

Gripped by the Gospel: Joy in Christ

Philippians 3:1-4:1

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As we begin chapter 3 this morning, we find that Paul has reached a transition point. He has already used himself as an example of Christlike attitudes and actions in the opening chapters of this letter, but now his argument takes a different turn.

Paul wants to protect this church from problems both without and within the congregation. As he begins to talk about “dogs” he is looking at protecting them from without and next week when he begins and talks about Euodia and Syntyche he will be talking about problems from within.

Who are these dogs? During the first century, filthy dirty wild scavenging dogs roamed the streets. And because the dog was so filthy Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs, but not in this case. Here Paul has reversed the term to refer to those who “hounded” the believers in churches that he started. These were Jewish Christians whose agenda was to make Gentile believers get circumcised, observe the Sabbath, keep kosher, and keep the whole mosaic covenant. Paul describes them in verse two as evildoers and those who mutilate the flesh.¹

And so, while the Judaizers prided themselves in their righteousness, Paul is describing their works as evil since their attempts to please God by their own prideful efforts could not accomplish redemption. In contrast to the Greek word for circumcision, which means to cut around, this term means to cut down, or cut off. We don’t necessarily have any evidence that they had yet come into the Philippian church, but Paul had reason to believe that just as they had followed him from church to church in the past, they might again, and so Paul issues this warning.

And so, what is the answer? The answer is the Gospel. The answer is Joy in Christ.

My family on my father’s side lives in West Virginia. And every time we travel to West Virginia to visit we are on route 2 going north along where the mountains have been blasted out to make the road. All along the way we see signs that read, “Watch for falling rock.” It wasn’t until I was an adult that I actually saw rock fallen on the long side of the road. In fact, according to the news, the falling rock had crushed a motorist driving by. Much like the falling rock warnings, Paul is giving the Philippians a serious warning about what may be ahead for them as a church.

Russ Kennedy writes, “All error in teaching and practice comes through people. Yes, may come to us in books, radio shows, TV, blogs, internet sites – but behind all error are people. And ultimately, behind them is Satan, the father by whom all errors and lies are spawned. Here is another twist. The Jews considered Gentiles to be dogs, evil doers and body mutilators because they did not do circumcision. Since the coming of Jesus, those who insist on Mosaic rites are outside the faith, wicked and mutilate the flesh. There are faces that go with this description. These are not, in his day, a nameless, “they” or “them”. This is real people who formed a faction in the church at Jerusalem who went around behind Paul, entered the newly founded churches and tried to teach a performance based substitute for grace.”

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, Eerdmans Publishing, page 181

But we, according to verse 3, are the true circumcision. It is our identity. My identity is not that I live in Southwest Ohio, or that I was born of Charles and Barbara Nixon, or that I am a pastor at Clearcreek Chapel. My identity is in Christ. And because of that I am the true circumcision and therefore I do not put confidence in what I can do or where I come from. Just as the Philippians did not need to be Jewish.

Do you remember how the Philippian church started in Acts 16?

A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “come over to Macedonia and help us.” This is what we know as the Macedonian call. So Paul immediately left and sailed to Philippi which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. And on the Sabbath day he went outside to the gate to the Riverside where he had heard there was a place of prayer and he’s sat down and spoke to women who would come together to pray. This is where he met Lydia. Paul remained there for a time and the church at Philippi was born. Remember, Paul’s normal method of operation was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath but there was no synagogue in Macedonia. In order to have a synagogue there must be at least 10 Jewish families and so we have a group of people here with a Roman background not a Jewish background.

And so, these people would be prime targets for Judaizers to come into the church and cause disruption and dissension.

To illustrate his point regarding their identity in Christ, he uses a personal illustration in verses 4 to 6.

Now, if anyone was going to have God’s approval, it was going to be Paul. If anyone had the right, had reasons to be confident in “the flesh”, in his religion and religious doing, it was Paul. Here is his personal, national, religious, denominational heritage.

He had the right surgery. He was part of the right nation. He knew his tribe and by implication, his family roots and lineage. He was the epitome of being Jewish, of being a Hebrew, of living out what it meant to be a son of Abraham. He had the right interpretation of the Bible and was formally a member of the correct denomination. He was so committed he was willing to persecute and if necessary, execute anyone who taught differently. When it came to what his religion required, he was perfect. He fully practiced everything that his conservative, orthodox, religion required.

This used to be his identity. Do you see the problem? Before he was converted, he had a certain identity. He was a Jew, an Israelite, a Pharisee. Because this was so, he therefore was one of God’s people.

This was how he pursued a right standing with God. It was more than just being in God’s people but having a right standing and relationship with God. God would approve of him and accept him because he not only had this identity but he was doing everything that could be expected of someone claiming to be of God’s people.²

² Russ Kennedy, *The Loss that Gains Christ*, preached at Clearcreek Chapel

And then in verse seven, we see the main point of this text from verses one through 11. **This is the focus of the entire section.**

Verse 7

To make the contrast as bold and dramatic as possible, Paul says that he now counts all those gains as loss. Paul has created a ledger with pros and cons, pluses and minuses as he has contrasted the benefits and gains, past and future in order to persuade the Philippians of this one thing.

Here is a loss that gained Christ. In one saving transaction of faith, he moved all that to the loss side of the column. In doing so, God credited the righteousness of Christ to his account. But there is more than just an understanding of righteousness here. It is a radical change in the “why” of who we were and what we did. Now, all that was put in the trash can because of, for the sake of Christ. He is no longer looking primarily out for himself; he is seeking to gain Christ – to have the right evaluation of his own righteousness because of Jesus.

Is this true of you as well?³

Now verses 8-11 comprise one long sentence and begin with an emphatic “Indeed.”

The only thing now to place totally on the credit side of Paul’s righteousness, is knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection. Paul is certainly not talking merely about knowing more about Christ. He is talking about his deeply personal relationship with the Lord.

Notice that in verse 8 Paul actually says he has lost everything. This certainly means his status as a Pharisee, various Jewish friends, probably property, and perhaps even his wife and family. Because of the age at which Paul came to Christ it is indeed likely he had a wife and family already. The point is, Paul gave it all up or counted it all loss in order to follow Christ and be apostle to the Gentiles.⁴

And even more important than the loss, is that it is Paul who is **counting** these things as loss. We are not merely talking about considering things, we are apparently talking about renunciation. Paul has abandoned or renounced any gains connected with his previous benefits, whether the privileges of birth, personal achievements, or material possessions. Like a liquidation sale at an expensive furniture warehouse, Paul concluded that all that **valuable** stuff was expendable and had to go if it got in the way of gaining Christ and being found in him.

It wasn’t that these past accomplishments and things and stuff were junk. They were valuable. Yet Paul counted them or considered them nothing compared to knowing and being in Christ. Paul gave up HIS righteousness (V9) for the righteousness counted to him by Christ.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, Eerdmans Publishing, page 203

In verse 10, Paul then contrasts what he gave up in verses five and six with what he gained. In verse 10 Paul lists things of real value to him. Knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection. The fact that some of these things Paul has yet to experience, enables him to endure all that has happened to him and indeed to share in Christ's sufferings. There is the honor of suffering with Christ for the same ends to which Jesus died, the redemption of the world. This is part of what it means for us to be conformed to the image of Christ as well.

Here then comes that radical reorientation. Paul now has a goal, an aspiration that will shape his life in a radically new way. These are what we aim for as the trajectory of our life. **Is this the way you think?**

Believing in Jesus, knowing Jesus in his suffering, being like Jesus in his death in order that I will be there on the day we are raised from the dead. Here is the final irony. What keeping the Law and being good was supposed to bring us can actually only come through faith in Jesus. The Law cannot give you life. Being good cannot raise you from the dead. Only faith in Jesus gains you, will attain for you, life and resurrection from the dead to eternal life.

Beginning in verse 12 we have a continuation of this previous discussion, but a shift in focus. The main idea in verse 12 is "press on", indicating Paul's present mindset and focus, drawing no more from the past.

Paul makes an accurate self-assessment. He knows he has not achieved nor arrived. His maturity is not yet complete. His knowledge of Christ, his experience of resurrection power, his participation in suffering with Christ is not yet reached the highest level. He knows he has a way to go. But sometimes, we think (though we may never say it) that we have really reached the pinnacle of attainable maturity. We know we are not yet Jesus. But we also think we are about as close as is possible for us.⁵ Paul would disagree.

Paul repeats the phrase *press on* multiple times in these first few verses adding also the phrase *one thing I do*. Those who succeed in various areas of life do so because they work hard, and focus all of their energies on that one thing.

The story is told of a noted concert violinist who was asked the secret of her mastery of the instrument. The woman answered the question with two words: "Planned neglect." Then she explained. "There were many things that used to demand my time. When I went to my room after breakfast, I made my bed, straightened the room, dusted, and did whatever seemed necessary. When I finished my work, I turned to my violin practice. That system prevented me from accomplishing what I should on the violin. So I reversed things. I deliberately planned to neglect everything else until my practice period was complete. And that program of planned neglect is the secret of my success."

What are we striving for? What is that glorious, dazzling prize that we strive for? What can so dazzle us that we will pursue it mightily? Here it is in verse 14.
I press on toward the goal...
Why press on towards the goal? for the prize...

⁵ Russ Kennedy, *The Loss that Gains Christ*, preached at Clearcreek Chapel

What is that prize? What is gold medal that will draw out from us such lifelong striving? The prize is... the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

In verse 15, Paul includes himself among the mature, but not among those who have obtained perfection or reach the finish line. The one who is mature is the one who will run the race rather than assuming it is already over. It is interesting the way Paul refers to the mature as those who realize they have not yet fully matured or not yet reached perfection, because they have not yet reached the finish line.

And I believe that verse 16 is an appeal for the Philippians to continue to live the way that they have already been living. Possibly referring back again to a potential problem if and when the Judaizers appear in their midst. Thus, Paul goes on and reiterates to them that they should continue to “walk according to the example you have in us.” This in itself is a mark of maturity.

Paul then returns to his warning in verse 18 and 19. Paul was referred to them many times, those who are not living according to Paul’s example and teaching. He could be referencing once more the Judaizers, or it may be a more general reference meant to indicate how the Philippians ought not to walk, avoiding self-centeredness when they should be following the self-sacrificial humility of Christ that we saw back in chapter 2. These people are indeed enemies of Christ.

Not everyone is as they seem to be. Some running on the track are actually there to trip you up. Their life marks them as enemies of the cross. They lived a life of physical appetites, boasting in what is shameful. Their minds are wholly occupied with earthly things. Living like this they will end up in destruction. Paul has warned us over and over again. People like this cause havoc in the church. I am guessing that it was people like this who were behind the threats to their partnership and fellowship. This is why Paul spoke with tears. It grieved him that these people could cause such damage. “But our citizenship is in heaven...” Here is an explanation that when we believe it, radically changes our lives. It redefines our identity. We are heaven’s citizens. We have been transferred from the realm of this world into the kingdom of heaven. This is not mere theological theory – this is spiritual reality. Do you see the contrast here? Through this whole text are running two essential mindsets, ways of thinking.

There is an “of this world” mindset that tends to put confidence in our self-salvation projects, eliminates a cross kind of living, and rejects suffering like Jesus. This way of thinking tends to focus on the here and now, on our pleasures and pursuits. And people like this tend to be charming, winsome and influential with the effect they draw others into their orbit and break fellowships and partnerships.

There is a “citizen of heaven” mindset that puts no confidence in anything we do, seeks first to please Christ, rejects self-righteousness and performance Christianity. It embraces a lifestyle of the cross, knowing Jesus as the greatest achievement in life, and suffering for Christ as an aspiration. It relies totally on the grace of God while striving forward to attain what the Lord purchased us for.⁶

⁶ Russ Kennedy, *The Best Goal*, preached at Clearcreek Chapel

Paul ends his appeal in chapter 4 verse one with the exhortation to stand firm. The Philippians have a great salvation awaiting them in the form of resurrection involving a total makeover in the flesh. The outcome will be full and final salvation. Paul echoes chapter 1:27 and reiterates it here.

And Paul concludes this appeal on a very positive and emotion filled note by calling them loved and beloved - speaking of what they already mean to him. He also calls them his crown and joy, speaking of what they will be at the day of Christ's return. Paul envisions a grand celebration. This verse indicates that the Philippians have not yet succumbed in any significant way to any Judaizing Christian missionaries, but Paul still warns them to stand firm continually.

And so, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

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, 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. (Philippians 2:12-16).

REFLECT AND RESPOND

What makes you happy spiritually?

Do you rejoice in Christ?

What is your greatest aspiration and goal in life

Which one of these is you?

Are you focused on the finer things of life? Are you spending your time and money to achieve the types of things that Paul counted as rubbish?

Are you exhibiting the marks of maturity? Do you strive to continue to grow and change? Are you looking and longing for Jesus to return?