

# To Be Reconciled: A Journey Through Lent

## “A New Kind of Confidence” (Philippians 3:1-14)

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### Introduction

1. Lent is an annual season in the Christian tradition where followers of Christ around the world set aside 40 days prior to Easter for personal reflection and renewal. This year’s Lent teaching series has focused on the theme of reconciliation with last week’s teaching being, “A New Way to See.” The sermon emphasized the important matter of being fully awake to the transformative presence of Christ in our lives such that, like Jesus saw others, we view ourselves and others with increasingly clear-minded generosity.

This week explores some of the ways in which the journey of Lent invites us to reconcile ourselves with our best “Christ awakened” selves. In specific we are going to consider what gives us confidence, and look at some ways to ground that confidence in a clear minded sense of God’s presence and love for our lives.

2. The text for today was written by the Apostle Paul to the first century Early Church in the Roman city of Philippi. Paul loved this church. He said in the opening of his letter, “I have you in my heart and long for you with affection” and that they “brought him joy because of their continual partnership with him,” even when he was incarcerated.<sup>1</sup> Overall, Paul’s letter to the Philippians sings with positivity and encouragement. And, today’s text was an encouragement to reflect on what it is that gives them confidence.

### Philippians 3:4b-14

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:3-8.

consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,<sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:4b-14, NIV

## A. Paul's Confidence Used to Be in His Credentials

1. This segment of Paul's letter to the Philippians tells us first, that Paul used to place his confidence in his credentials and his trust in religious legalism, or the act of putting law above gospel, and promoting rule following as the necessary means to earn God's love and blessings. Taking a look into Paul's broader personal biography, he confessed many times about his struggle with legalism, and how his conversion to Christ put the brakes on his judgemental ways. As is true with all major changes mid way through life he also wrestled with echoes or "hooks" of his past.

More than once, we read of Paul's deep anger toward the legalists, including the pre-text to today's scripture where he said, "Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh."<sup>2</sup> That's pretty harsh! And, was a reference to the Jewish Christian legalists dubbed "Judaizers" because they demanded that the only way you could have true faith in Christ was to keep the circumcision tradition of Abraham. Which was, at the very least, a major problem for women believers!

2. At the point of writing this letter, and his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul was officially a recovering legalist. He considered legalism a destroyer of the faith because it places demands on people that run counter to the way Jesus framed faith. Jesus framed faith as always open handed, grace-filled and redemptive in ways like what a modern Christian thinker, Richard Rohr, once said:

"Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change."<sup>3</sup>

Love and Gospel over law and legalism--that is what puts Christ first, and orders the hierarchy of influence with which people become their best selves. I am guessing that while Paul grew to promote this kind of thinking, it is pretty certain that he didn't just flick a switch and leave the culture and language of legalism completely behind. This is evidenced in some measure in today's text by Paul's use of language.

3. For instance, one key truth about legalism is that it looks at the world in fundamentally dualistic terms—everything is fear based and either all good, or all bad. Legalists tend to give themselves to over simplification of difficult matters, and they create very hard divisions between such concepts as what is sacred and what is secular, who is in and who is out.

One indicator of Paul being 'hooked' by his past is in the way he frames his life in relationship to Christ in this text. He almost gets frothy:

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:2.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7919.Richard\\_Rohr](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7919.Richard_Rohr) (accessed 3-12-16)

<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them *garbage*, that I may gain Christ...

Philippians 3:7-8. NIV

4. I have had spiritual directors, on and off, for most of the 25 years that I have been in vocational ministry. Almost every single one has coached me to be careful and gentle about the things from my past that “hook” me. They say this because, while it may feel good to blast the things that have betrayed the authentic Christ confidences in my life, self-flagellation such as Paul saying that “All I have done is garbage,” is counter productive and may even emotionally masque further work that needs to be done to transform the past that has been left behind.
5. Even more, I would argue that shifting our confidence from such things as credentials, legalism, and tradition, or perhaps material successes and intellectual prowess to more Christ likeness and trust in the ways of God...such shifts require seeing our lives on a time line continuum in which *everything* in our life is being transformed over our lifetimes, even those things that were false confidences in the past.

## B. Personal Confession: My Confidence Used to Be in Perfectionism

1. On a Sunday where several have shared “I am from” statements in our community--I have one “I am statement” to share. I am from perfectionism, and not because my parents gave it to me. My parents tell me that from infancy I showed signs of perfectionism and wouldn't even eat a broken cookie.



Here is a photo of me as a baby playing with a Fisher Price “Chatter” Telephone. I think that my parent’s gave me this toy so I would “call someone who cared” about my complaints about broken cookies.

2. Cookies aside, I developed ever deepening patterns of perfectionism as I grew into adulthood because our society rewards excellence regardless of how we get at it:
  - I went out for sports, and while being an average athlete, I would practice for hours to make this or that team, and find some way to stand out or at least be the underdog. My mother

tells me that in Little League baseball, I was very consistent--strikeouts or home runs, rarely anything in between. The home runs always earned me a spot on the team!

- Music was important to my family, and my parents provided sacrificially for me to take percussion lessons. And, because of my eagerness to perform, I took every opportunity to compete for awards.



I won a big scholarship to the Interlochen Arts Academy, statewide concerto competitions on the marimba, first chair in the World Youth Symphony Orchestra, and I was chosen by the Detroit News as High School Musician of the Year alongside winners in other categories such as math, science, and creative writing.

3. Graduating from Interlochen I went on to get a percussion performance degree from the Eastman School of Music in New York. Here's the deal, though—the shadow side of being a professional musician in the classical music world, similar to professional sports, is the pursuit of perfection. Some of my esteemed colleagues were able to, like me, practice six to eight hours a day and walk further into their performance careers with a clear minded sense of commitment to their craft. I felt as if I was swallowed whole by a performance orientation and the pursuit of perfection. It ruined me, and I couldn't tell the difference between making joyful and excellent art, and performing for pay and applause.

I don't doubt that some of my dis-ease was grounded in my personality and the fact that I enjoy working with people more than practicing music alone for hours on end. Perfectionism was a real and sustained struggle that transcended the arts in my life as evidenced when I shifted from a career in the performing arts to vocational ministry.

4. Along the road of my faith journey I picked up the notion that God would love me more if I was perfect. And, so, as I set aside "perfect artist," and I picked up "perfect pastor." Perfect prayer life. Perfect seminary grades. And, as much credentialing as possible: Masters in Divinity, Doctor of Ministry, Book Author, Top Pastor, Fellow, you name it. While saying that my confidence was in Christ, on a day-to-day level I placed my confidence in some version of being the perfect pastor.
5. Unlike the Apostle Paul's dramatic road trip to Damascus and encountering Christ in a bright light—my moment of awakening to mis-placed confidence was while painting my house. We had decided to polyurethane over the new colorful paint to give it a beautiful shiny finish, and I worked really hard to make sure that every square inch had a super glossy look down to the very last brush of my empty bucket. I was certain that I got it just perfect.

A few days later, with the lights off and natural light coming in from the windows and reflecting on the wall at just the right angle, there it was—right above a power outlet, a very obvious thin slice of non-shiny wall. It was where my roller and brush had avoided the outlet only create a triangle of un-shiny space right above it. Noooooooo!

This may all seem a little mental to you. But, in that moment, and because of all that was happening in my life: the imperfect process of the re-birthing of First Covenant, increasing awareness of being middle aged adult, awakening to how complicated life in large urban centers can be...it was because of *all of this* that I said, “I give up. God, I can’t do this any more. I need to let go of this exhausting and impossible way of life.”

6. What I sensed God saying back to me in that moment was, “Good! Now you will begin to be more honest with yourself and others. And, you will learn more about the deeper and more life giving patterns of life, that include failure and recovery, death and resurrection.” From that moment on I gave myself to the discipline of being on the lookout for the things that didn’t go as expected, or that were missed, or was a simple mistake, and rather than get anxious or angry, say, “There it is! There is the unpredictable and inevitable human factor as present and accounted for. And it has given me an opportunity to learn and maybe even be surprised about some unintended blessing.”

This has been huge in my day-to-day life, and for my spiritual journey. My awakening to perfectionism as a false confidence allowed me to begin to re-direct and reconcile my faith journey with a more authentic and clear minded sense of God’s grace in my life and greater grace and less judgment for those around me.

## Conclusion

What about you? How do you approach today’s text? When you think about your life, what is it that gives you confidence? What about Christ and being like Christ gives you confidence that surpasses all else?

In this season of lent, and final two weeks before Easter, I encourage us all to consider new ways that our confidences can be more grounded in a clear minded sense of God’s presence and love for our lives. If you are like me, it is likely that you have some confidences that are easily identified as false confidences. You know them, and struggle with them. But, it is also likely that you have some confidences that are not necessarily false, but need to be refined and placed differently in your life so they do not control your life or surpass your identity in Christ, which is where our deepest confidence is grounded now and for eternity.

In Paul’s words...let’s together acknowledge that we have not already arrived, or achieved the goal of perfect reconciliation and Christ0likeness. None-the less, let’s press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us!

## Prayer

God of all, and Jesus Christ our Lord—we pray that you awaken us to false confidences and to confidences that need to be refined in light of who we are in you. Help us to not be discouraged in our journey of reconciling our lives with our lives in you. Transform the parts of our pasts that hook us in the present such that we lead more wise, generous, and confidence lives.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.

### Benediction

As the new week begins, may we take time this week to consider what gives us confidence, let false confidences go, and refine confidences that point us toward our identity in Christ.

Go in Peace. Amen.