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 Philippians 3:1-11
 Ninth Message
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THE INFINITE VALUE OF CHRIST

In the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul embarks on the second of two major exhortations in the letter. The first appeal is 1:27-2:18, where he urges the Philippians to be steadfast in unity and humble themselves according to the pattern of Christ. The center of this section is the well-known hymn in 2:5-11, referred to by N.T. Wright as the “Christ hymn.” The thrust is to have the mind-set of Christ and follow his example.

Following a personal note at the end of chapter 2 dealing with Paul’s plans to send Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi, the apostle makes another appeal/exhortation beginning in 3:1 and ending in 4:3. The purpose of this appeal is to warn against certain false teachers who were preaching a wrong view of Christ, and what it means for Christians to be the people of God. The thrust of this section is to have the mind-set of the apostle and to follow his example. Several words are repeated that we find in the Christ hymn in chapter 2, signifying that to follow the pattern of Paul is to follow the pattern of Christ.

This appeal, just like the first one, is both lengthy and dense; it will be the focus of our study for three weeks. But it is very difficult to break this passage into manageable sections since each verse just flows into the next. So at the outset I will provide a summary before giving a more detailed analysis.

The Jews were the chosen people of God, and what identified them as such was the Law, or Torah. But when Christ the Messianic King appeared, everything changed. Christ fulfilled Torah and Spirit replaced Torah. In the new covenant, what identifies the people of God is not Torah but Christ and the Spirit. Some Jews, however, wanted to hold onto the old symbols, the old entrance requirements. They sought to convince Gentile Christians that they not only needed Christ, but also Torah, specifically circumcision, food laws, and holy days. They needed to become Jews in order to gain full membership into God’s people.

Paul would have none of this because it would undermine the gospel. He was willing to throw out all of the Jewish symbols he once held dear to fully embrace Christ and his pattern for life, even if it meant suffering. He had come to understand the infinite value of Christ over against Torah. He was completely sold out both for the present and the future. In fact, his future expectation for what it meant to be in Christ flavored everything he did and said in the present. Paul’s encouragement to the Philippians was to follow his example.

The question that this conflict presents is, What are we willing to give up in order to gain Christ? What might we be holding onto that keeps us from fully gaining Christ?

I. The Command to Joy (3:1)

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. (Philippians 3:1 NASB)

“Finally” means “the rest” or “remaining,” and thus signals the last matters that Paul wants to write about, although he did not intend to end the letter here.

The apostle begins with a command: “rejoice in the Lord.” This phrase is repeated in 4:4 and thus forms an inclusio or bracket to this major section of text. Rejoicing is a repeated theme in Philippians. The word “rejoice” occurs eight times and the phrase “in the Lord” occurs nine times. The Lord is the sphere in which we live and the focus of our joy. Joy in the Lord, the joy of the Lord, is the sign of a mature Christian. No matter what is happening, whether it is suffering, tensions within the church body, dealing with people who want to pressure you into doing something, as Paul is going to take up in the next verse, joy continues to pervade the believer’s life. Paul commands joy, meaning that it is something we choose. It is not a feeling but an activity, like a spiritual discipline to be practiced. When we live in full understanding of what Paul is about to say, joy wells up inside of us and bursts forth.

The “same things” that Paul is writing about could refer to either rejoicing in the Lord or to what the apostle is about to say. I think it’s the latter, since these things are a safeguard, a means of security, to the Philippians. These things deserve repeated warnings and it is not burdensome for Paul to stress them again.

II. The Enemies of the Cross (3:2-3)

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, (3:2-3)

Paul quickly transitions to the false teachers who sought to put new Gentile converts under Torah, teaching that circumcision was required to become a full member of the people of God. Unlike the situation in Galatia, there is no indication that these false teachers were in Philippi at that time. But Philippi lay on the Aegean Way, and Paul is aware of the

potential problems that could arise. We can readily see the urgency in his warning: “Beware, beware, beware,” meaning, watch carefully, be on the lookout. We can readily see his attitude toward these false teachers in his use of three harsh labels: dogs, evil workers, and false circumcision. In English we miss the beauty of Paul’s use of assonance: three words that begin with a strong “k” sound. These three terms are a complete reversal of how the Judaizers saw themselves.

Dogs. In Paul’s day, dogs were not the cute little pets that people take for walks and bathe at the dog parlor today. Dogs didn’t ride in automobiles or sleep in people’s beds. They were scavengers, detested by Greco-Roman society and considered unclean by Jews, who used the term “dogs” for Gentiles. But Paul turns the tables here. When Judaizers attempted to make Gentile believers “clean” through circumcision, they made themselves “unclean” dogs.

Evildoers. For the Judaizing teachers, keeping Torah was a matter of doing works of righteousness. Again, Paul turns the tables. Those who sought to do good works by appropriating the symbols of Torah were actually doing evil works.

Circumcision. The normal word for circumcision is *peritomh*, to cut around. But Paul uses a different word, *katatombl*, to cut in pieces or mutilate. In Galatians 5:12, Paul wishes that the Judaizers would castrate themselves, or cut off their private parts. Circumcision was the big-ticket item for these Jewish teachers, but we can quickly tell that Paul thought it was an abomination.

Paul’s language is abrupt and to the point. In verse 18 he will call these dogs the enemies of the cross of Christ. They posed a serious threat to true spiritual life in Christ and had followed Paul around for many years. He has no patience for them because they were spreading lies about God.

In contrast to the scavenging mutilators are the Philippians, Gentile believers, whom Paul calls the true people of God. He employs the normal word for circumcision, the word that the Jews would have used in describing themselves. Paul says that “we” are the people of God, i.e., Jews and Gentiles who have been circumcised in the heart by the Spirit.

For Christians, being the people of God results in three things, perhaps matching the three harsh labels given to the Judaizers. First, we “worship in the Spirit.” The word here is closely related to the term we saw last time for service or minister. It is used in the LXX almost exclusively for Levitical “service” in the temple cultus. Believers offer their time and efforts in service to God, in every activity of life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, not through Torah.

Second, we boast in Christ Jesus. The idea here is of putting one’s full trust and confidence in Christ and the Spirit, not in Torah and flesh.

Finally, Paul says that we do not trust or put confidence in the flesh, the negative of the previous phrase. “Flesh” here points to the rite of circumcision, but it also points to human

existence and human rebellion against God. The flesh is life before and outside of God. Trusting or boasting in the flesh means trusting in religious symbols or works. It means trusting in human ability or achievements. In Philippi, it might have meant boasting in the status and privilege of being a Roman citizen. Boasting in the flesh means finding confidence as the people of God from anything outside of Christ and his work on the cross.

This is what God said in the book of Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD. (Jer 9:23-24)

It is also what Paul affirmed to the Galatians:

For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Gal 6:13-14)

It is hard for us to believe how significant this problem was in the early church. Why would the Philippians, Gentile believers, be susceptible to certain Jewish teachers trying to impose the symbols of Judaism upon them? We must remember that the Philippians were under pressure from the outside world. Standing for Christ was being met with growing opposition. The Jews offered a safety net, a covering, a protection from potential suffering. Theirs was an identity that was accepted by Rome. Not only that, there was also the pressure of someone steeped in religious history telling these new converts that to be fully Christian they really needed something. The need for acceptance and the presence of “authoritative” voices could make them susceptible to sign up for Torah observance.

It is also hard for us to realize how significant this problem can be in the church today. We are so tempted to define our spiritual life, our life in God, our faith, through external marks or signs or symbols—our denominational ties, how we worship, what we wear, what kind of Bible studies we attend, what version of the Bible we read, or the particular authors we subscribe to. Subtly we can put our confidence in these things and not in Christ. Passivity makes us vulnerable to falling under the control of authoritative people. We feel better about ourselves; we gain acceptance and approval as full-fledged members of a community.

Paul’s harsh tone makes us aware of the danger. He is making it very clear that what qualifies anyone, Jew or Gentile, to enter into the family of God is Christ and Christ alone. That much is easy for us to understand. But the implementation of this principle is far from easy. It requires drastic measures, renouncing anything that might be the object of our confidence

and trust. This is what Paul shares now through his own story and example.

III. The Example of Paul (3:4-6)

although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: (3:4)

Paul has just stated that he puts his complete confidence in Christ and not the flesh. But if anyone could put confidence in the flesh, he could. He lists seven things that he could list on his resume.

circumcised the eighth day, of the nation 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 the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (3:5-6)

The first thing Paul lists is circumcision, the main badge that the Judaizers tried to enforce on Gentile believers. Paul was an eighth-day man. Second, he was a member of the people or nation of Israel and therefore had all the privileges and promises of God's covenant people. Third, he could trace his family origins to the tribe of Benjamin which, together with the tribe of Judah, were the only two tribes out of the twelve that didn't get lost. Fourth, Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, i.e., he was a Hebrew speaking Jew in a Hebrew speaking family. The first four items are Paul's status given by birth and they set the stage for the final three, all of which are all introduced by the same preposition.

Fifth, as to the Law, Paul was a Pharisee. He was passionate and fervent, dedicated and devoted. He sought to do everything right not just to earn covenant membership, but as an expression of his status as a Jew. He states this in a couple of other places in the N.T.: "I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion" (Acts 26:5). "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Gal 1:14).

Sixth, as to zeal, Paul was a persecutor of the church. The apostle was not your everyday Pharisee. Zeal meant the sword. He was intent on removing unclean people who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, since Jesus was cursed by being hung on a tree. This kind of Messianic King was unacceptable to the Jew.

And finally, Paul was blameless as to the righteousness which is in the Law. The apostle kept the standards and complied with all the rules of Torah—food laws, Sabbath, rituals, etc. He was "blameless" (see 2:15), an attribute that he desires for believers in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. "Blameless" does not imply moral perfection, since the law provided repentance through the sacrificial system. Paul was blameless in every outward, observable behavior prescribed by the Torah.

Paul had a glorious past. Prior to his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, he took great pride in these things. His life was exemplary. But when he came to Christ, he had a completely different perspective. His value system changed dramatically, as we read in verse 7:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (3:7)

The gain/loss metaphor is the language of the marketplace and accounting. There are two sides to the ledger: one side is gains or credits, the other side losses or debits. As a Jew with a paid-up membership into the covenant people of God through Law, Paul had a lot of things on the credit side of the ledger. He felt really good about his portfolio. But when he came to Christ, he moved all the credits onto the debit side and had but one credit or gain, and that was Christ.

The word "count" here was applied to Jesus in 2:6, "who did not regard [count] equality with God a thing to be grasped." Here Paul uses the perfect tense, meaning that a past action has continuing results in the present. He continues to renounce the things from his Jewish past that could be objects of confidence or pride.

Prior to the recent financial meltdown, many people had credits in stock and houses. In an instant everything changed and credits became debits. People had to foreclose on their homes to cut their loses. This is how Paul saw the things he took confidence in from his Jewish heritage.

Growing up, I went to church every Sunday. My church had some very well known preachers. I was baptized as an infant and went through confirmation class. In high school I was the president of Methodist Youth Fellowship and even gave the Easter sunrise sermon one year. But I didn't know Jesus. After I became a Christian, I decided that I should get baptized. I remember the night I waited my turn to give my testimony. I had a very difficult time and I was all torn up inside because I was renouncing my church heritage, the one that my parents had given me, in order to proclaim my own personal faith in Christ. It isn't easy to take things from the gain side and put them in the loss side of our ledger.

But Paul goes even further. He says:

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ (3:8)

Now the Jewish things become all things—religious advantages, status, achievements, wealth, honor, comforts—anything that might be a source of fleshly confidence. Compared to knowing Christ, everything else is not just a loss, but "rubbish," meaning dung or the kind of refuse that was thrown out for dogs to forage. Perhaps this is one more shot intended for the Judaizing dogs.

Several years ago, I read a story in the paper saying that the value of baseball cards had skyrocketed. I was a baseball fanatic

as a young boy and I collected baseball cards. My favorite team was the New York Yankees. I had cards for entire Yankee teams in the 50's and 60's. I had a lot of cards of my favorite player and idol Mickey Mantle. I had a treasure in the basement of my parent's home. I immediately got on the phone and said to my mother, "Mom, you know the baseball cards in the basement? They're worth a fortune." She replied, "John, I threw them into the garbage!"

To Paul, all of our earthly treasures are simply garbage when measured against the surpassing value of knowing Christ. The apostle came to know Christ Jesus as "his" Lord. Knowing Christ doesn't mean knowing him intellectually, but intimately and personally. Paul gained something of infinite value.

The apostle goes on to say that gaining Christ also meant being found:

and may be found [2:7] in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (3:9)

Verse 8 flows into verse 9. Gaining Christ means to be found in Christ, another word link to the earlier hymn. Just as Christ was found in the appearance of a man, so Paul is found in Christ. The result is having a righteousness not from Torah but from God.

It is easy to see the comparison Paul intends from the abc, abc pattern of the text. Righteousness from law is compared to righteousness from God. But it isn't easy to understand what exactly Paul means.

The meaning of the word "righteousness" has stirred a lot of debate in recent years. When it is applied to God, the word means God's faithfulness to his people in terms of the covenant. When applied to mankind, it can mean having a right standing or a right relationship with God. It can also mean right behavior or conduct. When righteousness comes from Law, we usually think in terms of earning a right status with God and we think of works versus grace. When we look back we see that Law does stimulate self-effort, but I am not convinced that that is what Paul is talking about here. In light of what he said in verse 6 about being blameless in keeping Torah, and in light of the context, one could see righteousness of Law more as a means to and expression of covenant membership. This is what the Judaizers were offering to Gentile believers.

The righteousness of Law is contrasted with the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. Now here is another wrinkle. Faith in Christ can mean our faith in Christ or it can mean the faith of Christ—Christ's faithfulness to his Messianic role. Israel was faithless, Christ was faithful. Of course, if Paul intends Christ's faithfulness, that would not preclude our faith in Christ.

There is a lot of theology in verse 9, and while I am not a theologian, I don't have to be one to see what Paul is getting at. Both Law and Christ offer membership into the people of God. But when Christ came, Law became obsolete. There is no comparison between the two systems. In light of Christ, a relationship with God through Torah means nothing. It only promotes putting confidence in the flesh and religious symbols, not the reality. When compared to what Christ has done and in knowing him, Paul now considers his own righteousness from Law to be a loss, and more than that, garbage. Knowing Christ is the only thing Paul wants to pursue.

The question for us this morning is: What is in the credit column and what is in the debit column of your ledger? What are the objects of your confidence? What do you boast about—wealth, status, education, family, business successes, religious background, your football team? Are you willing to renounce all those things to have the one thing, Christ himself?

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matt 13:44)

When we understand the infinite value of Christ, then, like Paul, our sole object of boasting, confidence, worship, and joy will be Christ and Christ alone. To be rich in Christ means to be rich in him alone. The value of Christ makes everything else insignificant. The only thing that matters is gaining Christ and being found in him.

My grandmother lived a hard life trying to raise four girls in a sod house on the prairie, with no help from an alcoholic husband who abandoned the family. Yet she had a deep, abiding faith in Christ. She wrote some things in her Bible that she wanted read at her funeral. One of those was this: "If Christ is not first in your life, you do not know the first principles of joy. If He is first, He can make up for any thing you have lost."

Isn't this what Paul is saying? Even if we suffer the loss of all things, gaining Christ is the only thing that really matters. We no longer cling to anything earthly but we abandon ourselves to Christ. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose" (Jim Elliot).

Lord of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of thy name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Book of Common Prayer)