

Philippians 3 • The Spiritual Mind

Introduction

One of the recurring words used in this chapter is “things”. The problem is that Christians too often get wrapped up in “things” to the point that it affects their walk in Christ, lacking the spiritual mind of a dedicated believer. Paul here describes the spiritual mind which thinks God’s thoughts and is set upon God’s goals, something he also wrote about in Romans 8:1-17. A hallmark of Christian maturity is a steady progression to no longer thinking and acting according to the standards of the world but being reshaped according to God’s Word and ways.

¹Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; ³for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, ⁴although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh.

If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

⁷But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

[Read v.1-11]

Q: What do the false teachers and Paul’s own resume as a Pharisee both have in common?

A: They are both a form of religion apart from Christ, a vain and false effort to save man.

Q: What false religion is Paul specifically addressing? Is it any and every false religion?

A: In this particular case Paul specifies “*the false circumcision*” versus “*the true circumcision*”. He is narrowly focused on false Judaism which continues in the Law apart from Christ, versus true Judaism now fulfilled and going forward in Christ.

Q: Why would it be especially powerful that Paul calls such people “dogs”?

A: This was the derisive term of the day which Judaism used to describe Gentiles, people considered to be the worst kind of unbeliever. To equate believers who emphasized circumcision and the keeping of Torah to “dogs” is one of the strongest ways possible of describing how corrupt and far afield they are from the truth.

Q: What is Paul expressing in the repeated use of terms relating to “gain” and “loss”?

A: To hold on to the Law and circumcision is to lose out on Christ; to hold on to Christ is to gain what can never be accomplished by the Law and circumcision alone. It is the difference between those who “*put confidence in the flesh*” vs. those who “*worship in the Spirit...and put no confidence in the flesh*” (v.4), or as Jim Elliot put it, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose”.

Application: Have you known someone or personally struggled with resolving a past history of being raised in a religion or denomination? Have you/they attempted to stay true to those traditions which came into conflict with a new life in Christ? Paul is an example of those of us who struggle not with a background that never knew God, but those with religious upbringings not in complete true alignment with Christ.

Q: How would you characterize Paul’s religion before coming to Christ?

A: He had not merely exceeded the accomplishments of others, but by the standards of the day was the best of the best by the measure of both his personal commitment and achievements according to their interpretation of the Law.

Q: How did Paul characterize these religious accomplishments after coming into a personal relationship with Christ?

A: “...those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ...and count them but rubbish...” (v.8)

Application: Just as we have to die to the old self and assume the crucified life of a new creation in Christ, so our old works must die and be discarded in favor of new ones in Christ.

Q: What is the contrast presented in v.6 & 9 which define the core issue?

A: "...the righteousness which is in the Law..." (v.6) and "...the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith..." (v.9) It is the difference between being religious enough to enter the synagogue, which falls far short of being righteous enough to get into heaven. The former is works-based, the latter based on the working of God's grace.

Q: How does Paul differentiate the superior working of faith in Christ vs. religion?

A: "...the power of the resurrection..." (v.10) It is literally the difference between life and death, the power of salvation through Christ able to do what mere religion cannot, to raise from death to life. By "being conformed to His death" Believers in Christ "attain to the resurrection of the dead".

Application: The spiritual mind deals with each Christian's past and how it is resolved through the biblical working of salvation to accomplish through God's grace in Christ what can never be accomplished by religion alone.

[Read v.12-16]

Q: How is Paul, in figure, presenting a different picture of himself in this section from the previous?

A: In the last section he was a kind of "spiritual accountant" calculating his losses and gains; in this section he is a kind of athlete striving to complete the race. The first is an expression of looking at the past, the second focusing on the present.

Q: How would a competitor in ancient Olympic games in figure be representative of a Christian?

A: Participants were required to be a citizen of the nation they represented and had to be free, not a slave. Likewise while the unsaved sinner is a slave, the Christian set free by Christ and is a citizen of heaven (see v.20). This theme is one of Paul's most used throughout all of his writings. (1 Co. 9:25-27; 1 Th. 2:19-20; Heb. 12:1-3; 2 Ti. 2:5)

Q: What is the first requirement Paul establishes for being able to reach the goal God has set for us?

A: By first declaring, "Not that I have already obtained in or have already become perfect", (v.12) he sets the example that we must be honestly and realistically assess our spiritual condition. A competitor has to realistically know what they are good at and what still needs work in order to prepare and train to improve and win.

Q: What is the next requirement established in v.13-14?

A: "...forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward I press on toward the goal..." We must keep our focus of faith ahead on Christ and not returning to the past. A race cannot be won by looking backward.

But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

— Luke 9:62

¹²Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ¹⁶however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Q: What was so important about an ancient athlete pursuing and maintaining standards?

A: If an athlete infringed the rules, although they would still be a citizen of their country, they were disqualified from winning the prize. As Paul told Timothy, “Also, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules”. (2 Ti. 2:5). Consider the biblical examples of those who may not have lost their salvation, but seem to have lost their rewards: Lot (Gen. 19), Samson (Jud. 16), Saul (1 Sam. 28, 31), or Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5).

Application: *The spiritual mind deals with each Christian’s present and how it is dealt with through the biblical working of sanctification in the forsaking of the goals of this world in pursuit of “the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (v.14)*

¹⁷Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. ¹⁸For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, ¹⁹whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. ²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

[Read v.17-21]

Q: Who is Paul contrasting in these verses?

A: Those who walk “according to the pattern” (v.17) of Christ vs. those who walk according to “earthly things”. (v.19)

Point: *Paul is not talking about the saved vs. the unsaved, but those who profess to be Christians who live like a citizen of heaven vs. those who continue to live as a citizen of the earth.*

Q: What are the characteristics of Christians who continue to live like a citizen of the world?

1. “...whose god is their appetite...” (v.19) They live for the flesh, for whatever is the object of their lust.
2. “...whose glory is in their shame...” (v.19) They become so desensitized they reverse reality and elevate the temporal over the eternal.
3. “...who set their minds on earthly things.” (v.19) They are fixated on the world and what it has to offer.

Application: *All three of these characteristics express a lifestyle in the world at the expense of a lifestyle in the Word.*

Q: Why is what these people do especially egregious in comparison with the work of the cross they once embraced?

A: The cross defeated the world and the flesh through sacrifice and suffering, yet these people live for the world and seek only to please themselves. Having at one time professed faith in the cross, they ultimately become “enemies of the cross of Christ”. (v.18)

Q: According to v.20, what seems to be the difference between the true and false believer?

A: The true believer acts and lives as a citizen of heaven whereas the false believer continues to live as a citizen of earth. True citizenship is betrayed by the country a citizen honors, in this case whether it is heaven or earth.

Q: How does Paul take this a step further?

A: It is not just about citizenship – a person’s allegiance, but the physical body of the person itself. Temporal glory gives way to eternal glory. (v.21)

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming. If you know that He is righteous, you know that **everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him**. See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And **everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself**, just as He is pure.

— 1 John 2:28–3:3

Application: *The spiritual mind deals with each Christians future through the biblical working of their glorification not just spiritually but, in the end, physically. The power of the resurrection which first began its work through salvation is ultimately and literally completed to “transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory”. (v.21)*

Overall Application

- *The Christian’s Past: Salvation (v.1-11)*
- *The Christian’s Present: Sanctification (v.12-16)*
- *The Christian’s Future: Glorification (v.17-21)*

In each instance the question is whether we live in accordance with these things, our spiritual focus fixated on their working toward the inevitable results in our life, or instead risking the loss of the prize or even possibly the whole race altogether by turning back to the world. Where do you place yourself?