

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

**I Once Was a Stranger to Grace
and to God**

By [David Strain](#)

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Philippians 3:1-11

Now let me invite you please to take your copies of God's Word and turn with me to Philippians chapter 3. Philippians chapter 3 - page 981 in the church Bibles. We'll be reading the first eleven verses. Before we do, let's bow our heads before the Lord as we pray. Let's pray together.

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus' name, amen.

Philippians chapter 3 reading from verse 1. This is the inerrant Word of Almighty God:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh - though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for 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; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count 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 that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,

and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy Word.

Jehovah Tsidkenu

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the minister of what is now Saint Peter's Free Church of Scotland in Dundee, where David Robertson, who is known to many of us, is the current minister, where one of our mission teams went to be this summer bringing the Gospel to the kids of Dundee. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, known to many of us for his daily reading plan, taking us through the Scriptures, he died not yet reaching his thirtieth year and he died probably of tuberculosis. And during one of the terrible bouts of suffering and fever that plagued him about nine years prior to his death on the fifteenth of November 1832, he penned a hymn in the midst of his sickness and suffering entitled, "Jehovah Tsidkenu" - "The Lord our Righteousness." It is an autobiographical hymn; it tells M'Cheyne's own story. It begins with an account of his spiritual condition prior to becoming a believer in Jesus:

I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.

Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,
I wept when the waters went over His soul;
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree
Jehovah Tsidkenu - 'twas nothing to me.

So here he is, before he became a Christian, and there were occasions even when he heard the Gospel preached and it moved him, but he did not yet understand the gravity and weight of his own sin or that it was his sin his Savior died to bear away that he might be made clean. He was still a stranger to grace and to God. But then one day all of that changed:

When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;
No refuge, no safety in self could I see, -
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Savior must be.

Now he sees that everything in which he once placed his confidence was really bankrupt and empty and he must have Christ if he is to have any hope at all.

My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;

My guilty fears banished, with boldness I came
To drink at the foundation, life-giving and free, -
Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me.

M'Cheyne has been converted at last and now he rests wholly on the righteousness of another, no longer his own righteousness and goodness but on the righteousness of Christ - the Lord His righteousness, Jehovah Tsidkenu.

Confidence in Christ Alone

In Philippians chapter 3, in the passage of Scripture we just read, we have a rare moment of autobiography from the apostle Paul in which he does something similar to M'Cheyne in that great hymn - he recounts his own story; he tells us where he once placed his confidence before God and how all of that changed, how he came to see his confidence in self and in religion and in his own performance, ultimately as bankrupt, and how he came to rest entirely on Jehovah Tsidkenu, the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church at Philippi, you will remember, is facing a period of internal conflict. There are false teachers, Judaizers, who are arguing that the Philippians must do more than simply believe in Jesus; they must also add to their faith in Christ legal performance. They must be circumcised and they must conform themselves to all the requirements of the Mosaic Law. In verses 1 to 3 Paul has contrasted true faith in Christ with the faith and life of these false teachers and he has denounced them actually in sharp and pointed terms. He calls them dogs and he compares them to the false prophets, the prophets of Baal, who mutilated themselves in order to try and manipulate the deity into blessing them. Why is Paul so pointed and sharp in exposing and denouncing these false teachers? Well as we'll see in Paul's autobiographical sketch in verses 4 through 11, Paul knows the danger of their error because he once embraced that error himself. He was one of them once upon a time. He knows where the road they are treading will take and he wants to save the Philippians from a terrible, spiritual detour. And so he begins to tell his own story so that with Paul, as Paul talks about how he came from trusting in his own righteousness to trusting in the righteousness of Christ, we may also be sure never to rest on ourselves but always upon our Savior for our hope and confidence before God.

The central motif that he uses to talk about all this is an accounting metaphor. You see that in verses 7 and 8. "Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." He's dealing with profit and loss, with assets and liabilities, with credit and debit. And as he talks about all of this he's going to show how he has moved from one accounting system to another, from an old way of life that reckoned certain things to be assets to a new way of life that sees those things in which he once trusted to be only liabilities as he comes to trust no longer in himself but in the righteousness of Christ. And so let's think about how

he viewed those imagined and perceived assets as an unconverted man.

I. The Perceived Assets of an Unconverted Man

First of all, let's look at verses 5 and 6 please. Here is Paul's resume as an unconverted religious Jewish man. Here are the assets in which he once rested his confidence, in which he once boasted. He starts with his inheritance and his pedigree. He was "circumcised on the eighth day," verse 5; that is to say he was circumcised just right, in exact accordance with the Mosaic Law. He is "of the people of Israel" - he is no Gentile dog; he is no Johnny-come-lately convert to Judaism. He is one "of the tribe of Benjamin," which is to say he's no ordinary Israelite like King Saul his namesake. He comes from the tribe of Benjamin; his is a noble pedigree. Then he moves on to speak about his choices as a Jewish man. He is "a Hebrew of Hebrews." That is, he is an Aramaic speaker - unusual for a Jew of the Diaspora. He has not compromised with the Greco-Roman culture within which he has been raised. Despite being brought up in the imperial city of Tarsus, far away from the Jewish homeland, he has chosen a path leading him into deep authentic embrace of all that is Hebrew culture and Hebrew language. He is, we might say, a hardcore Hebrew. "As to the law," verse 5, he opted for the very strictest sect of Judaism. He is a Pharisee. The word "Pharisee" means "separated one." His membership in this elite group puts him in the narrowest, most orthodox, most conservative sect of Jewish religious life. "As to zeal," verse 6, he can find no better account of his passion for Pharisaic Judaism than to tell us that he hunted down and persecuted Christians. "As to righteousness under the law," no one could find fault with his exacting observance of every detail of the 613 regulations of the rabbinic code.

To anyone's reckoning this is an impressive list. Gerald Hawthorne, one of the commentators, puts it this way: "By human standards, he was the best of the best." The best of the best - that's what Paul's resume tells us about him. If pedigree and performance and purity are what matters before God, well then Paul of all men has grounds for confidence in himself. "If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh," he says, "I have more." Quite reasonably as he outlines his resume. Those are his perceived assets. These are the things in which he places his confidence before God at this point of his life before he becomes a Christian.

II. The New Accounting of a Converted Man

But then do notice there is a great change that comes over Paul. He begins to think of his assets in an entirely different life. Now he sees them as loss. There is a new accounting system in place by which he makes a new evaluation of what really matters, what really counts. Here's the new accounting of a converted man. The perceived assets of an unconverted man, now secondly the new

accounting of a converted man. Paul is not the man he once was. He no longer views things the way he once did. He's exchanged his former boasting for something quite different. He undergoes an accounting revolution. That's the real significance of the bookkeeping language in verses 7 and 8 isn't it? "Whatever gain I had I now count as loss." He no longer reckons values the way he used to, do you see? His method for making an evaluation has been radically overhauled. He takes all his assets in which he once reckoned to the credit column in his account, he saw them as especially valuable in the sight of God, and now he puts every one of them in the debit column, in the liability column. He no longer sees them to be assets at all. In fact he now counts them as utter liabilities, as burdens, as debts. He goes so far as to say there is nothing in this world, nothing worthy to place his confidence in, nothing. He counts everything as loss. He says he counts them as rubbish.

The Debt of Confidence in the Flesh

There is no part of his past, no action, no monument of his, nothing to which he is now willing to point in himself that he will claim as a meritorious spiritual asset that will impress God or win acceptance for him at the bar of heaven's justice. It's as though he now thinks of those things in which he once boasted almost like misused credit cards. They appear like assets but the more you use them they simply drive you deeper and deeper and deeper into debt. Paul is trusting in empty, deceptive assets not assets at all, and he now realizes, his eyes have been opened and he now realizes they're all debt. "I carry a crushing burden of debt! I'm in terrible spiritual danger!" And so as he makes a new evaluation according to a different scale, a different set of measurements, he sees pedigree and performance and purity as liability, all debt. But having Jesus Christ, he says, wipes the debt clean once and for all. All those liabilities, but if you have the righteousness of Christ, it wipes the debt clean once and for all. He is of surpassing value, the one singular asset whose worth outweighs everything else. "Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

The Surpassing Richness of Christ

Notice, by the way, that Paul is using language there he uses nowhere else in the Scriptures - intimate language. He calls Jesus Christ, "my Lord." It's the only place he ever does that - "my Lord." He has been a Pharisee, he has been persecuting the church, he has denied that Jesus is the Messiah. You remember at the climax of the great "Christ hymn" in chapter 2 at verse 11 he says, "The day is coming when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," *o Kurios*, "Lord, to the glory of God the Father." It's a title that no self-respecting Pharisee could use of anyone other than Almighty God Himself and now here is Paul, now that everything has changed in Paul's heart, here he

is ahead of time, before that great day has dawned, bending his own knee and saying of Jesus Christ whom he once utterly repudiated, whose servants he once persecuted, "He is Lord, and more than that He is my Lord! I have Him! He is mine and I am His and because I do I have found something of infinite value. He is precious, like nothing else. In light of the value of Jesus Christ all of the empty trinkets in which I once trusted seem to be hopeless and useless and worthless. And all my boasting in my own righteousness I see to be liability and debt, but in Christ and in Christ only I am rich indeed!"

No Room for Confidence in the Flesh

"Put your whole life in the scales on one side," Paul is saying to us. Put whatever you find to be of ultimate value and worth in the scales and then put Jesus Christ, His obedience and blood, in the other. He will always, always outweigh every other in which you have once trusted. He is more valuable, He is more precious, He outweighs your very best boast. Paul has come to know what the Judaizer infecting the Philippian church have not understood, what we often forget - you can't boast in yourself and have Jesus Christ. His righteousness is all that you need. There is no room for confidence in the flesh. And why ever would you trust in the deceptive, lying assets that plunge you deeper and deeper into spiritual debt when the righteousness of Christ is available to you.

That's Paul's question to us. You can't get rich while plunging deeper into debt. You don't need to trust yourself; it will destroy you in the end. Your only hope is to trust in the righteousness of another - the righteousness of Christ. What do you make your boast in? In what do you place your confidence? Do you really rest, day by day, in your pedigree, your family, your heritage, your parents, your rich history in this church? Do you rest in your performance - you never miss a Sunday, you read your Bible? Do you rest in your purity? You're a good man; you're a good woman - your moral life. Paul says of people like you, "Beware of them. They are dangerous. I know, I used to be one," that's what Paul says. "Don't listen to them. Let me point you to true riches where real righteousness may be found. Let me point you to Christ." So we see that the perceived assets of an unconverted man, assets that actually turn out to be liabilities, we see how the accounting system by which Paul made those evaluations has been utterly overhauled and revolutionized in his conversion. That day on the Damascus Road he came to see Christ and to trust Christ. Jehovah Tsidkenu, the Lord his righteousness, and everything changed.

What You Gain when You Gain Christ

And then I want you to notice the real assets that Paul begins to itemize for us. Here is what you get when you get Christ. Here is just how rich He makes us when He is ours and we are His. Here are the surpassing excellencies and worthiness of Christ, itemized and outlined for us. Four things in particular -

verses 9 through 11.

Gaining Union with Christ

First, when you gain Christ you gain union with Him. Paul writes, verse 9, of gaining Christ, “being found in Him.” This is the fountain blessing from which every other blessing in the Christian life flows. From it, everything else proceeds. The center of the Christian life is not some particular gift or grace bestowed upon you to make your life better. It is Christ Himself; it is Jesus you get in the Gospel. He gives Himself to you. You are united to Him, bound to your Lord and Savior forever. And in Him is every spiritual blessing made over to you in the heavenly places. So you’re united to Christ.

Gaining Justification in Christ

And then because you’re united to Christ, secondly, you will be found in Him with His righteousness robing you. You are justified in the sight of God only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to you and received by faith alone. Verse 9 again, Paul says he will be “found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ.” The righteousness of God that depends on faith. Instead of your own homespun, cobbled together righteousness, all of which in the end is filthy rags, you get the righteousness which is from God, the righteousness of Christ Himself. You get it not by your works but by His. You get it not by your own attainment but by His work on your behalf. Not by doing but by trusting in Him you receive the verdict in the court of heaven, “Righteous, only for the righteousness of My Son.” There is no merit in your obedience. Were you to point to your very best works, your most pure motives, your most pious moments, to place your confidence there, were you to trust in your most religious attitudes and actions for your acceptance with God and your righteousness in His sight, your best works would damn you forever! You cannot trust them to save you. You need the righteousness of another. You need an alien righteousness. You need the righteousness of Christ.

Gaining Sanctification in Christ

Then thirdly, he says when you gain Christ you gain union with Him, you gain justification in Him, you also gain sanctification in Him. That is to say He changes you inside out. Verse 10, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, being like him in his death.” Notice carefully the order of that statement. It’s back to front, isn’t it? First is the power of the resurrection, then a sharing in Christ’s suffering, and then finally conformity to His death. It’s all back to front - suffering leads to death and after death resurrection. That’s the pattern. That’s how it was for Jesus - crucified, suffering He dies, is buried, on the third day He rose again. But for the Christian, Paul says, resurrection power comes first. The power of new life comes first. When you come to Jesus you are made a new creature and in Him you are changed; new

life springs up subduing your sin, generating in you an appetite for holiness, teaching you to live in grateful obedience not in order to lend God's favor but because He has lavished it on you freely by His grace. And endowed and infused with new life resurrection power, Christians, Paul says, now share in Christ's sufferings. You know we do not come to Christ to be spared suffering, as many of you know better even than I. You have been plunged, haven't you, through the valley. Some of you are going through it right now. And you have discovered that there is a fellowship with Christ in those dark, hard, and sore times. There is a communion with your Savior who has plumbed the depths ahead of you and you have discovered that in Him even your sorest trials are not purposeless; they have a design. Suffering in the Christian life is surgical. God is at work wielding the scalpel of suffering for the sanctification of your life.

A Call to Embrace the Surpassing Value of Knowing Christ

That's what Paul says in this text. The purpose of sharing in Christ's sufferings is that we might become like Him in His death, that we might die to self and sin and live only for His glory and praise. God is dealing with the diseases of your heart by your trials, hard and sore though they may be. Like a diamond against a black velvet cushion, the sufficiency and beauty and excellency and worth of Christ shines all the brighter in the context of the darkness of our trials. He shows us that He is enough in the worst of times and in our sufferings and in our sorrows He can be utterly trusted and relied upon. He is enough for you Paul is saying. When He takes you into the valley it is to show you that He is the one upon whom you are to place all your hope and rest all your confidence so that there's union with Christ leading to your justification and your sanctification and finally even one day to your glorification when suffering is undone and even death's dreadful grip is broken and new life that is already growing and bearing fruit within you overflows and undoes the grave so that you are raised incorruptible to dwell with the Savior who bore your sin in His body on the tree face to face in unending joy and perfect delight. That's what you get in Jesus - an entire life revolutionized, right-standing in the courts of heaven, a change of life reconfigured, remodeled by the grace of God at work within you, even in trials conforming you to the Savior and one day a destiny filled with glory and joy that will never end. Take your richest boasts and compare them with what you gain in Christ and they will appear for the paltry, threadbare, meager things they've always been - bankrupt and empty. It's Jesus that you need. Do you see that? It is His righteousness alone. Flee to and rest in and cling to and trust on Him. Only He can win the acceptance for you before God.

Three days after he penned that autobiographical hymn we read together at the beginning of the sermon, Robert Murray M'Cheyne's fever finally broke. And on November 18, 1834 he wrote of that season of sickness and suffering and pain in his diary. He said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul!" He almost died. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, learned more and more the value of Jehovah Tsidkenu." The Lord took him down into the dark valley of suffering that

he might learn more of the value of the Lord his righteousness. And the Lord Jesus is here today pleading with you that you would trust in His righteousness alone. Some of you are in that same dark valley and Christ is pleading with you to trust in His righteousness alone to see how the diamond of His sufficiency and worthiness sparkles the more brightly in the gloom of your trials and to lean and rest only upon Him. Christ is the treasure buried in a field, isn't He, who for joy over it we gladly sell all that we have that we might possess Him. That's what Paul is saying. "I'd let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. The body they may kill. His Word abideth still. His kingdom is forever. Jesus Christ is sufficient. His righteousness is enough. I trust Him and all else is loss compared with the surpassing value of knowing Christ." Is that your confession? Is that your confession? Christ is all and everything else is loss. He is gain and everything else is liability and I will trust in Him. By God's grace may it be so. Let us pray together.

Our Father, we praise You for Jesus, Jehovah Tsidkenu, the Lord our righteousness. Forgive us for ever trusting in our own goodness and works to win acceptance with You. Thank You that Jesus' obedience and blood does what we never could, that by Him we are justified in Your sight, by Him we are sanctified, and by Him one day we shall be glorified. Help us to see all else as loss and to believe and know and rejoice in the great gain that having Jesus really is. For we ask this in His name, amen.

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