

THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week One: Introduction & Themes

In Paul's epistle to the Philippians, the apostle expresses both his joy in serving Jesus and his perspective on the events in his life and ministry. Throughout the letter, the apostle calls his readers to develop an attitude and a viewpoint that are based on Jesus' own way of thinking.

Philippians was one of the letters Paul that wrote during his imprisonment, yet despite his personal sufferings, it conveys an attitude that is joyous, confident, and hopeful. The apostle encourages those who read the epistle to have the attitude of Jesus, and throughout the epistle he shows us what this means in practice, while also telling us how to develop this attitude.

Philippians is one of a group of epistles that Paul wrote while he was imprisoned, most likely during the house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30-31). The epistles of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were also written during this same general time period, which corresponds to a date of about AD 60-62. Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were probably all written and sent at the same time, while Philippians was most likely written at a different point in the same imprisonment (or possibly, as some commentators think, during one of Paul's other imprisonments).

■ Paul himself had been involved in ■ establishing the church in Philippi; his brief, tumultuous ministry there is described in Acts 16. The city of Philippi was founded by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, in the fourth century BC. In 42 BC, it was the site of the decisive battle in which the forces of Mark Antony defeated the forces of the rebels Cassius and Brutus. Not many years afterward, the city was made a Roman colony, and then in the first century AD it was destined to be the first European city where Paul would preach the gospel.

Paul's ministry in Philippi began as the result of a dream, in which he saw a man from Macedonia requesting his help. Early in his ministry there, he persuaded Lydia, a wealthy tradeswoman, to put her faith in Jesus. After a period of successful ministry, he and his partner Silas were arrested, beaten, and imprisoned at the instigation of a local slave owner. This in turn led to Paul and Silas preaching the gospel to their jailer. Not long afterward, they left town at the request of the city authorities.

Much of the message of Philippians is summed up in Philippians 2:5, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (NIV), or "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (KJV). It is a great challenge not only to act like Christ but also to think like him, to develop the same values and perspectives that Jesus had, and that devoted disciples like Paul strove for. With this important goal in mind, the epistle also discusses a number of other significant themes, such as unity, conflict with the world, and hope for the future. It provides us with a compelling statement of the ways that having the attitude of Jesus can nourish and strengthen our souls.

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2006*

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Week Two: Overview of Philippians

Before beginning a careful verse-by-verse study of Philippians, we shall make an overview of the book. As we do, make a special note of the ways that the main themes come into play. Note particularly the ways in which the theme of perspective (that is, attitude, values, or mind-set) arises, as the apostle describes a Christ-like viewpoint on numerous topics.

The first chapter sets forth some examples of the kind of thinking that Paul wants to instill in his readers. He begins, as in many of his epistles, with a greeting, with thanksgiving for the recipients, and with a prayer (1:1-11). Even in such straightforward matters, he emphasizes his focus on Jesus. He then shares his own perspective on imprisonment, opposition, and other problems (1:12-30), as an example for others to follow. Paul endured much more than any of us will have to undergo, and he did so without wavering in his faith in God or his hope in Jesus. It is his wish that every believer might have this same solid faith.

The second chapter develops the main theme further. In the key passage of the epistle, Paul discusses Jesus' perspective and attitude, which serves as an example even more powerful than Paul's own (2:1-11). To see Jesus, the very Son of God, live a life of humility and sacrifice is even more compelling than to see Paul, a penitent sinner, attempt to do the same. From this, Paul sets forth how Christians ought to live in this world (2:12-18), and then he follows this with two other good examples, in the ministries of his friends and co-workers Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30).

The epistle's third chapter applies these ideas to the possible ways that we can serve God. The apostle here contrasts two kinds of righteousness (3:1-11), showing that the false kind, that of fleshly righteousness, can and should be replaced by the true righteousness that comes from faith in Jesus. This helps us to grow as Christians with the right perspective (3:12-16), rather than allowing our past and our self-will to hinder us. Paul then compares two kinds of citizenship (3:17-21), as he contrasts the behavior of those who are citizens of this world with the lifestyle of those whose citizenship is in heaven.

Philippians 4 includes a personal appeal (4:1-3), which at first looks out of place. But it is yet another example of the kind of perspective that the apostle hopes to instill in Philippi. There is then a well-known passage that teaches us a general perspective on life (4:4-9), emphasizing godly thoughts and godly attitudes. Paul then has some observations on giving and receiving (4:10-19), demonstrating the kinds of godly attitudes we should develop, both about what we have and about what we do not have. In closing (4:20-23), the apostle passes along some warm personal greetings, and closes with a simple but sincere wish for his readers' spiritual well-being.

Throughout the letter, Paul again and again returns to the ways that Christians can learn to think about everything in a fashion entirely different from the ways that the worldly look at things. They are imprisoned by a fleshly mind-set that makes them slaves to sin, but we have been set free by the truth, so that we can overcome the world.

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Week Three: Partners in the Gospel (Philippians 1:1-8)

In the opening verses of the epistle, Paul shares his feelings about the Philippians, and he offers an important prayer for their spiritual growth. He then begins to give them examples of a Christ-like perspective in practice. From the very beginning of the book, the contrast between worldly attitudes and godly attitudes stands out.■

The first few verses of the epistle are filled with Paul's warm regard for the faithful Christians in Philippi. In sharing his personal feelings, he also establishes the gospel as the basis of his fellowship with them. In every way he considers them to be his partners in the gospel (1:1-6), who fully share in both the blessings and the hardships that come from a life devoted to Jesus.

Paul's greeting, "I thank my God every time I remember you", shows his sincere appreciation for the believers in Philippi. While this might seem to be almost a routine salutation, it comes from Paul's heart. He truly appreciated and valued each and every believer in Jesus. No one knew better than Paul did how hard it is to live a life of genuine faith, and how difficult it can be to make the changes in our own lives that God calls us to make.

Paul's prayer for the Philippian believers is thus offered with confidence and joy. Paul knows that, however much he appreciates the faith of his friends in Philippi, God values and appreciates them even more. And so he has complete confidence that God will indeed care for them and guide them through whatever challenges might face them.

It bears asking ourselves how confident we might be in our own prayers for one another or, for that matter, for our own spiritual needs. The confidence in our prayers should not rest on our own degree of concern or compassion for others, but instead on God's limitless love for them and on the unlimited power that he uses on behalf of those who believe.

Because of their partnership in the gospel, the Philippians also share in God's grace with Paul (1:7-8). This gives them an unbreakable fellowship, a common ground that enables them to help and encourage one another. This indeed is the true basis for our fellowship with one another: not having worldly things in common, and not even being involved in the same outward activities, but having all been saved and redeemed by the blood of Jesus, so that God's grace is poured out equally on us all.

Even these straightforward introductory verses show us that we can learn a number of significant lessons from Paul's perspective on relationships. He knew how badly he needed God's grace, and he knew how God's grace makes us all equal before our Creator. So Paul accepted each and every believer as equally blessed with him, and as equally important to God. This led to value and appreciate even those who were much different from him, and it also enabled him to see in the life of every Christian the hope of bringing glory and praise to God.

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Week Four: Prayer & Perspective (Philippians 1:9-14)

Even in the first few verses of the epistle, as Paul offers his friendly greetings to the believers in Philippi, we can see his deep appreciation of them and of how God's grace has brought him and them together. Now, in these verses, Paul looks ahead to the things that he will explain to the Philippians in the rest of the epistle. Being confident of their love, he prays that to this love they will add spiritual wisdom and insight. In praying this, he is thinking both of their ministry and of the eternal future that will be revealed to them when Jesus returns.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians (1:9-11) shows once more that he sees them as God sees them. He does not pray for them to be free from struggle, nor does he pray for them to experience unbroken success in their ministry. Rather, he prays for spiritual blessings greater than any worldly gains or numerical results would have been. Knowing of the joy and love in the lives of his friends in Philippi, Paul prays, "that your love may abound" in the additional spiritual blessings of knowledge and insight. By this he does not hope that they will acquire an extensive collection of factual knowledge, but rather that they will understand and value the spiritual truths that they have already been taught.

Many believers in every era quickly learn the basic teachings of Christianity, but then never deepen their understanding of them, preferring instead to focus on 'practical' ideas that produce outward results. If instead the Philippians will deepen their spiritual understanding, then God indeed will keep them pure and blameless until the Day of Christ. We might pause here to ask ourselves what Paul might have prayed had he known us. Most likely, he would have offered the same prayer, that we also might be brought to a better understanding of the gospel and a deeper awareness of what God is doing in our lives from the inside.

Paul gives them an example of this in his own perspective on his imprisonment (1:12-14). The Philippians were well aware that Paul was in prison as he wrote the epistle. When they think about this, Paul wants them first of all to know that he is by no means discouraged, but that he knows that God is using it for good. Then also, he wants them to be more willing to speak and act as God calls them to do.

Paul has been put in chains by the Roman authorities, but he considers himself to be in chains for Christ. Although Paul's ministry opportunities are now sharply limited, so that he cannot produce the kinds of spectacular harvests that his missionary journeys generated, he still sees and believes that his chains serve to advance the gospel.

The reasons for the apostle's imprisonment are well known, as is his own determination not to abandon Christ because of being persecuted. Such an attitude cannot help but serve as an example and an encouragement to others, and indeed Paul is well aware of examples that show this. It isn't important who preaches the gospel, as long as the gospel is being preached. It isn't important who teaches the truth, as long as the truth is being taught. It mattered little to Paul that others were now carrying on his ministry, as long as God's work was being done.

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Week Five: A Godly Perspective on Rivalry & Ambition (Philippians 1:15-18a)

The last half of this chapter (Philippians 1:15-30) provides some excellent examples of the godly perspective in practice. The apostle Paul truly practiced what he taught others, and as he discusses events, decisions, and problems in his personal life, he reveals a viewpoint that contrasts sharply with the normal human way of looking at these things. Before exhorting the Philippians to adopt the attitude of Jesus, Paul shows that his own life provides many examples.

Even in the first century, there were already those persons who used the church as a vehicle through which to pursue selfish goals. Paul knows, of course, that this is wrong, yet it is remarkable to see the lack of anger or insecurity in his response to these wrong motives. He thus provides us with a useful example of how we can view rivalry, competition, and ambition with the mind of Christ.

Then, as now, there were two different kinds of preachers (1:15-18a), with different motives for their ministries. Sincere preachers and teachers were and are motivated by love for God and love for others. They may not always be the most effective teachers, but they will always exalt Jesus, and will be helpful and supportive towards those who, like Paul, suffer for the sake of the gospel.

But there were (and are) those who proclaim Christianity in order to draw attention to themselves, or to gain power and authority for themselves. Such teachers are motivated by envy and rivalry, and they feel an urge to compete with other preachers, rather than to work together for the truth. These teachers were even trying to exploit Paul's imprisonment, either by deliberately adopting a confrontational style, in such a way that Paul would be blamed for any trouble, or else in hoping to 'surpass' Paul in the acclaim and authority they could gain while he was incapable of speaking publicly. In either case, their attitude was hardened and selfish.

The more that we can appreciate Paul's personal situation, the more surprising his attitude becomes. His imprisonment prevented him from responding publicly, or from undoing any harm that these self-centered teachers may have done. And no one would ever doubt Paul's loyalty to what was right and pure. Yet he is neither angry nor resentful, and indeed he is simply glad that they are teaching the gospel, as long as they teach the truth.

Paul knows that their attitude and viewpoint are wrong, and could even hurt others, but he knows that we all have the responsibility anyway to avoid making human beings the focus of our faith. So he is able to rejoice that they are preaching Christ, since sincere listeners can be brought to faith even through the words of those who speak from wrong motives. He trusts God to keep the hearts of these believers pure, since their teachers reflect the wrong reasons for seeking God.

We can certainly learn from Paul's example. Teaching about Jesus for selfish motives is wrong, yet it is often not our responsibility to deal with such attitudes. As long as the truth is being preached, we should be glad for this alone. Only God will judge the hearts of us all, and only he can bring to light all of the evil motives and selfish thoughts that humans hide.

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Week Six: To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain (Philippians 1:18b-30)

In these verses, the apostle shows that his godly attitude towards imprisonment and towards would-be rivals comes from a deeper perspective that affects everything he does and says. The way to change our attitudes about day-to-day situations is to develop a basic view of life in this world that is based on God's truth, rather than on worldly values.

Paul's perspective on daily trials and struggles comes from his perspective on life and death (1:18b-26). In explaining this, he starts with his certain expectation that God will deliver him from his present distress. Yet he himself is committed to exalting Jesus no matter what happens, and soon it becomes clear that his assurance of deliverance is not a simple certainty that God will rescue him physically.

We also see this when Paul knew his death was near, but could say that, 'the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom' (2 Timothy 4:18). Paul did not assume that God would always rescue him from suffering or death. He was eventually executed, and he also suffered many beatings, imprisonments, and other torments. Rather, his hope and certainty were in knowing that God would protect him spiritually, so that none of these horrors could ever pull him away from God.

Paul explicitly tells us that in his mind, 'to live is Christ and to die is gain', a viewpoint so alien to fleshly ways of thinking that it can be quite difficult for us to appreciate. The worldly perspective is, instead, that life is a chance to get as much gain as possible (pleasure, wealth, and the like) and that death is an unthinkable horror, which the worldly hope will never come to them. Even many Christians would reverse Paul's motto, seeing this life as gain, and Christ as of importance only in the event that they die.

But Paul has the godly perspective that everything in this present life is to be devoted to Jesus, and given to him to use as he pleases, while the real gain for us is to be found with Jesus after we die. In thinking about his own prospects of death or life, Paul then 'decides' (rhetorically) that it would be better for him to remain on this earth a little longer, not because there are things he wants to have or deeds he wants to accomplish, but because he is still needed by others.

In view of his perspective on his own trials, Paul now urges the Philippians to adopt some of the same values. He calls them to develop unity and courage (1:27-30), and in an exhortation that will be echoed throughout the letter, he calls them to stand together, and to do so unafraid of the opposition that they will find in this world.

Such things are worthy of the nature of the gospel. As believers in Jesus we are all part of him, so it is appropriate to come together and minister together in Jesus' name. Setting aside worldly distinctions and differences should not win us any praise, for it should be expected of those who believe the gospel of grace. God wants us also to strive to rise above our worldly fears. He knows that this can be extremely difficult, but when we do rise above our fears and endure hardship for Jesus, it can be a powerful testimony of love and grace to a world that needs God.

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Week Seven: Jesus' Attitude as Our Example (Philippians 2:1-11)

The apostle now appeals to the Philippians to adopt the same Christ-like perspective that he has shown in his own life. This passage is the heart of the epistle, laying out the call to have the attitude of Christ, and describing in detail Jesus' own perspective, as it was revealed through his life on earth. To share the attitude of Jesus is part of the apostle's overall appeal for his readers to set aside all selfish, conceited, or envious thoughts, so that together they can live godly lives.

To adopt the attitude of Jesus, the apostle first tells us to clear our minds of many basic hindrances to this attitude (2:1-5). He appeals to us to consider the great spiritual blessings we have as Christians, phrasing this ironically - 'if you have any . . . ' encouragement, comfort, fellowship, and compassion - knowing that these blessings are poured out abundantly on believers in Jesus. When we are distracted by worldly values, we can easily forget how blessed we are in our souls from knowing God and having our sins forgiven.

In view of such blessings, Paul calls the Philippians to set aside all selfish motives and all ways of exploiting or using one another. Not only would this give the apostle himself joy, but it would also allow them to develop the deeper perspectives that Jesus can bring to us. The world is so much louder, its cravings so much cruder, and its attitudes far more blatant, that unless we make a conscious effort to set aside such distractions, it will be hard for us to appreciate or even to understand the attitude of Christ Jesus.

As Christians - those who are like Christ - Jesus' own example should be our guide when it comes to setting perspectives and priorities in our lives. The next few verses describe some of the most significant of the ways that Jesus' own perspective was revealed through his life and ministry. Although the facts of his life are, in themselves, familiar to us, they mean even more when considered in light of the call that Paul is making to his readers.

The attitude of Jesus in his life and ministry on this earth (2:6-11) gives us a perspective that puts to shame all worldly viewpoints and philosophies. Although Jesus was divine in his very nature, he did not see equality with his Father as 'something to be grasped'. This vivid phrase aptly describes so much of worldly thinking. Worldly leaders, self-appointed intellectuals, the rich and powerful, and so many other kinds of sinners are all pursuing their own desperate desires to become God, and to be exalted over their fellow beings.

Humans were created by nature to serve God, and yet they want to be God. Jesus, though, was by nature God, and yet he chose to take on the nature of a sacrificing servant. His humility and obedience extended even to dying a horrible death on a cross, while many humans will not accept God's authority on even the smallest of matters.

While the world has never truly understood or appreciated Jesus, God has exalted him and has made his name the key to salvation. Someday every soul will have to acknowledge Jesus, and will bow in worship to him. But it makes a big difference to God - and it will make a big difference to us - when we acknowledge him now in this life.

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Week Eight: Christians Living in This World (Philippians 2:12-18)

Living in this world presents Christians with some inherent difficulties, but also some worthwhile opportunities. The ideas in this passage can help us to understand what God has called us to be, as believers in a world that is dominated by fleshly thinking and fleshly behavior.

It can make quite a difference if we truly understand the salvation that we have through Jesus (Philippians 2:12-13). These verses provide a basic reminder of the nature of our salvation, and also a call to understand our salvation more fully. The apostle uses the interesting phrase, 'work out your salvation', to describe what believers should do.

Notice first of all that he says to work out, not work for, our salvation. He clearly does not mean that we must make strenuous efforts in order to be assured that we are saved. Rather, we must strive to understand, through prayer, study, meditation, and discussion, what it means to be saved by the blood of Jesus. Eternal salvation is too great a concept to be understood through a simple dictionary definition alone.

Paul says to do this 'with fear and trembling'. If this seems unexpected, it is only because we are used to the erroneous portrayals of God that the world teaches. They either teach that God is stern and cold, or else that he is so lenient that he lets almost everyone into heaven. Neither is correct. God is the very definition of compassion, and wants us all to know him. But he is also the very definition of righteousness, and he cannot tolerate unforgiven sin in his eternal presence.

So we must give God the respect that he deserves, and be ever fearful of distorting his Word or his ways to fit our own agendas. It is God who works salvation, according to his own purpose. Neither preachers nor popes nor Presidents will have any say about anyone's eternal fate, even their own.

With this in mind, the apostle now calls his readers to a purpose higher than themselves (Philippians 2:14-18). He wants us to be conscious always of the light that we can provide to the world around us. Christians, who have something much greater than this world to live for, ought to strive to live in a way that shows this to those around them.

God has given us what we need to be lights in this dark world, but we must make use of it. When we complain, when we argue, when we debase ourselves by wallowing in the filth and impurities of the world, we hide the light that God has placed inside us. God does not tell us to become popular or successful in this world, but to remain blameless and pure. If this makes unbelievers uncomfortable about their sin, then so much the better.

We are like stars in a universe that is mostly darkness. There should be a sharp contrast between believers and the world, not just in outward habits, but also in our priorities, attitudes, and perspectives. We are given the word of life, that we may offer it to a world that needs God's truth. Since Paul is presently imprisoned, he expresses his personal hope that the Philippians will do what he would do if he could. His own sacrifices have been more than worthwhile, and he gladly accepts that he is no more than a drink offering, to be poured out at God's pleasure.

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Week Nine: Timothy's Godly Example (Philippians 2:19-24)

Paul has called his readers to have the attitude of Jesus, and he has established some important general principles about Christian living in this present world. Now, he provides two examples of faithful believers who have put these principles into practice. Timothy and Epaphroditus are good examples not just for the specific things they did, but even more because they show what it means to have the attitude of Christ Jesus. This week, we shall study what the apostle says about Timothy, and next week we shall look at Epaphroditus.

This is one of many passages that show Paul's appreciation for Timothy's life and ministry (verses 19-24). The apostle praises Timothy for putting the interests of the gospel of Jesus ahead of his own personal interests. Paul considered Timothy to be his own 'son' in the faith, as well as an example to others.

A brief overview of Timothy's life and ministry reveals the many places and ways in which he served Jesus, often in association with Paul. The book of Acts mentions how the apostle Paul eagerly wanted to have Timothy join him in his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3), and it goes on to mention the activities of the young evangelist several other times (Acts 17:14-15, 18:5, 19:22, 20:4).

The apostle also makes frequent mention of Timothy in his epistles, showing us the many places where Timothy was known and the high opinion that Paul had of his work in Jesus (Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10, 2 Corinthians 1:1, 1:19, Colossians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 3:1-6, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Philemon 1:1). Timothy is also mentioned in Hebrews 13:23, and of course there are two entire epistles that record Paul's personal messages and advice to Timothy.

Here in Philippians, Paul says of Timothy that, "I have no one else like him", for even among the many fine brothers and sisters with whom Paul had served, Timothy stood out. His genuine interest in the welfare of others was unusual even for a Christian. Paul goes even farther, describing Timothy as being devoted to the interests of Jesus Christ, rather than to his own personal interests.

Even most believers still retain a great many personal interests that, when things become challenging, they can easily be tempted to put ahead of God's will. And it is easy even for believers to serve others only when there is a chance of recognition or praise. Timothy, though, was the rare person who really thought about others for their own sake, and who felt a true compassion for their needs, with no thought of recognition or reward for himself.

Such an example of faithful service is both an encouragement and a challenge to us. Timothy's life illustrates the very principles Paul has been teaching in Philippians. Are we, like Timothy, ready to serve and sacrifice even when no one realizes what we have done? Or do we only want others to know God so that we can feel as if we have accomplished something? These kinds of questions test what is in our hearts, and they can reveal to us how we can better become what God wills us to be.

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Week Ten: Epaphroditus's Godly Example (Philippians 2:25-30)

Paul presents two special believers as examples of the principles he is teaching in his epistle to the Philippians. Timothy, his spiritual 'son', is a godly example because of his personal devotion to the gospel and his genuine interest in the welfare of others. Paul is able to say that Timothy truly puts the interests of Jesus above his own personal interests. Paul now explains why another brother in Jesus, Epaphroditus, is also well worthy of commendation and emulation.

The ministry of Epaphroditus was characterized by sacrifice and perseverance (verses 25-30). Unlike Timothy, Epaphroditus is not well-known, even to readers of the Bible, since the Scriptures mention him only here in Philippians. But Paul expresses a deep appreciation for his example, and for the personal help that he provided to the apostle. Epaphroditus is illustrative of the many faithful Christians in every era who provide invaluable service to God and to his people, even though they may get little recognition or attention from those in this world.

The apostle describes Epaphroditus as his messenger and fellow worker. This faithful brother had apparently been traveling back and forth between Rome, where Paul was imprisoned, and Philippi, where he was a member of the church of Christ. On the occasion of writing this epistle, Paul has decided to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi to stay for a time.

Paul has made this decision even though it would benefit him personally if Epaphroditus were to stay with him. This faithful believer has been many things to Paul. He has provided the incarcerated apostle with a caring brother, a trustworthy and diligent co-worker, an eager and reliable messenger to the outside world, and an experienced fellow 'soldier' in his spiritual battles. His faith has revealed itself in all of these ways.

While with Paul, Epaphroditus had fallen seriously ill, to the point where even his life had been in danger. Fortunately, God had graciously spared him and brought him back to health. Paul's response to this blessing is worth careful consideration. Rather than merely giving thanks and then having his friend continue in his ministry, Paul wants to share God's outpouring of grace with the Philippians, and in a practical way. So the apostle is eager to send his helper back home, explaining that it will give Paul joy and peace to think about the relief that the Philippians will feel when they see their friend alive and in good health.

Paul also exhorts the Philippians to welcome and honor their messenger, who has provided so much valuable help to the apostle. His constant willingness to sacrifice, suffer, and work has proven that he is even willing to risk his life for the gospel, if that is what God wills him to do. Although this brother is little-remembered by most believers today, the things he did demonstrated the kind of faithful heart that God values highly.

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Week Eleven: The Wrong Kind of Righteousness (Philippians 3:1-6)

In the second chapter of Philippians, Paul called us to have the attitude of Jesus, gave us some important general principles about Christian living in this present world, and then provided some good examples to follow. He now exhorts his readers to pursue true righteousness, the kind that comes through faith. There are in fact two types of righteousness (3:1-11), a right kind and a wrong kind. Paul discusses the wrong kind first, because it is one that he knows through personal experience.

Paul knows this wrong kind of righteousness very well, because he himself lived in it for many years (Philippians 3:1-6). It is a common and natural trap to attempt to justify ourselves by our own righteousness, whatever forms that may take. Paul mentions his own heritage and fleshly zeal in order to remind us that if he, who excelled at practicing that kind of righteousness, could still reject it, then we also ought to turn away from any such attempts to justify ourselves.

His call to rejoice in the Lord (3:1) is not merely a simple call for us to be joyful. Rather, the apostle is telling us where we should find our joy. He knows that even many Christians get their greatest joy from something else other than Jesus. It may be worldly possessions or distinctions, or it could even be accomplishments done in the name of ministry, but if our greatest joy is not in the Lord himself, then we should take heed of the apostle's lessons here. He calls this a safeguard, rather than a criticism, for he knows how hard it is even for believers to keep their focus on God and on Jesus.

The apostle also issues a warning, telling his readers to 'watch out' for those who would lead them into worldly forms of righteousness that depend on human effort or knowledge (3:2-3). Paul's intense, graphic denunciations of these false teachers (and in particular, those who would force all Christians to be circumcised) are startling. He resorts to such strong language because he experienced firsthand the destructive effects of a religion that emphasizes human acts of righteousness instead of the righteousness of God.

Paul has learned to put no confidence in the flesh, and he thus encourages his readers to do likewise. The apostle's personal experience (3:4-6) can help us avoid making the same mistake. As Saul, the future apostle had everything someone could ask for in terms of fleshly religious qualifications. Saul's actions, knowledge, zeal, and family background would all top anyone else's claims to have earned salvation or a relationship with God. Yet he finally realized that none of these things earned him anything in God's sight.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes warns us not to seek riches, power, or distinctions, but to seek God. What makes the warnings in that book so powerful is that they come from King Solomon, a man who had more riches, power, and distinctions than anyone else of his era. Since even he was not satisfied, it would be utter folly for anyone else to think that such things could bring lasting joy or contentment. Likewise, here in Philippians the era's greatest practitioner of fleshly religion warns us not to practice fleshly religion. Paul turned to Jesus' blood alone as the basis for his justification, and we ought to do the same.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2006

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Twelve: Righteousness Through Faith (Philippians 3:7-11)

In this part of the epistle (Philippians 3:1-11), the apostle Paul compares two kinds of righteousness. He knows both well: in the past he has practiced the wrong kind, and now he has learned to seek the right kind. His own experience has made it clear to him that righteousness through human effort or knowledge is the wrong kind, so he gives his readers some strong warnings not to follow such a path themselves.

The apostle does not want to stop with a rejection of fleshly righteousness. What he really wants is for his readers to embrace the true and lasting righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. In just a few verses (3:7-11), Paul paints a vivid picture of what it means to seek this kind of righteousness. Paul's affirmation that he wants to know Christ gives us the theme of the kind of righteousness that pleases God.

To attain this right kind of righteousness requires that we allow ourselves to be humbled, and that we stop seeking our self-worth through our supposed fleshly distinctions and accomplishments. Paul himself had to re-evaluate his entire life, taking all the things he had valued wrongly and discarding them. Whereas he once considered fleshly righteousness to be a profitable occupation, he now realizes that it is useless and even destructive.

It is particularly noteworthy to see Paul's attitude towards what he has given up in order to follow Jesus. He considers all these things rubbish and garbage, having no value at all. It is hard enough for our flesh to turn away from sins, false teachings, and worldly loyalties in order to turn to the truth - and it is even harder to see these things for what they are. Many believers erroneously think that they have made some great sacrifice in leaving worldly things behind, but this is never so. God does not ask us to part with things that would truly bring spiritual benefit.

To seek righteousness through faith means to accept that we cannot offer God anything meritorious or praiseworthy of our own. We can only offer him our faith, and our faith must be in his righteousness, not in our own. God is the only source of genuine righteousness, and this is why it is so important for us to know Jesus. It is only through a relationship with Jesus that we can see God as he is, and it is only through Jesus that we can have our sins washed away by his blood.

Paul prayerfully asks to know Jesus, to know the power of his resurrection, and to have fellowship with Jesus through sharing in his sufferings. He is not seeking God in the expectation of being blessed in worldly ways, nor is he expecting that God will make sure that his ministry is always successful. Rather, the faithful apostle is expressing his desire to experience life as Jesus experienced it, so that afterwards he may experience resurrection as Jesus experienced it.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Thirteen: Growing As A Christian (Philippians 3:12-16)

In this passage, Paul steps back from the specific exhortations he has given the Philippians, in order to teach some general principles of Christian growth. In this life, we shall always be imperfect, subject to weakness, temptation, and fear. Yet we can always continue to grow, and can develop a perspective on growth that looks ahead and looks to Jesus.

Paul presents a helpful description of Christian growth (3:12-16). Paul's call for us to nurture the attitude of Christ himself is a task that we can never perfect or complete in this life. His own testimony tells us that he realizes his own imperfections, and yet he is not discouraged by them, but rather is drawn forward to become even closer to Jesus.

Paul himself is still imperfect; in fact, he knows that he will never attain sinless perfection in this world. Certainly, if the great apostle can accept this about himself, we ought to do likewise. Rather than become frustrated or discouraged about his imperfections, Paul concentrates on what lies ahead, and entrusts himself to Jesus. His desire is to take hold of that to which Jesus called him. Just as Jesus sought his Father's will rather than his own, so also Paul seeks Jesus' will rather than his own.

This attitude also leads the apostle to forget what is behind him. He knows that he can learn many things from the past, but he will not allow the past to hold him back. The past can hinder us no matter what it holds. If we have been successful in the past, this can cause us to feel that we have 'arrived' and need not accept any new challenges. If we have failed in the past, we can let our failures undermine our faith. Anything worthwhile that we do has come about by God's grace, and in the future we shall also need his grace for all that we do.

In straining toward the 'goal' to win the 'prize', Paul is looking beyond the events of this world. The real prize comes to us only when we leave this world and return to the Father. Nothing that happens here in our lives or ministries can possibly be sufficiently exciting or fulfilling to overshadow the security that comes from having a home in eternity with God.

This is what genuine spiritual maturity is. The spiritually mature realize that their home is not in this world, and they do not expect anything in this world to give them ultimate fulfillment. They do not form unrealistic expectations of their lives, their ministries, or their brothers and sisters in Jesus. They accept positive things with humility and joy, and they endure negative things with patience and faith.

The apostle also understands that there are those who think differently, and who will not be able to understand or to accept these spiritual principles. He feels no need to make such persons feel inferior, or to engage them in debate. He simply entrusts their needs and weaknesses to God, knowing that God is more capable of enlightening them than he is.

A final principle of Christian growth is to 'live up to what we have already attained'. God has poured out his grace and has lavished his love on each of us in many ways. Even if we are capable of nothing else, we can be appreciative to him for all that he has done.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Fourteen: The Citizens of This World (Philippians 3:17-19)

Earlier in chapter 3, Paul compared two kinds of righteousness. Now, he will compare two kinds of citizenship (Philippians 3:17-4:1). Those whose citizenship is in this world will find themselves motivated by and attracted to the things of this world - to their shame, and eventually to their regret. Those who consider their citizenship to be in heaven will have their minds on greater, heavenly things.

Paul paints a vivid picture of those who live for this world (3:17-19). For his readers to live and think like Jesus, they must first realize the emptiness of living for this world. Those whose minds are on earthly things cannot truly understand God's Word or God's will. Even many believers in God, if they seek God with the primary goal of being blessed in this life rather than in eternity, can fall into these worldly attitudes.

Paul's description of the worldly mind is given in the context of a plea for the Philippians to follow his example. That is, he wants them to observe the humans around them, and then realize that there is a sharp difference between those whose minds are on the world and those whose minds are on God. The world considers even 'religion' to be essentially a cultural phenomenon, not the search for truth that it ought to be. Believers in Jesus must see this for what it is, and be prepared to move beyond mere outward religious activity.

We should follow Paul's example in this regard, for there are indeed many enemies of the cross in this world. It is not only rabid atheists who are 'enemies of the cross'. On the cross, Jesus shed his blood so that our sins could be forgiven. This in turn was necessary because we are all sinners. Those who will not accept the universal need for grace and forgiveness, and who thus trust instead in human effort, wisdom, or 'goodness', are making themselves enemies of the cross.

The apostle's description of those who live for this world rings true in any era. Their destiny is destruction, but they do not think of this consciously. Instead they indulge themselves in selfishness of one kind or another, hoping that by so doing they might forget their mortality and their need for God. 'They may literally live for food and drink, or for other sensual pleasures, but Paul's description applies equally well to those who live to satisfy their emotions, to accumulate wealth, to gain popularity, or to feel superior to others.

The worldly even glory in their shame. They praise sinful behavior and call this 'tolerance', behave selfishly and call this 'a matter of principle', hate those who disagree with them and call this 'fighting for the truth', deny the truth God's Word and call this 'intelligence'. May we glory in nothing except the blood of Jesus, which washed away our sins, in God his Father, who in his grace has prepared a home for us, and in his Spirit, who lives in us and sustains us despite our own sinfulness, weakness, and folly.

The earthly perspective is not always obviously sinful. Yet none of its forms can offer any real hope. No one likes being humble, and no one likes to feel helpless. But when we are weak, we are strong, and when we humble ourselves and repent, God will lift us up.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Fifteen: Our Citizenship Is In Heaven (Philippians 3:20-4:1)

In contrast to those whose citizenship is in this world, we whose citizenship is in heaven will have our minds on heavenly, spiritual things. Our hope will not be in ourselves or in anything of temporary value, but in a heavenly, eternal savior. While the things of this world seemingly offer great promise, they generally disappoint those who make idols of them, while the rewards of heaven (which at first may not seem so exciting) will bring us lasting joy and blessing.

Thinking of heavenly things (3:20-4:1) is a simple but pervasive concept, and it can lead to the kinds of inward changes that God values the most. This perspective comes as a blessed contrast to the worldly mindset that was described in the previous verses. The theme of hope is what particularly stands out in these verses. To those who truly believe in Jesus as both Lord and Christ, Jesus is the eagerly awaited savior from heaven, who shows us how to overcome the world. He is not merely a good man who tried to make this world a somewhat better place through his teachings.

We have a hope for eternity, and the day we most look forward to will bring the end of this world. For we know that Jesus' final return will also see the transformation of our weak earthly bodies of flesh, bone, and blood. At that time we shall set aside forever the weaknesses, fears, limitations, and frustrations that come with being mortal, fleshly, and fallible. We shall assume our true form, the form that God has prepared for those who seek something better than this world.

This, then, says the apostle, is how we ought to stand firm in the Lord. Notice that, to those who understand and accept their weakness, this coming transformation provides a blessed hope, a motivation to endure this world for the time being, and a reason to try to help others find this same hope. But to those who delude themselves into thinking that they are strong enough and wise enough to stand on their own, the last day is a cause for dread. Even those who vigorously deny any belief in God still know, somewhere in their hearts, that this time will come. And so they live lives of self-indulgence, self-promotion, and self-exaltation, as they attempt to force the frightening truths about God from their closed minds.

Many persons do this simply because the things of heaven seem, at first, to be of lesser value than the things of this world. But this is only because the things of this world are seen, and thus seem to be more desirable. God is using the apostle to remind us that we have 'better and lasting possessions' that are not of this world (and which we thus cannot see now), and which we shall be able to enjoy for a much longer time. The worldly are impatient, for they know that they cannot keep their possessions or distinctions for long. But Christians can afford to be patient, for we know that what we have will last forever.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Sixteen: Practical Christian Living (Philippians 4:2-9)

In the first three chapters of his epistle, Paul has discussed what it means to have the attitude, values, and thoughts of Jesus. In this last chapter, he will discuss some specific practical situations, and he will consider the ways that we go about our daily lives. In these next few verses, he addresses a particular difficulty in the church at Philippi, and after that he gives some general practical wisdom.

He wants first to help the Philippians to resolve a personal difficulty that has arisen (4:2-3). As an example of the very themes that Paul has been emphasizing, he addresses a conflict between two women who were both devoted Christians. He asks the two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to 'agree with each other in the Lord'. The nature of their disagreement is unknown, and it does not matter. Paul's plea for harmony is not for them to 'agree' on this issue itself, but rather to 'agree in the Lord', to accept the primary importance of Jesus and the grace that comes from him.

For it is a waste of valuable time to try to get even a small group of believers to develop the exact same opinion about every possible issue, but it is a valuable and powerful foundation for ministry when we can give Jesus' sacrifice, grace, and compassion the position of pre-eminence that they deserve. The apostle also urges one of his friends, whom he addresses as the 'loyal yokefellow', to help these two women to remember who they are in Jesus. Paul's hope is that they, and we, can set an example for a world that constantly engages in fruitless argument and confrontation.

This is then followed by Paul's memorable thoughts on developing a godly perspective for daily living (4:4-9). In some of the best-known verses in Philippians, Paul provides simple but invaluable advice. He calls us to focus on God, not on the world, and to concentrate on the spiritual, the eternal, and the holy, rather than on the fleshly, the temporary, and the sinful. Such a perspective also makes it easy for God to teach us, guide us, protect us, and care for us.

We all seek, in one way or another, the peace of God (4:4-7). To experience this blessing, we should start by rejoicing always in the Lord, that is, by reminding ourselves constantly of the blessings we have in him. Developing a gentle spirit and warding off anxiety are two of the things that this helps us to do. Neither is easy or quick, but we can progress towards these desirable goals through the kind of prayer life that the apostle describes here. Allowing God to carry our burdens, while thanking him for our blessings, truly does guard our hearts and our minds from many of the world's threats and assaults on our souls and spirits.

The apostle's advice to think the right kinds of thoughts is also quite practical (4:8-9). It is rather obvious that thinking about spiritual, positive, pure, noble things will lead to a healthier, more godly perspective on life. Paul's own example can guide us, and we can further take note of the things we allow to influence our thoughts. Do the books we read, the entertainment we watch, the conversations we have, fill our minds with godly thoughts or with worldly thoughts? Our flesh may dislike this principle, but its implications should be obvious.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Seventeen: The Secret of Being Content (Philippians 4:10-13)

In the last portion of the epistle, Paul discusses several aspects of giving and receiving, as they ought to be practiced by Christians. These verses contain practical wisdom and important spiritual principles. Paul thanks the Philippians for the help they have given to him, and then makes some important general observations about being content with what we have. This once again reveals an important difference between the mind of Jesus and the mind of the world.

Paul describes here what he calls 'the secret of being content' in all situations (4:10-13). The significance of his point is illustrated by the ways that his very words are often misunderstood. For we often base our contentment (or lack thereof) on whether our circumstances are as we wish them to be. If they are not currently as we wish them to be, we might then base our contentment on whether there is a definite means of getting them to be as we wish them to be. True contentment, though, is to accept all circumstances as a basis for God to work as he pleases, not as we wish him to work.

In noting with thanksgiving that the Philippians have again renewed their concern for Paul by sending him help, the apostle mentions an even more important lesson about contentment. Past experiences have given Paul a convincing demonstration of how widely the times in our lives can differ from one another. Times of triumph alternate with times of loss or disaster, while times of joy and peace alternate with times of despair and turmoil. Thus, any meaningful form of contentment must sustain us both in plenty and in want, both in victory and in defeat.

When Paul says he "can do everything through him who gives me strength" (verse 13), we know that 'him' refers to God. Yet we must also be careful also to understand the rest of the verse. The apostle is not saying that we can choose anything that we wish to do, and then God will somehow make it happen. Rather, he is saying that, whatever comes our way, whatever things we may have to do or to endure, we can always know that God is with us to help and guide us.

The world places great value on a person's own self-will, and the flesh thus wishes to interpret this verse accordingly. We want to know that there is always a way to get what we want, if we can just talk God into it one way or another. But this is not the case, and it is certainly not what this verse teaches. The godly realize that self-will is at best capricious and unreliable, and we instead take much greater comfort in praying that God's will be done in all things.

It is not at all difficult to be content in times of plenty, victory, or ease (although the worldly are frequently discontented even in times of great blessing). And it is really not all that difficult to be content if we confidently expect that God will give us everything we wish for, and will enable us to accomplish anything we wish to do. We would not need to find a 'secret' to contentment if this were all that it was. The test of whether we have true contentment lies in accepting all things that God calls us to do, whether they match our own will or not.

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THINKING AS JESUS THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM PHILIPPIANS

Week Eighteen: Giving & Receiving in Jesus (Philippians 4:14-23)

Paul closes the epistle with some general observations on giving and receiving. Besides being practical and encouraging, his remarks also bring out how important it is to God that his people care for each other and meet one another's needs when they can. This makes a fitting way in which to end an epistle that has constantly reminded us of the need to renew and re-evaluate our attitudes and our ways of thinking.

Sharing is one of the basic features of the Christian lifestyle, and here Paul reminds us that this includes sharing in one another's troubles, as well as sharing in matters of giving and receiving (4:14-19). The Philippians have done both for Paul, by remaining close to him through his difficult times and by sending frequent aid to him, providing things that he needed.

Paul notes further that they have done this even at times when others have pulled back from him. As odd as it may seem to us, there were times when even many believers found it awkward, and even undesirable, to associate closely with Paul, due to the troubles he faced both from secular authorities and from false teachers.

It is interesting that Paul tells the Philippians he is 'looking for what may be credited to your account', since we know that he cannot mean 'credit' in the sense of earning a reward. Rather, he knows that to help someone is a blessing in itself, and so he simply wants them to know how much he genuinely appreciates their gifts, and how much their assistance has helped him in practical ways. Even the renowned apostle by no means takes for granted the things that others do for him.

He calls what they have sent a 'fragrant offering' and an 'acceptable sacrifice', comparing them with one of the free will offerings that may have been made under the Old Covenant. Indeed, when we give for the right reasons, it is a freewill offering of our time, our energy, or our material possessions. We should give neither out of a sense of obligation nor out of a hope that we shall be rewarded in kind. Instead, we should consider the many blessings we have received, and thus rejoice whenever we can, in some small way, be a blessing to others.

Paul's final thoughts call to mind some of the overall ideas that he wants the Philippians to remember (4:20-23). All the things that he has said and done have been devoted to God's glory, and he calls the Philippians to have this same perspective and motivation. As he exchanges final greetings and prays for God's grace to be given to his readers, we can see that these simple sentiments are truly heartfelt by the apostle.

The epistle's last topic is rather appropriate, for we have seen in numerous ways that both Paul and the Philippian Christians are good examples of giving and receiving. We also should do both of these in a godly way that will also be an example to the world. Whatever we give, whether it is material things, time, encouragement, or grace, should be given generously and willingly. And whatever we receive, whether from God or from other persons, should be accepted with humility and thanksgiving.

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