

[dog fight]

:: philippians 3.2-3 ::

Our text is going to be Philippians 3, verses 2 and 3.

Last week we talked about rejoicing in the Lord. Paul is giving us an entire chapter of parenthetical thought regarding our Christian faith and how it is secured by our joy in the Lord. We saw how important it is that our lives are anchored in a personal love for God and a love for the ministry of the Gospel. We saw that this mindset is the key to attaining the kind of effectiveness and satisfaction that men like Paul and Epaphroditus and Timothy had.

Since rejoicing in the Lord is so important for us as individuals and as a church, then it should come as no surprise that our spiritual enemies will attempt to damage or rob that joy. Because a Christian without joy is a Christian without strength. And if something can take your focus off of personal holiness and personal devotion to the God who loves you, then you will be less of a threat to the kingdom of darkness.

Paul has given us instruction on how to focus our minds, but he is going to give us a warning about defending our lives against spiritual enemies. In our text, that enemy is **legalism**.

Philippians 3.2-3 - Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

Legalism is the focus on external behaviors or habits which a person thinks will make them more righteous or more deserving of God's favor. On the flip side, legalism says that a person can't really come before the Lord or be in God's good graces unless they perform certain rules and rituals, which make a person acceptable to God.

Paul rejects this notion altogether. Not only here, but throughout his writings. The Christian life is more than a list of do's and don'ts. The Christian life, according to Jesus, is to love God and to love others. That is the 'law' we are to follow, because a life that pleases the Lord flows from the heart of a person who is in love with Jesus Christ.

Yet, again and again, people and teachers and groups come along saying that there are physical things you have to do to be a *REAL* Christian. It happened to Paul everywhere he went, it continues today as the enemy attempts to weaken Christians and weaken the Church by putting people under bondage to rites and rules and rituals.

What we get here in our text is a comparison between living by the law and living by the Spirit.

First, Paul identifies legalism and legalists as dogs.

In our culture, a dog is man's best friend, part of the nuclear family. We esteem dogs as noble creatures.

However, if you visit the 3rd world, it's a different story. I know that when we've spent time in Honduras or Peru or Chile...you don't want to be friends with **ANY** of the dogs you encounter there. And there are **LOTS** of them all over the place.

The same was true in the first century. In fact, in the Bible dogs were used to illustrate lowest of the low. You didn't want to be compared to a dog. Solomon compared fools to dogs in the Proverbs. Peter called false teachers dogs in his second epistle.

Over in Galatians chapter 5 we get a great picture of how legalism works, it's in verses 13-15:

Galatians 5.13-15 - For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

Legalism bites and devours, spiritually speaking. It's an attitude that people use to tear away at others and even profit off of them. Self-serving, spiritually diseased individuals who often run in packs, trying to enforce their brand of spirituality on others.

Second, Paul says that legalists are **evil workers**.

What is so remarkable about legalism is that it appears to be so holy and so Godly, it's so impressive to us on a human level, yet in reality it is empty and corrupt and does a huge amount of damage to those around it. It actually works evil in the name of righteousness.

The Pharisees are such a perfect example of legalism. They were so obsessed with their own definition of godliness and cleanliness, yet they were enemies of Jesus Christ, whose father, He said, was Satan. They put incredible burdens on the people of Israel.

Jesus said,

Matthew 23.27-28 - "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Legalism always seems impressive, but really it just houses an empty heart. It is a facade that sits on top of a life devoid of true spirituality. And the work that is birthed out of legalism isn't a work of grace. It is evil work because it puts obstacles between God and man and requires impossible things of people.

God went to great lengths to tear down any separation between man and Himself. When a person or a teacher or a group comes in and says that God can only be **TRULY** pleased if you do this on this day or don't do that on that day, then that work is evil. Because God desires a personal relationship with us, not a legal one. And He desires a genuine service, not lip-service.

Thirdly, Paul said to beware of the mutilation. In this regard he was referring specifically to those who were teaching that a person must be circumcised in order to be saved.

Today we don't encounter a lot of this particular teaching. However, we do encounter teachings which state a person must be baptized in order to be saved, or speak in tongues in order to be saved, or other similar heresies.

When a teaching like that goes out it does a couple of things. Number one, it mutilates the Gospel message that we have received from God in the Scriptures. The simple teaching that we are saved by grace, through faith and **not** of works, lest any man should boast.

But second, it leads to spiritual (and sometimes personal) mutilation. This is the only time this specific Greek word is used in the New Testament. And what it means is 'to cut up.' And legalism causes people to cut themselves up, trying to force God's hand through some dogmatic law they've set up as opposed to living a life of love for God.

When we see how Paul described spiritual legalism it should worry us. It should cause us to stop and see it for what it really is. Something that is dangerous and damaging and terrible. And we should take his warning to beware seriously. He repeated it 3 times. Legalism is deadly to spiritual growth and to the ministry and it is out there right now trying to syphon you off.

Instead of getting drawn off into the trap of legalism we should continue living the Spirit-led life, which is what God has wanted for us all along.

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.

The Spirit-led life is the opposite of legalism. Legalism seeks to force God into giving His favor through our habits and rules. The Spirit-led life seeks to please God because we love Him who first loved us.

The legalistic life worships God in ritual. This day in this way.

The Spirit-led life worships God in the Spirit. William Barclay said:

We worship God in the Spirit. Christian worship is not a thing of ritual or of the observation of details of the Law; it is a thing of the heart. It is perfectly possible for a man to go through an elaborate liturgy and yet have a heart that is far away from God.

We don't sing because singing 5 songs once a week will keep God from being angry at us. We sing because we love the Lord and because of who He is and what He's done. We worship Him by giving ourselves to Him, as we've been talking about for 19 weeks. If thankfulness and adoration isn't the root of our worship, then we're worshipping in vain.

The legalistic life rejoices in self-righteousness. And then it goes out and evangelizes others into that same form of self-righteousness. A Pharisee, be they Biblical or modern-day, are never really worried about people receiving more of God's Spirit or more of God's grace. They're just concerned that you do the same things they do and they let you know how early

they get up and how much of the Bible they've memorized and all of those sorts of outward, physical things which *seem* spiritual. But it's just boasting. It's self-righteousness and legalism rejoices in it.

The Spirit-led life is to rejoice in Christ Jesus. A Spirit-filled man thinks less and less of himself and more and more of his Lord. Because the more filled with God's Spirit we are, the more we will understand God's mercy and grace and see ourselves for what we really are: men who have nothing to offer.

In fact, that's the third comparison we see Paul making.

The legalistic life has a huge amount of confidence in the power of the flesh. That by my activity I can elevate myself above the puny mortals around me. That God will have no choice but to bless and honor me because of my great spiritual accomplishments.

But the Spirit-led life is exactly the opposite. Having **no** confidence in the flesh. Our flesh is evil and wicked and it hasn't gotten better. It's been replaced by the Spirit. We must refuse to return to the flesh for insight or inspiration or ambition. Because, within ourselves, we have nothing to offer the Lord.

God doesn't need our talents. He doesn't need our abilities. He doesn't need us at all. In His grace He's willing to work *THROUGH* us. Him working through us so that we can be a part of His will. Along the way, the Lord refines us and strips away the corruption that sin has brought into our lives. But anything that God does in us is because of His power and His mercy. He has no need of our meager humanity.

Yet we know that God does desire to establish and continue work through each and every one of His people. This should cause more rejoicing and give us a huge amount of confidence that each of our lives has purpose in God's eyes.

But if we reduce our faith to some tally-sheet of how much better we are than the Christian next to us, then we've completely removed ourselves from the Spirit-led, Spirit-filled life. And it's easy to become a Pharisee, because that attitude begins with pride. And all of us have to continually deal with pride. The key is to remember who God is, what Jesus Christ has done for us and the plan that He has revealed in His word. If we stay focused on that, then we're not going to be drawn away into the emptiness of legalism and we will be able to retain that joy that is so central to our faith.