

Not Having a Righteousness of My Own
Philippians 3:1-11
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Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read Philippians 3:1-11

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

A man named John Keble was a professor (called a “don”) at Oxford University in England in the early 1800s. Keble was asked to be the financial officer in addition to his other duties of teaching, but it became very clear that he was much better at teaching than he was at accounting because he was always off by just under 2,000 pounds. They couldn’t figure out why until someone finally noticed that he wrote the year (1820) at the top of the page and accidentally added it into the amount.¹ Much more recently, there have been accounting errors that have cost companies and their customers millions of dollars. The bigger the businesses and the more sophisticated the computer programs, the larger the errors have been made. In 2012, Groupon misreported their quarterly earnings by \$20 million, forgetting to factor in customer refunds. In 2016, Valeant Pharmaceuticals incorrectly claimed over \$58 million in revenue, which caused their stock to plummet by 86% when it was corrected. In 2017, Uber announced that it would be paying its drivers \$50 million because they used the wrong formula to calculate driver commissions.²

It's easy to make a mistake in accounting. In today's Scripture passage, the Apostle Paul realized that he had made a massive accounting error. He wasn't a financial officer for a national firm, and his mistake was not going to cost anyone any money. The stakes were higher than that: his mistake could have had eternal implications. You see, in the accounting ledger of Paul's life, he had a list of assets and advantages that he thought could justify his soul before a holy God. If he stacked things in that column and then kept the losses, the liabilities side of his ledger minimal or blank, then he would find favor with God. But then Jesus came and blew up all of his expectations and his previous way of keeping score in life, and he figured out how to do the right accounting, Gospel accounting. And while we may list different things in our asset columns, we need to be careful not to make the same mistake that Paul did.

Before we flesh that out, though, we start with the first three verses that reminded the Philippians to resist those who wanted to draw them away from the simplicity of the Gospel, because they knew that they had

I. No Confidence in the Flesh (vv. 1-3)

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—

Verse 1 makes it sound like we're going to get into a section of the letter where Paul tells them a bunch of things to rejoice in. Instead, we have a series of warnings – “look out” or “beware” stated

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul For Everyone* (London: John Knox, 2002), p. 118.

² <https://smartbooks.com/resources/articles/4-times-accounting-errors-cost-big-companies-big-money/>

three times: for dogs, evildoers, and for those who mutilate the flesh. Are these all one group of people, or are they three different groups? I think that he is referring to one group. They are what were called the “Judaizers,” Jews who were trying to enforce the old covenant conformity to the law among those who converted to Christianity, even the Gentiles. Acts 15:1-2 is the first introduction to them: “*But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’... Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.*” This group was a bit confused on how Christianity was different from traditional Judaism; they weren’t ready to understand Jesus’ new covenant as such a radical break from what God had been requiring of His people since the time of Abraham and Moses.

Why is Paul so negative and inflammatory here in verse 2? Isn’t this an “ad hominem” attack, where you call the other side names rather than actually having to engage with their arguments, which is so common today? Kent Hughes says that what Paul was doing here was that “each of the three insults took a virtue that the Judaizers claimed for themselves and reversed it. Paul impaled (them) on their own vocabulary.”³

-He called them dogs because that was their derogatory term for Gentiles and lapsed Jews. Nobody kept dogs as pets back then, dogs were wild scavengers who fed on unclean garbage, so it was not a term of affection.

-Calling them evildoers was to point out the irony that they were trying to achieve holiness by keeping the law as strictly as they could, and imposing it on everyone else as well.

-And finally, saying that they “*mutilate the flesh*” is a reference to circumcision, the sign of the old covenant. God had commanded His people to circumcise their sons and any male converts to Judaism way back in Genesis 17 as a sign of His covenant with His people. But with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, the sacrament had changed from circumcision to baptism. No longer were believers to be initiated into the covenant by circumcision, but by the waters of baptism. So Paul mocked it by calling it mutilation. That’s not even the harshest that Paul got; in Galatians 5:6 he said, “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love,*” and then in verse 12 he adds, “*I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!*” (If you don’t know what that means, ask your parents!)

In verse 3, Paul says that those who are in Christ Jesus are the true circumcision. Romans 2:28-29 explains that Christians have received the circumcision of the heart – “²⁸ *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.* ²⁹ *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.*” The main point is that to continue to force people to submit to the ritual of circumcision was signifying that they were submitting themselves to the law. But the New Covenant is based on faith in Christ, not keeping the works of the law. Don’t add anything to faith in Jesus, that destroys the work of Christ and turns out to be a different gospel! Paul ferociously protected salvation by faith alone by grace alone, not by works of the law, and warned believers to watch out for those who would change that.

Before Paul continued with that theme, though, he took a moment to mention that if any of these strict Jews wanted to compare their credentials against his, he’d be happy to see how they stacked up because he knew he would come out looking good. If keeping the law and earning your salvation through works was how God accepted you, then Paul would have

II. Much Confidence in the Flesh (vv. 4-6)

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon: The Fellowship of the Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), p. 125.

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.

Paul's history and testimony here shows that he is not reacting against the Judaizers out of any jealousy or feeling that he didn't measure up. On the contrary, Paul knew that he had all the right benchmarks and bona fides to be respected in the Jewish community. Paul was a "Hebrew of Hebrews," a pure Jew, no mixed Gentile blood in his lineage. Not only did he know what tribe of Israel he descended from, but he was proud that it was the tribe of Benjamin. That was the tribe that Israel's first king, Saul, was from, and it was the only other tribe besides Judah that stayed loyal to the line of David when the kingdom divided. The holy city of Jerusalem was in the land of Benjamin.

So Paul was from the right bloodline and his parents had raised him well in that faith, including circumcising him on the eighth day, the proper time to do so. That's the stuff that he had no control over but was born into. But he had built on his inherited privileges in the Jewish faith by training and studying and becoming a pillar in his community. He followed the path of rigorous righteousness, becoming a Pharisee, blameless under the law. Pharisee means "separate one" and they distanced themselves from the unclean and pagan. They kept all the laws of the Old Testament and then went way beyond them to keep a huge set of laws that they had added through the years. You couldn't get more serious or rigorous in your law-keeping than being a Pharisee.

Why would Paul include "*persecutor of the church*" on this list of accomplishments and credentials? Because Jesus had challenged the Jewish leaders and their traditions and been killed for it, Paul was naturally on the side of the Pharisees and priests who had sent Jesus to His death. When Jesus' followers carried on His mission and were spreading Jesus' message and growing the early church, it was even more alarming to the Jewish leaders. Now instead of one man and His small band of followers needing to be silenced, there was a whole movement. So Paul took it upon himself to try to stamp out the early church. Acts 8:3 describes that he was "*ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.*"

But then Acts 9 describes when Paul experienced a life-changing encounter on the road to Damascus where Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light. He went from being a zealous persecutor of Christians to a zealous planter of Christian churches. Jesus changed everything, to where Paul no longer cared about his old life and his accomplishments, but found

III. All Confidence in Christ (vv. 7-11)

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— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus led to his rethinking his entire life and coming to some radical conclusions. If ever there was someone who could have earned their way to heaven by their religious zeal and devotion, it was Paul. But he realized that God was not looking for human beings to justify themselves, to rack up every achievement possible to tip the scales in their favor to get to

heaven. God was looking for righteousness in human beings, but it was never going to be their natural, innate righteousness. It had to be an “alien righteousness,” a holiness, a perfection that comes from somewhere or someone else, because every human being, no matter how well they think they keep the law, are dead in sin and guilty of eternal rebellion. We all deserve hell for our actions and attitudes because they violate the holiness of the Lord. But thank God that He has revealed to us exactly where we can find that righteousness: verse 9 says *“not having a righteousness of my own... but that which comes through faith in Christ.”*

Whatever things Paul thought were his positives/his gain he realized in the light of Christ’s love and grace that they were nothing. To get back to the sermon’s introduction and the idea of accounting errors, Paul had looked at the profit/asset column of his achievements and realized that they actually belonged in the loss/liability column. Not that they were negatives in themselves, but that they were not the assets that he needed to get him to heaven. The only thing remaining in the assets column was Jesus, and His work on our behalf – living a perfect life so that He kept the law on our behalf, and dying a sacrificial death that paid the penalty for our sins.

Isaiah 64:6 says it this way: *“all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”* Paul called his deeds something similar in v. 8: *“I count them as rubbish,”* but that’s a polite translation. The King James calls it *“dung,”* and the Greek word, *skubalon*, can mean both spoiled food and excrement. My family was walking somewhere recently and I noticed everyone’s faces wrinkling up as they covered their noses. Since I don’t have a sense of smell, I asked, “Something smell bad?” Miles said, “Imagine the hose that comes off an RV camper getting rid of all their sewage breaks and it spills onto the ground.” I still don’t know what that smells like, but I get the idea. That’s what the things that we do right to please God smell like on their own.

Now, is Paul saying, “stop doing good things and go ahead and indulge in sin”? Or as Romans 6:1 poses it, *“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”* Well, no, the Bible says that we can please God and offer a pleasing aroma to Him. What is a pleasing aroma to God?

2 Corinthians 2:15 – *“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”*

Hebrews 13:16 – *“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”*

So we can do things and act in a way that pleases God. But only after we stop hoping they will save us and realize that they are garbage on their own. It’s about the timing – it’s only after Jesus saves us and gives us new life and makes us new creations that our obedience matters at all. We can do things that are pleasing to God, but only because He sees us as sinless and righteous because of the work of Jesus on our behalf. Until then, everything we do is stained in sin and filthy dung.

What is the ultimate goal for the Christian? To gain Christ. To know Christ. To become like Him in suffering and death and resurrection. What is the power of Christ’s resurrection in verse 10? It’s the fact that since God raised Jesus from the dead that He also guarantees that He will raise every believer who is united to Christ to new life after they die. “Sharing in his suffering” and “becoming like him in his death” in verse 10 are essential to all believers - if you want to share in Christ’s glory, you must share in His suffering. Knowing Jesus involves being willing to take up your cross and being shaped by God through suffering.

Conclusion

I know a guy who has really thorough religious credentials:

-He’s the son and nephew of Presbyterian pastors

- He was raised as a believer, baptized in the early months of his life, and says that he always knew that he believed in Jesus
- He was in church every time it opened, attending worship, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, kid's choir, fellowship dinners
- As a teenager, he went to every youth ministry event; every retreat, every large and small group meeting. He led music for the youth group, as well as for Young Life and his school's Christian club
- In college, he did homeless ministry, volunteered as a youth leader, and served at a church as an intern
- All of which led to full-time ministry, seminary, and ordination
- He's now worked for several churches, been on lots of committees, attended over a dozen mission trips, and led numerous retreats
- Now he pastors a really encouraging church in central Delaware

Now, all of that may look really good on a resumé or impress other Christians. But if he thinks that any of those things are getting him into heaven, he has missed the main point of the Gospel and the free grace of Jesus. That guy is getting into heaven the same way that the high-school dropout, drug-dealing gang member who has never stepped foot in a church can get into heaven: by gaining Christ and having Christ's righteousness count for him so that he will attain the resurrection after death. Paul was saved by the blood of Christ in the same way that the thief on the cross, who lived a life completely opposite from Paul, was saved – by having Jesus forgive their sins and bring them into paradise.

What about you? What do you consider your accomplishments? Does your confidence rest in your excellent church attendance, or your morality, or in being a good law-abiding citizen? Do you place your hope in what you've achieved in life – being a great student or an accomplished athlete or someone who wins awards in your profession? Your wealth, your status, your education, your emotional stability, your family, your political or business successes, your denominational alignment – do you somehow imagine that faith in Christ Jesus and delight in him is a little less important than your personal accomplishments?⁴ Can you see your good things as garbage, filthy excrement that count for nothing in salvation? Can you see that you bring nothing to the table, that as the song "Rock of Ages" says: "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling"?

Another old hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" by Isaac Watts, says: "My richest gain I count but loss / And pour contempt on all my pride / Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast / save in the death of Christ my God." Jesus paid it all, He achieved every part of salvation for us. Until you receive His grace, your good works count for nothing. After you receive His grace, God is pleased by your obedience. You just have to get the accounting right. Amen.

Benediction

Colossians 2:13-14 - *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 86.