refers to the Lord's spiritual or resurrection body appropriate for eternity. Christ will change believers' bodies to be like His, not merely in external appearance but also in essential nature. Believers will reach full maturity.