

# Gospel Gleanings, “...especially the parchments”

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## Trusting God, Not Self

*For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. (Philippians 3:3-6)*

Sometimes the best way to grow in our trust toward God is to look at both sides of the “trust” question and compare them. What—or whom—can I trust? The more a person focuses on self the more impaired his/her ability to trust in God. “It is all about me” may well describe the dominant Western twenty-first century theme of Christian culture, but “It is all about God” defines New Testament Christianity. I am convinced that most contemporary Christians in our culture desperately need a true paradigm shift to realize anything near New Testament Christian faith and blessing.

More than almost any person living, Paul could have claimed self-trust as a viable lifestyle, but he chose not to. He could not trust self and live by faith in God. Notice the foundation of his teaching in this chapter. He listed three specific activities that defined his view of the Christian life.

1. We worship God in the spirit.
2. We rejoice in Christ Jesus.
3. We have no confidence in the flesh.

I suggest for your consideration that a full engagement of the first two points will create the third. Those who trust in their “flesh,” however loudly they proclaim their faith and joy in Christ, are deficient in their true worship and in their choice of things that cause them joy.

Only after Paul established this basic worldview and lifestyle did he offer that, if anyone had grounds to trust in themselves, it was himself. From this basis he goes on to list all the reasons that he could have—and at one time did—trusted in himself. The folks who live by self-trust in fact have far less basis for that attitude than Paul had. Consciously Paul rejected the human inclination to trust in himself

and chose the simple—the profound and profoundly simple—lifestyle of God-centered Christianity, not self-centered religion. We typically define the self-centered attitude in religion as Pharisaical, but we tend to avoid application of that understanding to our own life and attitudes. If you examine the dominant attitude of the Pharisees in the New Testament, you will readily grasp the spirit of the Pharisee. In the lesson of the two praying men (Luke 18:9-14) we see this attitude that distinguishes the Christian from the Pharisee. Luke introduces the lesson as directed toward those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” How can I detect the Pharisee in others or in myself? The answer is rather simple. In essential theology the Pharisees were closer to the true teachings of God than the other first century sects of Judaism. Their attitude toward themselves and toward others defined our Lord’s disdain for them and their conduct. The Christian will focus on his own sins and be rather transparent about them, both with God and with other believers. The Pharisee always focuses on the sins of others and views self as wholly right and righteous. The Pharisee will keep a detailed record of all the wrongs that others have committed, both personal wrongs, real or imagined, against him/her self, and general sins. The Pharisee freely pointed the accusing finger, even in his prayers, at the publican, the tax-collector, and thanked God that he was not like that dreadful excuse for a human being. The publican was oblivious to the Pharisee in his prayers. He stood afar off rather than stepping up to the most prominent place for prayer. He smote his breast. There was intense emotion, not against the Pharisee or others, but against himself and his own sense of sin in his life. He didn’t thank God that he was not like

anyone else, especially the Pharisee. Rather he begged God to be merciful to him, the sinner. The person who claims to be a believer in Christ, but who constantly accuses others of sin, quickly pointing out their sins, but vigorously denying ever doing anything wrong, dreadfully exhibits the heart of the Pharisee.

I fear that many in the contemporary Christian community have fallen prey to the spirit of the Pharisee. We still sing about the reality of sin in our lives. We imply the fact in our theological teaching of salvation by grace. However, we conspicuously avoid the mention of personal sins in our prayers and in our preaching. We will reluctantly confess to being sinners “by nature,” but we carefully avoid any confession of personal sins in our own lives, all the while gleefully pointing out the sins of others with surgical precision. Friends, this attitude precisely depicts the heart of a Pharisee, not the heart of a faithful believer who trusts in God and keeps him/her self busy worshipping God and rejoicing in Jesus, the “friend of sinners.” Oh for a return of the transparent spirit of authentic New Testament Christianity in which those who claim faith in Christ busy themselves with these worthy activities and readily confess their sins, making their reliance on Christ as the Savior of sinners a reality in their profession.

The word “spirit” appears in lower case in this verse. Does Paul intend the human spirit as opposed to external rituals such as were the emphasis in Judaism? Or does he intend the Holy Spirit? Matthew Henry in his concise commentary leaves the door open for either interpretation, making good points for both. A. T. Robertson (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*) offers three views, all anchored in the idea that the word “spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit.

1. We worship God *by* the Holy Spirit, not by external rituals and ceremonies.
2. We worship God, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit *is* God, so we worship Him, not rituals and traditions or our culture.
3. We worship God *in* the Spirit. Only those who possess the indwelling Holy Spirit are able to worship, or have any interest in worshipping God.

In several instances in the King James Bible the word “spirit” appears in lower case, but it distinctly refers to the Holy Spirit, so we should not draw our interpretation purely on the question of capital or lower case letters. For

example, Joel 2:28 refers to the future day when God would pour out of His “spirit” (lower case) upon all flesh, but the clear reference is to the Holy Spirit, a fact confirmed by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:18 where the word is capitalized, “Spirit”).

Robertson’s three-point view, consistently emphasizing the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit, seems consistent with the immediate context of this passage, as well as with the general teachings of the New Testament. Grammatically one, not all three ideas, was Paul’s intent. Robertson indicates that there is some doubt as to the case of the verb in this phrase, leaving him to offer the three possible interpretations, depending on the case of the verb. Based on Paul’s teaching in Romans 8:5-8 and 1 Corinthians 2:14, the “spirit” of natural or unregenerate man cannot worship God, and additionally isn’t interested in worshipping God. Only those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells worship God. Thus Robertson’s first interpretation is true. Since the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:11, especially notice the personal pronoun “he,” not an impersonal “it”), it is appropriate for Paul to teach worship of the Holy Spirit as God. Due to the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13, in fact the general teachings of John 14-16), I am less inclined toward this interpretation, but I applaud Robertson in his emphasis on the fact that the Holy Spirit is God, not God’s impersonal “force.” Robertson’s third point is also true in that any true worship of God occurs *in* the Holy Spirit, not in any way apart from Him or His divine influence.

Spend some time with this chapter, specifically listing all the various accomplishments that Paul names as possible reasons to trust in the flesh (Philippians 3:4-6), but pay special attention to the bridge from verse 3 to verses 7-17. Paul unequivocally rejected all grounds for trust in self and in his accomplishments and in fact categorically discounted all of them so that he could become absorbed in his Lord Jesus Christ, both worshipping and rejoicing in Him alone.

Is this your vision of true Christianity? Is it your vision of your personal life? How well does your vision live up to the way you live and the things that you most emphasize in your daily life and in your interaction with the people around you? If you said nothing whatever, would the people who know you discern by your attitude and conduct that you trust exclusively in God and not in yourself?

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Worship service each Sunday    10:30 A. M.  
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