

The Self Reflections of an Inspired Man of God

by Tim Conway

This sermon delves into the self-reflections of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3, highlighting his autobiographical insights under inspiration. It explores Paul's perspective as a prisoner for Christ, the confidence of being a God-made minister, and his self-assessment as the least of all saints. The sermon challenges listeners to consider their own calling, confidence in God's sufficiency, and humility in self-reflection.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1, 2 Corinthians 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:9, 1 Timothy 1:12

Topics: "Humility in Self-Reflection", "Confidence in God's Sufficiency"

Description

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Transcript

Ephesians 3. Now, we're going to read this again. We'll read through it pretty quickly and then we're going to go back and we're going to look at some things. What I want you to notice, I'll tell you right off, the title of my message is The Self-Reflections of an Inspired Man of God.

This section of Ephesians is special. Now, I know that there's other portions of Paul's writings where you get glimpses into his life. His person.

This is autobiographical. These first 13 verses of chapter 3. We get a lot of information from Paul under inspiration. So let's read this.

For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and we remember last week, the reason, because the Gentiles are fellow heirs, because the Gentiles are in the family of God, because they're included. For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles, assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you. You see that.

Paul's a prisoner. Paul is a steward. How the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

He's the recipient of revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight. Again, autobiographical.

He's looking at himself. What's true of himself. He has revelation.

He has insight into the mystery of Christ which was made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to him. He's one of the holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs.

There's the mystery. Members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Of this Gospel, again, self-reflecting here, of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of His power to me, though I am the very least of all the saints this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God Who created all things.

And then if we jump to v. 13, So I, again, Paul, speaking specifically to them, I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering. He's a sufferer. He's in prison.

Which is your glory. Brethren, example is powerful. All you have to do is think about Scripture itself.

We could think of Hebrews 11. I've heard John Piper say that based on Hebrews 11, he is convinced that he ought to be doing the biographical sketches that he does every single year at his pastor's conference. Because holding up such men, I find that to be true.

I find that to be true in my own life that when I read about men, what I'm hit with is their example. I'm hit by their life. And it's powerful.

Imitation and example. God has designed us to be affected and influenced by the example of others. You think about the Proverbs.

If you want to be wise, what do you do? Walk with the wise. If you walk with a fool, you're going to suffer harm. Or you come to the New Testament.

You think about maybe Hebrews 13. What does the author say to us about those who are leaders over you? Those imitate their faith. Exactly.

Imitation. That is the reality of Scripture. You want to surround yourself with bad companionship? What does it do? It corrupts good morals.

Good influence. Bad influence. They affect us.

And Scripture speaks about both of them. I was just talking to a brother yesterday, and he was telling me about a season of life where he began to associate with a guy that was lost, and he was hoping to impart truth to him. And in the end, he ended up being corrupted by him.

And you know what? When I was first saved, same thing was true. I thought in the beginning, I'm going to hang around with my friends from my old way of life because I want to influence them. And you know what? I began to recognize they were having more influence on me than I was having on them.

And I needed to break rank. This section of Ephesians is special because what we have is the example of Paul in certain aspects of his life. Certain truths about his life that are displayed before us.

It's autobiographical. But you know what especially? It's inspired autobiography. You know when you read... we're talking autobiography here.

Somebody that writes about themselves. You know what the problem is when somebody is uninspired? When they're inspired, it means that the Spirit is carrying Paul along to show us about Paul. Which means it's all true.

You know what? When you have uninspired authors writing about themselves, two things happen I find. On the one hand, they don't want to tell you the bad because they're trying to protect reputation. Or on the other hand, if they're humble men, they won't tell you the good because it seems like they're boasting.

You know what's interesting about Paul? There are times when you read him when it does sound like he's boasting. And he's going on about his strengths, but he also does not leave out his weaknesses. And he tells you about his weakness.

And he tells you that he's the least. I like that. There's truth.

There's reality in that. We don't always know what's embellished or omitted when it's an uninspired writer. But when Paul pens Scripture, we know it isn't just true.

But it's God bringing out of Paul's life what is true that he wants you and I to know about. I mean, you think about that. Paul is being guided here to tell us the things about himself that we need to know.

And that can be helpful to us if we think about them. Here's Paul writing a letter to somebody else. He can say this.

He can say, I am the least of all the apostles. Unworthy to be called an apostle. Don't you like that? Is that true? But you know what? He can come right around within one verse and say this, I outran them all.

Speaking of the apostles. Basically saying, I'm the best of them. I ran the hardest.

Now, he gives credit where credit is due. He says it's not me. It's the grace of God in me.

But still, he can tell us where he excels and beats everybody else, but he can also tell us at the same time he's not even worthy to be called an apostle. I love that transparency. And there's one place, listen to this, are they servants of Christ? Now here he's not talking about the other apostles.

Here he's talking about the false apostles. He says, are they servants of Christ? I am a better one. Far greater labors.

Far more imprisonments. Countless beatings. Often near death.

You see, this is the kind of thing when a guy isn't inspired and he's a Christian, he would hesitate to tell us. Because it sounds like he's boasting. The truth is, if you look at 2 Corinthians, it sounds like he's boasting.

In fact, he says he's boasting. And he says he sounds like a madman. But he's being driven to it because he's trying to vindicate his ministry.

Then in the same verses, he can tell us about his weakness. Look, I'm thankful for the transparency here because this is a man that you and I are called to follow. I find this very interesting about the Apostle Paul.

Very interesting. Paul seems to be the prototype saved sinner. Now look, I know that Jesus Christ is the preeminent example, but he's not a saved sinner.

What you have in Paul is somebody who actually has been saved and then is walking through this world with the weakness of a sinner saved by grace enduring the sanctification process that Jesus never had to go through. And so Paul is the prototype saved sinner. God worked in Paul in such a way as specifically to make him a pattern for us.

And you know what's interesting? I never find that Peter or John ever said follow me or imitate me. Maybe I'm wrong. But I find this, that Paul said it more than once.

He said, I urge you then, be imitators of me. 1 Corinthians 4.16 1 Corinthians 11 Be imitators of me as I am of Christ. Philippians 3.17 Brothers, join in imitating me.

But he says not only me. He says keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Keep your eyes on them.

Isn't that interesting? We often say keep your eyes on Jesus. True. And Scripture says that.

But you know what? Equally, Scripture says keep your eyes on those who are made of the same stuff we are. I mean, we come from fallen stock. And we've been converted.

Look for the people who run the best and save sinners. Keep your eyes on those. Paul sets himself as an example.

It's interesting. In one place, yes, he can say imitate me as I imitate Christ. Christ is the ultimate example.

But in Philippians, it's interesting that he says it's almost like he's making himself the pattern and he says imitate me and anybody else who is like me. And that's what we need to do. Brothers and sisters, surround yourself with the godliest people.

Surround yourself with the wisest people. Read biography. Read autobiography.

And read the best ones. Read the ones that are an example that are worthy to follow. Be in churches where there's actually leadership whose faith you would want to imitate.

Don't go to churches where you wouldn't want to imitate that. Don't go to churches where you wouldn't want to invite somebody to come to. We want that, brethren.

We want it. It's good. It's right.

You want to go to churches where you want to be like the majority of the people that are there. And surround yourself with the best. Surround yourself with that.

Now, the self-reflections of an inspired man of God. That's my title. The self-reflections, Paul looking at himself of an inspired man of God.

And I have four points that I want to draw out. The first one is this. Paul's self-assessment of himself as a prisoner.

Now check this one out. Verse 1. You see it there. I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus.

Now, I want this to be personal with each one of us. Because I got thinking last night. I went outside and I was thinking about this very statement of Paul.

I think each one of us need to wrestle with this if we're really going to benefit from Paul's example as we ought. Let me tell you what I mean. Paul, you know, where was Paul? Every bit of the evidence is that Paul, you remember, Felix, Festus came, wanted to do a favor to the Jews, left them in prison.

Basically what happened was there was an appeal made to Caesar. Paul was sent there. He was in chains.

Apparently, he's at Rome. He's in prison. Now, look, we don't have it in inspired fashion all the rest of Paul's life.

Could Paul have been released from prison there and gone on? Some think he went to Spain, even all the way up to Britain. Is it possible that he was let go and he did more evangelism and he was imprisoned in various places along the way? Perhaps. The assumption is he's in Rome.

Now you think about it. You're in a Roman prison. You know, the assumption is Nero is Caesar.

But Paul doesn't say, I'm a prisoner for Nero. I'm a prisoner for Rome. It's putting his place in life in perspective to Christ.

That's the issue. He was a prisoner for Christ. This singular fact held sway with him.

And it should hold sway with us too. If we think about our lives correctly like he did, Paul sized up his whole life according to how it related back to his Savior. It's the most important thing.

It's the highest thing. Do you remember what Paul said? Listen. Paul said this.

Dealing with differences in the church. About convictions over things. He said, look, if you're going to observe a day, what do you do? You observe it unto the Lord.

And if you're not going to observe a day, you don't observe it unto the Lord. And listen, this isn't cheap talk. This is serious.

Oh, it's so easy to tag that on there. Well, if I eat, we eat unto the Lord. If I don't eat, no, this is something that's done with a will.

It's done with a thought. It's done with an allegiance to Him. If I watch the Super Bowl today, well, I'm going to do it unto Him.

Why? Because I'm a Christian and if I do it, it's got to be unto Him. That's not even thinking right. We should be measuring our life by Him.

Everything. Everything. He says this, if you eat, you do it unto the Lord.

If you don't eat, you don't eat unto the Lord. You see, everything is within perspective of that. Or you go over to 1 Corinthians 7 and you know what you have there? He says to slaves, He says, if you are a slave, He said, basically, don't be concerned about it.

You know, today, we'd get all up in arms. Oh, slavery! It's so horrible! Oh, did you know that some of those church fathers had slaves? We better boycott them! You know what Paul would say to you? Don't be concerned about that. Because even if you were a slave back then, don't be concerned about it.

Why? Because brethren, sometimes the things that we count to be the big issues in life, just aren't the big issues in life when you see things with the proper perspective. And see, this is what I love about Paul. He sees things by the proper perspective.

And we know it because he's under inspiration. He sees life the right way. There in 1 Corinthians 7, it says, He who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed man of the Lord.

Don't you love that? He's a freed man of the Lord. Again, it's all with regards to the Lord. If you're a free man when you were called, you're a slave of Christ.

Everything has to do with Christ. It has to do with that perspective. A Christ-word perspective in all things.

This is what gives value to anything and everything. Are you a wife? Don't just say, well, yeah, I'm a wife and I'm a Christian, so it must be unto the Lord. No! It's more than that.

It's a proper heart attitude and a perspective in your brain about where you fit into the whole scheme of things. You're a wife for Christ. Do you recognize what it's saying? All for Him.

I'm going to live for Him as a wife? It's for Him. What I go through? You remember what's said? Fear nothing. Remember that's what Peter said? You don't have to fear anything.

Why? Because you're living for Him. If you're single, don't just say, well, I'm single and I'm a Christian, therefore I'm single for Christ. You know what it is to be single for Christ? It means you're not going to go hang out looking at pornography to try to satisfy your singleness.

See, single for Christ, it's a right perspective. Paul didn't flippantly just append that name on the end of things. And don't you either.

Oh well, I'm single. So I'm single for Christ. None of that.

None of that. You think about what that means. Yes, you are a Christian.

You are single. I would say this. Be what Paul was.

Be single for Christ. Be a wife for Christ. Be a husband for Christ.

You say, I have lost children. Then be a father or mother of lost children for Christ. You see, it looks like something.

It isn't just empty words. It means I live my life as though He is at the center and everything branches out from Him and He is the one around which everything else revolves. If I'm going to be a parent of a lost child, then I'm going to parent them for Christ being lost children.

That's the idea. Don't use His name in vain. There must be wrestling.

We ever sing the song that I surrender all? I would say that anybody with a real conscience, anybody who's really under the influence of the Spirit, you cannot sing that song flippantly. There has to be some

self-survey survey some self-examination. Those words come out of your mouth.

You're saying them before God. I surrender all. Same thing here.

You want to be able to say whatever place you find yourself in. I'm a homeowner! Be a homeowner for Christ. You see, you want to be able to put that on the end of everything that you are.

But it shouldn't be flippant. You shouldn't use His name in vain. Tag it on the end just to try to sound like Paul.

You see, what Paul recognizes to be a prisoner for Christ, his whole life was invested in everything that that meant. To be in prison? And you know what? You had people in the guard getting saved. Why? Because he was speaking the truth.

And while he's there in prison, what's he doing? The anxiety of the churches, the care of the churches rested upon him. He was penning letters to them. Undoubtedly, praying for them.

This is something to wrestle with. Wrestle with it! You work! What is your line of work? I'm a stay-at-home, homeschooling mom. Be a homeschooling mom for Christ.

What does that look like? Does that look like getting agitated with the kids? Not if it's for Christ. Don't offer him that. You see, it's for.

What a preposition. A prisoner for Christ. It's like something to offer him.

You think about offering your life up on the altar. This is Paul. This is how he lived.

Everything with a Christ perspective. That's how we should be living. What an example.

Can you imagine walking with him? Everything. His decisions, his choices. It's for Christ.

It's all for Christ. No split allegiances. You know what? A prisoner for Christ.

This is what a man says about himself who's able to step back and see the whole picture. The big picture of things. See that in the whole scope of things, what's really happening in the world? Where's history going? Do you recognize in the end, every one of us stand before Christ as judge? Everything is moving in that direction.

Everything. Why would you want to do anything or be anything that you could not append that prepositional phrase to? For Christ. No, you know what? I'm going to go do something this afternoon.

I did my religious deal. I came to church today. Now I'm going to live, what? For me.

There needs to be a wrestling. A proper perspective. I'm a husband for Christ.

I'm a father for Christ. I'm a pastor for Christ. I'm a citizen of the United States for Christ.

I own a home for Christ. I mean, I have what I have for Christ. This man is in touch with reality.

Because the truth is, this isn't fiction. It's not just, well, it's good to think like this, but, this is necessary. It's not just good, it's necessary if we're going to be in touch with reality.

Because this is really the issue. Everything is going to be measured against Christ. You recognize that.

On judgment day, I was hungry and you fed me. I was hungry and you did not feed me. I want you to notice the I in that sentence.

You see, everything revolves around Him. Everything. And Paul lived that way.

A prisoner for Christ. All for Christ. Are you poor? If you're poor, be poor for Christ.

Whatever He gives you. Have it for Christ. Paul says imitate me.

You remember that? Imitate me. I think if Paul showed up at this church, we would, we would all of us have a hard time keeping step with Him. The truth is, if He came here and we saw Him, we might not actually like the pace that He had set in His Christian life.

Because it would kind of crimp our lifestyles. It would be uncomfortable. He would look at us and say, seriously? You have all that stuff? What are you doing? I left all that stuff behind a long time ago.

Did you never read Christ's words that we are supposed to sell your possessions and give to the poor? I mean, the security you're living for? I think we'd be, we might not like Him here. Really. I mean, do you examine the life of this man? I know Christ.

Sometimes we can just write Christ off. You know, He's just surreal. He doesn't struggle with the devil and the flesh and the world and the devil bombards us.

Jesus seemed impervious to that. Listen, Paul's made of the same stuff we are. And God raised Him up as an example.

And He tells us. God tells us. Look at Paul.

Keep pace with Him. You imitate Him. Do what He does.

For Christ. A prisoner for Christ. Okay, the second thing.

I want you to notice the confidence of a God-made minister. Notice verse 7. Of this Gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of His power. Now look, I'm thankful for this.

It's inspired. It tells me that God makes it plain to a man that He is called to the ministry. I was made a minister.

He was made one. He didn't just become one of His own accord. He was made one.

To be made one means He was acted on from outside of Himself to become this. Brethren, I can say that. I can say that.

I believe that. God has communicated that to my own soul. That He has made me a minister.

They're not man-made. Nothing could really be clearer from Scripture than this reality. Paul says there in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, he says God has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant.

Sometimes people ask, oh, are you new covenant? Look, those men who are God-made ministers are always ministers of the new covenant. God has made us sufficient. You like that? Sufficiency.

The sufficiency that is given to a man to be a minister, to be in the ministry is given by God. It's God. A man's sufficiency is not from Himself.

Listen to the Apostle Paul in other places. 1 Timothy 1.12 I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, notice this, appointing me to His service. Again, confidence.

I'm talking about here the confidence of a God-made minister. Or in 2 Timothy 1.11 I was appointed Here's that confidence again. He knows it.

I was appointed not just an apostle. He says, I was appointed a preacher and a teacher. He knew that.

Even being a preacher or a teacher comes by appointment. He knew it. He knew it.

And God tells us He knew it. God wants us to know that a man can be confident about His calling. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his series on Acts I'd remembered this from listening to his messages.

I went back and dug it up. He says this, Why am I a preacher of the Gospel? He says, there's only one answer to that question. I'm a preacher because I believe I have been called.

Paul had confidence. Pat Horner told me one time, he said, brother, you don't want to go into the ministry unless you know that God has called you to be there. He said, you don't want to wait until you get in the midst of the battle before you try to figure that out.

And he's right. Because you know what? In the days that I've wanted to fly away to the mountains and be at rest. In the days when I've thought about driving out and sticking the key in and starting up that car and just driving.

It's never been serious. It's never been a serious thought even on the most difficult day. Because I really believe that this is what God has called me to.

And I believe that that is something that God tells us in His Word is indeed a reality. A pastor or preacher without a calling, that's to have a name and nothing more. Brethren, you know it.

It's the cause of many fruitless ministries and it's the cause of declining churches. Men in the pulpit. I come across examples of this men who get in the pulpit and they just don't belong there.

God said this, I sent them not. He says this in Jeremiah. I sent them not, nor commanded them, therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord.

That's what happens when men seek to be preachers, teachers, apostles, pastors. Brethren, the reality is that you know that this isn't just something that's said of the Apostle Paul. You remember what happened when the Apostle was speaking to the Ephesian elders.

He specifically said of those Ephesian elders, he said the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God. And again, in 1 Corinthians, we know God appointed in the church first apostles and then prophets and third, teachers. Not just the position or the office, he's talking about individuals have

been appointed.

Anyway, I like that about Paul. He's confident of what God has called him to. Third thing, the self-assessment of a great man.

Notice verse 8. The self-assessment of a great man. Well, maybe we can talk about whether he indeed was a great man. He seems to not think of himself as a very great man.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. Again, I would just say this, the Spirit of God wants us to hear Paul speak this way. And I think if he does, we should wrestle with it.

What's the benefit for me? Is the benefit for me to say, oh, he's the very least of all the saints, so that doesn't include me, so I must be greater than him. He's the very least. Is that basically the conclusion we should come to when we read that statement by Paul? I would just ask this, was Paul the least saint? Now remember, he's under inspiration.

Is it true? I mean, the truth is, many of us would regard him as... Like I just got done saying, of all the men in Scripture who's a saved sinner that's set up as an example for imitation by God Himself, the Apostle Paul. If that's true, we would expect him to be the greatest example among saints. Not the least.

I mean, I would expect that. Now look, on the one hand, this can't be false humility because the Spirit of God isn't going to allow falsehoods in Scripture. But does the Spirit perhaps allow Paul to express an opinion about Himself basically Paul's perspective of himself in light of the shame he feels for what he did to the church in his lost days? I mean, is this perhaps hyperbole? Hyperbole is an acceptable exaggeration.

You need to hate mother and father. See, that's acceptable exaggeration in Scripture. It drives a point home.

Is it true that Paul is the very least of all the saints? And you know, he says things in similar fashion in other places. You remember what he said? Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief or foremost. And you know, he also said, we already looked at it, he says there in 1 Corinthians 15, I'm the least of all the apostles.

Not even worthy to be one. The self-reflections of an inspired man. You know what's interesting about the text in 1 Corinthians 15? It's right in the next verse.

He says, I worked harder than any of them. Don't you love that? I am the least, yet I'm the greatest. And that seems to be how he speaks.

I love that. But what I ask is this, he's supposed to be an example to us. So what does it tell us about how we ought to view ourselves? Should we strive to see ourselves in the same way Paul saw himself? Or was Paul really the least? And for us to try to think of ourselves as least is only, you know, trying to think of ourselves in a way that really isn't true.

Or is this a healthy self-reflection that each one of us should have? And if it is, how do we get to the place to where we really think like this? And you know, it's almost like, okay, let's all try to think of ourselves as the least. Let's compete for that. Let's be in competition for trying to see ourselves as the lowest, the

worst.

Which is what? It's actually trying to be greatest and pursuing being least. And you know, it's almost like you go down that road, the moment you start to even think that way and pursue it, by nature, you just move in the opposite direction. But how can we think about this in a way that's healthy? I remember hearing John Piper one time.

Somebody said to him, somebody asked him somewhere, how do you cope with... I think the question was how do you remain humble in light of all the success that God has given to you? You know what he said? Piper responded with, I know who I am. In other words, I know how I talk to my wife when I go home. I know the thoughts that I struggle with.

I know my failures. I know my sins. I know my struggles.

And that's the issue. I would say this, do you know based on the facts available to me, like I can sit around an elders meeting and think I'm the least. I can think about life in the church and I can feel like, Lord, I'm the last guy you should have called to this.

I can think about a Denton conference and compare myself to the other preachers. I can think that way. That I'm the least.

Why? That doesn't mean that we don't struggle

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