

PHILIPPIANS

3:1-16

Introduction

"Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!"¹

Paul's first century readers knew who these people were... And we need to know who they were, too, if we are to understand this part of his letter to the Philippians.

The book of Acts tells the story of the first century church. In the beginning, the gospel went "to the Jew first."² The first seven chapters of the book of Acts deal only with Jewish believers or with Gentiles who were converts to Judaism.³ In Acts 8, the gospel went to the Samaritans, but this did not cause too much of a stir among strict Jews since the Samaritans were partly Jewish themselves. But when Peter went to the Gentiles, to the household of Cornelius, in Acts chapter 10, this created an uproar! After all, the Gentiles in Cornelius' household had become Christians *without first becoming converts to Judaism!* This was a whole new thing for the church. Peter explained how God Himself had supernaturally directed him to preach to the Gentiles, and the matter seemed to be settled.

But it was not settled for long. Paul was sent out by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel especially to the Gentiles.⁴ It did not take long for the strict Jewish believers to oppose Paul's ministry and come to the Gentile church at Antioch teaching that it was necessary for the Gentiles to submit to Jewish rules and rites before they could be saved.⁵ This disagreement led to the church council at Jerusalem that is described in detail in Acts 15. The result of this conference was an approval of Paul's ministry: Gentiles did **not** have to become converts to Judaism in order to become Christians!

But the dissenters were not content with the church's decision. Having failed in their opposition to Paul at Antioch and Jerusalem, they followed him wherever he went and tried to steal his converts, still teaching that you must submit to Jewish rules and rites in order to be saved. Bible students call this group of false teachers "Judaizers." **These** are the "dogs," the "evil workers," and the "mutilation" that Paul is referring to in our text.

You may not struggle with Judaizers who insist that you become a Jew before you can be saved... But the fundamental issue that the Judaizers promoted still troubles the

¹Philippians 3:2

²see Acts 3:26; Romans 1:16

³Acts 2:10

⁴Acts 13:1-3; 22:21

⁵Acts 15:1

church today. They believed that you could attain a right standing with God by your works. They believed that righteousness came through your self-effort to keep certain rules and rites.

There are many groups that teach righteousness by works today: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other cults are works-oriented. Even within the church there are those groups and individuals who see certain works as being necessary to your salvation. There are those who, for example, teach that you cannot be saved unless or until you are baptized.

What do we say to all those who add works to the grace of God in salvation? We say what Paul said in these verses, especially at the end of verse 3 where he said, "have no confidence in the flesh." By "flesh" Paul means your personal works which seek to attain salvation. Don't think that works can or will save you. They won't; they can't.

Rather than having confidence in your flesh, Paul talked about the confidence of faith, especially in verse 9 where he said,

Philippians 3:9 and be found in Him, not having [your] own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Salvation is not by your *attainment*, but by Christ's *atonement*. We'll take a look at two things this morning:

#1 You Can't Make Spiritual Gains Through Confidence In Your Flesh

#2 You Can Make Spiritual Gains Through The Confidence Of Faith

#1 You Can't Make Spiritual Gains Through Confidence In Your Flesh (v1-7)

Paul has been much maligned by Bible teachers for the first word of chapter 3. He says "finally," as if he's going to close the letter, then goes on for two more chapters! The word means *as for the rest* and is simply an indicator that he is changing his subject and is about to talk about the "rest" of the issues on his heart.

Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.

Paul never passed up an opportunity to exhort believers to "rejoice in the Lord." The sovereignty of God impacted his life in such a profound way that he could rejoice in any and all circumstances.

The apostles taught by repetition. Paul was writing "the same things; that is, things he had already told them, either in person or by other correspondence. Peter, in 2 Peter 1:12-13, wrote,

2 Peter 1:12 For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth.

2 Peter 1:13 Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you,

Especially those who are well taught - those who "know and are established" - need constant reminding in order to be stirred-up.

Philippians 3:2 Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!

"Dogs" are the scavenger variety that feed on waste and garbage. Jews sometimes referred to unbelieving Gentiles as dogs; here Paul refers to the Judaizers as dogs!

"Evil workers" is a kind of play on words. These Judaizers promoted good works, but good works added to grace have the effect of being evil since they lead men astray of the truth.

"Mutilation" is the translation of "concision," a pun on the word "circumcision." These Judaizers taught that you must be circumcised to be saved. But Paul taught that circumcision was nothing more than a fleshly procedure - a mutilation.

Philippians 3:3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,

Circumcision is nothing more than an outward sign of inward faith. Now that Christ has come, and we have the Spirit indwelling us, it is an unnecessary ritual.

Philippians 3:4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so:

Rites and rituals cannot save. Using himself as the prime example, in verses 5 and 6 Paul discusses the futility of confidence in the flesh.

=Confidence in a rite is futile:

Philippians 3:5 circumcised the eighth day...

Paul was not a late convert to Judaism. He had been circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law. Yet he put no confidence in it.

It should be obvious that **no** external rite can save you...

=Confidence in your race is futile:

Philippians 3:5 ...of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews...

Paul had a superlative background as a Jew, both by birth and education.

It should be obvious that **no** physical descent can save you...

=Confidence in religion is futile:

Philippians 3:5 ...concerning the law, a Pharisee;

Pharisees not only endeavored to keep the Mosaic Law, they also held to the traditions surrounding it.

Paul had enough religion to keep him out of trouble, but no righteousness to get into heaven. It was not bad things that kept him away from salvation in Jesus; it was good things!

It should be obvious that **no** religion cannot save you...

=Confidence in your record is futile:

Philippians 3:6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church...

Paul's record was unequaled by any of his peers. The Judaizers who were persecuting him couldn't hold a candle to the way he himself had persecuted Christians.

It should be obvious that your record cannot save you...

=Confidence in your own righteousness is futile:

Philippians 3:6 ...concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Paul had been more faithful in keeping the finer points of the law than even the Judaizers. It only led him to declare, in Romans 7, "O wretched man that I am." The law only condemned him.

It should be obvious that your own righteousness cannot save you...

Confidence in the flesh - in rites, race, religion, record, and your own righteousness - cannot save you. Paul learned that on the road to Damascus when he met Jesus.

Philippians 3:7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.

Confidence in the flesh was, and is, an obstacle to meeting Jesus and being saved by grace through faith alone. That's why Paul refers to confidence in the flesh as "loss" - it held him back from the true experience of the saving grace of God.

+You can't make spiritual gains through confidence in your flesh!

#2 You Can Make Spiritual Gains Through The Confidence Of Faith

(v8-16)

In contrast to the flesh, Paul looks at faith as the principle for living out the Christian life.

=The confidence of faith is regeneration:

Philippians 3:8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

The "knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" is the experience of being saved by grace through faith. It is personal faith in the risen Savior. Everything else - that is, everything and anything of works and flesh - is "rubbish." Some of your Bibles have the word "dung."

=The confidence of faith is righteousness:

Philippians 3:9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

All your very best efforts at righteousness fall short of perfection. Jesus died for your sin to give you His perfect righteousness. A right standing with God is yours by faith in Jesus.

=The confidence of faith is resurrection:

Philippians 3:10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,

Philippians 3:11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Jesus suffered, died, and was resurrected. Paul speaks of knowing resurrection power and suffering and dying. The order is reversed to describe your experience as a believer. You are regenerated and declared righteous; then the power of the resurrection allows you to share in the fellowship and sufferings of Jesus, dying to yourself and living to God.

There is room for growth and maturity in your Christian walk, and that is what Paul is describing in the remaining verses. Growth and maturity do not and cannot come from confidence in the flesh. It comes from experiencing the power of Jesus Christ's resurrection in your everyday living.

It is this experiencing of the power of God in your life that Paul is talking about in verse 11 where he desires to "attain to the resurrection from the dead." He's not talking about his future resurrection; he's talking about the ongoing results of the resurrection of Jesus in his life *right now*. He's talking about experiencing the power that raised Jesus from the dead giving him victory over sin and producing growth and maturity in his life.

=The confidence of faith is reaching:

Philippians 3:12 Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.

Philippians 3:13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead,

Philippians 3:14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul talked about victory, about experiencing the power of the resurrection. But he knows that absolute perfection, such as exists in heaven, is never achieved in this life. There is the possibility of growth, maturity, and the satisfaction of serving the Lord acceptably. This reaching forward, pressing on, is what verses 12 through 14 are about.

John Walvoord paraphrases these verses, saying,
"I did not attain perfection by a single act in the past and still am not perfect, but it is a continual exercise of my life to pursue perfection... [to further and fulfill] God's purpose in my life."⁶

There are two extremes in the Christian life:
^On the one hand, discontent with your growth can bring discouragement and resignation to spiritual defeat.
%On the other hand, overestimating your spiritual growth can lead to complacency.

The proper attitude is to keep on reaching forward, making spiritual progress. A key is "forgetting those things which are behind," both your failures *and* your successes. Whether you failed or succeeded yesterday, today you need to reach forward toward growth and maturity, relying on the resurrection power of Jesus.

Philippians 3:15 Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

Philippians 3:16 Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

A mature believer must agree with Paul. Anyone who disagrees is wrong, and God will show you as you consider the apostle's words.

A maturing believer has made progress, reaching forward, and will continue on the same path.

+By faith you are regenerated and declared righteous. By faith you experience the power of the resurrection in your daily life to go on reaching towards maturity until you see Jesus in heaven.

Conclusion

You can't be perfect in this life, but you will be in heaven. You can make progress.

⁶Philippians, p. 90.

God intends for you to make progress until you are perfect. But you can only make progress if you have no confidence in the flesh. Instead, have the confidence of faith.