

Homiletics Analysis: Philippians 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Philippians 3 opens with a sharp warning against “the dogs” — circumcision-party teachers who insist on law-keeping as the ground of standing before God — and pivots immediately to Paul’s autobiographical exhibit A: his own irreproachable Jewish credentials. He lists them with precision: tribe of Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee, blameless under the law. Then, without pause, he declares every one of those credentials to be *skubalon* — refuse, dung — compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. The logic is not that his credentials were worthless in themselves, but that they have been revalued by the discovery of something infinitely greater. Gaining Christ and being found in him — not with a righteousness of his own derived from the law, but with the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God — is the great exchange that reorients every other calculation.

The second movement (vv. 10–16) is forward-pressing and athletic. Paul wants to *know* Christ — not merely know about him — and specifically to know the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, in order to attain the resurrection from the dead. He is careful to say he has not yet arrived; he has not been perfected. But he has received one defining orientation: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, he presses on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. The chapter closes with a contrasting portrait — those whose god is their belly, whose glory is their shame, who are set on earthly things — and calls the Philippians to imitate Paul and those who walk according to the pattern he has modeled, because their citizenship is in heaven and their Savior is coming from there to transform their lowly bodies into conformity with his glorious body.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through Philippians 3 is to reorder the believer’s entire value system by confronting the perennial human tendency to trust in religious performance, personal achievement, and earthly security, and to replace that trust with an all-consuming, forward-pressing orientation toward Christ himself. The passage is not primarily instructional — it is disruptive and reorienting. God is seeking to produce in the reader a radical revaluation of credentials, a restless holy dissatisfaction with the present state of sanctification, and a firm heavenward citizenship that relativizes all earthly attachments. The idol under attack is self-generated righteousness in all its forms — religious, moral, and cultural. The vision held out is not merely right doctrine about justification but a living,

active, straining-forward relationship with the risen Christ as the supreme and sufficient treasure.

Subject Sentence: Paul counts all credentials as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and presses forward toward final conformity to him.

Primary Claim: God is calling every believer to perform a total revaluation — counting every ground of self-trust as loss — and to press forward with single-minded, resurrection-fueled urgency toward Christ as the one sufficient treasure and coming Savior.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identity of “the Dogs” (vv. 2–3)

Most evangelical interpreters agree that Paul’s opponents in verse 2 are Judaizers — almost certainly connected to or in the pattern of those addressed in Galatians — who insist on circumcision and Torah observance as either the ground or the completion of standing before God. The reforming inversion is deliberate and biting: those who call Gentiles “dogs” are themselves the dogs; those who insist on physical circumcision are the mutilation; the true circumcision are those who worship by the Spirit of God. There is no significant divergence on this basic identification, though Dispensational interpreters sometimes read the passage in a more Israel-specific frame (Paul defending his apostleship to an ethnically Jewish audience) rather than as a universally applicable warning against all forms of merit-based religion. The Reformed reading — that Paul’s argument here has direct application to any system that supplements or replaces the righteousness of Christ with human achievement — is exegetically stronger, because Paul’s own logic moves from his *exemplary* credentials to their *total loss* in a way that generalizes to any achievement, not merely Jewish ethnic markers.

The “Righteousness of My Own” (v. 9)

This verse is one of the clearest statements of the forensic nature of justification in the Pauline corpus. The contrast is between “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law” and “the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” The Reformed tradition reads this as imputed righteousness — the alien righteousness of Christ credited to the believer through faith, as opposed to any righteousness generated by the believer’s own covenant performance. The Lutheran tradition reads this in essentially the same direction and, characteristically, places even greater homiletical weight on the Law/Gospel antithesis here: the entire first half of the chapter is “law” (credentials, achievement, self-trust) that the gospel has annulled. The Wesleyan tradition *acknowledges* the forensic force here but tends to give more weight to the imparted or transformative dimension in

verses 10–11 (knowing Christ, conformity to his death, resurrection). The Reformed verdict is that the forensic dimension in verse 9 is foundational and must not be collapsed into the experiential/transformational dimension in verses 10–12, even though both are present and both are Paul's. The righteousness that is received (v. 9) is the foundation for the conformity that is pursued (vv. 10–14). Wesleyan readings that make verses 10–12 the primary frame can inadvertently turn Paul's pursuit of Christ into a pursuit of sanctified experience, which softens the radical gift-character of his foundational claim.

The “Knowing Him” in Verse 10

Pentecostal and Charismatic interpreters often read verse 10 — “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection” — as a warrant for seeking heightened experiential encounter with the Spirit and miraculous power. The verse does have an experiential dimension — Paul is not describing knowing *about* Christ but knowing *Christ himself*, with resurrection power as one dimension of that knowing. However, the structure of verse 10 — “the power of his resurrection *and* the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death” — makes clear that the knowing Paul seeks includes and requires conformity to Christ's suffering and death, not merely access to resurrection power. An interpretation that extracts resurrection power from its paired context of cruciform suffering has misread the verse. The Reformed reading: to know Christ is to be united to him in the full pattern of his death-and-resurrection, which means the power of his resurrection is always and only the power that works through suffering and weakness, not around it. This has direct homiletical implications — the application of this verse must not become a warrant for power-seeking disconnected from cross-bearing.

“Not That I Have Already Obtained This” (vv. 12–14)

Some Wesleyan interpreters have historically used Paul's language here to argue for the possibility of “entire sanctification” or “Christian perfection” as an attainable present state — Paul says he has *not* attained it, implying that attainment is theoretically possible in the present life. The Reformed reading interprets the “prize” in view (v. 14) as eschatological — the resurrection from the dead (v. 11), the final conformity to Christ's glorious body (v. 21) — not a state of perfection achievable prior to glorification. Paul's one-thing posture (v. 13) and his pressing-forward imagery are not describing progress toward present sinless perfection but the eschatological urgency of a runner who has not yet crossed the finish line. The passage's *telos* is explicitly the return of Christ and the resurrection body (vv. 20–21), not an intermediate stage of complete sanctification. This does not minimize the call to pressing-forward growth — it grounds that growth in the right eschatological frame.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:6** — “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” The foundational OT ground for the righteousness-through-faith that Paul is claiming; Paul's revaluation of his own credentials in Philippians 3 is the

NT equivalent of the Abrahamic paradigm — faith, not works, as the only ground of standing before God.

- **Isaiah 64:6** — “All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” The OT prophetic witness that even Israel’s best covenant performance cannot generate a righteousness sufficient before God — directly corroborating Paul’s “skubalon” verdict on his own credentials.
- **Romans 3:21–26** — Paul’s full forensic exposition of the righteousness of God revealed through faith in Christ, apart from the law. The same claim Philippians 3:9 makes in compressed autobiographical form is here made in full theological argument.
- **2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10** — Paul’s “momentary light affliction” passage, which maps directly onto Philippians 3:10–14: the outward wasting is matched by inward renewal, the present suffering is the pathway to the coming glory, and the eschatological frame (resurrection, appearing before Christ) governs the believer’s present orientation. Confirms that the “pressing forward” of Philippians 3 is cruciform, not triumphalist.
- **1 Corinthians 9:24–27** — The athletic imagery Paul uses in Philippians 3:12–14 (pressing toward the goal, the prize) is more fully developed here, confirming that the imagery is eschatological in force — the prize is obtained at the finish, not during the race.

Aim: To shatter any confidence in self-generated righteousness and reorient the reader toward Christ as the one sufficient treasure and the resurrection as the one final goal, producing both doctrinal clarity on justification and personal urgency in pressing forward.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	Paul urges rejoicing in the Lord; warns that repeating the warning is not tedious but necessary for safety	“Safeguard” — the warning is protective, not merely corrective
3:2	Triple warning: “watch out for the dogs, the evil workers, the mutilation” — sharp polemical language	Inversion: those who impose circumcision become “mutilation” (<i>katatome</i> vs. <i>peritome</i>)
3:3	Defines true circumcision: worshiping by the Spirit,	Structural thesis for the chapter’s argument

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	boasting in Christ Jesus, putting no confidence in the flesh	
3:4–6	Paul’s credentials: circumcised on the 8th day, Israel, Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, Pharisee, zealous persecutor, blameless under the law	Not false humility — these are genuine, elite credentials by any Jewish standard
3:7	These gains he has counted as loss for the sake of Christ	Perfect tense (<i>hegēmai</i>) — a settled, ongoing revaluation, not a one-time decision
3:8	Surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord — everything counted as <i>skubalon</i>	<i>Skubalon</i> — dung, refuse; the strongest possible term of revaluation
3:9	To be found in Christ: not with own righteousness from the law, but the righteousness from God through faith	Forensic center of the chapter — imputed righteousness explicitly contrasted with self- generated righteousness
3:10–11	To know Christ: power of his resurrection, fellowship of his sufferings, conformity to his death, attaining resurrection	Knowing is relational and cruciform, not merely cognitive; power and suffering are inseparable
3:12–13a	Paul denies having already obtained or been perfected; but presses on, having been laid hold of by Christ	The passive “laid hold of” (<i>katelēmphthēn</i>) — Christ’s prior claim is the basis and motive for Paul’s pressing forward
3:13b–14	Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward (<i>epekteinomenos</i>) to what lies ahead, pressing toward the goal	Athletic imagery; eschatological orientation; the prize is the upward call of God in Christ Jesus
3:15–16	Call to mature believers to hold this mindset; God will reveal divergent views; hold what has been attained	Pastoral flexibility without doctrinal relativism

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:17	Call to imitate Paul and those who walk according to the pattern	Pattern-based discipleship; Paul's own life is exhibit A
3:18–19	The contrast: enemies of the cross — their god is their belly, glory is shame, mind is on earthly things	Not theoretical opponents but real, present, tearfully dangerous influences
3:20–21	Philippian citizenship is in heaven; Savior coming from there to transform lowly bodies into his glorious body	Eschatological foundation for all the pressing forward — Christ's return is the telos

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–3	Warning and True Circumcision: The Ground of Spiritual Safety
2	3:4–9	The Great Revaluation: Counting All Credentials as Loss
3	3:10–14	The Great Pursuit: Pressing Forward in Cruciform Urgency
4	3:15–17	The Call to Mature Pattern: Imitate and Walk Accordingly
5	3:18–21	The Contrast and the Horizon: Earthly Enemies, Heavenly Citizenship

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Paul counts all credentials as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and presses forward toward final conformity to him.

Primary Claim: God is calling every believer to perform a total revaluation — counting every ground of self-trust as loss — and to press forward with single-minded, resurrection-fueled urgency toward Christ as the one sufficient treasure and coming Savior.

Applications (Five)

1. Audit your credentials before they audit you. (*Mind/Belief*) Paul's list of credentials in verses 4–6 is not presented as shameful — it is presented as impressive. The problem is not having achievements; the problem is allowing those achievements to become the basis of standing before God or the measure of spiritual security. Every believer carries a comparable list: church membership, theological pedigree, ministry record, moral uprightness, doctrinal correctness. The question this passage demands is not “do you have credentials?” but “where are those credentials placed?” If they are in the “gain” column — if your peace before God rises or falls with your spiritual performance record — Philippians 3 is calling you to move them. The settlement Paul makes is not a one-time decision but a settled, ongoing revaluation: *I count them loss*. Make that revaluation explicit, specific, and honest.

2. Let the word *skubalon* do its full work. (*Affections/Worship*) Paul does not say his credentials were “less important” or “secondary to Christ.” He calls them *skubalon* — dung, refuse, the thing you push off the table and away from you. The sharpness of that word is not an accident; it is proportionate to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. The problem with most believers is not that they have wrong doctrine about justification — it is that Christ does not functionally feel like surpassing worth. His credentials feel like resume items rather than refuse. This passage is calling the affections, not just the intellect: *does your love for Christ, your delight in him, your desire to know him, have the same all-or-nothing, nothing-else-compares quality that Paul's language requires?* Ask that question honestly, and let the answer convict or confirm.

3. Receive the alien righteousness before you attempt the forward press. (*Mind/Belief*) The structure of verses 9–10 is not accidental: Paul wants to be *found in him* (v. 9, forensic, received) *in order to know him* (v. 10, relational, pursued). The righteousness from God through faith is the foundation, not the goal. Applications in verses 10–14 about pressing forward and straining toward the goal have no motivational fuel unless the righteousness of verse 9 is received and settled. The person who presses forward in order to earn standing will exhaust themselves and eventually quit; the person who presses forward because they have already been laid hold of by Christ (v. 12) presses from security, not toward it. Receive the gift in verse 9 before you feel the urgency of verse 14.

4. Identify what you are running from and refuse it. (*Will/Behavior*) Verses 13–14 — “forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” — are commonly applied as encouragement to leave past failures behind. That is a legitimate application, but it is incomplete. In context, “what lies behind” includes Paul's impressive credentials — the things that *went well* in his religious life — not only his failures as a persecutor. The greatest hindrance to pressing forward is often not past failure but past success — the achieved status, the reputation earned, the theological correctness established — that

becomes a resting place rather than a launching pad. Name what you are using as a spiritual resting place and refuse it the status of finish line.

5. Live now as a citizen of the place you are heading. (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 20 — “our citizenship is in heaven” — is not merely a comforting promise about the afterlife. It is a present-tense identity claim that carries behavioral and affective weight now. Citizens live by the laws and culture of their home country even when they are abroad. Paul’s contrast with those “whose mind is set on earthly things” (v. 19) is not between those who think about heaven and those who don’t — it is between those whose functional loyalty, daily orientation, and deepest security are anchored in what this world provides versus those who are genuinely organized around what is coming. The return of Christ and the transformation of the body (vv. 20–21) are not abstract eschatology — they are the functional horizon that determines what is worth pressing toward today. Let that horizon order your actual choices, your actual fears, your actual investments.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Philippians 3 is one of the NT’s most concentrated exhibitions of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, grounded in Christ’s righteousness alone, received apart from any merit generated by the believer. Paul’s autobiographical argument is not merely illustrative — it is theological demonstration: if anyone had grounds for law-based confidence, Paul did, and he has declared those grounds worthless. The passage also holds together what systematic theology sometimes separates: the forensic gift of righteousness (v. 9) and the relational, progressive, cruciform pursuit of Christ (vv. 10–14) are not competing emphases but sequential and integrated realities — the gift is the foundation for the pursuit, and the pursuit is shaped by the death-and-resurrection pattern of the gift’s author. Finally, the passage anchors the believer’s entire orientation in eschatology — the return of Christ and the resurrection body (vv. 20–21) are not appendices to the argument but its goal, providing both the “prize” toward which pressing forward is directed and the frame within which present suffering makes sense.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Philippians 3 is a direct assault on every form of covenant nomism, moralism, and merit-based religion — which is to say, it is a direct ally of Reformed soteriology and a direct challenge to any framework that makes grace conditional on human performance. The passage is specifically important for Reformed anthropology: Paul does not list *vices* as the things he counts as loss — he lists *achievements*, the things his culture (and he himself) considered most commendable. This exposes the idolatrous tendency not in human depravity at its worst but in human religion at its *best* — the Pharisee, the morally blameless, the doctrinally precise. Keller’s idol-diagnosis lens is directly applicable: the deepest false saviors are not alcohol and adultery

but religious credentials and achieved righteousness. The passage is also foundational for the Reformed ordo: imputed righteousness received by faith (union with Christ, v. 9) precedes and grounds progressive sanctification (knowing him, conformity to his death, pressing forward, vv. 10–14). This ordering guards against any sanctification-first model in which justification is treated as something the believer must maintain by subsequent performance. The Savior comes *from heaven to us* (v. 20) — grace moves in one direction throughout this passage.

Main Takeaway

Every credential you have ever earned, every religious box you have ever checked, every spiritual achievement you take comfort in — Paul has a word for all of it: *skubalon*. Not because those things are worthless in themselves, but because Christ is worth infinitely more, and whatever you place in the gain column beside him has already misunderstood what you have in him. You have been laid hold of by the risen Christ. The finish line is his return and the resurrection of your body into conformity with his. So count the credentials as loss, receive the righteousness that is already yours in him, and press forward — not to earn, but because the prize is worth everything.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Moralizing verse 13 (“forgetting what lies behind”) into a therapeutic encouragement to leave past failures behind.** This application is not wrong, but it is incomplete and actually misses the passage’s primary target. In context, “what lies behind” refers most directly to Paul’s impressive religious credentials — his gains, not his failures. The passage is more concerned with the temptation to rest in spiritual achievement than the temptation to be paralyzed by moral failure. A sermon that uses verse 13 only as comfort for the struggling sinner has not yet reached the passage’s most convicting application: the warning to the self-satisfied saint.
- **Treating the “knowing him” of verse 10 as purely experiential and separating it from the forensic ground of verse 9.** The resurrection power Paul seeks in verse 10 is not an upgrade to spiritual experience — it is the power received by one who is already in Christ, already clothed with his righteousness, pressing deeper into that union. Applications that focus on “pursuing a deeper experience of the Spirit’s power” without grounding that pursuit in the imputed righteousness of verse 9 can inadvertently turn verse 10 into another form of works — spiritual striving for an experience rather than pressing forward in the security of one who has already been laid hold of.

- **Extracting verse 13–14 from their eschatological frame.** “Pressing toward the goal” and “straining forward” are athletic metaphors with an explicit finish line: the resurrection from the dead (v. 11), the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14), the return of Christ and the transformation of the body (vv. 20–21). Sermons that use this passage to motivate personal productivity, goal-setting, or self-improvement have ripped it from its eschatological frame and made it serve therapeutic individualism. The pressing forward is toward Christ’s return, not toward self-actualization.
- **Reading “citizenship is in heaven” (v. 20) as merely future comfort rather than present reorientation.** Paul does not say “your citizenship will be in heaven when you get there.” He says it *is* — present tense, present identity. The behavioral and affective implications are immediate. A preaching approach that treats verse 20 as eschatological consolation (you’ll be with Jesus someday) misses its force as a present-tense identity claim that reorders every current allegiance.
- **Softening *skubalon* in the interest of decorum.** Most translations render *skubalon* as “rubbish” or “garbage,” which considerably softens Paul’s chosen term. The word is crude, deliberately so — Paul is not offering a measured revaluation of his credentials but a visceral, forceful rejection of them as the ground of standing before God. Preachers who smooth this into “less important things” have missed the rhetorical point. The sharpness of the term is proportionate to the surpassing worth of what replaces it — and that proportion is itself the sermon.
- **Failing to hold the forensic (v. 9) and the relational/progressive (vv. 10–14) dimensions together.** Some Reformed preaching is so focused on verse 9’s imputed righteousness that verses 10–14 become a brief, almost apologetic addendum. Some sanctification-focused preaching reverse-engineers into the chapter and makes verses 10–14 the primary claim. Both are distortions. The architecture of the passage requires both: the righteousness received by faith is the foundation and fuel for the cruciform pursuit; the cruciform pursuit is the lived-out expression of what it means to be in Christ. Neither half of the chapter can stand alone without misrepresenting the whole.