

Not My Own Righteousness

Philippians 3:9

Please turn to Philippians 3, and we'll look at the first nine verses of this chapter. We'll try to follow the flow of the apostle Paul's logic in this difficult passage, building to verse 9. Verse 9 is the key verse in this section. Here's a quick summary of the section we're going to cover: Nine verses. Paul is giving his testimony as a way of refuting his chief theological adversaries—some heretics and false teachers who insisted salvation was not possible for anyone who did not adhere strictly to all the Old Testament ceremonial laws, starting with the rite of circumcision. Paul, of course, was the apostle to the Gentiles, and as he planted churches throughout the Roman empire, most of the people who responded to Paul's preaching were Gentiles. And these false teachers insisted in order to become true Christians, these Gentiles first needed to become Jewish proselytes. They needed to submit to the ritual of circumcision, observe all the Old Testament feasts and dietary laws, and essentially live under the restrictions of the Mosaic Covenant. These false teachers are generally known as the Judaizers, because they believed membership in the church should be limited to Jews. In short, they said the Mosaic Covenant was the door to salvation, rather than Christ alone.

Paul is answering them in this section. He does that by giving his testimony, recounting how fastidiously he kept the Mosaic law from birth—then he formally and emphatically renounces everything he had gained through his own legal obedience—and in verse 9, he gives us one of the most powerful single-verse statements of faith recorded anywhere in Scripture.

I love verse 9 because it summarizes the very heart of the gospel message. Here is the gospel according to Paul in a single verse: "**[To] be found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own [but] the righteousness from God that depends on faith.**"

The point of verse 9 is simple: the righteousness by which I obtain my standing before God is "**not . . . a righteousness of my own.**" That's the main point of the doctrine of justification by faith.

Let me read the whole passage, starting with verse 1:

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

2 Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh--

4 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:

5 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;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

8 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

9 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 is, I think, the best window Scripture gives us into the soul of the apostle Paul. It's an abbreviated summary of his whole autobiography. It is a full explanation of why he lived and ministered the way he did—a man fully trained in Old Testament law and totally devoted to the Jewish religion, but now he is the apostle to the Gentiles, the principle nemesis to these men who were insistent on keeping the church Kosher, an enemy to all who insisted Christians should practice the kind of religion Paul had spent his life mastering. Paul powerfully explains why he was so strongly opposed to that kind of teaching. And then at the end of this section he gives a beautiful synopsis of the Christian faith, a powerful statement of gospel truth, and a brilliant summary of the principle that lies at the very heart of all gospel truth: the doctrine of justification by faith.

In order to establish the context for you, let's see if we can step through the flow of logic as Paul moves from thought to thought. This whole section is something of an addendum to the Philippian epistle. Paul was writing to exhort them to joy and harmony. The theme of the epistle is joy, and you might not expect to read a passage like this in a letter urging the church to be joyful. Verse 2, for example, doesn't really set a joyful tone for the rest of the passage: "**Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.**" That verse marks a very abrupt change of tone in the epistle, which up to this point has been an exhortation to joyfulness, even in the midst of great trials. Chapter 2, verse 17: "**I am glad and rejoice**

with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me."

And then, as chapter 3 begins, Paul seems like he is about to conclude. He actually begins a conclusion (v. 1): "**Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.**" That neatly summarizes everything he has said so far. Remember now: joy is the theme of this epistle. Throughout the first two chapters, Christian joy has been the central theme. In chapter 1 Paul talked about his own intense joy in the midst of his trials. The word joy appears in five times in those first two chapters; and the word rejoicing in one form or another occurs at least six times.

Then here at the start of chapter three, as if he has reached his conclusion, Paul sums up the whole reason for his writing: "**Rejoice in the Lord.**" That simple command summarizes the message of Philippians, and Paul will repeat it again-twice-in Philippians 4:4, when he . There he writes: "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.**"

Now, this idea of the Christian's joy in the Lord is a message that Paul had probably preached in person many times to the Philippian assembly. He is clearly aware that they are going to think he is harping on a theme they have heard from him over and over. So at the end of verse 1, he says: "**To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.**" In other words, "I know this you have heard this before- but I like saying it, and it's good for you to hear it."

Now, Paul clearly was planning to conclude epistle at this point. We know that because the phrase, "**Finally, my brothers.**" That is how Paul always brought his letters to a close. For example, in 2 Corinthians 13:11, four verses before the end of that epistle, he writes, "**Finally, brothers, rejoice.**" This is Paul signing off. It's the standard closing phrase in most of Paul's epistles,

and normally it comes (as it does there in 2 Corinthians 13) as an introductory phrase for the final few words of the letter.

At very the end of Ephesians (Ephesians 6:10) he writes, "**Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.**" In 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul launches the conclusion to that epistle by saying, "**Finally, brothers, pray for us.**"

So this phrase, "**Finally, my brothers**" is a sort of signature ending for Paul's letters. He normally uses it to summarize and reiterate the main thrust of the epistle. So when you see the apostle Paul say, "**Finally, my brothers,**" it means he has come to the end of what he is writing and he is about to give one final, profoundly important statement or command that more or less wraps up or punctuates what the whole epistle is about.

Philippians is the only one of Paul's epistles that contains this phrase two times. Here we find it in 3:1, so it sounds like Paul is finished. But then he suddenly changes tone and adds a whole chapter plus. Then once more in Philippians 4:8 he repeats that famous Pauline sign-off expression: "**Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, [etc.] think about these things.**" That's the key to a joyful heart: think thoughts that foster true joy. Think edifying thoughts. Focus on the things we're joyful about. And then, after Philippians 4:8, Paul actually does write the concluding words of the epistle.

So everything that comes between 3:1 and 4:8 is a parenthesis; it is a digression in the flow of Paul's thought. He was about to draw the epistle to a close when something made him pause and add this whole chapter and a half.

It's actually pretty easy to see how Paul's mind is working here: As he thinks about their joy in the Lord,

he remembers a grave danger to that joy. And so he stops to warn them about the danger. It is a grave and serious danger-the danger of false teaching. Bad doctrine that corrupts the truth of the gospel. He wants them on guard against that. That's what's behind this sudden change of tone between verses 1 and 2. "**Rejoice in the Lord,**" he says. And then suddenly in verse 2 he brings up a subject that seems totally incongruous-almost contradictory-to the principle of our joy in the Lord: "**Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.**"

There is no doubt about whom Paul was referring to here. He's warning them about the Judaizers. They are the same false teachers who were causing trouble for Paul in the churches of Galatia. They are the same false teachers described in Acts 15. Several of Paul's epistles address their error in one way or another, and Galatians is an extended refutation of their teaching. Here we see that Paul was concerned about their effect in Philippi, too.

Acts 15 gives the best description of the Judaizers and their teaching. They were a sect led by some Pharisees who had professed faith in Christ and joined the Jerusalem Church. Acts 15:1 says "**some men came down from Judea**"-that's where Jerusalem is, of course: in Judea. And Acts 15:5 says these men "**belonged to the party of the Pharisees.**" So these are Pharisees who have professed faith in Christ, but they are still Pharisees at heart-classic legalists. These men had taken all the errors of Pharisaism and blended them with Christianity. They were corrupting the gospel with legalism. If you understand the self-righteous nature of Pharisee religion, you'll understand what these men were teaching and why it was so deadly. They came to Antioch while Paul and Barnabas were there, and (Acts 15:1) they "**were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are**

circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

These men were very proud of their membership and their status in the Jewish nation. They flaunted their heritage as if it made them worthy of veneration. They were especially drawn to the external features of Old Testament ceremonial law. That was their area of expertise, and they exaggerated these external things because they thought religious ceremony was the essence of righteousness-because it made them look righteous. Jesus said of them in Matthew 23:5: **"They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others."** In other words, they literally wore their religion on their sleeves. Phylacteries were leather boxes containing passages of Scripture, and they would bind these on their arms and foreheads with big, ostentatious leather straps-making the straps as wide as possible so no one could miss the visible signs of their piety. The external, ceremonial elements of Moses law were so important in their system that they insisted no Gentile could become a true Christian without first embracing the ceremonial aspects of Judaism, starting with circumcision.

Keep that in mind, and notice how Paul describes them. He uses three expressions that would have been extremely offensive to the Judaizers. First, he calls them **"dogs."** That was the Jewish nickname for gentiles, wasn't it? In John Calvin's commentary on this passage, he says this: "[Paul] calls them dogs . . . meaning that, for the sake of filling their belly, they assailed true doctrine with their foul barking." I love Calvin's colorful language there. Like the apostle Paul,

was not one to mince words. And Paul does say in verse 19 that "**their god is their belly.**"

But (if you'll permit me to disagree with one of my favorite heroes from church history) I think Calvin has missed the real point of why Paul chose this expression dogs. I think this was an intentional insult aimed at these heretics, who took pride in their Jewish heritage. By calling them "**dogs,**" Paul put them on the level of unbelieving Gentiles. Paul is suggesting that their religion is no better than the worst Gentile paganism. This was a pointed jab at everything the Judaizers regarded as precious.

To make it even more emphatic, he calls them "**evildoers.**" Again, that was standard Jewish language used to describe the rankest sort of paganism. The Old Testament constantly speaks of wicked unbelievers and pagans as "**evildoers.**" Jesus Himself sometimes referred to reprobate but religious people as "**workers of iniquity.**" Paul is employing an equivalent expression here.

This is (of course) not a brotherly expression. It's not a term any godly person would ever use to describe another believer. So it is absolutely clear that Paul regards these Judaizers as unbelievers, enemies of the true God. He says so explicitly down in verse 18: "**I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, [they] walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction.**"

And look at this third expression. I'm using the English Standard Version, so the translation I read says, "**look out for those who mutilate the flesh.**" The New American Standard Bible says, "**Beware of the false circumcision.**" The King James Version uses the word concision. The Greek word is katatome. The normal word for "**circumcision**" is peritome. The word translated "**true circumcision**" in verse 3 is peritome. But here in verse 2 Paul uses katatome. It literally means "**flesh-**

cuttings." It refers to the mutilation of the flesh. Self-mutilation was a common practice among pagan religions, but it was strictly prohibited by Jewish law. Leviticus 21:5 explicitly forbid the Jews to make any kind of cuttings in their flesh. So by using this expression katatome, Paul was again placing the Judaizers in the same category as the rankest sort of pagans. He is using the strongest possible language to describe them. He is saying they are not authentic Christians. More than that, Paul does not even regard them as true Jews.

That is consistent with Paul's theology. In Romans 2:28-29 Paul says this: **"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."** In Romans 4:12 Paul says that Abraham is **"the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."** Faith is the issue, not a ritual. The ritual was only a symbol for what was really important: the cleansing of the heart. Even the Old Testament taught this. Look up Deuteronomy 10:16 (**"Circumcise . . . your heart"**) and Deuteronomy 30:6 (**"the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring"**). And Jeremiah 4:4 makes it very clear that circumcision was supposed to symbolize a renewed heart. It says this: **"Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts."** That's what Paul means in Romans 2:29, (the verse I just read) when he says that the true **"circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter."**

And so he tells the Philippians, **"We are the [true] circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh"** (3:3). He is

drawing the line as clearly as possible between genuine believers in Christ, and these Judaizers, who in spiritual terms are dogs, evil workers, and mutilators of the flesh-equal to the grossest kind of pagans.

Consider what a monumental threat the Judaizers posed for Gentile believers in the early church. The Judaizers were trained as Pharisees-knowledgeable in the Old Testament law. They were religious leaders of great esteem in the Jewish establishment. They had apparently become extremely influential in the Jerusalem church. When Paul refers to them in Galatians 2, he calls them "**certain men [who] came from James.**" James, of course, was a towering figure in the Jerusalem church. He wrote the epistle that bears his name. He acts as spokesman for the whole church in Acts 15, so He was an important leader in the church, and these men apparently claimed to be emissaries of James.

James's speech in Acts 15 makes it clear that he regarded their doctrine as erroneous, but for awhile, that wasn't clear to everyone. So it's possible that they did initially go to Antioch with the knowledge and approval of James and the Jerusalem church-before anyone fully realized what destructive false teachers they were. In fact, Galatians 2 suggests that even Peter was intimidated and confused about how to respond to the Judaizers when they first showed up preaching legalism.

It's easy to see why even Peter might have been intimidated by them. The Judaizers were Pharisees. They were experts in the rabbinical doctrines, and well-trained in the Old Testament Scriptures. The apostles who led the Jerusalem church were a bunch of fishermen and unlearned men whose sole claim to authority was that they were hand-picked and personally disciplined for three years by Christ. I suppose from a human standpoint it was quite natural that most

of the Apostles would feel a little intimidated by the Judaizers.

But not the apostle Paul. He was a Pharisee himself. In Acts 22:3 Paul says he was trained at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the leading Rabbis. If the Judaizers had any reason whatsoever for being proud of their heritage, their training, or their mastery of the rabbinical traditions, the apostle Paul had every advantage over them.

And that is what prompts Paul to give the personal testimony he gives in this passage. In verses 4-6 Paul compares himself with the Judaizers to demonstrate that by their own standard, the record of his life put them to shame. They were proud of their Jewish heritage, their upbringing under the law, and their rigid obedience to legalistic minutiae. But Paul says if those things gave the Judaizers any kind of pious advantage, he had an even greater reason to boast. And he draws this autobiographical sketch for us (vv. 4-6):

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: 5 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; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Now that is probably a familiar passage to most of you, but let's look at it systematically. Paul enumerates seven advantages that he enjoyed. He basically gives us a checklist of all the things he once trusted to make him acceptable to God. And the seven advantages fall into two categories. Four are advantages he inherited by birth, involuntarily. The other three reflect matters of personal conviction-Paul's own personal achievements:

Let's look at them individually. When Paul says he was circumcised the eighth day, he is underscoring two facts: 1. He was brought up from his infancy according to the letter of the law; and 2. He was no proselyte, nor was he a latecomer to the law. This matter of circumcision was the Judaizers' favorite complaint against the Gentile converts, so Paul puts it at the head of his list to show that by the Judaizers' standard, Paul's credentials are impeccable. He was circumcised on the eighth day, just the way the law prescribed.

Next, he says that he belongs to the nation of Israel. That's a genealogical claim. Not only was Paul no proselyte, but neither were his parents. Nor their parents, nor theirs, and so on. Paul's entire genealogy was traceable right back to Jacob himself.

Furthermore, he says he is of the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin, of course, was the son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. He was the only one of Jacob's children actually born in the Promised Land. His offspring were the noblest of all tribes. The tribes of Benjamin and Judah alone remained loyal to the house of David when the kingdom divided. And the city of Jerusalem was just inside the territory inhabited by Benjamin. So this was an especially honorable tribe.

Next, he calls himself "**a Hebrew of the Hebrews.**" In Paul's day, there were Hellenistic Jews. They were called "**Hellenistic**" because they had accommodated their culture to Greek thought and lifestyle. Their primary language was Greek. Some of the extreme Hellenists were blending pagan philosophy with Jewish religion. Paul had avoided all those influences. By calling himself "**a Hebrew of the Hebrews,**" he is emphasizing how different he was from the Hellenistic Jews. It suggests that Paul spoke Hebrew or Aramaic rather than Greek as his primary language.

We know that Paul came from Tarsus, in Cilicia, which was a Gentile nation. But don't get the idea that Paul had grown up in a Gentile culture. Paul's parents had evidently arranged for him to spend his youth and childhood in Jerusalem. Remember when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after his third missionary journey? There was a near riot in Jerusalem, and when order was restored, Paul made a speech to the people. Luke says Paul spoke in the Hebrew dialect. And Acts 22 records the incident (I'm reading the first three verses of Acts 22:

**[Paul] addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying,
22:1 "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."
2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:
3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.**

So Paul evidently grew up in Jerusalem, speaking Hebrew. Notice that those verses from Acts 22 are exactly parallel to what Paul says here in Philippians 3.

Now Look at Philippians 3, the end of verse 5. Here Paul gets into the second category of advantages-those that reflected his own personal achievements, as opposed to privileges he was born with. And by the standards of the Judaizers, these are pretty impressive achievements: "**As to the law, a Pharisee**". In Acts 23:6, when he appeared before the Sanhedrin, he told them: "**I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.**" So he was not just a Pharisee; he was from a line of Pharisees (plural). His father, and apparently his grandfather were Pharisees,

too. And as Paul explained to Agrippa in Acts 26:5, the Pharisees were strictest sect of the Jewish religion. As a Pharisee, Paul was bound to obey not only the law of Moses, but also hundreds more laws that were passed down by verbal tradition.

Next Paul points to his well-known persecution of the church as proof of His zeal for the Jewish law and Jewish traditions. At one time Paul had been feared throughout all the church because of His determination to persecute Christians. You want to talk about religious zeal? No one could be more zealous than Saul of Tarsus when he was in Pharisee mode.

Now, why does Paul list this among his reasons for boasting? We know from 1 Timothy 1:13 that Paul was not proud of the fact that he had once been "**a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.**" But that is just the point. Paul was not proud of any of these things. They were things any committed Pharisee would most certainly take pride in, but when Paul came to Christ he abandoned them all. And he's going to explain all that in a moment. But the point here is that his zeal-fiery, even violent zeal-was vivid proof of his commitment to the law.

Notice the second half of verse 6: "**as to righteousness under the Law, [I was found] blameless.**" That's an astonishing claim. It reminds us of the Rich young Ruler in Matthew 19:20, who claimed to have kept all the commandments from his youth up.

In what sense could Paul have thought that he had attained the status of blamelessness? Remember: Paul is describing an era in his old life when he thought of the law primarily as a standard for governing external behavior. The law (as he understood it then) was a handbook to govern our behavior. The most important aspect of being a righteous person was the issue of what we look like to others. So Paul, like any typical

Pharisee, took extra care to obey all the external and ceremonial aspects of the law, and it was in that respect that he was blameless. There was nothing visible in his life that anyone else could ever point to in order to accuse him. Remember that the apostle Paul admits in Romans 7 that he struggled with covetousness. Saul of Tarsus might not have seen that as a disqualifying sin. Covetousness is an internal thing. No one can see it. So no one can point the finger of blame. And by attaining a veneer of blamelessness, Saul of Tarsus assumed he had attained a righteousness that was sufficient to please God.

That was the heart of the Pharisees's error. Their main obsession with the law had to do with external and ceremonial matters. They focused on what others could see, not on what God could see. And they confused their high standards of external behavior with real righteousness. They believed that God would accept them because they kept up a righteous facade. That was what drove Saul of Tarsus. He believed that by obeying the law as strictly as he could, he was earning a righteousness that would give him favor with God.

But something happened to change this proud Pharisee from Saul of Tarsus into Paul the apostle and humble tentmaker. He met Christ and had his entire worldview suddenly overhauled. Here is the part of his testimony Paul does not want us to miss. It is a contrast—a very pointed contrast between two ideas of righteousness. Two contrasting—flatly contradictory— notions about what it takes for a person to obtain a right standing before God.

This contrast also explains the difference between Saul of Tarsus and Paul the apostle.

Here is the whole point of this entire passage: Paul is contrasting **two kinds of righteousness**-one that is fatal, and one that saves. In fact, the distinction between these two ideas of righteousness is so fundamental and so important that if you can grasp this point, you have understood the whole gospel.

There are two kinds of righteousness. They are as different as day and night. One is a righteousness that belongs to man, and Paul calls it the righteousness of the law; the other comes from God, and it is by faith. One is a flawed righteousness that is the product of our own works; the other is a perfect righteousness that is the product of what Christ has done. One is a righteousness that we make for ourselves; the other is a righteousness that is imputed to us. One is a righteousness **of human merit**; the other is a righteousness **of divine grace. One is our own righteousness; the other is God's righteousness.**

What happened on the road to Damascus was that Christ literally stopped Saul of Tarsus in his tracks and showed him that all his righteousness, as impressive as it might have seemed by human standards, fell far short of the divine standard and was totally unacceptable to God.

Notice Paul's response to this: (v. 7-8) "**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.**"

In other words, Paul says he took all his earthly advantages, any hope he might ever have of earning any favor with God, and he jettisoned it in favor of knowing Christ.

This very strong language Paul uses here. In the King James Version he says, I count all these things as dung. And that is a fitting way of translating the expression. The Greek word is skubalon. It refers to the worst kind of filth; muck; excrement; ordure; sewage. I can't think of any other English equivalents that are polite enough to say from this pulpit. I'm reading the English Standard Version, which says "**rubbish,**" and that really tones down the force of the expression. "**I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as [manure.]**"

This is shocking language from the apostle Paul! It is clear that he means to give his readers a jolt. He wants to state this as plainly and powerfully as possible. He has just listed all the finest spiritual advantages available to any person. (Remember that Judaism was a biblical religion, so Paul is not describing a pagan notion of righteousness here.) He has just outlined the highest level of personal piety and privilege that any human being can attain to-and then he says it is nothing but skubalon, dung.

Here is the whole difference between Saul of Tarsus to the apostle Paul! In essence Paul abandoned everything he had spent his whole life trying to attain. And he didn't just abandon it; he came to regard it as revolting, disgusting-skubalon. Here's how John Calvin says it: "**Paul . . . declares that he had not only abandoned everything that he formerly reckoned precious, but that it stank like excrement to him.**"

This is all the more remarkable when we consider who Paul was. He represented a strain of Pharisaism that had elevated religion to an almost unattainable, superhuman level. Let's be honest: You and I would never be able to adhere to the law with the same rigor as Saul of Tarsus. In human terms the Pharisees had elevated personal righteousness to a level unattainable

by most of us. They were super-spiritual, über-legalistic, absolutely fastidious holy men-by all external standards. And Paul, who had reached the pinnacle of that system, said it was all for naught. It was of no more value than if you took a shovel full of cow manure and decorated it like a wedding cake and tried to make that an offering to God. Skubalon. It was an offense to a holy God.

Now remember Paul's main point here. This is the one thought he wants us to retain: There are two kinds of righteousness. One is skubalon, revolting, abhorrent to God, no matter how wonderful it may appear to human eyes.

What is the other kind of righteousness? Paul mentions it in verse 9: He says that it is now his great hope to "**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 there is a wealth of good theology in that sentence and I don't want you to miss it. The whole gist of the gospel message is summed up in that verse. What Paul is teaching us here is a very important doctrine. I don't hesitate to say that it is the most important truth in all theology. It is the doctrine of justification by faith.

Notice what this verse suggests. First, the only sufficient ground on which we can stand before God is a righteousness that exists outside of us. Here's the truth that Saul of Tarsus finally came to grips with-and we must come to grips with it as well if we hope to gain eternal life: The righteousness that saves us is not our own righteousness. That idea is absolutely contrary to the whole belief system of the Pharisees. It flatly contradicts everything Paul had ever been taught. That's not all. This doctrine sets Christianity apart from every other religion known to man. Every religion

you can name teaches that people must become righteous in order to be acceptable to God. Christianity alone teaches that God supplies on our behalf all the merit we need to please Him. The lowest sinner—a thief hanging on a cross—can be redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God, all on the basis of a righteousness that is provided for him.

Some people think Paul introduced this doctrine in Scripture, but that is not the case. This is what Scripture taught from the very beginning. Abraham believed God and righteousness was reckoned to his account (Gen. 15:6). And in Galatians 3:17 Paul says that the law, which came centuries after Abraham, did not nullify God's promise of salvation by grace. The law was never intended to be a means of earning favor with God. The law was given to underscore the hopelessness of salvation by works. The law condemns those who break it. And if you break it at one point, you are guilty of all, according to James 2:10. So the law was meant to keep us from trusting in our own righteousness—by condemning us every time we sinned.

This is exactly what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: He said that external conformity to the law is not enough. One lustful thought carries the same guilt as an act of full-fledged adultery. Being angry with your brother brings on you the same condemnation as a wanton act of murder. If you want to meet the law's demands, it is not enough to be blameless on the outside, the way the Pharisees were; you must also be spotless on the inside. And Matthew 5:20 is the focal point of the whole Sermon on the Mount: "**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**"

See, once you understand the utter inflexibility of the law, it should drive you to utter despair. That was the purpose of the law; to drive us to despair. But the

Pharisees got it wrong. They decided that if they could just obey the law externally, and be blameless in the sight of men, they could attain a standard that would be acceptable to God.

But salvation is not based on any human standard. Jesus says our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. In fact, the only acceptable standard is the absolute perfection of God Himself. In Matthew 5:48, still hammering this same point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, **"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."**

So the standard is divine perfection. Where are we going to get a righteousness that meets that standard? Not within ourselves.

Look again at Philippians 3:9, and notice where Paul found the righteousness necessary to justify him before God. Two words: **"In Him."** In Christ. That is the theme that runs throughout the Pauline epistles. This was his favorite way to describe the Christian: **"In Christ."** It evokes the idea of a mystical union with Christ that confers on us all the merit of Christ's obedience and clothes us in His perfect righteousness.

Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Paul says this expressly in Romans 4:6: **"God imputes righteousness [to believers] apart from any works."** And Roman 4:5: **"To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."** In other words, before we do a single good work, the full merit of Christ's righteousness is transferred to our account, so that God regards us as **"in Christ,"** and therefore in perfect standing with Him.

This is an amazing doctrine, and I never tire of it. Christ's righteousness is reckoned to our account, just as our sins were reckoned to Him. He paid sin's penalty; and we reap the reward of His righteousness. That is

the gospel in a nutshell. It is the one point Paul wants to convey to us here in Philippians 3:1-9. Let's paraphrase what he is saying:

There are these two contradictory, totally incompatible kinds of righteousness. One you earn, and the other is given to you by grace. One is your own righteousness, and it's therefore flawed and imperfect. The other is the spotless, pure righteousness of God himself. One resides in you and is therefore tainted with your sinfulness; the other resides in Christ and is therefore as spotless as He is. **Which righteousness would you rather entrust your future to?** Do you see why Paul gathered up all his own righteousness and threw it on the rubbish heap? He opted instead for another righteousness. Theologians often call it "**the alien righteousness,**" because it is a righteousness that in no way comes from within us.

This theme of the alien righteousness was never very far from the apostle Paul's thoughts. The whole first half of the book of Romans is Paul's systematic presentation of the doctrine of justification by faith-and his focus is to show how an alien righteousness is imputed to those who believe. The book of Galatians defends this same doctrine against the error of the Judaizers. It is everywhere in the Pauline epistles.

Why was Paul so obsessed with refuting the error of the Judaizers? Because their error was exactly what he turned away from when he turned to Christ. He knew very well that it is spiritually fatal to trust your own righteousness to any degree-rather than resting all your hope on the righteousness that is imputed by faith. Paul says this was the whole reason most of Israel remained under condemnation and outside Christ: "**For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's**

righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Romans 10:3-4).

Jesus taught exactly the same thing. Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican? (Luke 18:10-14):

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

How was this publican justified? There's only one possible answer: He received a righteousness that was not his own. It was an alien righteousness. It came to him from an external source. It was the righteousness **"which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."**

That is the only ground on which any of us can ever stand before God. We cannot engineer a sufficient righteousness of our own. If Saul of Tarsus couldn't do it, no sinner can. And that is exactly what Scripture tells us over and over again.

We must seek a righteousness that is not our own-**"the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."**