

X. Lesson 10 Look Out!/Room for Boasting?/Christ Is Gain – Phil. 3:1-11

February 7/8, 2007

Aim: To understand what is involved in having a truly Christian ambition for our lives.

In Philippians 2 Paul has shown the church how to avoid pride and disunity by pointing them to Christ's humility and to the spirit of Christ's servants Timothy and Epaphroditus. Now, in chapter three, Paul shows up false Christianity by painting a portrait of the true Christian he himself longs to be.

A. Look Out! (Phil. 3:1-3)

'Finally' (*to loipon*). At first glance it appears that he is actually on the point of bringing the letter to a conclusion, but is distracted by some new thoughts. In that case what he goes on to say in 4:8ff would be what was in his mind earlier. It is possible that Paul did mean to draw to a conclusion here, but new information reached him and compelled him to develop a new theme. On the other hand, 'Finally' might be better translated, 'Now, to go on ...', 'Well, then ...' or 'Furthermore ...', meaning that Paul was moving to a new subject. For what follows between 3:1 and 4:7 is not an incidental extra to the letter; it is part of its doctrinal and pastoral heart.

1. Rejoice (3:1)

While the apostle himself has expressed joy throughout this letter this is his first explicit exhortation to the Philippians to rejoice (*cp.* 2:18). That was not an easy thing for them to do. They were worried about Paul, because they knew he was shut up in prison in Rome. They were also anxious about their church member, Epaphroditus, who had been sent to Paul and had been very ill. In addition to all that, they were concerned about their own welfare.

Paul indicates that all true joy is 'in the Lord' (3:1). It has its source and ultimate object in him. Our circumstances provide an all-too-fickle foundation for profound and lasting joy. But joy in the Lord is able to co-exist with all kinds of situations. Its source does not lie in our changing circumstances but in our unchanging Savior and in the joy-giving word he has spoken to us (*cp.* John 15:11).

Paul's reference to teaching the 'same things' (*ta auta*) may be an introduction to what comes next in the letter – a warning against the enemies of the gospel. Paul does not hesitate to take up this vital matter of warning the Philippians against false teachers. He has possibly sent previous messages of warnings in letters which are now lost; now he reiterates the teaching.

We can sense here that Paul feels a little self-conscious about repeating teaching he has earlier given. Not only the ancient Athenians, but sadly some contemporary Christians, always want to hear something new and different (Acts 17:21). Their presence can place a subtle pressure on a teacher or preacher to produce novelty. Paul resisted that pressure; he realized the frailty of our understanding, the brevity of our memories. We are rarely as mature as we think; we are never beyond needing the truth of Scripture explained to us again. The freshness lies not in novelty, but in the power of the Spirit helping us to see how much more wonderful and potent is the truth we already knew. Then we realize how comparatively superficial our knowledge has been. In this connection, Paul has a specific reason for going over well-trodden ground. He believes that

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the Philippians may soon be confronted with destructive false teaching. He knows such teaching always destroys joy.

2. Dogs, Evil-Workers, & Mutilators (3:2)

Immediately after calling his readers to rejoice in the Lord, the apostle begins warning them about confidence in the flesh. One cannot rejoice in the Lord and at the same time rejoice in the flesh. The two are mutually exclusive.

The violent warning in verse 2 is certainly among the strongest sentences in any of Paul's letters. Three times, in the Greek, Paul warns the Philippians to be on their guard (*blepete* – ‘look out for’). Paul had previously warned about false teachers (1:28-29). Now he warns them about a particular kind of false teacher. Paul is addressing certain false teachers who were ‘flesh-promoters’ *par excellence*. Most likely, the false teachers were Judaizers who insisted that in order to be a true Christian, or perhaps a ‘perfect’ one (contrast 3: 12ff), it was necessary to add to faith in Christ faithfulness to the Old Testament ceremonial law, including circumcision. Theirs was, then, a ‘Jesus-plus’ religion. To be saved, one had to have Jesus plus works.

‘Dogs’ (*kunas*, *cp.* Lat. *canis*). In the eyes of the Jew, Gentiles were ‘dogs,’ ritually unclean animals, not to be associated with, devoid of divine blessing (*cp.* Mt. 15:26; Rev. 22:15). They were unclean because they had not undergone the religious rite of circumcision. In the present verse the application is reversed and the enemies of God are now those Jewish Christian emissaries who misrepresent the gospel (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15). Paul is saying: ‘These false teachers, with their Jewish teachings have so distorted the truth of the gospel that they have become like Gentile unbelievers.’

‘Evil doers’ (*kakons ergatas*). It does not seem that Paul is referring in this passage to those selfish Christians (1:15) who were at least preaching Christ, even if they had the wrong motives. The people Paul warns about here are those who ‘do evil.’ With this term, the apostle may have intended to convey how very diligent the Judaizers were in spreading their doctrines. The false teachers evidently insisted on legal observance as a qualification for grace. They were not lazy and indolent slackers, but busy workers. But while they advocated good works as the means for attaining salvation, they were, in fact, ironically doing evil works. These teachers were not doers of good; they were overturning the only way to do good and to fulfill the law, namely exclusively through faith in Christ. Any teaching that denies the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus or any way detracts from it has the apostolic description stamped upon it for ever—evil!

‘The mutilation’ (*katatome*). The Judaizers believed that the circumcision of the flesh required by the Law of Moses was essential for salvation. Paul decisively repudiates and rejects this teaching. The council of apostles who had gathered at Jerusalem some years earlier had declared that circumcision was not necessary for salvation (Acts 15:6-29). With a striking play on words, Paul calls those who would cut off the foreskin not friends of salvation but agents of destruction; not healers but mutilators. The proper word for circumcision is *peritome*; instead by a pun, he mockingly calls it a mere cutting, *katatome*, *i.e.*, mutilation of the body on a par with pagan practices forbidden in Leviticus 21:5. The same derision is applied to the Judaizers in Galatians 5:12, where *apokoptein*, ‘to cut off’ is a reference to their concern with the physical act of circumcision, and ironically also means ‘to castrate.’

These false teachers were only concerned about the outward act of circumcision. They had forgotten that the real purpose of this sign was to indicate that a spiritual transformation had

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taken place in the life of the person. The circumcision of the Mosaic Law was intended to be the outer manifestation of the true circumcision, which was of the heart (Lev. 26:41; Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4). If this inner reality was missing, the outer manifestation of it amounted to nothing more than mutilation of the body.

3. True Grace (3:3)

Paul calls himself and his readers (whether or not they had undergone physical circumcision) the true ‘circumcision’ (*peritome*). In light of Romans 2:25-29, this must be a title for the church as the covenant people of God inheriting all the promises made to ancient Israel (Rom. 9:24-26; 1 Pe. 2:9-10). That is, they were the true chosen people of God. Paul explains in Colossians that the ‘cutting away’ which matters is not that of a piece of flesh, but the removal of the sinful nature – not by a knife, but by the blood of Christ which He shed on the cross (Col. 2:11).

What, then, are the hallmarks of true teachers and true Christians? The ‘real circumcision,’ that is the true covenant people of God, have three characteristics:

1. They ‘worship by the Spirit of God.’ The old age of ritual, ceremony, and specially sanctified places has gone. Paul is not simply talking here about singing hymns and choruses. He is speaking about the way in which we conduct our lives. If we are true Christians, then the whole of our lives must be given over to the glory of God (Rom 12:1). It is the Holy Spirit of God who alone can inspire such worship.
2. They ‘glory in Christ Jesus’ as their Savior. It is better to render ‘glory’ (*kaucheomenoi*) as ‘exult.’ The exultation of believers in the Savior stems from, and is based on His finished work. They realize that they can do nothing to save themselves and that Christ has done everything for them. To add circumcision, or any rite to the work of Christ is, effectively, to destroy it, because it denies the sufficiency of His grace to save us. Our ‘boasting’ is not in ourselves, which is the essence of sin, but in another whose arm alone has brought salvation and on whom we rest in utter confidence.
3. They ‘put no confidence in the flesh’ (*ouk en sarki pepoithotes*). By ‘flesh’ Paul meant anything that was not from God. This is a way for Paul to express the innate tendency on the part of the religious person to obtain a standing before God and to secure, by one’s own effort, approval and acceptance with Him. The Judaizers had put all their hope in the sign of circumcision – a cut in their flesh. Upbringing, natural qualities and gifts, possessions, traditions, an education that makes us feel superior to others - all these are irrelevant.

Not only should we live humble, godly lives ourselves, but we should also constantly be on the watch for those who teach that religious observance, without true spirituality, is what is required for godliness.

B. Room for Boasting? (Phil. 3:4-6)

The Judaizers against whom Paul was warning the Philippians were not lacking in zeal. But zeal can be misplaced, and, equally seriously, wrongly resourced. It can be spiritually uneducated, undisciplined by the guidelines which God gives us in Scripture. And it is all too easy for young or poorly instructed Christians to be deceived by an impression of superior spirituality. In many ways, the idea of being superior, of being able to boast in higher achievements, is the hallmark of false teaching. Paul has already indicated that. For all the apparent advanced spirituality of the

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false teachers, the apostle hints that their confidence was not, ultimately, in the Lord, but ‘in the flesh’ (vv. 3, 4). It was not rooted in faith in Christ or motivated by love for him.

1. Paul’s Former Confidence (3:4-6)

These Judaizers claimed a certain religious superiority to, and practices older than, Paul’s gospel. But Paul is able to point to his own background, itself superior to theirs, and argue: ‘All this I have, but it profits me nothing.’ Paul’s point is that few of the Judaizers could match his record, and none of them could surpass it. As far as depending on the flesh was concerned, Paul was the ‘dependor’ *par excellence*. He lists seven marks in his own life that might have provided him with ‘reason for confidence in the flesh.’ Four of them are inherited, three refer to his personal accomplishments. The surprising thing was that all of these points in his favor (the pluses) came, not to seven (which for the Jews is symbolic of perfection) but to nothing – in fact, they came to less than nothing; they amounted to a minus.

1. In relation to the Jewish rite of circumcision Paul was ‘circumcised on the eighth day’ (literally ‘an eight-dayer’ *oktahemeros*), in accordance to the law (Lev. 12:3). The expression is used only here in the New Testament, but is one which cleverly underlines the purity of his Jewish background, and the devoutness of his family. After all, circumcision was the rite for which the Judaizers contended more than anything else. The proudest claim is put first: he is a true-blooded Jew from the cradle, and nursed in the ancestral faith. Therefore he speaks with an authority which none can challenge, least of all the opponents whose main tenet may have been the need of circumcision.
2. He was ‘of the people of Israel’ by birth (v. 5), a pure and true descendent of the great Old Testament patriarch. The privileges to which Paul refers in Romans 9:4-5 all belonged to him as a birthright.
3. Furthermore, Paul was ‘of the tribe of Benjamin,’ a fact which he again mentions as significant in Romans 11:1. Benjamin was the special son of Jacob and Rachel. It was from the tribe of Benjamin that Saul, Israel’s first king, had emerged – a fact probably memorialized in Paul’s given name. Benjamin had remained loyal to the dynasty of David after the division of the kingdom (1 Ki. 12:23). In addition, the city of Jerusalem and its temple lay within the territory of this tribe (Jdg. 1:21). The tribe of Benjamin also occupied a position of honor when the arm of Israel went into battle (Jdg. 5:14; Hos. 5:8).
4. The apostle was also ‘a Hebrew of Hebrews’ (v. 5). He was a native Hebrew speaker brought up in a Hebrew-speaking family even though they had lived in Tarsus in Asia Minor. This was no small feat, since many Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire had lost their Hebrew roots and only spoke Greek. Ability to speak the ancient languages of Hebrew and Aramaic was a mark of faithfulness to the old culture and commanded special attention. So committed had his family been to Jewish orthodoxy that they sent him to study in Jerusalem under the rabbi Gamaliel who had ‘thoroughly trained’ him in the law (see Acts 22:3).

It is hard to imagine a pedigree in which it would be easier to boast. But there is more to come. These grounds for ‘confidence in the flesh’ were inherited. Paul himself had added to his credentials by personal commitment.

5. Paul had grown up with a great desire to put God first in his life. He had adopted the lifestyle of ‘a Pharisee’ in relationship to the law (*cp.* Acts 26:5). As their name implies

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(‘separated ones’), they were deeply committed to pure religion. Their aim in life was to try and please God by refraining from all things which they considered impure. In order to maintain a covenant relationship with God they strictly observed the Mosaic Law. No Judaizer of the first century could out-Judaize these men in their zeal for Old Testament religion!

6. Did they have zeal (*zelos*)? Because he was a strictly religious Jew, Paul had expended a great deal of time and energy in defending his own religion from what he saw at the time as the threat of Christianity (*cp.* Gal. 1:14). He had formerly been so incensed by the teaching of the early Christians that he had been ‘a persecutor the church’ (*cp.* Acts 8:3, 26:10-11). Paul seems never to have been able to forget his persecuting activity, based on his misdirected zeal for God that knew no limits to its energy. The memory of it continually haunts him; so much so that he uses the present participle of the verb, ‘persecuting’ (*diokon*), as if the action were before his eyes at the time of writing.
7. Paul also believed himself to be, in terms of ‘righteousness, under the law, blameless.’ His pharisaic observance of the law was beyond reproach, ‘without fault’ (*amemptos*). But the law was given, in part, to reveal our sinfulness, to reveal that we have dethroned God from the center of our lives and there raised an altar where self is worshipped.

Paul had a kind of righteousness ‘a righteousness which is from the law’ (see v. 9). Paul thought he had kept this law, and those who observed him no doubt would have agreed. In the eyes of Judaism the four privileges which Paul had inherited from his parents and the three evidences which he gave of his religious devotion all added up to a great deal of righteousness. But the righteousness Paul had was not the kind of ‘law righteousness’ God demanded. It was not perfect obedience to every single demand of the law. It was ‘law righteousness’ in an external fashion only (see story of the rich young ruler – Mk. 10:17-25).

Paul spells this out in Romans 7:7-11. There he says he came to understand that his keeping of the law was in an external fashion only and God’s demand for perfect righteousness was so radical and thorough that it included even internal desires. This hit Paul with devastating impact. He realized that all he had done was in the way of external works, that internally he had not really kept the law of God and, therefore, fell far short of God’s demand for perfect righteousness.

Saul had seen a Christian, a contemporary whose righteousness surpassed his own (Mt. 5:20), whose love for the faith of the Old Testament and whose appreciation of the prophets pointed him towards Christ rather than against him – a young man prepared to die for his risen Lord. Stephen, the martyr had experienced what all the zeal and law-keeping of Saul of Tarsus could not bring. Stephen had Christ, and having Christ meant everything (Acts 7:55-60). Saul had only the bare bones of Pharisaic rule-keeping; without Christ he had nothing.

Every reason we have for ‘confidence in the flesh,’ be it family background or religious upbringing and activity, withers before Paul’s testimony. He is simply telling us all that it is possible to be and to have, and yet not be a true believer and not have salvation because in all our having we do not yet have Christ.

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C. Christ Is Gain (Phil. 3:7-11)

1. Loss (3:7-8)

In Philippians 3:4-6, Paul had mentioned the many advantages that were his by birth and attainment. But now he calculates their true worth in the light of the gospel. What is the ‘gain’ they provide in relation to salvation? As far as Paul was concerned, they all amounted to nothing. In fact they came to less than nothing! They totaled a minus. The truth is that everything Paul might have counted as ‘gain’ was actually ‘loss’ (v. 7).

The tense of ‘I now consider’ (*hegemai*) is the Greek perfect, denoting an action in past time which is effective in the present. It refers to the choice of his conversion, on its human side, and reminds us that the transformation of Paul’s life did not come about gradually and unconsciously. It came dramatically and with abiding effects.

Paul’s confidence in his good works came to a sudden stop when he realized that despite all he had done he still had fallen far short of what God demanded. Paul’s whole view of himself was turned on its head. Instead of being accepted with God, he discovered he was rejected; instead of having gone further in holiness than Christians like Stephen, he had completely lost the way; the very things he was counting on to gain righteousness with God turned out to be witnesses for the prosecution against him. All he counted on as his accomplishments were in fact his failures!

Lest we fail to grasp his point Paul repeats it in three different ways in verse eight: everything is a ‘loss’ (*zemia*) compared to the excellence of the knowledge (*gnosis*) of Christ; in order to know Christ he has ‘suffered the loss of all things’ (*ezemiothen*); he now considers them ‘rubbish.’ He well expresses the vigor of his discovery when he calls his previous achievements ‘rubbish’ (‘excrement’ or ‘dung’) (v. 8). This word (*skybala*) can also refer to the ‘refuse or leavings of a feast’ – *i.e.* the food which is thrown away from the table. A word like ‘muck’ conveys to the modern reader something of the distaste and disgrace of the original term. The Judaizers spoke of themselves as honored guests seated at the Father’s table enjoying a banquet, while they referred to the Gentile Christians as dogs greedily snatching up the refuse meat which fell from the table. However, Paul reverses the image.

Compared to Christ, all is garbage. Our false thinking leads us to conclude that what we are and have achieved ought to gain us entrance into heaven. The terrible truth, however, is that it disqualifies us from heaven. What we count as profit with God is actually loss.

Paul has counted as a loss all of the privileges and attainments of the flesh so ‘that I may gain Christ.’ Paul’s use of ‘that I may gain’ (*kerdeso*) pairs up with the ‘gain’ (*kerdos*) of v. 7.

2. Gain (3:9-11)

Paul had yielded up everything for Christ. No knowledge could now compare with the knowledge of Jesus (vv. 7-8). This meant fellowship with Christ, or union with him, in which all that Christ had done for him in his life, death, resurrection and ascension was brought into his life through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This implied three things.

1. *Full justification.* Paul was now ‘found in Christ.’ He no longer approached God on the basis of his own achievements, but covered in the ‘righteousness’ of his risen Savior. This righteousness has three important attributes. First, it is not based on human works. This righteousness is in diametrical contrast to ‘a righteousness of my own;’ *i.e.*, it cannot be acquired by human effort on the basis of ‘the law.’ Jesus is the only one who had true ‘law

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righteousness.’ This justification is God's declaration about us; it depends on what Christ has done, not on our works.

Secondly, Paul stresses that it is complete and sufficient because it comes to the believer as the gift of God in Christ. He is the sole author of the saving righteousness imparted to sinful men. God Himself has provided in Jesus Christ the very righteousness that He, God, demands. Because Christ provides the righteousness we need, there is absolutely nothing we can do to add to it or take away from it. Justification is full because it gives us Christ's righteousness; it is final because it does not depend on our keeping *the law* but on God's gift of His Son; it cannot be reversed; it can never be destroyed.

Thirdly, the medium through which the divine righteousness reaches us is ‘faith.’ It is ‘through faith’ (*dia pisteos*) in Christ, and ‘by faith’ (*epi te pistei*). The initiative is with God in His provision of a saving righteousness in Christ, and human faith is the grateful acknowledging of this provision. Faith in religious upbringing, valuable as such upbringing is, cannot save us. Faith in religious ceremonies, helpful as they can be, can never earn us eternal life. Faith in good works, important as they are, cannot open up the way into heaven for us. It is only as we put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and as we seek Him, that we can be granted that gift of God's righteousness.

2. *Ongoing sanctification.* Paul knows Christ. But he wants ‘to know Christ’ more and more. He wants his fellowship with him to be sweeter and deeper. He was so filled with Christ that he wanted to know Him in a better and richer and fuller way. What he longed for, more than anything else, was to have a greater and more intimate knowledge of his Lord and Master. That ought to be our desire also. Those of us who can really say that Jesus is ours should not be content to think, ‘Well, I'm a Christian now. That's all there is to it.’ We should want to know Him better and we should constantly be seeking the Holy Spirit's aid to lead us into closer fellowship with God.

Notice the striking order of the statements in verse ten. Paul wants ‘to know Christ in the power (*dynamis*) of His resurrection’ and the ‘fellowship’ (*koinonia*) of ‘sharing His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.’ We would normally expect the opposite order (death first, then resurrection). But Paul leads us to a central element in Christian experience: it is as we live in Christ our risen Savior that he leads us on to the fellowship of ‘sharing His sufferings.’ Paul knew that this work was not yet finished. So here, he confesses that he wants to know more about this mysterious, life-transforming working of God.

3. *Anticipated glorification.* The end result of such fellowship with Christ is that ‘by any means possible’ Paul will ‘attain the resurrection from the dead’ (literally ‘the resurrection from among corpses,’ *exanastasin ten ek nekron*) and experience salvation in its full and final form. ‘By any means possible’ does not mean Paul doubts whether Christ can do this but his sober realization that it must be done in one like himself, full of imperfection and weakness.

Here, in a nutshell, lies the difference between Saul of Tarsus and Paul the apostle. For the unconverted Saul nothing would have surprised him less than hearing that he would be saved and among the people of God on the day of resurrection. After all, he had every reason to have confidence. But then came ‘The Damascus Road Crash’! His gain became loss, his confidence boosters lay in shreds around him. Now he knew that in and of himself he was utterly unworthy of God, of heaven, of salvation. But Christ had sought him, humbled him, saved him. No wonder all he wanted now was to know Christ!

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D. Application & Discussion Questions

- *How can we obey the command to ‘rejoice in the Lord’ (v. 1)?*
- *In this section, Paul writes some of his strongest words against false teachers. How can his fierce language be justified? Should we use it?*
- *What are the practical implications of the three characteristics of true Christians which Paul lists in verse 3?*
- *In what ways are we tempted to rely for our standing before God on things in our background?*
- *The martyr Stephen may have had a considerable impact on Paul, even if Paul did not notice it at the time. Do other passages of Scripture support or illustrate this? What lessons can we learn from this?*
- *In what ways is the gospel ‘a tremendous shock to the system’? In what ways does it continue to be this to the Christian who grows in understanding of it?*
- *Paul gained justification. But what is justification? How does Paul explain its significance in verse 9?*
- *Express Paul’s ambition (vv. 10-11) in your own words.*
- *‘As we live in Christ our risen Savior ... He leads us on to the fellowship of sharing His sufferings.’ What is the biblical basis for such a statement and what does it involve?*

For next time: Read Philippians 3:12-19 and Ferguson chapters 20-21