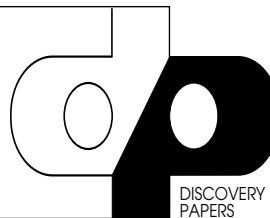


PURSUING MATURITY IN THE LORD

SERIES: JESUS, OUR JOY



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Philippians 3:1-11
Fourth Message
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Have you ever ignored a warning? What about those little red lights on the dashboard of your car? Perhaps you have said to yourself, “I don’t need to pay attention to the light. I’ll keep going until tomorrow.” But tomorrow never seems to become today. We always have so many other things to do. Warnings, red lights that signal impending danger, exist in all areas of life. Regardless of how they work, warnings come with the same purpose—to alert us to danger.

Unfortunately, we do not always heed them. All of us have learned to close our eyes or cover our ears in order to tune them out. They can be as blunt as sledgehammers, and we still turn our heads and whistle them away. We believe that we are the proverbial “exception to the rule.” It is as if there is a miniature receptionist in our brain instructed to intercept all warnings and deflect them. Warnings flash about us unheeded as we doze in our canoes, floating down the Niagara River to the Falls.

Philippians 3:1-11 is a warning. It is a red light! Failure to heed this warning has far more serious implications than car troubles. The issues at stake are personal and eternal. Therefore, give your mental receptionist an extended coffee break and respond to the warning you are about to hear. Some of you might be dangerously close to the rough waters.

Because I want to finish our study of this book in this series of messages, we are going to bypass the second half of chapter 2. In those verses, Paul reinforced his exhortation on the importance of unity by looking at three people who modelled this truth. Remember we looked at the illustration of Christ who gave up his rights as God in the first half of the chapter. The three lives he looked at were his own, Timothy’s, and Epaphroditus’. I encourage you to study and apply those verses on your own.

Chapter 3 begins with a command which is a safeguard for the warning. Then in verses 2 and 3, Paul gives the warning. He tells us how he personally came to the knowledge of that truth in verses 4 through 8. Finally, having heeded the warning himself, Paul gives us his desire for the future which can be formulated into a goal for our own lives.

Let us begin in verse 1 with the command.

I. A COMMAND WORTH REPEATING

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.

The key phrase is “*in the Lord.*” We are to rejoice in the Lord. Paul’s point is that we should let the Lord make us happy. We are not to look to any other source for joy.

This has been Paul’s message throughout the letter. Remember in chapter 1 Paul wrote that we are to rejoice in the preaching of the gospel. The heart of Philippians is Jesus Christ as our life. Thus, this command is the key to this passage, bridging what Paul has said before to what he is

about to teach. As we saw in chapter 2, Jesus has been glorified as our God, Savior, example, and Lord. Now he is revealed as our pride, choicest possession, pattern, possessor, and coming Savior. Should we not then rejoice in the Lord?

But this command is also a safeguard. There is danger ahead, temptations from within and without that will try to rob of us of this joy by convincing us to look elsewhere for it. Paul says if we can remember this one truth then the red light will not have to flash. Let the Lord be your source of joy. This is the truth this warning is designed to show us.

The warning itself is found in verses 2 and 3.

II. A WARNING WORTH HEEDING

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,...

Paul warns the Philippians, “Be careful to discern true Christianity.” In doing so, he uses harsh terms. This might seem out of character for Paul, for we have already seen how he was reticent to discuss the sins of others. Instead, he was tender and compassionate when dealing with their weakness or failure. But Paul would not tolerate a distorted gospel, teaching that was perverted and thus robbed of power.

To the Christian, Jesus is our obsession

He is referring to a group of men called Judaizers who were preaching a false gospel to the church. These men followed Paul from city to city, harassing him and debating his teaching. In fact, he is in prison because they accused him of violating the temple. Their message is summarized in Acts 15:1, “Unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Although they preached Christ, they added something else. Their view of salvation not only required belief in Christ, it also required personal works of righteousness. Their gospel was Christ plus the law or Christ plus circumcision. Paul could not tolerate this, for man cannot rejoice in the Lord and the law at the same time. The two are incompatible.

In reference to these men, Paul uses three titles. First, he calls them “dogs.” The dogs in Palestine were not your Benji or Lassie types; they were not warm and cuddly. They were wild scavengers to be feared and hated. To call someone a dog was as low as one could go. In fact, the Jews called the Gentiles dogs because they were outcasts. But Paul uses this term with regard to the Judaizers.

The reason Paul refers to them in this manner is revealed in

his second title “evil-workers,” or more accurately “evil advocates of works.” These men put a “+” sign after Christ in their teaching about salvation. They proposed a system of works instead of grace through faith.

Lastly, he calls them the “false circumcision.” In fact, Paul does not even use the term “circumcision” which is a title they would have enjoyed. With a graphic word play, he gets his point across. The word for circumcision is *peritome* which means “to cut around.” But Paul calls them *keritome* which means “to chop into little pieces.” Do you get his point? He sees these men as mutilators destroying believers. Paul desires to lead believers into joy in the Lord and nothing else. Anything which detracts from the glory due Christ and the sufficiency of his saving work is the object of Paul’s holy anger.

With deliberate emphasis, Paul affirms, “We are the true circumcision.” Paul could not have chosen a more suitable or instructive word. He means that we are the covenant people of God. Circumcision was introduced into Abraham’s family and passed on to Israel as a sign of the special relationship which God had established with them. The covenant theme is one the unifying themes of the Bible because the covenant is God’s promise to bring salvation to the earth. He started with one individual, Abram, and promised to make him into a great nation and to give him a seed and a land. Thus, through Abraham and his seed, God was going to bless the earth. He reiterated this covenant to Moses: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” It was the act of circumcision which symbolized that one had entered into this covenant relationship with God.

Paul applies all of this to us and declares emphatically that we are the chosen recipients of the promises of God. We are the true circumcision. This phrase is even stronger in the Greek for “true” is not there. Paul says, “We are not the true as opposed to the false circumcision. We are the only circumcision.” In other words, we are the only Israel, the sons of Abraham, the children of the covenant. We are God’s treasured possession. We are the kingdom of priests and the holy nation.

How can such a glorious claim be true? How can we be sure that we are partakers of these promises. To encourage our confidence, Paul adds three characteristics as defining marks of membership. As we mention each one, think of them in terms of your own life, for they are warning lights. They can help you discern whether or not you have true Christianity in your life.

A. An Internal Spiritual Reality

Paul says the first identifying characteristic is “worshipping in the Spirit of God.” The dominant characteristic of our worship is that it is internal not external, spiritual not physical. We have experienced a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit which is not tied to any special place or time. Both Ezekiel and Jeremiah spoke of this new covenant when they prophesied, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you...I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

Our worship involves a new birth—a new life regenerated by the Holy Spirit. This is why Paul refers to holiness in the

Christian life as the “fruit of the Spirit.” These are the qualities the Holy Spirit produces within us from the inside. The Christian life resembles a fruit tree, not a Christmas tree, with fruit growing on it rather than decorations attached to it.

Paul faced the same struggle with these Judaizers that Jesus had with the Pharisees whose religion was also external. Worship in the Spirit of God demands a heart that is right with God. It involves the daily offering of our bodies as a living sacrifice. Then all of life becomes worship. True Christianity is prompted and controlled by God’s Spirit. This is internal spiritual reality.

Now let us look at the second mark of true Christianity.

B. A Correct Attitude Toward Jesus Christ

Paul says, “...who glory in Christ Jesus.” There is no exact English translation for the word “glory.” It has various meanings such as “boast in, glory in, trust in, rejoice in, revel in, or live for.” The object of our boasting and glorying is that which fills our horizons, engrosses our attention, and absorbs our time and energy. In a word, our glory is our obsession. To Christians, Jesus is our obsession. We rejoice in him alone. We enthusiastically appreciate who he is and what he has done, and we acknowledge him as the only one worthy of praise. His work is sufficient.

There are many among us who would add to his sufficiency. They say nice things about him, but they do not consider him to be sufficient. Therefore, they add other requirements for salvation, saying, “You need to join our sect” or “You need to have an additional experience with the Holy Spirit.” The second mark of true Christianity is a correct attitude toward Jesus Christ.

The third mark is an obvious conclusion to the first two.

C. A Refusal To Rely On Yourself

Paul says, “...who put no confidence in the flesh.” Our salvation began with God who reached down from heaven to call a people to Himself. He animated us by giving us life through His Spirit, and he has displayed before us the beauty and worth of his Son. Before this life-giving Spirit and exalted Son, we become aware of our own unworthiness. “Flesh” describes what a person is apart from the grace of Christ—unregenerated humanity.

These are the elements of true Christianity: an internal spiritual reality, a correct attitude toward Christ, and a refusal to rely on ourselves. Paul now demonstrates how he discovered this truth in his own life, how he learned not to put any confidence in his flesh. Look at his example in verses 4 through 8.

III. AN EXAMPLE WORTH PONDERING

...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; 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. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 in order that I may gain Christ,...

In telling us how he discovered his own worthlessness, Paul gives us a picture of the flesh. He first lists seven achievements which he previously relied upon for his worth. They can be divided into two categories: those he inherited and those he earned, his natural and personal advantages.

Of his natural advantages, Paul starts his list with the covenant privileges he had from infancy; he was “circumcised on the eighth day.” He was not a Gentile who had become a Jew but was introduced into his inheritance on the eighth day of his life. In addition to this, he claimed the national advantage of pure Israelite descent, for he was “of the nation of Israel.” He was from the twelve tribes descended from Israel, the transformed Jacob. There were others who could trace their lineage back to Abraham but only through the impure line of Ishmael. Paul says, “My tribe originated with one of the true sons of Israel.” Not only that, he was “from the tribe of Benjamin” out of which came the first king of Israel. This was the only tribe to remain loyal to David and his successors. Finally, among his natural advantages, he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” He was the child of zealous religious parents with all the benefits and lasting heritage that entailed. What a background!

And to this special list of natural advantages, Paul adds his own personal advantages including attitude, activity, and achievement. Towards the law of God, he adopted the most respectful and responsive attitude possible. He was a Pharisee, the strictest of all groups. His overriding concern was to live in the strictest conformity to what he believed were God’s regulations. He was so sure that his belief was the will of God he zealously defended his faith against “heretics.” Since he considered Christians to be a false sect, he persecuted them with a clear conscience. As a result of his achievements, he saw himself as “blameless” in regard to the righteousness under the law.

Thus, Paul describes the flesh not as man at his worst but as man at his best. Flesh can be the man who has reached the pinnacle of moral and religious development. In other words, flesh describes our state before God brings us to the new birth. Do you see the point of all this? If anybody could have confidence in human accomplishments, the apostle Paul did. In fact, he had spent most of his life depending on these things to give him worth.

In what do you glory? What gives you confidence? Is it your background, looks or salary? Is your confidence based upon the school you attended or the degrees or titles you have received? Is it in your address? Do you glory in your activities or service to the community? Is it in your morality, the fact that you do certain things and not others?

Maybe you are more spiritual than that. Perhaps you find your assurance in the fact that you went to a Bible college or travelled to the Holy Land. Maybe you glory in the fact that you only use a certain translation of the Bible or have been on a short-term mission. It is great to be a Christian, but it is even better to be something more. My friends, do you know what all of this is? It is flesh!

Having defined flesh for us, Paul now estimates its worth.

His moral achievements were a feat of human achievement and a significant contribution to humanity. But in giving confidence before God, they failed miserably. Man at his best is woefully unfit. Paul had no recourse but to add up all his advantages and admit that the total was zero. He concluded, “Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” Notice that he puts his gain in plural—“whatever things.” Paul carefully lists each advantage forgetting nothing. But as the accountant’s eye travels down the list, the total is singular—“loss.”

I am sure Paul can remember the hour his personal system for spiritual accounting broke down. It happened on the road to Damascus when the Lord Jesus appeared to him. This is why he uses the past tense, “have counted.” When he saw that all he had been counting on was worthless, he rejected it and began a new system of accounting. In place of his loss stood Jesus Christ. The man whom he had despised and rejected was his credit to cover all his needs. This was a private transaction. No one else was there.

The same holds true for us. Those distinguishing marks of true Christianity can only become ours when we possess Christ as our own. No one can do this for us. These marks only become evident when we consider everything else as loss. We cannot have both. Christ only comes into our lives when what we already have is reckoned as loss. If we learn anything from Paul’s example, we learn that Christ is not the prize at the top of the ladder of self-advancement. He does not become ours by our effort but by our rejection of effort.

This is not just a once-in-a-lifetime decision. Paul says, “More than that, I am presently counting all things as loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Paul knew how easy it is to subtly revert back to confidence in the flesh. When the pressure increases and the suffering hits, there is always the desire to go back to what used to give us meaning and strength. When we feel insecure, lonely or rejected, it is easy to revert back to the things that once brought us confidence.

Christ does not become ours by effort, but by rejection of effort

But Paul has a different perspective. As we look to the Lord for our joy, confidence and assurance, we will find new peace and strength with which to face our circumstances. Not only does Paul describe accomplishments in the flesh as loss, but he calls them “rubbish” which is a mild translation. The term means “dung” (or any other term you might care to insert that would be more meaningful).

Having revealed to us how he came to this conclusion about his own life, Paul now reveals his goals for the future. Look at verses 9 through 11.

IV. A GOAL WORTH PURSUING

...and may be found 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, that I may know Him, and the power of

His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Let me restate Paul's goal to gain Christ in an exhortation: *Let Christ satisfy you.* If you could pick only one goal for 1988, make this it. Two verbs summarize Paul's thinking in these verses. The first is in verse 9: "...that I may be *found* in him." The second is in verse 10: "...that I may *know* him." In these verses, we are given three practical means by which we can allow Christ to satisfy us. As you think about the areas in which you long to be different, think of these three exhortations.

A. Be Satisfied To Be Found In Christ

Paul changes the metaphor in verse 8. Having portrayed Christ as an all-sufficient wealth, he now sees him as a dwelling place which is so attractive and secure that he cannot bear to be away from it. This word "found" is used in chapter 2 to say that Christ Jesus was "found" in human form. He presented a human appearance to all who saw him and would have been judged to be a man.

Paul wants people to see him as a man "in Christ." Jesus is his permanent address whether he is in Rome or Philippi, healthy or ill. Jesus is the only address worth boasting about. There is no greater security in all the world. Nothing is a threat when we are "in him."

There is a second way in which we can let Jesus satisfy us.

B. Be Satisfied To Be Blessed By Christ

In this permanent address "in Christ," there is one particular treasure that is deeply satisfying: righteousness. Righteousness means "being right with God." Paul had spent years trying to establish a do-it-yourself righteousness based on his own self-sacrifice and conformity to an external code of behavior. He had awarded himself high marks, but his efforts could not give him confidence before the judgment of God. However, there is the possibility of a certificate of righteousness in which we can be confident. This is a righteousness which proceeds from God. Since it does not come from ourselves, it is certain from the start. And the glorious truth is that the only condition for our receiving it is faith. Gone is the endless striving to keep laws, the passion for legalism. This goal is not reached by the stairs but by the elevator! Let Christ bless you with his righteousness.

C. Be Satisfied To Be Like Christ

Paul says, "...that I may know Him." When the Bible talks about knowledge, it refers to more than acquiring facts about Jesus. Biblically, nothing is known until it is applied. Second, knowledge implies personal intimacy. This is the word used in Genesis to say Adam "knew" Eve. Paul wants to know Christ intimately.

As we learned in chapter 2, this ultimately involves a cross because Christlikeness always leads to Calvary. The servant is not greater than his master. But where there is a cross, there is also a resurrection. Applying these truths involves suffering and pain as we give up confidence in ourselves. But Paul promises that all of the suffering can be faced in the resurrection power of the Lord himself.

I trust that this warning is applicable to your life. As I was applying this to my life, I meditated on my own spiritual journey and realized how blessed I am! I have been unable to put any confidence in the flesh in my life. I had none of Paul's spiritual heritage, for I grew up in a non-Christian home with an alcoholic mother and no father. And I was an average student most of my life. When I think of where I am now intellectually and spiritually and of all that God has done for me, I feel like a spectator. Dr. Donald Campbell used to describe his life as "a turtle on a fencepost." He explained that when he was a child he would occasionally see a turtle on a fencepost. He knew that someone had to have put it there, for it could not get there on its own. That is the way I feel. All that I am was given to me by Christ. I did not earn any of it. I am incredibly privileged.

The sign of the old covenant was circumcision. A symbol that we have partaken of the new covenant is the Lord's supper, communion. The old covenant was written on tablets of stone with man saying, "I can keep the law." But the wonderful promise which we have in the new covenant is that it is written within us. The spiritual covenant is no longer based upon our promises. This is the problem with the old covenant—living in the flesh which is unable to keep the promise. Our New Year's resolutions will never succeed. I trust that you have lived long enough in your Christian life to know that holiness can never be achieved on that basis. Holiness requires God's strength and enabling.

It is my prayer as you enter 1988 that you would heed the warning to discern the reality of your own Christian experience. In the midst of the many voices that are encouraging your confidence in the flesh, pay attention to the red light. There is only One who is worthy of our confidence. Let your joy be found in him.

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