

**New Life International Fellowship**  
**Sermon by Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.**  
**February 16, 2020**

**“How can we attain the ‘perfect’ life?”**  
**Philippians 3:1-14**

**Introduction**

Do you ever dream about having the perfect life? If so, what would it be? Paul offers a very unusual definition of perfection and the perfect life in his letter to the Philippians. And that’s our subject for today: “What is the perfect life, and how can we attain it?”

**Prayer**

**Exposition of Philippians 3:1-14**

After urging them to exercise their heavenly citizenship worthily of the Gospel, to serve like Jesus, and to live for Jesus, he begins what sounds like the final set of instructions.

“Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord” (3:1a)

However, he no sooner says, rejoice in the Lord, when he suddenly steps back to make a quick comment. It’s as if, he starts an important subject only to remember that there’s something else he wants to say first. As it turns out, he won’t come back to this subject of rejoicing in the Lord until the middle of the fourth chapter. For now, there’s something he wants to say first. And what he has to say is going to launch a whole string of important comments on the Christian life.

“To write the same things to you is...for you...a safeguard” (3:1b).

We don’t know what “the same things are” that he’s referring to. Some scholars even think that this portion of the letter is actually a letter fragment that was written after the original letter, but now appears sown into the fabric of what we call Philippians. However, there’s no real evidence for that theory. So, instead of speculating on how the letter parts may have come to be, we should just focus on what he actually says. Whatever he’s writing again is a “safeguard” for them.

*What or who are your spiritual “safeguards”?*

- Who speaks words of wisdom into your life? (Scripture, parents, spouse, friends, pastors, etc. ?)

- Whose presence in your life keeps you safer? (reliable, trustworthy, godly men and women of integrity)
- In contrast, who or what puts your spiritual life more at risk? (what you’re reading, watching, listening to, hanging out with, doing, etc.)

“So, watch out!” (3:2-3)

- Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!
- For it is we who are the [true] circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—

We do not know for sure who these “dogs” are, but they could have been Judaizers. Judaizers were Jewish Christians, who tried to impose the Law on new, Gentile Christians. Mutilating the flesh probably refers to circumcision.

The reason Paul is so hostile is that these false teachers were misleading his spiritual children and putting their spiritual life at risk. They were putting a burden on them that was not from God. Perhaps, even worse, they were misleading them by getting them to focus on their own religious performance, rituals observed, and human accomplishments. This is wrong-headed and dangerous, Paul is saying. In order to remain steadfast in one’s faith, as citizens of heaven exercising their citizenship worthily of the Gospel, it is just as important to know who *not* to be (and what not to believe) as it is to know who to be (and what to believe).

These false teachers are not the true worshipers of God. Only those who worship in the Spirit and focus on what Jesus Christ has done, not what we can do or have done, are true worshipers of God.

“... even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, **I have more**...circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (3:4-6).

In other words, Paul is saying, if there were a contest regarding taking confidence in his own pedigree, status, and achievements, he would win (3:4-6). There was no Judaizer who could stand up to his status. Is Paul bragging here? No, not all. He’s simply laying the groundwork for what he wants to say next. He wants to make clear that the reason he is discounting achievement and status is *not* because he had no achievements or status.

On the contrary, he had more than most people. But that’s not what truly matters in the spiritual life. So, he says...

“Yet whatever gains I had, these **I have come to regard as loss** because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the **surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and **I regard them as rubbish**, in order that I may **gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own** that comes from the law, **but one that comes through faith in Christ**, the righteousness from God based on faith” (3:7-9).

Paul did not always think this way. However, when he came to know Jesus Christ, he no longer viewed himself as he once did. What was once gain to him, he now considers loss on account of Christ, even rubbish. Why? Because now he sees **all those achievements, ambitions, attachments, and other self-glorifying preoccupations as distractions from what matters most**. What’s more important than advancing his image and status is to **gain Christ and be found in him**.

What does that mean?

When his life is finished and he appears before the throne of God, there will be a rightness (righteousness) about his heart, mind, and behavior that shouts “Christ,” not “self.” This kind of righteousness is a gift from God, but it is more than a gift. The righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ actually transforms us. Why? Because this kind of righteousness is only possible by abandoning all your attempts to prove, defend or to justify yourself before God. This kind of righteousness comes from depending entirely upon the one who died for you and now lives for you and in you. And this kind of relationship with Christ demands **a lifetime of “letting go” of self and “taking hold of” Christ more and more**.

And so Paul adds:

“I want to **know Christ** and the **power of his resurrection** and the **sharing of his sufferings** by **becoming like him in his death**, if somehow **I may attain the resurrection** from the dead” (3:10-11).

Now that his identity is in Christ, Paul only wants to **know and experience Christ**. Paul threw himself into his relationship with Christ, way, way beyond words, confession of faith, church membership, or good deeds. His passion was to be completely caught up with Christ, following in his footsteps and even more. Paul also wanted to share in Christ’s suffering, being conformed to his death, and ultimately being swept up with him in resurrection for eternity.

Since Paul was in prison and may have anticipated martyrdom, he may have been literally referring to his physical death and future resurrection. At the same time, we who are not facing martyrdom can recognize a spiritual truth in his words for all Christians. Paul is describing the same pattern of movement that we saw in the Christ hymn of chapter two. Paul gave up all his self-aggrandizing in order to be freer to move toward Christ and to move with Christ’s Spirit in every way that fit with God’s purposes for his life. This **spiritual movement goes from life** (in privilege, power, and possibilities) **to death** (of self-glorifying and self-serving thinking and behaving) **to life again** (“resurrection,” living in harmony with God’s will and good purposes).

**“Not that I have already obtained** this or have already reached the goal (NASV: “or have already **become perfect**”); **but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.** Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind** and **straining forward to what lies ahead,** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (3:12-14).

Paul freely admits that he has not attained his goal or been perfected, but he is super clear about what life is about and what his priorities are. For Paul the perfect life is simply this: to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of him. That’s it. Any other idea of the “perfect life” would be rubbish to him. So, he presses on toward the only worthy goal for life.

1. forgetting what is behind (both “achievements” and failures), and
2. straining for what is ahead, before him.
3. pursuing the goal to get the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus.

## Conclusion

Paul’s personal testimony speaks directly to Christians who may be confused, intimidated, or destabilized by pressures to conform to some false idea of who they should be. What was once gain to him, he now considers loss on account of Christ, even rubbish. Why? Because now he sees all his former achievements, ambitions, attachments, and other self-glorifying preoccupations as distractions from what matters most—knowing Christ more and more and experiencing his power at work in his life.

The sky may be the limit for your personal, social or professional life, but, if you want to grow in your identity in Christ, your so-called glory days are over. You need to put them in the past. They’re of no lasting value to you anymore. For Paul, being in Christ defined who he was, and he spent the rest of his life trying to live into his identity. In his own words, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (3:12).

## Closing Prayer

**For self-reflection and discussion**

1. What would make your life more “perfect”?
2. What would it mean for you to consider all the things you normally boast about as “rubbish”?
3. If you were to seek to know Christ as your top priority, what would change in your life?
4. What does it mean to seek to know the power of Christ’s resurrection in your life?
5. What would it look like if you were to “forget what is behind” and keep “straining toward what is ahead” to make Christ your own?