

Philippians (3:1-6) Warnings Against False Teaching

In this passage Paul turns to specific warnings about those who seek to pervert the Gospel message. After laying out the way of humility (2:1-11), Paul now warns against the wickedness of pride.

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD” (Jer. 9:23-24).

I. Transition (3:1)

A. “*Finally . . . rejoice in the Lord!*”

1. This expression “Finally” could be used to indicate a fresh break in thought and not necessarily a closing of a letter (cf., 1 Thess. 4:1 for similar use). It could, therefore, be rendered, “And so” or “Well then” or “What remains to be said is . . .”
2. “Rejoice in the Lord” is not some superficial exuberance that ignores the reality of circumstances. Rather, it is the attitude that finds rest in God’s sovereign control over circumstances, especially the trials and pressures that often weigh us down (Jm. 1:2-3). Despite the hostility of other believers toward Paul (1:17-18) and the possibility that his trial may lead to death, Paul found reason to rejoice (2:17-18).
3. Christians are called to rejoice “in the Lord” regardless of adverse circumstances and difficulties *because* God is at work in them (Rom. 8:28-30). Hope is what our world needs and hope is what we project when we “rejoice in the Lord” (see also, Ps. 32:11; 35:9; 64:10; Hab. 3:18; Philip 4:4).

B. “*Same things*”

1. What are these “same things?” It appears that nothing in what follows is alluded to from what has already been mentioned.
2. It seems best to view these “same things” as a reiteration of those oral teachings given by Paul when he was present in Philippi. Shortly he will remind them of what they were taught “as I have often told you before and now say again” (3:18).
3. When the purity of the Gospel message was at stake, it was “no trouble” for Paul to review his teachings and it ensured his readers that they had the truth (cf., 2 Pt. 1:12-15).

II. Avoid Legalists and Their Legalism (3:2-3)

A. *The Counterfeit (v. 2)*

1. There is no hint that these people of whom Paul warns are literally present in Philippi. But, the threat of their false teaching was real. There was not a substantial Jewish population in Philippi, but Paul regularly had to defend the purity of the Gospel message against Judaizers—Jewish “Christian” missionaries who came on the heels of Paul teaching that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but adding conditions to the Gospel that were not part of the Gospel.
2. The warning is powerful and strong, indicated by the repetition of “Watch out.”
βλέπετε τοὺς κύνας
βλέπετε τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας
βλέπετε τὴν κατατομήν
3. All three expressions . . .
 - a) Describe the same group of people.
 - b) Are beyond being descriptive and sarcastic—they are pejorative, insulting, and full of emotion.
 - c) Are inversions of Jewish boasts, viz., the things that set first-century Jewish people apart are the very things that condemn them.
 - (1) “dogs” represent everything unclean and vile vis-à-vis ceremonial purity and those who submit to Jewish dietary restrictions (cf., Mt. 7:6). In Jewish piety, dogs and Gentiles were synonymous (Mk. 7:25-28). In biting irony Paul insists it is the Jews who are to be regarded as Gentiles—the worst of insults!

- (2) “men who do evil” is an expression used for God’s enemies and all those who do not practice God’s Law (Ps. 5:5; 34:16; 139:21-22; Pr. 10:29) vis-à-vis the strict observance of the Law (cf., Lk. 18:20-21). Paul claims that those who pride themselves in keeping the law actually do evil (see Rom. 2:12-15 for a related Pauline view of the Law)!
 - (3) “mutilators of the flesh” represent circumcision and thus genuine, pure-bred Jews vis-à-vis the pagan religions who often performed circumcision as a rite of passage. Those who insist that circumcision is a sign of new life in Christ depreciate his work on the cross (cf., Gal. 5:12), thus making the rite of circumcision no better than conversion to a pagan religion!
4. Conditions that were being added to the Gospel message amounted to:
- a) *Legalism*—the notion that one must do more than believe and repent as a means for salvation or an indication of salvation. In other words, one’s righteousness (standing before God) is based upon specific performance of Jewish customs, e.g., circumcision, Sabbath observance, food laws.
 - b) In essence, legalism adds a “plus factor” to grace, thus nullifying grace altogether. Those who teach/practice such things engage in a form of “false humility,” which is really pride (see Col. 2:16-23).
 - c) These Judaizers were insisting that circumcision was *the* sign of entrance into the new covenant, just as it was for the old. Paul explicitly denies that circumcision has any significance whatsoever for the believer (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15).
 - d) The basis for this false teaching was grounded in a misunderstanding of the function of Old Testament Law. In every case, the Law anticipated the fulfillment found only in Jesus (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:24). The temple was pointing to *the* Temple who is Jesus as the supreme sacrifice (Jn. 2:21). The priesthood pointed to *the* High Priest who is Jesus (Heb. 5, 7). The sacrifice of bulls and goats signaled *the* final sacrifice made by Jesus’ crucifixion (Heb. 9:11-28). The Passover looked to *the* Passover Lamb whose sacrifice is comprehensive and complete (1 Cor. 5:7).
 - e) Moreover, the OT clearly teaches that God was more concerned with a circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 9:25; Ezek. 44:9), than mere sacrifice (Hos. 6:6; Mt. 9:13). Paul insists that “a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Rom. 2:29; see also, Col. 2:11-12).

B. The Real McCoy (v. 3)

1. By saying “we” and not “you” Paul is implicitly including Jews (himself) and Gentiles as the “Real McCoy.” Paul knows nothing of a “spiritual Israel” nor “Jewish believers” and “Gentile believers;” he knows only of the Body of Christ as “God’s people” (see, Eph. 2:11-16).
2. To receive the promise of the Spirit by faith is to be the true circumcision (Gal. 3:14).
3. Authentic sacrifice and service to God that He accepts is only accomplished *by* the Spirit of God and never by human effort alone (cf., Jn. 4:24; 15:1-5).
4. Therefore, our glory (i.e., boasting) can and should only be “in Christ Jesus.” To put “confidence in the flesh,” therefore, is antithetical to all that God has done in and for us through Christ by grace alone. It is the height of human sin to take pride in one’s own accomplishments and not give glory to God. After all, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

III. Paul’s Life Before Christ (3:4-6)

A. There is No Future in Our Past

1. For the sake of argument and as a rhetorical device, Paul plays the self-righteousness game to show its absurdity. He claims that if one were to go tit-for-tat, he would be way ahead of them all (see also, 2 Cor. 11:21ff where Paul admits the foolishness of such boasting).
2. Paul lists seven reasons that would have given him confidence in the flesh. The first four speak of his pedigree, the last three speak of his personal accomplishments.
 - a) “circumcised on the eighth day” – A Jew by birth according to God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:12; contrast Timothy, Acts 16:3)

- b) “of the people of Israel” – the pride and privileges belonging to the chosen of God—some of which Paul lists in Rom. 9:4-5—provided a rich heritage for boasting.
- c) “of the tribe of Benjamin” – Paul was able to trace his specific descent. It is from Benjamin that Israel got her first king (Acts 13:21). Also, the land allotted to Benjamin contained the city of Jerusalem (Jdg. 1:21). It is possible that Benjamin’s blessing from Jacob may have had influence upon Paul’s zeal to persecute the Church (Gen. 49:27).
- d) “a Hebrew of Hebrews” – Paul grew up speaking Hebrew (“Aramaic” [NIV] was widely used to include Hebrew; the Greek says “Hebrew” *Ἑβραϊδί*, cf., Acts 21:40, et al.), and so did his parents, indicating avoidance of assimilation into the Hellenistic culture of Tarsus. He heard Jesus in Hebrew (Acts 26:14) and addressed a hostile Jewish audience in Hebrew (Acts 21:40; 22:2).
- e) “in regard to the law, a Pharisee” – the term meant “separated ones.” His teen years were spent studying under the leading, conservative Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3) and was himself “the son of a Pharisee” (Acts. 23:6).
- f) “as for zeal, persecuting the church” – the vigor with which Paul persecuted the Church was matched by Nero, who tortured thousands of believers in 70 A.D. Paul was a fast-burner while training for Pharisee (Gal. 1:13-14). If sincerity and enthusiasm was any measure of being right with God, Paul would have been ahead of the class.
- g) “as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” – High commendation from blameless living through keen observance of the Law was the epitome of the Jewish religion and ambition (cf., Lk. 1:6; 18:21).

B. Practical Implications

1. List some of your personal accomplishments in life? Do you see these as resulting from your own efforts apart from God’s grace?
2. How do your personal accomplishments relate to God’s grace?
3. Meditate on God’s Word to you: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Cor. 4:7). How does your life reflect this teaching?
4. Why do you suppose our society is so performance based?
5. Are there any “plus factors” you may be adding to grace?
6. As a parent, are you careful to teach your children the concept of grace and avoid performance-based discipline? Explain.

Next week . . . Paul’s life since Christ (3:7-14)

His past renunciation (3:7-8)

His present aim (3:9-11)

His future hope (3:12-14)