

Transforming Grace: Grace that Motivates

Part 4 of 5 - Philippians 3:1-14

Discussion Questions

1. Looking back at your own childhood or younger years, what was something you valued or spent significant time pursuing? How did that item or goal motivate your daily choices?
2. The Philippian church faced Judaizers who taught a doctrine of "Jesus *plus*" (requiring law-keeping and circumcision alongside faith). In modern church culture, what are some subtle "Jesus *plus*" additions that people might rely on to feel accepted by God or others?
3. Paul listed his impressive cultural, religious, and moral heritage—family background, strict tradition, external righteousness—and declared it all "loss" and "garbage" compared to knowing Christ. Which area of a modern "spiritual resume" (e.g., growing up in a Christian home, moral ethics, church service, sincerity) are you most tempted to rely on for your sense of security or worth? Relying on self-effort creates an exhausting, transactional relationship with God—feeling He is happy with us on good weeks and disappointed on bad weeks. Have you ever caught yourself operating in "resume mode" or treating God transactionally? How did that affect your daily peace and joy?
5. Paul's driving desire shifted from *earning* God's favor to *knowing* Christ personally, comparing it to how a friendship or marriage deepens over time spent together. What does "knowing Christ personally" look like in practical, everyday terms, as opposed to simply knowing facts about Him?
6. How does understanding that you are already fully accepted in Christ change your motivation for reading the Bible, praying, and serving, compared to doing those things to earn God's favor?
7. The message warned against viewing spiritual growth like an airport moving walkway—standing still and assuming God will automatically carry us along without our effort. What is one active discipline or step (e.g., prayer habit, Scripture engagement, fighting a specific sin) you feel called to "press on" in this week?
8. Paul refused to let his past achievements cause him to settle or think he had "done enough." Is there an area in your spiritual journey where past victories or years of faithful service have subtly led to spiritual complacency? How can you reignite a desire to keep growing?
9. Looking back at past failures and regrets can paralyze our faith. Is there a past

failure, regret, or ongoing struggle that you tend to look back on? How can turning your eyes back to Christ's righteousness help you let go and press forward?

10. Looking ahead at the coming week, what is one tangible way you can demonstrate that knowing Jesus is your highest treasure? (For example: adjusting your daily schedule, forgiving someone, shifting a financial priority, or sharing your faith with a friend.)

Summary

A few years ago, my mom decided to pack up several tubs filled with my old personal belongings from when I lived at home, load them into her car, and drive them over to my house. She said she thought I might want my stuff, though I suspect she mostly just wanted to clear out her house!

Inside those tubs was a neatly organized binder of trading cards I had spent countless hours collecting as a kid—including Michael Jordan and Ken Griffey Jr.

cards—alongside a tub full of old sports trophies and plaques. Sorting through those items was an interesting exercise in reflecting on what I considered valuable at different points in my life, and more importantly, how those values motivated my behavior.

Because I valued those athletes and believed those cards might be worth money someday, I was willing to spend my money and negotiate with friends to get the cards I wanted. Because I valued the recognition represented by those sports trophies, I was motivated to practice hard, work, and improve.

What we value motivates us. Or put another way: **what we treasure motivates us.**

As part of our sermon series *Transforming Grace*, we are examining **Grace that Motivates**. As followers of Jesus, grace motivates us to pursue a growing relationship with Him—knowing Him better and becoming increasingly transformed into His likeness. By looking at the life of the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:1–14, we can see how what he once valued drove his life, how his values completely shifted when he experienced the grace of Jesus Christ, and how that same grace ought to motivate us today.

The Danger of Misplaced Confidence (Philippians 3:1–6)

Paul begins chapter 3 with a firm, protective warning to a church that was very dear to his heart:

"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. Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. 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..." — Philippians 3:1–3

To modern ears, calling someone a "dog" might sound odd. Today, we view dogs as beloved, four-legged members of the family. (We used to have a Cockapoo in our home, and if I ever mistakenly called him a "pet," I would receive sharp stares and immediate correction from my family—he was a full family member!) But Paul wasn't a "cat person" taking a jab at household pets. In first-century culture, dogs were not domesticated pets; they were wild scavengers that ran in dangerous packs and caused trouble.

Paul was warning the Philippian believers about a group known as the Judaizers. The Judaizers claimed to believe in Jesus, but they taught a doctrine of "Jesus *plus*" for salvation and acceptance before God. Specifically, they claimed that one must believe in Jesus *plus* undergo circumcision and strictly observe the entire Old Testament Law of Moses. They based their ultimate confidence on the "flesh"—on what they could achieve in their own human effort.

Paul counters their argument by essentially saying, "If anyone wants to compare spiritual resumes or put confidence in human achievement, let's look at mine before Jesus took hold of me":

"If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." — Philippians 3:4–6

Paul's pedigree was flawless according to Jewish standards:

- **Heritage & Lineage:** He was circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with Moses' law. He was from the tribe of Benjamin—one of only two tribes (alongside Judah) that remained loyal when Israel split. Benjamin was also the tribe of Israel's first king, King Saul (from whom Paul, originally named Saul, may have directly descended).

- **Tradition & Position:** As a "Hebrew of Hebrews," his family strictly maintained Jewish customs and resisted Hellenistic/Greek cultural pressure. As a Pharisee, he belonged to an elite group treated like modern celebrities, disciplined in external obedience and capable of reciting entire books of Old Testament Scripture.
- **Zeal & Record:** Before encountering Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul viewed Christianity as a disease and passionately persecuted the church to eliminate it. Externally, regarding legalistic righteousness, he was blameless.

Modern Spiritual Resumes

We may not boast in ancient legalistic requirements today, but many people build similar spiritual resumes to justify their standing before God:

- **Family Heritage:** Relying on growing up in a Christian home, having a deacon for a dad, or a grandmother who played the church piano.
- **Religious Observances:** Relying on rituals like baptism—which is vital in our church identity, but does not save us.
- **Morality & Ethics:** Pointing to being a "good person," a faithful employee, a good parent, or keeping isolated from cultural stains.
- **Sincerity:** Believing that as long as a person is sincere in what they practice, it is enough to make them right with God.

Paul demonstrates that every item on this kind of spiritual resume is misplaced when it comes to standing righteous before God.

From Gain to Garbage (Philippians 3:7–9)

Everything changed for Paul when he encountered the resurrected Lord:

"But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 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 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." — **Philippians 3:7–9**

In an accounting sense, everything Paul once listed in his "gain" column—the credentials he thought gave him worth and standing before God—he moved straight into the "loss"

column.

He goes even further, describing those human achievements as "**garbage**" (translated in other versions as *rubbish* or *dung*). The original word refers to rotting food scraps and human excrement. This bold imagery highlights how completely his perspective shifted. The moment Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road, he realized that all of his moral strive, self-effort, and religious credentials could never earn God's acceptance. He stopped trusting in a self-made righteousness produced by law-keeping and instead trusted in the righteousness that comes exclusively from God through faith in Jesus Christ, based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Knowing Christ Relationally, Not Transactionally (Philippians 3:10–11)

When grace takes hold of a heart, the fundamental motivation for living changes: *"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."* — **Philippians 3:10–11**

Paul's driving motivation shifted from **earning** to **knowing**. He is not describing mere intellectual head-knowledge, but an intimate, experiential, growing relationship. Consider human relationships: you can know *about* a person, but truly knowing a friend or a spouse requires spending time together. Over time, you discover their personality, their delights, their dislikes, and what makes them laugh.

Living in "resume mode" makes faith an exhausting roller coaster. If you have a good week, you assume God is pleased with you; if you have a bad week, you fear He is disappointed and frustrated with you. A transactional relationship—treating God like a checklist of "look what I did for You"—creates a heavy weight of constant striving. The gospel breaks this cycle. Because Jesus fully accepted us by His grace, we no longer work to earn God's favor. We are already part of His family. That security fosters new affections. What we treasure changes, and out of that transformed heart, we naturally desire to draw near to Christ and reflect His character.

Pressing On: Effort, Focus, and the Danger of Looking Back (Philippians 3:12–14)

Lest anyone mistake receiving grace for spiritual passivity, Paul immediately clarifies the active nature of the Christian walk:

"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. 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, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." — **Philippians 3:12–14**

Paul—an apostle who performed miracles, planted churches across the Mediterranean world, and authored much of the New Testament—humbly admits he has not yet arrived. He pictures himself as a runner straining with every ounce of energy toward the finish line.

Active Grace vs. The "Moving Walkway"

Grace saves us freely, but it never leaves us passive. On a family trip to theme parks in Florida, I noticed the long moving walkways at the airport and park entrances. You can step onto them, stand completely still, and let the track carry you forward.

Sometimes believers treat spiritual growth like a moving walkway, assuming, "I'll just stand here and God will move me along". But spiritual growth requires intentional effort—pursuing prayer, diving into God's Word, mortifying sin, and actively seeking to know Jesus. Grace doesn't eliminate effort; it *energizes* it.

The Danger of Looking Back

Running well requires undivided focus. Paul emphasizes: *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead"*.

A famous illustration of this occurred during the legendary 1954 "Miracle Mile" race between Roger Bannister and John Landy—the only two men at the time who had broken the four-minute mile. Entering the final lap, Landy was leading with Bannister right behind him. As they rounded the final turn, the roaring crowd drowned out Bannister's footsteps. Unable to hear where his opponent was, Landy glanced back over his shoulder. That momentary loss of forward focus gave Bannister the split-second opportunity he needed to surge past him and win the race. Looking back

cost Landy the victory.

In our spiritual race, Paul warns against looking back at two specific areas that threaten to derail our progress:

1. **Past Successes (Leading to Complacency):** It would have been easy for Paul, sitting in a prison cell after decades of ministry, to claim he had done his part and rest on his laurels. Instead, he kept sharing the gospel so faithfully that members of Caesar's household came to faith. We should celebrate what God has accomplished through us, but we must never let past achievements make us spiritually complacent.
2. **Past Failures (Leading to Stagnation):** Paul had a history as a violent persecutor of the church, and he openly wrote about his ongoing battle with sin (as seen in Romans 7). Had he fixated on his past mistakes, guilt, and shortcomings, he would have been paralyzed. We cannot allow past failures or regrets to keep us from moving forward in the grace and calling of God.

Examining Your Heart

As you evaluate your own journey with Jesus, take time to quietly consider what truly drives your spiritual life:

- **Are you trying to earn your salvation?** Are you relying on family heritage, church rituals, moral behavior, or personal sincerity to prove your worth to God?
- **Is your walk with God transactional?** Do you view God through the lens of performance, assuming He is pleased only when you perform well and disappointed whenever you stumble?
- **Is Jesus your supreme treasure?** Is your heart motivated by the surpassing worth of simply knowing Christ, drawing near to Him, and becoming like Him?

Shift your trust away from your own resume and rest completely in the finished work of Christ. Ask the Lord to renew your desires, that He would become your greatest treasure, and that His grace would motivate you to press on toward the prize of knowing Him more every day.