

Anything You Can Do, Paul Can Do Better

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome, guys. So we've made it to about the middle of the book. We'll start chapter three today. And so previously in the letter from Paul to the Philippians, he made a point to encourage them towards humility and humbling themselves and counting others as more significant. This idea of humility gets rooted in Christ, as Ryan laid out for us a few weeks ago, through the riches to rags to riches story arc of Christ emptying himself of his glory and becoming a servant in the greatest act of humility. Paul then goes on to continue this theme of humility, calling for them to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. That idea gets further linked to humility, seeking for them to pursue a life that is free of grumbling and disputing, setting aside pride so the work of the Lord done in and through us can shine as lights in the world. So Sarah will read our scripture today. So if you have your Bibles, you can open them to chapter three and she'll start in verse one. In addition, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a safeguard for you. Watch out for the dogs. Watch out for the evil workers. Watch out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the spirit of God. Boast in Christ Jesus and do not put confidence in the flesh. Although I have reasons for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcise the eighth day of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of

Hebrews, regarding the law, a Pharisee, regarding zeal, persecuting the church, regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless. But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ. Thank you. So I have a lot of questions as I work through this text.

Why does Paul offer such a strong warning in verse 2? Who are these dogs, these evildoers, mutilators of the flesh? So Paul is identifying the group that has been the constant opponent to him through his time in ministry. And this group is known as the Judaizers. Are there any self-proclaiming Judaizers with us today?

Just, no, that's good. That'll probably make for less follow-up questions after the sermon. So this group, they were influential religious leaders, they were Jews, and they also believed in Christ, in Jesus. However, they insisted that the law, God's law, the Old Testament, be held fully, specifically circumcision. And so they knew the law very well, and they valued that adherence to and observance of that law. So they're basically saying, we know Jesus, but if you really want to follow and know Jesus properly, you must first also follow these laws. So effectively, they're seeking to add works, and perhaps even well-intentioned good works, if we could say it that way, to grace. Can we all agree, just as an aside, that it's probably not a good idea to add works to grace, to the finished work of Christ? So Paul's warning is very severe to the Philippians, but his strong word choices help the church parse out the moment or the spot in which these false teachers lose the gospel, and they slip into teaching a false gospel. So let's have a look at how Paul takes their teaching and kind of turns it around on themselves to describe the error of their ways.

So we'll read verse 2 again. So it says, look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. So these three phrases I think Paul subtly uses so that we can kind of see the real thing. I'm a carpenter, I don't really know much about money, but I do know that when they're trying to teach people how to spot fakes, they don't show them fakes, they show them the real thing, so they have something to look at. And so Paul is showing us, he'll show us later here the real thing, but first he's going to also point out that exact moment when, where they err. So the word dogs was often used to call somebody unclean or impure, but the Jews specifically used that phrase to describe Gentiles and specifically as being outside of the covenant agreement with God. So Paul is flipping this and saying, by pursuing these false teachings, things, you actually are in fact now in the new covenant outside, you are outside of the new covenant and what it teaches. The evildoers, their teaching to strictly observe the law has now become a false teaching because they were imposing regulations and rules on people who God never laid those regulations on. He never laid those on those outside of his covenant people in the Old Testament.

[6 : 08] The last one there is those who mutilate the flesh. The Jews valued circumcision because it was a sign that they were in with God within the Old Covenant. So Paul flips that over and calls them mutilators of the flesh. And I think that's a little bit of a poke at saying they're no different than some of the Baal worshipers and pagans that would have been around at the time. And so he's identifying them not with what they want to be as identified with, but he's basically calling them out for what they are.

So we'll just keep that in the back of our mind as we continue along. I think there's two main points today that I want to try to convey. I think there's two things that Paul is highlighting here. And thing one is that, like I said earlier, he's offering a sharp warning to the church at Philippi. He's teaching them how to avoid the false gospels by showing them the real thing, like we talked about with the money. We need to understand what the true marks are so that when we see fake teachings, false teachings, that we can identify them and categorize them and know not to slip into those teachings. And secondly, and maybe more subtly and surprisingly, I don't think Paul gives us the warning that we're expecting.

Normally when someone offers a warning, they would have a because or a why after that. They would say something along the lines of like, we'll have nothing to do with these dogs then if that's what they are. But he's not doing that. I think rather instead, he shows us that because of our identity in Christ as true believers, through humility, love, and a desire to be of one mind in Christ, we can see that these opponents are not actually his opponents. They're in fact opponents to the gospel.

people. And because Paul can rightly position that, that they're not his opponents, I think he can identify with them and draw closer to them. And I think we'll explore that later.

But the first thing is, what does mark us in the new covenant? And he gives that to us in verse 3. So verse 3 says, For we are the circumcision.

[8 : 40] He's doing a little bit of a wordplay here, and he's taking a verb, and he's flipping it into a noun. And that's really subtle, and the first hearers of this message may not have really unpacked that, but we have a lot of years and a lot of scholarship towards thinking about these things and kind of digging into them.

So, he takes it, by doing that, he takes it from an action or something that you do, and he flips it and makes it into an identity or something that you are.

So by the mark, the mark of the Old Testament was an outward, sorry, it was an outward action and an outward sign. It was a visible thing.

And by turning that, Paul says, in the new covenant, we experience a change, but first and primarily, it's an internal change of our identity and not an outward mark.

So I think that Paul is not, he's not reinventing the wheel here. He's not coming up with a new promise or a new idea. This is actually an old promise.

[9 : 54] And we'll explore one of those, but I want to explain a little bit before we get into that text. One of the ways that that's talked about or described in the Old Testament, in the Old Covenant, is by being given a new heart.

And so I want to explore a little bit on what does that mean? Because when the Bible says heart, it has a little bit different context and implication than what we would use as heart.

So, Jeremy gave us a much more fun word. It was, I think, splonknon is what he said. This word's not quite as fun. It's lev, is the word in Hebrew for heart.

But if I, if I say to the Orcut girls, if I say, boy, I would just really like one of those chocolate chip cookies that you make because they're really good, where would you guys say that that came from?

Is, like, when I think that thought, where does that thought that I would like more cookies originate in? Does any, any kid have an answer for that?

[11 : 08] Splonknon. Tim. Yeah. Not your splonknon. What do you think? Probably your brain, right? So, we, we have the understanding that ideas and actions and thoughts all originate in our brain.

And, in the Bible, they don't really have that word. In Hebrew, it doesn't have a word for that. They use the word heart. And so, it's, it's like the center of your thoughts and your reasoning and your desire.

It's your inner self and, importantly, it drives our responses and actions. So, it's kind of how we would think, like, combined our heart plus our brain.

So, those two things kind of combine to get an understanding of what we mean when we talk about heart. So, I want to look at Ezekiel 36, 26 through 28.

And it says, it says, it says, it says, and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

[12 : 17] And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. So, first, the first thing we see here is the internal change, right?

So, it's not us, it's God. God gives us a new heart, which means a new identity, new thoughts, and new desires.

And we just think about things in a way that's different from how we used to. And as a secondary result, not a primary cause of that change, our actions and obedience flow outward.

forward. That's really important to get the ordering correct. First, there's a change which causes new desires.

And secondly, as a result, we experience an internal change and our actions and obedience flow outward because of that. So, that's the old promise that Paul is latching on to here.

[13 : 25] Let's look at how Paul puts that to work in the context of a true believer in the new covenant. So, back to verse 3. It says, who worship by the Spirit of God.

So, the true mark of those who belong to Christ is that they have the Spirit of God. And I want to highlight John chapter 4 verses 21 through 24 because it addresses this same issue.

These are Jesus' words to the woman at the well. He said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

You worship what you do not know. We worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is here now when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. So, we don't have time to unpack all of this.

[14 : 34] This is not our text for today. And there's a lot here. This would be a great verse to meditate on the connections between our text and Jesus' words here.

but we can see that it's absolutely necessary in order to be a true worshiper that you have the spirit.

Either you have it or you don't. It's a clear mark in a similar way to how in the Old Covenant circumcision you either have it or you don't.

You're in or you're out. The next mark that we have that Paul gives us back to verse 3 again is to glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

So, the word glory here is the same as boasting. And so, boasting, this is my working definition for boasting for today. Boasting implies confidence that is undergirded with assurance.

[15 : 39] So, as an example, I've been working out of town driving on Highway 10. one of the things about the Midwest and small towns is that they really like to have the biggest of stuff.

Right? So, this small, if you'd call it a bedroom community of Audubon, Minnesota, boasts greatly that they have Minnesota's largest Purple Martin house.

I know, seems like a big deal. Probably, every year, tens of people clamor just to see this thing.

And the irony is it's not very big. I wish I had a picture of it, but it's not big. But, the thing to know and how we fit this in with boasting, they're confident in it.

It's a thing that you can see. It's visible. You can see it's there. And it's undergirded with some sort of assurance. Now, I'm not from Audubon. I have no claims to this Purple Martin house.

[16 : 48] That's very large. But I'm sure that they maybe even called around. Minnesota, not a huge state. They could probably check into that. I'm sure there's some confidence undergirded with assurance there.

So, our boasting and confidence is a little different than a Purple Martin house. But, it's because of God's grace to us.

And we're confident that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. That's Paul's words from earlier in the letter. That's our confidence.

It's rooted there. And it's undergirded by the assurance that is offered only through the humility and obedience of Jesus. There's nothing, nothing that you or I could do that can add to, that can take away, that can change or alter or affect that gift.

And that's good news. And so, we boast of our Savior Christ Jesus. It's by those marks that we're known as a Christian.

[17 : 57] Those are the, those are the real deal authentic marks that Paul shows us so we can spot fakes. So, I think the second thing that Paul is showing us here is that he can move towards his opponents in humility and reduce himself so that the real truth and beauty of God's work can be the focus.

So, Paul closes the distance by showing them that he can relate to them because he and they share an identity. It's their present identity but it's Paul's past identity.

And this, the group of Judaizers, it's a pretty specific and narrow group. We read the Bible and we, in our minds, maybe make this group of early Christians up to be a larger group than it was.

is a fairly small community. It's a very small community growing and the Judaizers would have also likely been a very small and narrow group and it's probable that given Paul's past identity that he probably knew a few of them.

And so, it wasn't really a faceless, nameless group. Paul, very likely, could have been like, oh, I know that guy. That guy, that's Steve.

[19 : 16] Steve and I, we studied together under Gamaliel. So, we'll work through verses 4 through 6 now and we'll see how Paul addresses Steve because I think he's pointing this towards the Judaizers while also giving this warning to the Philippians.

So, it starts and it says, circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.

So, whenever I get a list like this, my tendency is to just want to be a huge nerd and go down every single rabbit trail and track all the loose ends down and I'm sure that you guys have plans for the afternoon that don't include me and so we won't do that today as much as I really want to.

This first group is things that Paul has as an identity but he has no control over. He was born into this. He can track his lineage back which is very important in the Old Covenant because the promise of the seed of the woman was to come through this line of people.

They have this desire to be able to put themselves in that line of people and we see that and that's very important and I think that's why he's highlighting this grouping of people.

[20 : 47] I also think that when he says, of the tribe of Benjamin, I think that's maybe a bit of a humble brag because it's the smallest tribe.

it was the last born son of the favored wife, Rachel and they were almost eliminated as a tribe completely.

It was through that kind of odd little story at the end of the book of Judges but they almost were eliminated. So he's identifying himself and he's boasting of these identities and achievements that he has but I think there's also a little bit of a string of ironic humility inside of there.

Another thing that as I was studying and researching that got pointed out that I just can't skip over today, I gotta say it. Because the people at Philippi would have been Philippian citizens and Roman citizens, they often would have had a three-fold identity which would be their Philippian citizenship, their family name and their Roman citizenship.

And so one commentator that I came across, he highlighted on the fact that he thinks that Paul by identifying himself in the same manner but flipping it to be distinctly Jewish in nature is also him saying that he's completely outside of the Roman order which would have made him as a Jew with Jewish credentials more pure if I can use that word.

[22 : 34] So there's a lot of subtlety here but we'll move on to the next group. The first group is all things that he has no control over but was born into.

The second group are things that he does that he chose to act on. So the next group says, as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.

So these are things that he did choose to act on and he's not giving an exhaustive list of his actions or qualifications but he is making an exaggerated claim and I think he's pointing it back at the Judaizers.

He's saying anything Steve can do I can do better. He's saying guys, I used to think the same as those religious leaders that you're learning from.

I've tried all this. In fact, I've probably done it to an even greater level than they have. All of your efforts and actions won't get you anywhere. It's not what you do.

[23 : 39] It's who's in you. So this idea also not a new idea to Paul. He's not reinventing the wheel here either. He's drawing from an old promise again.

And though Paul looks at it a little different in the new covenant, Moses knew this to be true as well. So let's just look at Exodus 33 verses 14 through 16.

I'm going to insert the sayer of some of these. and he, the Lord, said, my presence will go with you and I will give you rest. And Moses said to the Lord, if your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here.

For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Here's the key. Is it not in your going with us so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?

Moses knew that apart from God, their actions would not make them any different from anyone else. There's a lot of people in our world that do good things and would be labeled as good, but that's not the thing that sets them apart.

[24 : 55] It's God's presence. So the next question I had as I walked through this is, why does Paul continue to draw closer to these dogs rather than distance himself?

It seems logical that if he wants his calling and his mission to build the church up to succeed, it would be a lot easier if he were to do that without opposition.

So I'd like to look at another verse that gives us maybe a clue or a hint towards why, why Paul is taking this position.

let's just look at Revelation 22 verses 14 through 15. Now this is describing the new city and the first part is really good.

It says, blessed are those who wash their robes so that they may have the right to the tree of life and they may enter the city by the gates. But here comes this warning and this word that we see, dogs, same word.

[26 : 06] it's the same word that Paul uses to describe these false teachers. It says, outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters.

Everyone who loves and practices falsehood. So that's a pretty stark warning. So Paul recognizes the difference between himself and these false teachers and that difference is the free gift of grace that he received.

He knows that if they continue on this course, their end will be eternal separation from God and destruction. Paul also can identify that he was on that path.

And that knowledge should stir us to take Paul's warning to look out for false teachings very seriously. That gift of grace.

So, I have a quote here. It's from John Flavel. He's a Puritan minister and author. In his book, Preparations for Suffering, he writes this.

[27 : 16] Grace teaches us to value and measure all things by something other than we used to. So Paul's able to, because of grace, because of his identity and his experiences, see the disparity between the two and see where the real value lies.

This warning should help us get a sober view of how, if we let pride of self, grumbling, and disputing rise up within us, we may become opposed to the very nature of our call to advance the gospel.

Laying ourselves low with a posture of humility, encouraging others in the Lord, worshiping by the Spirit, and boasting only in Christ Jesus is how, dear brothers and sisters, we are to shine like lights in the world.

Paul knows that the more we reduce our pride, the brighter Christ shines through us. Consider this, church. if we are too occupied with do good, try harder, check the boxes, and be a good person, our pride will grow to where we cannot keep our eyes fixed on Jesus because we'll have trouble looking past our own reflection.

If we have trouble seeing the presence of God in our lives, how could we expect our neighbors, our coworkers, our friends, or others around us to see it?

[28 : 39] Even if what we're doing could be described as a good thing, if the spirit of how or why we do it is for the wrong reason, it can easily become a stumbling block. So what are we going to do with that?

That's a lot. That's a lot. We can take a page out of Paul's book here. When we're having a conversation with non-believing coworkers, neighbors, and they share how they've been hurt or broken, you probably shared that identity.

You probably have that in common. I mean, who hasn't been hurt? If they tell you about the newest book authored by some Steve, we can probably see it's not going to solve their problem.

It's not the real thing. It's the fraud. It's a false teaching. As we move closer, we can move closer because we can identify with them and point to Christ.

As Paul followed in the path of Christ's humility, we too can follow and say something along the lines of Paul in verse 7. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

[29 : 49] Can I pray for us? Lord, we thank you. We thank you for humbling yourself. We thank you for emptying yourself of your glory and coming and dwelling on earth and living a perfect life and dying and submitting to the will of God.

Lord, we are so thankful that you are set on high. We are thankful that you seek and save the lost. Lord, we just, we are so thankful for your finished work on the cross.

Lord, we are thankful that we cannot do anything to contribute to or screw it up. Lord, I just pray that you just continue to draw near to us to help us to see these things that may become stumbling blocks so that we could boast in you and not in ourselves, Lord.

As we move towards communion today, as we quiet our hearts, let's just take a few moments to reflect on this text and consider what identities, what works, what things that we value that we need to hold up against God's grace to see how little its worth actually is.

And let's ask the Spirit for help to count that as a loss. It's in your name we pray. Amen.