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The Battle Against the Judaizers

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, again we just thank you for how you have provided for us, how we are able via You Tube to come into each and every one of your homes. We're just thankful. We may have an empty church but we have a full church body wherever you may be. So we pray this morning as we are opening up your word, we pray for the power of your Holy Spirit. We are back in the book of Philippians and again, Lord, we're grateful and thankful for Paul and for the church that you established there. We pray as we open up this book and look again into it that you would give us the presence and the power of your Holy Spirit and the lessons that we see in there would be of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well it's been a whole month since we've been in the book of Philippians and that's a good thing because we all want time to fly in the wintertime and it certainly has flown in these last few weeks. When we last left Philippians, we were at this verse, this is *Philippians 2:14* which says: *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God*

without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world. We spoke back then of the difference between imperatives and indicatives, noting that imperatives are commands, they're things that you must do. An indicative simply indicates, they indicate something about someone or something. And we spoke about the difference between religion which consists of rules and imperatives, things that you must do and a relationship with Jesus Christ in which his sheep simply hear his voice and they follow him.

As Christians, we are not under imperatives or commands. We follow Jesus because it is our great joy. And our lives simply indicate that we are his sheep. And as I said last time, we are not under the law because Jesus has fulfilled it in our place, so we're not under orders. We're not doing things in order to earn our way to heaven. Rather we are overwhelmed by the fact that God has made us blameless, innocent and without blemish and placed us squarely in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation and that we want nothing more than to tell that crooked and twisted generation about what God has done. So Paul ends this section by saying: *Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.* And then he goes on to say: *holding fast to the word*

of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul has fixed his eyes on that final day of Christ when all things are going to come under judgment, and he longs to see that his race was not run in vain and that the Philippian church truly honors and glorifies Christ. And remember Paul is still sitting in a prison cell and the possibility of his execution is very real. And so he reflects on that and he says, if my death results in your faith growing, I will be glad and you should be glad and rejoice with me, because in the end nothing else matters. He then goes on to speak about some of his fellow co-workers. He says this starting in verse 19, he says: *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.*

So first question is, okay, who is Timothy? Well, we first get introduced to Timothy through Luke in Acts 16 and this is what it says. It says: *Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.* Well not only was Timothy well spoken of but he was also willing to put himself through considerable physical pain just to be able to present the gospel to his fellow Jews. Because Timothy came from a mixed marriage and because he was never circumcised, he had a double reason to be rejected by his fellow Jews, and so he underwent the procedure just to eliminate the possibility of his family background becoming a stumbling block. Now you have to understand that this particular circumcision was a procedure done on an adult in a time and place where anesthesia and pain management were nonexistent. Just consider the amount of physical sacrifice that Timothy was willing to undergo because of his passion to spread the gospel. And ask yourself, guys, if you were presented with the same opportunity, would you accept it?

In addition to Timothy, Paul greatly appreciated Epaphroditus. In verse 25 he says: *I have thought it necessary to send to you*

Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. See, Epaphroditus was a member of the Philippian church who had been sent to Paul in prison and he brought with him a gift to minister to his needs. And while he was there he apparently got sick, very sick, and so Paul is writing back to his home church in Philippi. And he's telling them how much he appreciated Epaphroditus and he was pointing out that he wasn't slacking, he's not trying to get out of work, he was genuinely and deathly sick. Paul wants the Philippian church to recognize and appreciate the efforts that Epaphroditus put into ministering to Paul himself. See Paul loves the Philippian church. And he rejoices to see Epaphroditus physically healthy once again and ministering back at that church. And that brings us to the end of chapter 2.

Well, chapter 3 begins and it begins on a very different note. You

see Paul, the passionate one here, who deeply loves the church of Philippi, now becomes Paul the angry one, and he's assessing the dangers that the Philippian church has come under. We pick up at *Philippians 3:1*. It says this: *Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.* See, Paul had two sets of enemies to deal with when it came to the Jews. *Baker's New Testament Commentary* points out that he wasn't just fighting the Jews, he was fighting the Judaizers. The Jews were those who were committed to following Paul from town to town discounting and discrediting the gospel that he's presenting. They hated everything about Christianity and claimed that Paul was an apostate who was just spouting a false religion. These were the outsiders, these were there to attack Christianity. But the Judaizers were another story. These folks were not outsiders, these folks were insiders. I mean these were Jews who believed that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. They believed that he went to the cross, they believed that he paid the price of yours and my sin at the cross and that by faith in him you could be saved but only if. It was that two-letter word "if" that made the Judaizers one of Paul's bitterest enemies, because they believed in the gospel plus. Jesus

Christ was God incarnate, he lived a perfect life, he went to the cross to pay the price of our sin but faith alone in Christ was not enough, they said. You still had to follow some of the aspects of Jewish ceremonial law, not the least of which was circumcision. Paul doesn't waste any breath referring to these Judaizers as anything other than enemies of the cross. In fact the language couldn't get more stark than what he says. He calls these folks dogs, evildoers, mutilators. That's about as strong a language as you're ever going to get from Paul but it gets even stronger in the book of Galatians where Paul takes on the very same subject of circumcision as the scourge of those who preach the gospel plus. There he said this in *Galatians 5:6*, he said: *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!* You know, Paul says to the Judaizers, if you think it's so necessary to circumcise, why don't you just stop there? I mean if cutting body parts gets you God's favor, why not go ahead

and cut the whole thing off?

Well, so how is it that Paul would be so adamantly against circumcision when the very same Paul is the one who took Timothy to be circumcised? And he knew that Timothy was already a believer. I mean, wouldn't it be the height of hypocrisy to insist that Timothy be circumcised and then condemn these Jewish believers who were demanding the exact same thing? I mean what's the difference? Well, the difference is in a word, and that word is "motivation." You see, Paul's motivation for Timothy's circumcision is not to have him do something to make himself worthy of heaven. Paul says over and over again that we are already worthy of heaven not by virtue of anything that we did or could do, but instead by the virtue of the blood of Christ, and to add anything to that gospel is to demean the value of Christ. It is as if to say that God becoming a man and living among us perfectly and then allowing himself to be slaughtered as a sacrifice for our sin is not enough, it's not enough of a price to pay, it needs something else, something for me, something that I can contribute to make it of true and lasting value. I mean can you see how incredibly demeaning to God that is? I mean can you see how incredibly enslaving to man that is? God's sacrifice is not enough. It's his sacrifice plus my adherence to ceremonial law that truly saves. Well, you know, according to this view, I, I have to provide the

missing ingredient. So why does Paul want Timothy to be circumcised? Well, simply because it removes a potential stumbling block to those who are still enslaved by those ceremonial laws. Having been freed by faith in Christ from the penalty of the law, Paul is now free to pursue his own passion and that is that others who are still under that law become free from that law. And he'll do anything to help folks find that freedom, and he wants Timothy to join him in that passion. This is what he says in *1 Corinthians 9*. He says: *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

You see, it was Paul's desire that his companion Timothy would also become all things to all men, in this case to the Jews. I mean Timothy would become totally Jewish in his flesh so as not to become a stumbling block to his fellow Jews. You see in God's

economy the decision to get circumcised as Timothy did counted for nothing as far as his worthiness before God. Paul and Timothy knew that. The ones who did not know that and who taught others to not see the difference were the Judaizers. They're the ones who saw circumcision as the human effort required to complete Christ's death on the cross. And it was that that caused Paul to see the Judaizers not just as teachers who needed some help, some assistance, some tweaking, but as wolves, wolves come in amidst the flock to wreak havoc. So Paul invites a stunning comparison. This is what he says. He says: *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.* He says Judaizers are dogs. He's not talking about pets, he's not talking about companions, he's talking about skulking, evil predators. I mean Isaiah added this in *Isaiah 56*, he said: *The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all.* Paul says they're not only predators, they're evildoers intent on mutilating the flesh.

Why do you suppose Paul is so exorcised against these people? I mean, remember, he's writing this letter from a jail cell. He's sitting in a dank, filthy dungeon awaiting his release or his

execution. He's going to be executed by people who were quite willing to kill him for his belief in Christ, and yet instead of railing against Rome or the Jews who've put him there, he's attacking the Judaizers who acknowledge that Jesus was God in the flesh who died on the cross. Well he's attacking them because he deeply loves the church at Philippi. And he's been hearing these disturbing accounts that the Judaizers, they're making real inroads into the church and he understands that they represent a far greater threat than does Rome or his Jewish enemies. They represent a threat that comes from within.

See, the enemy has far more success masquerading as an angel of light than he does as a mere enemy. Oppression and persecution have some things in common. I mean they define, they illuminate who is who. There's no guessing if the Roman government or the Jewish leaders are your friend or your enemy, they made the position clear and it's painful, but as difficult as the persecution is, at least it's obvious. What is far more of a threat is an attack that's so far under the radar that it almost looks like a blessing. But that's exactly how the enemy operates. You know, when the snake tempted Adam and Eve in the garden, he didn't gather them together and say, "Hey, let's make a stand. Let's the three of us go against God and against all of his ways." That's exactly what he wanted and that's exactly what he got, but

his approach was a lot more circumspect. You know, he starts out just merely questioning whether or not God was serious in demanding that Adam and Eve not eat the fruit. *Genesis 3* says: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"* When Eve made it clear that God did in fact forbid eating the fruit, Satan responded with a flat out lie accompanied with a loaded half-truth. It says: *But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* Well, we all know how the story goes, I mean, they ate the fruit, began the process of dying and they certainly did have their eyes open to know the difference between good and evil, not at all in the way that they thought they would. That's precisely the way the enemy works. I mean he greatly prefers subtlety to confrontation. So sometimes confrontation, outright confrontation is a blessing.

I know lots of folks who are upset about the way things are going in our country politically. They see and I see this new political order coming in as decidedly anti-Christian. And they are concerned that the church may come under persecution and they fear what they think might be a confrontation between the church and the state. Well, there's two things that concern me about this

position. Number one, every one of us believe that God is truly sovereign over all things and that certainly includes our politics. So we have to conclude, we have to believe that this is God's will for us. Well, the second point comes when you think, well, it can't be God's will if it means the church is going to suffer persecution. And to that I say really? Are you kidding? All you have to do is look at scripture to see that oftentimes the church grows sick and oftentimes the medicine that a loving God prescribes for that sickness is persecution. I imagine the first Christians in the book of Acts thought that the persecution that came about right after the death of Stephen, well, it couldn't have been of God, but they were. I mean the church back then wasn't sick but it needed to grow. And persecution was the mechanism that God chose in order to spread the gospel throughout all of Asia and into Europe. And we know that persecution is God's medicine for a church that has grown sick.

Now, if you look around at the world, you can see the places where the church is sick and you'll notice that all of those places share three things in common: They're places of ease, prosperity and power. If you look historically at the spread of the church from Europe to the United States, you see the very same process repeating itself over and over again. The church gets established through suffering and persecution just as the church did in Europe

and then it begins to grow and it begins to grow wealthy and prosperous because God's way is the right way and oftentimes it brings with it wealth and prosperity and power, and it is those things sadly that sicken and cripple the church. Its vision turns earthward and it starts looking inside instead of toward the kingdom, then it starts worrying about its earthly assets instead of its heavenly goals.

Listen to what Jesus had to say about one church, the church of Laodicea in Revelation. Revelation 3 said this: *"I know your works: You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."* May I suggest to you that the church in the United States is on the wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked end of the scale, while the church, say, in China is on the persecuted and hungry side of the scale.

I recently listened to a teacher speaking about a session that he had with church leaders in China in the Hunan Province, and it illustrates better than I can the difference between the church here and the church there. Bill, would you cue that up? I'd like to you listen to this:

<https://youtu.be/mvx9KOD9uh0>

I think you get the point. You see, Christians respond to persecution for the sake of the gospel by growing stronger and more committed to that gospel. Christians respond to ease and wealth and prosperity by tending to grow into churches just like Laodicea thinking I'm rich, I've prospered, I need nothing when we are actually poor blind and naked and set up perfectly for the enemy's attack particularly when it doesn't seem like something that appears to be an enemy in the first place. Paul certainly didn't mince words in describing the Judaizers as dogs and evildoers and mutilators because in his mind they were far more dangerous than Rome or the Jews. These were folks that you want to take home with you for dinner. They look like believers, they talk like believers, they have act like believers but in reality they weren't. That's why Paul is so exorcised and so upset, his beloved Philippians were under attack and they didn't even realize it. Again he says: *Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.* Paul's making this incredible three-point comparison of true believers that he identifies by calling them the circumcision and the Judaizers.

Number one, he says: *We are the circumcision and they are the dogs. Again Isaiah said the dogs "are shepherds who have no understanding; they have turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all."* The Judaizers were false teachers who were able to work their ways into positions of leadership in the local church and their goal was for personal gain even at the cost of the church.

And number two, he says the circumcision puts no confidence in the flesh. And they, the Judaizers, they're mutilators of the flesh. See the pride and joy of the Judaizers was circumcision. This was a ritual commanded by God and first undertaken by Abraham as a sign that the flesh of the procreative organ was to be cut away singling a new life with a new heart. This is what *Deuteronomy 10:14* says: *Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. Deuteronomy 36* says: *And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.* See, circumcision was an outward sign that you were part of a community, a covenant community of believers, and as such it was

the perfect illustration of the difference between believers and these Judaizers. The Judaizers saw it as a mark of exclusivity, something that set you above and apart from all others. It was a physical manifestation that they were not like anyone else. But that's not what circumcision was supposed to symbolize. What mattered was not the cutting of the flesh but the inclusion into a covenant community that believed in the one God as revealed to Abraham. In the New Testament, that community believed that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh who had come to live out a perfect life and that by faith we transfer his righteousness to our account. It was also a recognition of our absolute bankruptcy and inability to make ourselves worthy of heaven along with accepting by faith the incredible worthiness of Christ himself.

And thirdly, the true circumcision were worshipers by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Judaizers were workers of evil. Circumcision was, according to Paul, an outward sign of an inward transformation by the Holy Spirit. And an outward sign counted very little compared to an inward transformation. This is what Paul says in *Romans 2:25*: *For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps*

*the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. See, Paul insisted that genuine believers put no confidence whatsoever in their ability to make themselves worthy of heaven. The Judaizers believed that the spirit counted next to nothing. They thought that simply mutilating the flesh to conform outwardly was a work necessary for salvation in addition to the work of Christ on the cross. Folks, it's no different today when we draw distinction between a gospel that says we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and a gospel that says we are saved by a combination of God's grace and my good works. So Paul then doubles down on the whole concept of good works. This is what he says, he says if you want to go the works righteousness route, I'll be happy to challenge any one of you in a contest of qualifications. He says this, he says: *Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people 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 righteousness under the law, blameless.* Paul knows he can out righteousness any of these*

folks, but he also knows what they seem to ignore and that's God's standard for righteousness is absolute perfection. And to be perfectly honest, being perfect and maintaining that perfection is perfectly impossible because you have to do everything perfectly. That's just the way it is. I mean the vast majority of people still today think that God judges all of us by this balance beam, you know, he's got your good works over here and he's got your sins and your bad things over here and hopefully your good works are going to outweigh your bad works. He's going to look at you, say, "Okay, you get to go." And oh, if your bad works are outweighing the good works, you're in serious, serious trouble because God marks everything on the basis of what you do and of course nobody tells you what the scale is. Nobody tells you how who marks what. We just assume that God marks all of us on a sliding scale that's based on our ability, but God doesn't operate that way at all. He's all perfect. And his standard is all perfect and his demand of all of us is perfection itself. I mean it couldn't have been stated more plainly than what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. In *Matthew 5:48* he says: "*You therefore must be -- what? -- perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" But God, that's an impossible standard. Nobody's capable of being perfect. I mean only God himself could ever pull that off. Well now you know why it is that God became one of us. Now you know why he came and lived among us perfectly. His holiness set the standard of

perfection and his life on this planet fulfilled that standard for us.

The reason why Paul was so exorcised at the Judaizers is that they had the gall to insist that human effort, which could ever never ever meet the standard of perfection, but that human effort had to be added to divine perfection in order to make salvation possible. I mean what Jesus was saying in the Sermon on the Mount over and over again is if you want to look at the law as your means of earning salvation, then you just don't understand the law. Look at what Jesus said for instance in *Matthew 5:27*. This is the Sermon on the Mount. This particular part he's talking about adultery. He says: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." I mean Jesus is addressing all those Judaizer types who thought they had completely met the demands of the law simply by not committing the physical act of adultery. Well, Jesus says if you want to go that route, you don't stop just as at the physical. Oh, no, no, no, you have to perfectly meet the demands of intent as well, even down to a look or a glance. See, Jesus insists that the law covers not only the outside actions of the flesh but also the inside intent of the heart. And he says you have to meet this law perfectly, and not just this law this time but every law every

time. And if you don't succeed, if you fail in keeping the tiniest bit of the law perfectly, you failed the whole law. That's why James says in *James 2:10*: *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.* What God is simply showing us here is that the standard, his standard is absolutely unreachable for fallen human beings. And what Paul reacts to among the Judaizers is their attempt to reduce the demand for perfection down to something as simple as an act of circumcision, as if mere external rule keeping could somehow entitle you to be worthy of heaven. Paul's whole argument to the Judaizers says, you know, I fall ridiculously short of the mark even though my moral life by comparison was probably head and shoulders above yours. Paul goes on to demolish the argument by pointing to all of his accomplishments. This is what he says. He says: *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.*

Now I've spoken at length about this. The Greek word here that's

translated as rubbish, it's the Greek word "skubalon." The word literally means "dung." And Paul is being quite explicit here and he doesn't mind being offensive. They just cleaned it up a little bit in this translation. Paul is trying to say here that his very best efforts at moral purity and righteousness which are a lot better than all of these exemplary standards you think you have, when even Paul's standards are held up to the standard of God's own perfection, even they, for all practical purposes, look like dung. In this final blow to the Judaizers, Paul says that he counts all of his goodness as dung so that he might gain Christ, because in Christ alone he finds a righteousness that comes not from law keeping but from faith. The Judaizers insist on adding our works to Christ's perfection. And Paul sums it all up by pointing out that adding dung to perfection doesn't elevate the dung, it just attempts to demean Christ's perfection, and God will not have it. And so we're grateful to Paul for putting the argument in such stark terms but I wonder how many times we've done the exact same thing as the Judaizers every time we think we are earning God's approval by our good behavior. Think how could God really love me, I mean, if all of my best efforts are literally a pile of rubbish and filth, how could I ever possibly earn his affection? Well the answer is you can't. It is there as a gift, period. I have no idea why God would ever choose to fix his love on me or you, but he has. And once God has fixed his love on you, he will never take it

away. There's not a thing that you and I can do to increase or diminish it because we didn't cause it in the first place, and that act alone should take your breath away.

And if you've never given your life to Christ and this is just starting to make some sense, it's only because God's Holy Spirit is drawing you by his grace alone into the kingdom. And any of you out there, if that is the case, if you are starting to get that sense, just get in touch with me. I would love to have a conversation with you. Because we are not just Joe or Jane Schmoe from Port Jervis, New York or wherever, we are *blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world* -- not because of anything that we did, and least of all because of circumcision, but because of the all-surpassing love of God in Christ Jesus. And all we can do in response is ask God for the grace to truly shine as those lights in the world. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for this incredible gift. And I confess that we are constantly trying to earn our way into something that is unearnable, that we are constantly trying to view our performance as something that grows your love for us. I am grateful and thankful that nothing can grow your love for us because it's already maxed out. I just praise you and thank you for the gift of

your Son, for that perfection. And I just dread the thought of anyone dragging that perfection down to our level and demanding that we add our "good works" -- quote, unquote -- to your perfection. Lord, give us the grace, give us the wisdom, give us the understanding, the threats that come from within and without and give us the wisdom to see your gospel as the gift above all gifts. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.