WEEK 05 · PHILIPPIANS 3-4:1

We are made righteous not by our achievements and works but by God through faith in Christ (salvation). We should not boast of our merits, but should press on to know and conform to Christ (sanctification).

Preface

Last week, we read about the need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, illustrated in the characters and actions of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

This week, Paul warned against putting confidence in one's works. He used himself as an example—that even his unquestionable heritage and works would not save him, and that even he had not fully achieved the goal and would press on towards sanctification.

Background: Having set out the positive examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus, Paul then turned to negative examples, particularly the Judaizers who overly emphasized circumcision, heritage, and works (3:1-11), and the antinomians who advocated self-indulgence (3:15-21), which were both prevalent at that time.

Judaizers are individuals who sought to impose Jewish laws, especially circumcision, on Gentile Christians.
Antinomians are believers who rejected the moral law, claiming that faith alone frees them from following it.

Warm-up question: Share your most memorable "race" or "competition". Did you win or lose? What was the prize?

Study

Read Philippians 3:1-3 to answer the following questions.

1. What are the qualities of people Paul warns us to watch out for in 3:2? How may these qualities manifest in the present day or in our everyday life?

> Notes: "**Dogs**" were often used to describe the opponents of God's truth. "**Mutilators of the flesh**" is also translated as "concision" or "false circumcision", i.e., circumcision for the wrong reasons; the wrong teaching that circumcision is the only way to become a Christian.

2. In contrast, what are the qualities of people in 3:3 that Paul affirmed? What is the difference between the "circumcision" in 3:2 and in 3:3? What implication does it have for our salvation?

> Notes: The word "circumcision" (3:3) refers to the **circumcision of the heart** that takes place when a person trusts in Jesus Christ. They serve God by his Spirit, and boast only in Christ Jesus.

Read Philippians 3:4-11 to answer the following questions.

3. Summarize the "gains" that Paul possessed or achieved (3:4-6). What was Paul trying to convey by mentioning these in relation to one's righteousness and achievements?

> Notes: In Paul's self-description, the first four items were inherited (3:5), while the last three were things that he did (3:5-6), establishing his nearly **unquestionable status from a Jewish perspective**. He aimed to show how much his perspective changed upon following Christ, implying that the gains are far greater.

4. How did Paul view his “gains” then? What changed his perspective, and what were his new goals (3:7-11)? How does this inform us about living a faithful life as followers of Christ?

> Notes: Observe the **downward progression** of Paul's view of his **achievements** and the **upward progression** of his **knowledge of God**. He suggests that some achievements may not only be **useless** in God's eyes but could even be **against** Him. Paul emphasizes that we stand before God based on Christ's merit, not our own.

Read Philippians 3:12-4:1 to answer the following questions.

5. In the previous section, Paul was discrediting his own works and actions. Yet in this section, Paul became very action-based (“press on”, “strain toward”). How can these be reconciled?

> Notes: **Salvation** is by grace through faith not by works, but **sanctification** does not come automatically by faith and has to be pursued diligently by the believer as the Spirit continues to work in the believer.

6. What is “the goal” and “the prize” in 3:14? How can one attain that? (Refer to 3:8-11, 15-16)

7. What is the destiny of those who set their minds on God, not on earthly things? (3:18-21)

8. How do those with “citizenship in heaven” live differently from those who are “enemies of the cross of Christ”? Why are they able to live this way? (3:20-4:1, also refer to 3:5-11)

Application

1. What were the things or qualities that you considered as “gains” in your life before knowing Christ? How has that changed after you have known Christ? Is there anything that you should count as “loss” or “garbage” now in order to pursue a closer relationship with God?

2. Do you see yourself as “righteous” or not? Do you find it easy or hard to understand and attain the “righteousness” described in 3:9-11?

3. What practical steps can you take to “strain toward what is ahead” and “press on toward the goal” (3:13-14) in your spiritual journey? How can you involve your Christian community?

Optional Follow-up Exercise: Count as Gain or Loss?

While Paul counted his heritage and works as “loss” and “garbage” (3:4-8), he was referring to the basis of his salvation. It does not mean all gifts and achievements are worthless—those are also given by God to us, and we are called to use them wisely. In this week’s activity, let us reexamine our gifts and achievements, share with our small group, and keep each other accountable for how we steward them.

Instructions:

- Write down: (i) 3 positive characteristics of yourself; (ii) 3 achievements in your life (e.g., work, study, family); and (iii) 3 contributions or roles in your church/spiritual community.
- Reflect on whether these traits, achievements, and contributions have helped or hindered your spiritual growth and your relationships with God and others. Share your thoughts with your group.
- Respond to each other's sharing: Do you agree with their self-assessments? Should you warn them of anything (e.g., legalism, pride)? What can you encourage them about (e.g., faithful use of talents)?
- Pray for one another in light of Paul’s reminder: forget what is behind, strain toward what is ahead, press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus, and stand firm in the Lord. (3:13-14; 4:1)