

Unit 2: Letters to Philippians and Colossians

Lesson 10 | November 9, 2025

Focus on the Goal

Study Text

Philippians 3:1–21; 4:8–20

Central Truth

Christians should be motivated by God's values, not the world's values.

Key Verse: Philippians 3:13–14

Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus(KJV).

Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us(NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will ask the Spirit to search their hearts and focus their attention on serving God.
- Students will consider how they might support and encourage other believers.
- Students will practice generosity toward those in need.

Introducing the Lesson

Goals help us evaluate whether our achievements match our values. By setting goals and measuring our progress toward them, we're more likely to succeed in the accomplishments that matter most.

Goals

What are some goals you have set and achieved? What are some goals you have set and failed to achieve? What were the major factors that determined whether you succeeded?

Paul compared the Christian life to a race toward “the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us” (Philippians 3:14). The closer we draw to God, the more we will be motivated by what He values rather than what the world values. When we prioritize the one overarching goal of serving God, our smaller goals will fall in place.

Paul warned his friends in the Philippian church not to lose their focus on the main goal: receiving their heavenly prize. Paul used himself as an example to show the foolishness of pursuing what the world considers valuable. The best human credentials are worthless when it comes to our standing with God. The thing that matters most is being made right with God through our faith in Jesus. He is the only way we can reach our eternal goal.

Part 1—Righteousness through Jesus Alone

The Worthlessness of Human Effort

Philippians 3:1–6

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul shared his concerns about false teachers who had slipped in and begun to threaten the believers' freedom with an incorrect approach to salvation. Both then and now, drifting from sound doctrine can poison churches and endanger people's souls. We should actively resist any substitute for the gospel.

Philippians 3 begins with Paul's reminder to "rejoice in the Lord" (Philippians 3:1). This may seem like an unexpected introduction in view of the subject matter Paul would talk about next, but he was setting up a contrast between people who rejoice in the Lord and people who rejoice in their own human accomplishments.

Paul used strong terms to solemnly warn the Philippian believers to keep their distance from legalistic teachers (verse 2):

1. **Dogs.** Dogs were not beloved pets in Bible days, but despised scavengers. This term cast reproach on the false teachers infiltrating the Philippian church.
2. **People who do evil.** The false teachers were zealous and active, claiming to be spiritual leaders, even apostles. But their goals would tear down the fellowship, not build it up. They robbed people of the blessing of God's grace.
3. **Mutilators.** The false teachers were Jewish converts to Christianity who expected Gentile converts to add the existing Jewish law to their faith in Jesus.

These who insisted that a right relationship with God demanded circumcision may have done so from a desire to obey God. But Paul made it clear that they were wrong. Not only were they trying to earn favor with God by means of their own "human effort" (verse 3), but they were forcing these teachings on the Philippian believers.

Paul saw the danger in this legalism. Those who were trusting in rituals to appease God stood in stark contrast to those who were trusting in the "new covenant in [Jesus'] blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25, niv). The ones who were "truly circumcised" (Philippians 3:3) were those who worshipped by the Spirit of God and relied on what Jesus had done for them. They "put no confidence in human effort." Like the Philippians, we must analyze every teaching, comparing what people say with what God has said in His Word. If any message exalts human effort or contradicts the gospel, we must reject it.

Paul continued his argument about legalism by drawing on his own background (verses 4–6). If it were possible to accomplish any merit with God through human effort, Paul would have done so. His Jewish lineage, his résumé of religious accomplishments, his zeal as a Pharisee, and his commitment to the Law were unparalleled. But Paul had come to realize these things were worthless.

? Why did Paul urge believers to guard against false teaching? Do you think Paul would consider false teaching to still be a danger in today's church? Explain.

? Why are people so tempted to earn favor with God through human effort?

The Infinite Value of Knowing Christ

Philippians 3:7–11

Coming to faith in Jesus opens our eyes to better understand who God is and all He has done for us. Suddenly, all the religious achievements that seemed so important are revealed for what they really are: poor substitutes for knowing Jesus himself.

Paul's conversion completely changed his perspective on what pleases God. He realized his many religious accomplishments were of no value "because of what Christ has done" (Philippians 3:7). In fact, all human effort to gain religious merit is worthless compared to "the infinite value of knowing Christ" (verse 8).

Paul's passion for following Jesus led him to surrender not just his religious status, but everything else as well. After his conversion, Paul's entire life was consumed with actively pursuing a deeper knowledge of Jesus as Lord. Whatever he gave up to pursue Jesus was more than repaid by God's grace. As Paul explained to the Philippians, right standing with God is based on faith, not human effort (verse 9).

Paul's dependence on Jesus helped him maintain focus on eternity (verses 10–11):

1. **"I want to know Christ."**Paul wasn't satisfied with knowing about Jesus. He wanted to continually get to know Jesus better.
2. **I want to "experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead."**Paul wanted to live in the power of the Holy Spirit—the One who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:2, 11).
3. **"I want to suffer with him."**Suffering for Jesus was not something to be avoided from Paul's point of view. Instead, he took the stance of Peter and the apostles, who after being beaten for preaching in Jesus' name in Jerusalem, "left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:41).
4. **I want to "experience the resurrection from the dead."**Not even death could dissuade Paul from following Jesus. In fact, it would allow Paul to see Him face-to-face.

Paul viewed his earthly life as merely a prelude to the everlasting life that awaited him. The infinite value of knowing Jesus means discarding everything else so we can "gain Christ and become one with him" (Philippians 3:8–9).

Part 2—The Heavenly Prize

Press On

Philippians 3:12–14

Often, accomplishing one goal leads to setting new goals. If a person achieves the goal of saving \$1,000 for an emergency fund, they often keep working their way toward financial stability. If a person reaches their goal weight, they normally keep working to live a healthier lifestyle. And reaching spiritual goals causes us to press on to achieve new goals—including our ultimate goal of receiving the heavenly prize awaiting us in eternity.

Paul knew he had not yet achieved his ultimate goal (Philippians 3:12). Instead, he described himself as an athlete pushing toward the finish line. People who think they've "arrived" as Christians cease to be passionate about following Jesus. They stagnate and stop growing. The truth is, following Jesus is a lifelong endeavor. We will only have finished the race when we see Him in eternity.

Paul's ongoing desire to press forward and grow closer to Jesus kept him from looking back over his past accomplishments (verses 13–14). He was too busy moving ahead to get caught up in what lay behind. The same is true when we are passionately pursuing Jesus. Even if we have managed to accomplish great things for Him in the past, we fix our eyes on the future and continue to obediently follow Him day by day. As one commentator points out, Paul viewed Jesus as "both the goal and the prize. This is one of the amazing marvels of Scripture. In a human contest the goal and the prize could not . . . be the same."¹ But for us, eternity with Jesus is not only what we're racing toward, but it is also our reward. Press on!

- ? How can we stay passionate about growing closer to Jesus?
- ? What are some ways to keep our eyes fixed on the future rather than getting distracted by past accomplishments?

Hold On

Philippians 3:15–21

Spiritual giants like Paul aren't the only ones who passionately follow Jesus. It's a characteristic of anyone who is maturing in their faith. Starting wherever you are in your relationship with Jesus at this moment, hold on to the progress you've already made, and keep moving ahead as you wait for Jesus to return.

Continually growing closer to Jesus is a mark of "all who are spiritually mature" (Philippians 3:15, nlt; "as many as be perfect" in the sense of being complete or mature, kjv). Not letting go of the progress we've made, we keep moving in the same direction—toward the Christlike perfection we will only achieve when Jesus returns (verse 16).

Paul presented himself and other believers in the Early Church as examples of people who were pressing toward the goal of being more like Jesus (verse 17). He also cautioned believers to examine those whose conduct proved they were "enemies of the cross of Christ" (verse 18).

Earlier in this chapter Paul had warned believers against those who demanded that they practice Jewish rites like circumcision. Now Paul dealt with another false teaching that was invading the church. Antinomianism (which means "against law") held that since salvation comes by grace, believers were free to behave however they wanted. Paul explained that these false teachers were not headed for salvation, but for eternal destruction (verse 19). By teaching people that a sinful lifestyle creates an avenue for demonstrating God's grace, they were contradicting the truth of God's Word. They were indulging their appetites and worshipping themselves rather than God.

¹*The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Study Bible*, ed. Ralph W. Harris, Stanley M. Horton, and Gayle Garrity Seaver (Tulsa, OK: Empowered Life, 1994–2000), Accordance.

As Christians, a primary focus should be our eternal home and the soon return of Jesus (verse 20). At that time, our bodies will be changed to be like Him, “using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control” (verse 21). In the meantime, we should each evaluate our progress toward spiritual maturity. Have we lost ground, letting go of the progress we’ve already made and allowing the values of this world to take our eyes off the prize? Or are we continually moving forward and becoming more like Jesus every day? Press on toward the prize! Hold on until Jesus returns!

? How can Christians keep their focus on eternity while continuing to live and function in this world?

? How should believers both “press on” and “hold on” to grow more like Jesus every day?

Part 3—Contentment and Giving Content through Christ’s Strength

Philippians 4:10–13

The more we become like Jesus, the more we will be motivated by what God values. We’re no longer captivated by the things the world worships—like money, fame, charisma, and power. Instead, we can be content in any situation because of all Jesus has done for us.

Philippians 4:10 marks Paul’s transition to the final section of his letter to the Philippians. In these verses, Paul thanks the believers for their financial support and assures them that he is content and “generously supplied” (verse 18)—even in prison.

Paul explained to the Philippians that he had learned how to be content with whatever God provided (verses 11–12). When Paul says, “I have learned,” he borrows a Greek word related to secret initiation. It was “used by the Stoic school of philosophy to mean a man should be self-sufficient for all things.”² But he turns the meaning of the word on its head. Paul did not claim self-sufficiency, but complete dependence on Jesus to take care of him during times of plenty and times of need. Leaning on Jesus was the true secret Paul had learned. Through Jesus’ strength, Paul could endure anything (verse 13). Material comforts could be taken away, but the Source of Paul’s joy—Jesus himself—could never be taken from him.

Compare Paul’s attitude with the level of contentment in our society. Many people are never content, no matter how much they have. When we look to material things for satisfaction, we will never have enough. Only by learning the secret of contentment—finding joy in Jesus himself—can we be satisfied with whatever God has given us. The more we become like Jesus, the more we will be motivated by what God values.

? Some people confuse contentment with laziness. How would you describe the difference between the two?

? Read Hebrews 13:5. What is the connection between contentment and the assurance of God’s presence?

²*The Complete Biblical Library: New Testament.*

Generosity Pleases God

Philippians 4:14–20

The financial support from Paul's friends in Philippi was a blessing from God and an offering to God. Paul was confident the Philippians would be blessed in return as they partnered with him in ministry.

Paul was grateful that the Philippians had obeyed God and been used by Him to provide for Paul (Philippians 4:14). It must have brought joy to his heart to know they were thinking of him in his difficult situation. Among the churches in Macedonia, the Philippian church was the only one that supported Paul in the early days of his ministry (verse 15). In fact, they went beyond a one-time gift, providing Paul with continued support during his second missionary journey (verse 16).

When Paul expressed his gratitude to the Philippians, he shared an important principle that we should keep in mind. He appreciated the Philippians' financial gift not only for how it benefited him, but also for how it allowed the Philippians themselves to participate in ministry. Using financial terminology, he explained, "What I desire is that more be credited to your account" (verse 17, niv). Through their generous support of Paul's work, the Philippians had made the kind of ministry investment that would produce eternal dividends. Like them, we can participate in ministry and reap spiritual rewards when we give generously to the Lord's work.

As Paul's letter draws to a close, he assures the Philippians, "I have all I need—and more!" thanks to their generosity (verse 18). They would have understood Paul's metaphor of a "sweet-smelling sacrifice," since they often viewed animal sacrifice in public and smelled the meat being cooked.³ Paul then reminded the believers that God would take care of their needs just like He took care of Paul's needs (verse 19).

Unlike our resources, God's resources are unlimited. Whatever we need, He is able to provide. Because of God's generosity and grace toward us, we can join with Paul in celebrating: "All glory to God our Father forever and ever! Amen" (verse 20).

? In what ways does God supply your needs?

? Along with financial support, what are some other ways we can partner with people in ministry?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Paul's athletic imagery can help us focus on our goal of growing closer to Jesus. The best athletes dedicate themselves completely to their sport. Everything else in their lives becomes secondary as they prepare to compete. Can we say the same of our relationship with Jesus? Are we fully committed to loving God with all we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–39)? Or is our devotion divided between God and something or someone else? If our answers to those questions are not what they should be, now is the time to repent and refocus on our eternal goal.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and clarify your focus. Repent and make the changes He inspires you to make.
- Think of someone who appears to be struggling in their Christian walk. Pray and ask God how you might humbly support and encourage this brother or sister.
- Knowing that generosity pleases God, set aside some money to give to a person in need or a ministry that helps people in need.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Radical Obedience.

Genesis 6:13–22; Hebrews 11:7

Tuesday:

Directed by God.

Genesis 18:16–19

Wednesday:

Unshakable Faith.

Daniel 3:13–18

Thursday:

Let Your Light Shine.

Matthew 5:13–16

Friday:

Witness without Fear.

Matthew 10:17–20, 26–32

Saturday:

Walk in the Light.

Ephesians 5:8–14