

CONCERNING CONFIDENCE

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-16

INTRODUCTION

I want us to ask us a few questions to get us thinking about the text we are looking at tonight...

- What is the Gospel worth to you? How valuable is it?
- What things make you acceptable to God? What is enough? What is necessary?
- Have you ever thought about what you have given up (or should have given up) coming to Christ?
- What orients and drives your life? What sets your ambitions? What infuses your relationships?

As you reflect on here questions, think about what others might say they see in your life that would answer these questions. Let's keep these in mind as we approach our text tonight.

CONTEXT & SETTING

In our text tonight, we will see that Paul wrote to the Philippian church concerning their confidence, and what brought them home and security before God. But, before we dive in, let's take a few minutes to frame our passage to better understand it.

The book of Philippians was a letter written by Paul to the church in the Roman colony of Philippi. The city of Philippi is almost 800 miles (by boat) from the city of Rome that controlled it. It was taken over by Roman forces and established as a colony which gave it special status in the Roman empire. This put the city of Philippi in a unique and privileged position in the empire, one that would make them very familiar with the idea of citizenship and credentials of government officials. This also meant they would have seen Roman military forces in their town as a part of their culture. These might seem like insignificant details, but they help us understand why Paul uses some of the words and phrasing in this letter.

There are three key things from the background of the church that we should remember to help us.

First, Paul has experienced a miraculous conversion from being an elite Pharisee in Judaism to following Jesus. He was an extremely devout and (what some might call) fanatic Pharisee. He kept highest standard of the law, was completely devoted to the way of the Pharisees and was an incredibly zealous follower. He was even going so far as to slaughter Christians who were opposing their ways (Acts 8). But, as Saul (Paul's pre-conversion name) was on his way to persecute Christians, Jesus appeared to him and called him to himself (Acts 9). This is the author of our letter, Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we must remember that Paul has been a key figure in the church at Philippi. Sometime after his conversion, we read in the book of Acts how Paul began taking trips around the Mediterranean region to tell people about the good news of Jesus, what he had done, and how they could be saved. On these trips he began establishing churches along the way with the help of some faithful believers along with him.

During his first trip he stopped in Philippi and God used his ministry there to establish the Philippian church, the recipients of this letter. (Acts 16:11ff)

Thirdly, in this letter we learn that the church at Philippi had partnered together with Paul's ministry to spread the good news about Jesus. (1:3; 4:14) They provided support to him as he journeyed around the region proclaiming Jesus' life, death and resurrection (4:16). But, that's all in jeopardy now as Paul sits in a Roman prison (1:7), and it appears to be contributing to some significant strife within the Philippian church (4:2). Just after our text, Paul will mention two women, by name, in written format, publicly...which is a rare and serious situation we should take note of. This is the only letter where Paul does something so serious, so official, and so public. These women stand in stark contrast to the two examples in Timothy and Epaphroditus immediately before our text, back in 2:19-29. You can almost feel Paul beaming with joy as he presents these two men as examples of humble service and dedication to the Gospel ministry.

With this context and back-story in mind, let's dive into our text tonight. Philippians chapter 3, verse 1.

FINALLY...

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

— *Philippians 3:1 (ESV)*

We'll pause here as we open. This is the first of two "finally"s in Philippians (the second in 4:8) and each one indicates a particular focus that Paul dives into. This first "finally" is less about the conclusion to the letter, and more about continuing on with Paul's intention and logical flow.

Paul uses the word "brothers" to remind the Philippian church of their spiritual connection among each other and with him in Christ. He considers them family and dearly loves them, as shown in more detail previously in the letter's opening and later in 4:1. These are his spiritual kin, united together for the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

He reminds them to "...rejoice in the Lord," in contrast to grumbling and complaining that appears to be happening in this church (2:14-18). This is an important consideration Paul has for the church at Philippi and for us: what are we focusing on? What situations give us reason to rejoice? What brings us joy? Fans of the home organization guru Marie Kondo know how this world is full of material possessions that we cling to with the hope that they will make us experience joy. Some of us may also long to rejoice in certain idealized circumstances. But, Paul doesn't simply say "rejoice" or "be joyful", but rather "rejoice *in the Lord*". It's certainly not wrong to be thankful and to enjoy the blessings God has given us in this life, but if that is the end of our rejoicing...then we have lost sight of who we are, and where we are. More to come on this...

Now, Paul is reminding them of a topic that the Philippians should already be familiar with...he's repeating himself. Not only for the sake of repetition and getting it across, but also with the end goal of spiritual safety for the Philippian church. Paul considers it no trouble to repeat himself. He patiently reteaches what they must know. But, what is Paul repeating? What safety is he looking out for? What is he drawing their attention (and ours) to? Let's look ahead and see where Paul goes...

A WARNING ABOUT CONFIDENCE

Verses 2 and 3:

*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—
— Philippians 3:2–3 (ESV)*

What safety is Paul aiming at? He dives right in with a stern and repeated warning. Three times he says, ‘look out’! Just like a parent trying to get the attention of a child in danger, this kind of repeated phrase should wake up any listener or reader and cause them to be focused and be on the lookout for whatever he is warning against.

Paul lists three things to be on the lookout for: dogs, evildoers and ‘those who mutilate the flesh’. These three are all set in a negative tone giving us a clue as to the seriousness of this warning. These dogs are not the kind of cute, fluffy, cuddly little pets we’re used to in our culture today. Jews didn’t have pets for comfort and joy like we do today. No, these are ravenous, street animals that were dangerous and unclean in Jewish culture¹. Next, Paul provides another label that we should look out for: evildoers. They are, simply put, those people characterized and known for their evil deeds and wickedness. Lastly, Paul refers to “those who mutilate the flesh”. What might Paul mean here? Maybe those with tattoos, piercings, cutters, or even murderers? More importantly, these three labels seem to work together to highlight us to a severe and evil threat we should be on watch for. So, what is Paul warning the Philippian church about? Who or what is Paul personifying here?

I believe verse three gives us the answers we need. It starts with “for”, which shows us that Paul is continuing the warning. “For” what? “We are the circumcision...” Paul appears to be aiming at those who still put their confidence of a right-standing before God in human actions. Those who believe it’s necessary to modify their physical bodies (by the removal of foreskin) to be worthy to worship Jesus Christ as God. In the Old Testament, we see that this circumcision was a sign of the covenant that Yahweh God made with his people. It was an outward, physical expression of this covenant of God with Abraham and extended to his descendants. It’s important to note that circumcision did not do anything for Abraham or the Israelites who would follow to make them God’s chosen people. Rather circumcision was an outward, symbolic response to what God had already done (Rom. 4:11ff). Then, later the Law given to Moses on Sinai formalized and build on this.

We know from Acts 15:1-21 that Paul encountered a group of Jewish Christians who believed that circumcision (and adhering to the rest of the law from the Old Testament) was necessary to attain and complete salvation. However, in that very same passage the apostles make it clear that salvation is given by God in his amazing grace and not by following the law provided on Mount Sinai (or any laws added later). Believing that salvation can be earned is adding our own human works to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to “fully earn” salvation. This is to demean and undermine Jesus Christ’s sacrifice by claiming that it wasn’t enough for salvation. This is heresy. Jesus’ work alone is what’s necessary for you and I to be saved and relying on anything else is tragic unbelief (1:27-29).

¹ Preaching the Word: Philippians by R. Kent Hughes, 2007

In our text, Paul makes the claim that ‘we’ (the Philippian church, and by extension all who have faith and trust in Jesus) are the “true” circumcision. It’s demonstrated by a worship in the Spirit of God and a glory in Jesus, the Christ (Messiah). The rest of verse 3 provides the evidence for this contrast by setting worship in God and the glory of Jesus opposed to confidence in the outward ‘flesh’. Paul takes this opportunity to clearly example the type of ‘flesh’ that he means in the next few verses.

MIS-PLACED CONFIDENCE

Before we look at these examples that Paul provides of fleshly confidence from his own life, I want to ask you a question: What confidence did you have before coming to Christ? What things gave you hope and meaning in your former life? Or, as you have grown in your faith, what have you begun to shed confidence in?

Paul begins by laying out those things that brought him confidence and hope before Jesus called him. Let’s continue in our passage...

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.

— Philippians 3:4-6 (ESV)

Paul doesn’t mess around when he hears the Philippians are up against Judaizers (those Jewish Christians that believed salvation depends Jesus’ sacrifice plus following the law). Paul has personal experience with this way of life and its error. Paul provides a list of examples from his life before his conversion, and what a list it is! Paul’s long list of reasons to be confident in his salvation and is far more than the average person. He provides two distinct groupings.

First, he lists his physical and genetic qualities. He was circumcised on the eight day according to the Old Testament law (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3). He was a full-fledged Israelite. He was from the tribe of Benjamin. These are all things outside of his control and set him apart as a ‘special’ case. Paul has born into the right family line that provided a false foundation to believe he was on the right track.

Second, Paul provides his list of actions and works that further his flesh-based salvation efforts. “...as to the law...” indicates his focus on performing all of the right rituals and actions to earn salvation. He used to be a Pharisee! And not just any Pharisee, but one with great ambition and purpose...as exemplified by his persecution of the Christians that he now belongs to. Furthermore, he was blameless when it came to following the demands of the law. He kept it ‘perfectly’.

This is what Paul’s life *used* to be filled with. This is where he placed his confidence of salvation and acceptance into God’s family. However, the next section shows the Philippians and us how Christians should look at those kinds of credentials.

TRUE CONFIDENCE, A SURPASSING REWARD

Now, I've chosen to keep this next chunk of verses together. Yes, verses 7-11 make a longer paragraph to handle, but to split them apart may lose the emphasis and drive that Paul is trying to communicate here. Remember, this is the second half the stern warning that starts with three "Look out"s. Lets read...

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— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

— Philippians 3:7-11 (ESV)

Paul says three times that considers all of those human credentials as lost. To put it in a modern phrasing, "they're dead to him." Paul 'counts', or believes, that his lineage and works are lost. He's set them down and picked up faith in Jesus. He sets it all down, "everything", to know Christ Jesus as his savior. Don't miss the importance of what Paul is saying here. He is giving up everything he used to rely on and believe in for salvation and the hope of his future eternal destiny, setting it all down to abandon it, and run to Jesus...the only true source of salvation.

I want to pause here for a moment and point out that this is the truth about salvation from the wrath of God. Our faith and trust for redemption and salvation must be in Jesus Christ...alone. To mix in any reliance on the 'right' works is to leaven the whole lump of bread. It taints it and undermines the perfectly complete Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Since Genesis 3, we see that humans are fallen and sinful. God demands that that sin must be paid for, and the payment is eternal death in hell under the wrath of God forever (Rom. 3). That's what we deserve. That's the destiny of every human being. But God...sent Jesus, his son, to come and take that punishment on our behalf. Jesus lived the truly perfect life of obedience that was required to please God. He was spotless lamb from the Jewish lineage and truly blameless. He was the perfectly clean sacrifice that could bear our sins...and he did. The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spend the majority of their time showing us the life and death of Jesus. Most importantly though, the story doesn't end there. Those four authors also show us his miraculous resurrection from death, conquering the grave and making a way for us to live forever with him. That way is not by 'doing the right things', but by simply repenting of our sins, having faith that Jesus Christ is enough and making him king of your life...faith that salvation depends on God, and not yourself. You can be saved from the wrath of God and restored to peace with him by trusting in Jesus.

And with this rich truth lingering in our minds, we pick up our text again. Paul grounds the Philippians in this true saving confidence and the reward that comes with it. When Paul fixes his eyes on the greatness of the Jesus Christ, his former credentials and fleshly confidence look...gross. The ESV and NASB translates Paul's word as "rubbish". The NLT translates it "garbage". The NET translates it "dung". Our English bibles seems to struggle a bit with this word (perhaps out of embarrassment) and some of the softer translations of the word get the point across, but lose some of the emphasis. This isn't the kind of American garbage we may regret throwing out. This is the kind of garbage that belongs in the garbage. Its

only use is to be thrown out. Commonly, the Philippians would have heard this word and thought of poop². It is literally has no use but to be discarded. It's...repulsive.

However, it's only repulsive when it's viewed in contrast to the Gospel, to Jesus. When we look at our own efforts, they can never compare to the complete and satisfactory work of Jesus. In Paul's former life he tried to create his own righteousness by following the law blamelessly, but he gave up what he had tried to earn himself for the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus. This righteousness is from God through faith in Jesus' work and nothing we can create. Viewing this in contrast with Paul's former life, we see that no genetics, heritage, words, actions, or obedience of our own brings this righteousness. Being found "in him" through faith means that we gain the righteousness of Christ applied to ourselves. We are viewed as righteous because of what Christ has done, not because of what we do.

But the story doesn't end there. Faith in Christ is the only way to know him and to be righteous. It's the only way live, but it's not an easy life. Paul reassures the Philippians that suffering is normal in the Christian life and follows the pattern of Christ's suffering and his ultimate death. In Paul's view, suffering seems to be part of the journey for believers. Anyone who places their faith in Jesus should expect to suffer. But, this suffering isn't without its reward. This suffering produces something and has an end somewhere. It's pointing to and a part of the path to the "resurrection from the dead". Ultimately, this resurrection is a future hope that we look to by spending eternity in a new creation with Jesus that is not tainted by sin. Brothers and sisters, this is where Paul fixes his gaze. This is where he points us to fix our gaze. Not here on this earthly stuff around us, or on our former lives, or even on our immediate sufferings (whether COVID or otherwise). The object and final destination of our hope is to be with Jesus, renewed and recreated in an endless eternity with him. Is this your gaze? Are you so easily downcast from these present sufferings? Are you so enamored by the shiny new trinkets of this earth? Are you so captivated by accomplishments of the business world, sports, sex, popularity or academic pursuits?

But Paul doesn't leave us there. Oh no, this "resurrection from the dead" is not only a distant hope that's out of reach, it's here...it's now. This future we are gazing at should change and transform our actions, thoughts and emotions in our everyday lives. Paul continues in verse 12...

LIFE'S NEW AMBITION

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

— *Philippians 3:12-16 (ESV)*

The "...resurrection from the dead" in the previous section seems to be one of these 'already but not yet' concepts. Paul is connecting the "...resurrection from the dead" with the here and now, with this current life. Paul continues "Not that I have already attained this or am already perfect...", connecting the resurrection from the dead with a perfection, a holiness...righteousness. Prior to our conversion we were

² New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words by James Strong,

1996

dead in our life of sin (Col. 2:13; Eph 2:1-5). Paul reminded us in the previous section that the righteousness we have now after conversion is not of our own but is Jesus' perfect righteousness that is ours through faith. But this righteousness isn't something that should remain distant or outside of us, we are to make that righteousness our own, working hard by pressing on to make it our own. Since Jesus Christ has made us his own under his righteousness, we are to make this resurrection from the deadness in sins, our own. We are to press on, continuing, laboring working to clear sin from our lives and become more Christ-like, making his righteousness ours. Paul reminds us that this is what lies ahead of us, this is what we are striving for.

Paul calls the Philippians to forget the confidence they relied on before conversion and pursue Christ. Practically speaking, it's hard to run a race looking back on what is behind you. Runners who look backwards are going to stumble, trip and likely injure themselves and Paul uses this imagery. This is why he sets the goal ahead of us reminding us about the prize at the end of the race. We run to make this resurrection our own to attain the perfect eternal hope with Jesus.

Paul sets the long-term view of believers by encouraging them to be forward-looking and his is what believer should be growing into, thinking about the future resurrection from the dead and how that impacts their here and now.

Before Jesus appeared to Paul and called him, Paul's life ambition was consumed with vile hate for those who were challenging the way of the Pharisees. Now, after his conversion and faith in Christ, his life is consumed with advancing the Gospel that saved him and pursuing his future hope in Christ. He is pressing on, and later in the letter he invites all the Philippians to join along with him.

This paragraph ends with a similar statement to its opening. Paul admits in the opening of this section that he hasn't obtained the resurrection from the dead, nor is he perfect. However, in closing he commands us to "hold true to" what we "have attained". But, what have we attained? The tense of this verb shows us that what the Philippians attained happened in the past but continues into the now. They attained something and still possess it. In the previous paragraph Paul refers to the resurrection from the dead. In this current paragraph we see that Christ has made us his own. In the next section he goes on to refer to our citizenship in heaven. So, what have we attained? Based on these references, I believe Paul goes on to answer that in the next section...their citizenship in heaven pointing to a future inheritance and glorification. You see, Paul realizes that the way we live in the here and now is informed what we believe about ourselves and what we dwell on; and he goes on to address these both in the rest of the letter, but this is where we end this evening. With Paul admonishing the Philippians to hold to the citizenship that is theirs now and will be fully fulfilled in the future. They are citizens of heaven living in this world. Just as all believers are.

A CHALLENGE FOR YOU

As we come to a close, remember Paul's instruction that we started with: to "rejoice in the Lord"? Well, here we are back at the heart of his instruction. Let's consider for a moment the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus just before our passage tonight and the stark contrast we see in Euodia and Syntyche that are called out in the next few verses. What separates these two examples? A confidence in the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf that leads to a life-altering devotion for him fulfilled in our citizenship in heaven.

If we intentionally think about and dwell upon these truths, knowing we are currently living in the foreign land of earth, knowing we are in him, knowing we will attain the resurrection of the dead...we can “rejoice”. We can rejoice that Jesus has paid the price for our debt of sin and made us his own. That intentional thinking will drive us: our thoughts, our desires, our emotions, and our actions. That intentional thinking will place Jesus in the right spot as King supreme of our life, owning us outright. Bought by his sacrifice on our behalf. If we don’t, there are dangers that await us, as Euodia and Syntyche learned the hard way.

Now, I admit, this life is full of entertainments, pursuits, concerns and problems that we encounter every moment of our lives. These can easily consume our thoughts and ambitions. If we’re not careful they will distract us from who we are in Christ. If you’re interested in what happens when believers lose sight of this, for homework you can keep reading on in chapter 3. It’s a proper warning for anyone claiming to be a follower of Jesus.

Brothers. Sisters. Family. Friends. The Gospel isn’t a nice to have. It’s not bonus or an add-on. The Gospel...the good news...the truth about Jesus achieving what we could not on our own *is the core of our life*. It’s our here and now. It’s our future. It’s our everything. It’s our safety.

So, let’s revisit the questions we opened with:

- What is the Gospel worth to you? How valuable is it? How much would you trade for salvation from eternal wrath? Is there anything you wouldn’t trade?
- What things make you acceptable to God? What is enough? What is necessary? Is there anything you’re trying to add?
- Have you ever thought about what you have given up (or should have given up) coming to Christ? Does anything remain that you’re clinging to?
- What orients and drives your life? What sets your ambitions? What infuses your relationships? What might others say if they had to answer for you?

If you are here today and you have never placed your faith in Jesus, or don’t know what that means...talk to someone here tonight, or if you’re watching online, please reach out to us.

As you can see from our time in the word tonight, we should be concerned about our confidence. When you evaluate your life, what brings you confidence? What brings you hope and future security? What brings you joy? Let’s repent from seeking confidence in fleshly things. Let us set our gaze on the prize ahead and strain with all of the God-given energy we have by making much of Jesus and his kingdom.

Look out for influences that draw us away from a Jesus-centered life. Regularly evaluate your lives individually and with the help of a wise and Godly discipler. Hold to the only confidence that matters. Jesus Christ, the Lord.

PROMPTS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Consider the theme of “Spiritual Family”. Paul writes with compassion and love for his “Brothers”, patiently re-teaching and reminding them of truths, looking out for their safety (3:1). How do you

view your spiritual family? How do you view your relationships with fellow believers? How do you labor for their benefit?

2. Where is your confidence for salvation before God? What has saved you? What reconciles your relationship to Yahweh? What earns you any merit before God? Paul's credential and former confidence are similar in category to Christ's. He was born of the Jews. He lived the truly blameless life. Yet, Paul's confidence wasn't good enough. He needed Jesus' righteous life and death for himself. He had to lose all of that, to gain salvation. What are you clinging to for hope? What are you doing now that you think makes you "more saved"? What might you need to "lose" hope in, to "gain" hope in Christ instead?
3. How valuable is the Gospel to you? If you had to put a dollar figure on it, could you? What is it worth to attain salvation from a completely justified, unending torment and punishment for your sin and rebellion? If not dollars and cents, what comforts, treasures, pleasures or preferences? What earthly things have distracted your hope, away from Christ?
4. What characterizes your life? What would people see if they replayed your life, looking for an example to follow? Paul's life was full of ambition for self-glorification, but then Jesus called him and he was transformed. His new life in Jesus was full of ambition for Jesus's glory. Is your life full of ambition for Jesus' glory?
5. Whose example are you looking to follow? Who do you spend your time dwelling on? Who fills your heroes' hall of fame? Sports figures? Racing drivers? Actors and Actresses? Rich and famous? Reformers and church heroes of bygone-eras? Loud and polarizing individuals? Godly men and women? Elders? Disciplers? Are you drawn to a particular type of personality or individual? Do you prize a certain character quality? When you look at the people you adore and follow, do they walk and talk like the suffering servant King, Jesus Christ? Are they attempting to follow Christ's pattern, or follow some cultural relevance? Does their life inspire you to be more Christ-like? Be careful whom you spend your time imitating. Read on in Phil 3:17-21 for more.