

Text: Philippians 3:1-3

Title: Rejoice, but Have no Confidence in the Flesh

Truth: Paul commands the church to rejoice but beware of false teachers.

Date/Location: March 6 and 13, 2022 at FBC (rev. from April 20, 2011)

Introduction

¹ Finally, my brethren,
 rejoice in the Lord.
For me to write the same things to you
 is not tedious,
but for you *it is safe.*

² **Beware** of dogs,
 beware of evil workers,
 beware of the mutilation!

³ For we are the circumcision,
who **worship** God in the Spirit,
 rejoice in Christ Jesus,
and **have no confidence** in the flesh,

I. Rejoice in the Lord, v. 1a

- A. “Finally” does not mean that Paul is at the end yet. He uses the term again in 4:8, but it is not until 4:20 that he makes his concluding remarks. It is used as a transition to new material and can be translated as **beyond that, in addition, as for what remains to be said.**
- B. To this point in the book, Paul has urged the church to be like-minded, to be humble, to be obedient, to avoid complaining and arguing, to hold steadfastly to the word of life. He has shown by example of Timothy and Epaphroditus how they should be watching out for the things of others and give of themselves for the work of Christ.
- C. Along with all these duties, they are to rejoice in the Lord. Paul already modeled joy—Phil. 1:4, 1:18, 4:1, 4:10—and called for the Philippians to live joyfully—1:25, 2:17-18, 2:28-29, 4:4. Whatever circumstances might arise; whatever difficulties; disappointments,

illnesses; persecutions; inter-personal problems; all of this is to be subordinated to a deep-seated joy in the Lord.

Our joy is supposed to be focused about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, it is “in the Lord.” He is the *realm* in which we find joy. He is constant, faithful, and good, and this gives us an anchor point for joy amid the vexing circumstances of life.

- D. This rejoicing is contextually so near to the “writing the same things” and the warning of verse 2 that it seems they were having, or were about to have some serious problems, so Paul was encouraging them to rejoice in the Lord during those difficulties. Further, their joy or boast was to be in the Lord (rejoicing in Christ Jesus, 3:3) in contrast to the “confidence in the flesh” of the evil workers.

II. Beware of False Teachers, v. 1b-2

A. Purposeful Repetition of Previous Instruction, v. 1b

1. Repetition. Paul indicates next that he is **writing the same things**, apparently repeating some things he has written or said before to them. He is about to give them a warning about false teachers who distort the gospel. He mentioned some adversaries in 1:28 and the conflict and suffering that they were causing the church. This is not entirely new information.
2. Repetition is not a problem for Paul. This writing of review material is not tedious or troublesome to Paul. He does not feel upset about reviewing the truth with them. The word he uses for *tedious* is related to the word for *lazy* or *indolent*, about someone who shrinks from work. Paul is not shrinking from writing again. And just because it is review, it does not mean he is lazy in the sense of not coming up with new material. First, he feels the need to repeat it because it is so important. Second, repetition comes with new insights, new illustrations, new approaches that help us understand. Finally, repetition is important because there are always new disciples coming along who need to hear it for the first time.
3. Repetition of truth is a safeguard for the church. On the recipient’s side, it is a safe thing for him to go over the truth

again. It was not tedious for him, nor did he shrink back from it. But it is more than mere mental reminder. It is a safety factor. It is a safeguard to help the hearer not fall into the trap of the devil and false teachers. It's like reviewing where the nearest exit is on an airplane, or how to use a fire extinguisher, or what to do in the case you get a caustic chemical on your skin or eyes. When you review Biblical truth, it is not an insurance policy that you hope never to use. It is safety training that you *will* use. Take for example the teaching on rejoicing—the world does not tell you that. It tells you to fear, to be dissatisfied, to complain, etc. Another example is the false gospels that are promoted all over the world. You need to be reinforced in the truth as you walk with God. You should not become upset at review of the truth, as if you know everything and do not need any of it. If it was good enough for Paul, it is good enough for you!

B. The Warning Against False Teachers, v. 2



1. Paul commanded the church in Philippi to **beware**, that is, to watch out for something hazardous to their spiritual well-being. The admonition is repeated three times. It refers to false teachers generally, and to Judaizing false teachers specifically in all three cases. I do not see Paul trying to call out three specific types of false teachers here because there are no details given as to the three types. Also, he contrasts them with one type, the real circumcision.
2. The false teacher's distortion of the gospel has to do with the difference between having confidence in the flesh and **not** having confidence in the flesh (end of v. 3), along with other details. There are two contrasting types of doctrine that are set over against each other. The false teachers and their character are contrasted with the truth as follows:

Verse 2	Meanings of Verse 2	Opposites in V. 3
Dogs	False teachers pictured as filthy scavengers	Worship God in the Spirit
Evil workers	Opposite of workers of righteousness	Rejoice in Christ Jesus

Mutilation	Useless circumcision, “cutting off” as opposed to a “cutting around”	Have no confidence in the flesh
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3. The word **mutilation** is a play on words with the word for **circumcision**. What the false teachers were advocating was not castration, but it amounted to external and religiously useless cutting away of flesh with no effect on one’s relationship with God. Their teaching had nothing to do with true circumcision as a sign of a circumcised (regenerated) heart. The word *mutilation* means “cutting in pieces” whereas circumcision is the “cutting around” to remove the male foreskin flesh. The false teachers did the same ritual, but when associated with false teaching, it was meaningless for real religion and undermined the work of Christ. Pentecost puts it this way: beware of the “cutters” (*The Joy of Living*, p. 125). Accepting circumcision meant you were agreeing to try to be a law-keeper to please God (Galatians 5:3). **Recall from the Old Testament that pagans cut their own flesh (1 Kings 18:28, Deut. 14:1, Lev. 19:28, 21:5).**
4. **Evil workers** echoes the words of Christ in Matthew 7:23. See also John 7:7 and 1 John 3:12. The “work” they are doing is moving people backward, away from God. It may not be that they were vile wicked sinners as in “diabolical savages;” instead, this phrase could refer to the evil of religious-sounding false teaching combined with keeping the Law. This doctrine confused people and made them disciples of the wrong thing; thus, it was evil. **Far from being doers of good in their pursuit of Torah-righteousness, they were in fact doers of evil. The tragedy of do-gooders is that they think they are on the right path, when they are exactly *not* on that path.**
5. The term **dogs** was extremely negative and politically incorrect. Jews referred to *Gentiles* as dogs, **and Paul flips the script again, turning what they thought into its opposite, which was in fact the truth.** Dogs were lower on the scale than humanity. But here Paul is referring to Jewish false teachers as dogs. The Lord used the term along with *pigs* in Matthew 7:6. Peter picked up that notion and used it in his own letter (2 Pet. 2:22). False prophets are dogs in Isaiah 56:10-11.

6. False teachers followed Paul's footsteps and attempted to gain followings for themselves, and some if not most believed the false doctrines that they promoted. These were Judaizers and antinomians. The **Judaizers** believed you must follow the Jewish law to be saved **or as evidence of true salvation**. They are legalists in the true sense of the term. They were not adherents to biblical Judaism (Old Testament), nor of Pharisaic Judaism, but to a new version of Judaism couched in Christian language but which was not Christian. The **antinomians** believed that once saved, grace "covered it all" and you could sin as you please and be forgiven. We know Paul is focusing on Judaizers in this context because he talks about the "mutilation." **He is rightly upset with them, because for basically his entire ministry, they have been attacking his work—God's work—and trying to upend the lives of Christians. They were servants of the Devil instead of the Lord.**

III. Know Your Christian Identity, v. 3

Christians are totally different than the false religious teachers. The focus needs to be directed away from false teachers toward what we are supposed to be in Christ. If we fill our attention with that, we will not have an inch of room for false teaching.

A. The people who are true believers are called the (real) **circumcision**. They share in the faith of Abraham and have the circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16, 30:6) regardless of external markings on the body. They are cleansed from sin and have spiritual life. Regardless of whether one has the physical markings of the covenant with Abraham, God sees the heart and desires it to match the *meaning* of the outer symbol. Saved Gentiles are just like saved (spiritually true) Jews because they share heart-circumcision. They might not share bodily circumcision, but that is no matter. Abraham was imputed the righteousness of God *before* he was circumcised (Romans 4:10-12). Romans 4:11 says specifically that "he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised." Note that: **circumcision was a sign of righteousness-by-faith**. The

Judaizers had a righteousness-by-works, so their circumcision was a bad sign.

Be careful to understand Paul is not saying that “real circumcision” means that Gentiles become Jews. He is not talking about a “spiritual Israel” which has become the church of Jesus Christ. Instead, he is saying that Christians have the real spiritual circumcision, which is *regeneration*. This is the placement of a heart of flesh in place of the sinner’s heart of stone (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26), also a cutting away of the hard heart of sin. This is the meaning of “circumcision of the heart” in Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6.

This is analogous to baptism: the real important kind is *Spirit* baptism, with water baptism in second place and symbolic of what the Spirit did to us in salvation. Spiritual circumcision = regeneration, which is in first place. Physical circumcision is a sign of the need for the spiritual work of God in the heart. Spiritual circumcision = regeneration *is* that spiritual work (Col. 2:11).

Followers of Jesus are now described by three phrases which show the outward manifestation of the inward work of heart circumcision. Christians:

B. Worship God in the Spirit. The Christian renders spiritual service to God. This includes singing, which many today think of as “actual worship,” but in fact all service to God is worship. A minority believe that “Spirit” should be lowercase to indicate that our worship is from our inner man (which is certainly true). Most English translations take Spirit to be capitalized, referring to the Holy Spirit. There was no distinction between upper and lower cases in the original manuscripts. The next phrase’s reference to Christ makes me lean toward the capital ‘S’ meaning. We can only truly worship God by the work of His own Spirit in us (John 4:23-24). That internal righteousness works itself out in service.

The point is that the first mark of a true believer in Christ is that they render service to God. Their life is one of serving the Lord.

C. Rejoice in Christ Jesus. All the credit goes to Christ for providing salvation, but our rejoicing is *ours*. We boast in Him, and we are so

happy to be rightly related to Jesus. We “take pride” that we belong to the Lord but not in a sinfully proud way—in a humble way in which we recognize that all we have is because of Jesus. He fulfilled the Law while we could not; in Him we are in God’s sight as those who have kept God’s way perfectly. Thus, we rejoice! We rejoice by action and attitude on the basis of what Christ has done, and point our rejoicing *at* Him. This is the second mark of a Christian. See Jeremiah 9:23-24. Is Jesus your highest joy?

How does this connect to the passage? Look again at verse 1: “rejoice in the Lord.” And then again here: Christians “rejoice in Christ Jesus.” How in the world, if you are fully satisfied in who Christ is and what He has done for you, are you going to look for merit elsewhere? If you are going elsewhere for satisfaction (in a spiritually adulterous kind of way), you are saying that Jesus is not good enough, His work is insufficient, He is not powerful enough. You are looking for *more* or *better*, but you cannot get *more* or *better* than Jesus Christ. There is no one more beautiful than Him. Once in Christ, it is inconceivable that you would go elsewhere.

It is also not an incidental detail that in these two phrases we have the Triune God prominently displayed. We worship God (the Father) by the Holy Spirit and rejoice in Jesus Christ. You cannot get any better than that—there is *nothing* more that is needed.

D. Have no confidence in the flesh. We cannot boast in ourselves. The third mark of a believer is a “no confidence vote” in the flesh (Romans 7:18). Fleshly confidence is trust in what man can do on his own, apart from God, in religion or anything else. The world is full of this today—humanity thinks that the keys of death are just barely out of our medical reach; that we can control the world’s affairs with education and politics, or that science can direct nature, and so forth. There is little fear of God in this place (like Genesis 20:11, but without the excuse-making feature of Abraham’s statement). The Jew trusted in his genealogy, his circumcision, his keeping of the law, his being part of the nation that had favored status with God, etc. The Gentile trusts in his religious works, or his own inherent goodness, or his intellect, or his idols. But none of this saves a person from the awful, infinite *penalty* of sin. Neither can any of it save us from the *practice* of sin.

To put it plainly, Paul's concern, which will become even more clear in the upcoming verses, is that Torah-observance is not another way to obtain the righteousness of God. It is a futile attempt. Keeping Torah neither saves nor sanctifies anyone. Keeping the New Testament commandments of God is *connected* to sanctification, but it is the *Spirit* who sanctifies and creates willing, faithful obedience in us.

Romans 4:2 and Ephesians 2:9 make it abundantly clear that boasting in the flesh has no place in the Christian's thought process. The *only* reason we are saved is because of the grace of God in Christ alone. There is *absolutely no* reason in us that obligates God to save our souls.

- E. All the phrases contrast true doctrine with the false doctrine brought by the evil workers. They all describe true Christians.
1. The first two phrases describe manifestations of true belief, namely right worship (John 4:24) and right focus (boasting in Christ Jesus). The exultation of a believer is not in themselves, but in another outside of themselves.
 2. The last phrase is most pointed as to the underlying difference between the false teachers and the true gospel. To *have confidence in* means to have trust in or to depend upon. True believers do not rely on anything other than Christ, but the false teachers were relying on and trusting in their flesh. That was most literally true in their trust in circumcision as saving or necessary to salvation (Acts 15:1, 5). But it was also emblematic of their whole approach to religion, namely that it was externally focused (Hebrews 9:10).
 3. This contrast of approaches (flesh-based versus Christ-based) sets the stage for the next eight verses in which Paul contrasts his former fleshly confidence with confidence in Christ Jesus. It is an auto-biographical section that tells us how Paul, the top expert in religious piety, had an extreme religious makeover when he met Jesus Christ and realized all his previous piety had been worthless. In effect, Paul had been one of the evil-worker/false-teacher types, though his piety was not cloaked in Christian terms. Rather, he was a quintessentially Pharisaic Jew.

But the basic philosophy of confidence in the flesh was the same.

Verses 4-6 explain Paul's former confidence: works of the flesh. He thought these works of the flesh were meritorious, just like the professing Christian teachers who were teaching that circumcision is necessary to be saved. That is, they claimed these were works of righteousness, but in fact they were evil works. This is a paradox to the unsaved person, but it is true. The unsaved person thinks he is doing good when in fact his works are evil because he is not submitting to the righteousness of Christ. He is dismissing God's only way of salvation—and that is an evil, immoral thing.

Verses 7-11 show Paul's new confidence, Jesus Christ, and how he strives to grow in knowing the Lord.

Conclusion

Check yourself out against verse 3 again. Make sure you have the right focus, and your boasting is in the Lord and not in your own fleshly accomplishments. Make sure that you are in fact serving God. Are you wary of bad doctrine that would oppose the true gospel (v. 2)? And finally (v. 1), are you rejoicing in the Lord no matter what your circumstances might be—and so much so that any religious teaching that draws attention away from Jesus Christ is of no interest to you?

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