

**The Highest Priority**  
**Philippians 3:1-11**  
**Part 6—Choose Joy**

**Introduction**

Many of the NT letters were written to address problems in the churches. A good illustration is 1 Corinthians when Paul offers counsel on issues like division in the church, immorality, lawsuits among believers, spiritual gifts and the resurrection. 1 Corinthians deals with one problem after another.

In contrast, Philippians is one of the few NT letters that isn't focused on problems. For the most part, Philippians is a personal letter from its founding pastor, the Apostle Paul, who is writing to encourage the believers in Philippi.

But if there is one concern addressed in the letter, it's found in today's passage. Chapter 3 opens with Paul expressing his great concern about false teachers. When I first sat down to study the passage I was taken aback by his strong language. Paul calls the false teachers: dogs, evildoers and mutilators of the flesh.

Those descriptions seemed very harsh to me. Especially given how graciously Paul refers to those who stirred up trouble by preaching with impure motives. Do you remember what Paul wrote in 1:18? "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached." Paul is so gracious in chapter 1. Why is he so agitated in chapter 3?

Well, this is the reason: Paul's opponents in chapter 1 were preaching the true Gospel of salvation by Christ alone through faith alone. But they were doing it with improper motives to create problems. We don't really know who they were, but they were trying to cause trouble. The difference in chapter 3 is a false gospel is being preached. It's not true. The false teachers in chapter 3 are not preaching Christ alone through faith alone. They're preaching heresy; they're preaching a salvation based on works.

I think it's important for us to know that the content of what we believe really does matter. The Bible makes it clear that God has been concerned about the purity of the Gospel from the beginning. Jesus offers a sobering warning in Matthew 7. It's what I call one of the Lord's hard sayings.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:21-23)

This passage raises a number of questions. But one thing that's clear is that not everyone who claims to know Jesus really does. Some people look like Christ followers, but they're not authentic. One day, Jesus will say *"Away from me, you evildoers."*

This should cause us to be cautious. We need wisdom. The Bible says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5) Friend, what we believe makes a difference—that's why Paul gets so worked up in today's passage. Doctrinal error can be a matter of spiritual life and spiritual death. Sometimes we may think of doctrine as trivial. But it's not; it's huge.

Awhile back, I read a quote from Ann Holmes Redding, who was an Episcopal priest in Olympia, Washington. She said, *"I am both a Muslim and Christian, just like I'm both an American of African descent and a woman. I'm 100% both."*

Does it shock you that a clergy claims to be both a Muslim and a Christian? Is that even possible, according to the Bible? One of the buzz words in today's society is tolerance. Many suggest all roads lead to heaven, it doesn't really matter what we believe. So, they say, we need to be tolerant, not create waves; in the words of the Beatles' song, *"just let it be."* But let's see if this is the approach taken by the Apostle Paul.

*Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.* (Philippians 3:1)

This is the half-way point in the letter. Paul reminds us to rejoice in the Lord. This is one of a dozen times the words joy or joyful are used in the four short chapters of the letter. It still blows me away to think about Paul telling us to keep rejoicing while he's chained to a Roman soldier!

Then he says he wants to write *"the same things"* again. He wants to bring something back up for a second time. He's referring back to 1:27&28. *"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you."* Paul alludes to certain opponents in this passage. But now he brings them back up again as a safeguard so the Philippians don't get sidetracked.

*Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.* (Philippians 3:2)

He's using harsh language, isn't he? Notice the three phrases that are used to describe the false teachers:

- The term *"dogs"* was used for the wicked scavenger dogs that plagued ancient cities. In some smaller towns in Chile wild packs of dogs roam the streets. They're called *"perros callejeros"* or street dogs. That's the idea behind the word in verse 2. These dogs can be vicious and dangerous.

- The second description is “*evildoers*.” These men were intent on leading people astray from the true gospel of Christ alone through faith alone. Notice Paul doesn’t call these false teachers misguided or off-base. He calls them evildoers.
- The third phrase is “*mutilators of the flesh*.” These opponents were a group who persistently followed Paul known as the Judaizers. The Judaizers denied the gospel of grace. They taught it was necessary to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved. Christ was not sufficient. They taught that a person needed Christ plus the Law to be saved. Christ alone through faith alone was not enough. Now, verse 3...

*<sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup>though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:* (Philippians 3:3-4)

The Judaizers were focused on the outward ritual of circumcision. But God has always been primarily concerned with our heart. Paul describes it like this in Romans 2. “*A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.*” (Romans 2:28-29)

Circumcision, then, was to be a sign similar to baptism in the NT. Both are an outward manifestation reflecting a work that’s happened in our heart. But the Judaizers missed this. They focused on the outward sign but missed the meaning of the sign.

That’s why Paul says in Philippians 3:3, “*For it is we who are the circumcision...*” Genuine Christ followers are transformed from the inside out. The book of Hebrews contains the longest OT quote in the entire NT. It’s from Jeremiah 31 when God describes what will happen when Christ comes.

Part of the quote says, “*I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their heart.*” In other words, because of God’s grace through faith in Christ, God promises to change our mind and our heart. That’s the true circumcision and it happens from the inside out.

When that happens; When we receive God’s grace, it is evident in three ways:

1. Our worship changes. According to verse 3, we begin worshipping by the Spirit of God. Pastor John MacArthur writes, “*True worship is by the power of the Spirit of God because only he can produce the love, joy and peace that characterize true worshippers.*”

I remember vividly when I became a Christ follower how the words I sang in church suddenly took on power and meaning. In recent months I’ve heard numerous testimonies from people at ECF who are experiencing God in our worship services at a whole new level.

A second change that happens when we receive God's grace is...

2. Our boasting changes. Paul puts it like this: we "*boast in Christ Jesus.*" The word boast in this phrase describes boasting with joy about what a person is most proud of. When our heart is genuinely transformed by Jesus, we begin to boast about Jesus. 2 Corinthians 10:17 says, "*Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.*"

A third change is...

3. Our confidence changes. Part of coming to Christ involves recognizing how lost we are in sin. Because of that, we no longer put confidence in the flesh. The flesh represents our fallen humanness. The flesh is our life apart from God's touch. Jesus says, "*The Spirit gives life, but the flesh counts for nothing.*" (John 6:63)

So, a third way we change once we receive God's grace is we begin to see the futility of relying on ourselves. Paul says he "*puts no confidence in the flesh.*" Instead of living in the flesh, we begin to live in the power of God's Spirit. I love how this is put in Galatians 5:16. "*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.*"

Thus, Paul outlines three major changes that accompany true conversion to Christ:

- Our worship changes (we worship by the Spirit of God)
- Our boasting changes (we boast in Christ Jesus)
- And our confidence changes (we put no more confidence in the flesh).

Then he adds in verse 4, "*though I myself have reasons for such confidence.*" In other words, humanly speaking, Paul had plenty of reasons to put confidence in his works-based Jewish pedigree.

At this point Paul has in mind the Judaizers. In response to what he's just written, they could come back, "*Well, Paul, who's he? He doesn't understand the heritage of the Jewish faith. If he did, then he'd understand why it's necessary to be circumcised.*"

With those questions floating in the air, Paul catalogues his Jewish credentials. The point he wants to make is this: If anyone could ever have been saved by good works, Paul would be the first in line.

*...though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* (Philippians 3:4b-6)

Paul gives Seven dimensions of his impeccable Jewish pedigree.

1. Circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day—It's likely Paul puts this first because some of the Judaizers were Gentile proselytes. In other words, they were not born Jews. They were Gentiles who became Jews later in life. But Paul was born a Jew. In the Greek he says, "*with respect to circumcision an eighth-dayer.*"

2. Of the people of Israel—In other words, unlike some of the Judaizers who not Jews by birth, Paul was born as one of God’s chosen people. He was a physical descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
3. Of the tribe of Benjamin—Benjamin was one of the most noble tribes of Israel. By Paul’s time, many Jews could no longer trace their lineage because of intermarriage. But Paul’s family had remained pure and they knew their heritage.
4. Hebrew of Hebrews—In other words, he grew to manhood strictly maintaining all the Jewish traditions. In Acts 26:4, Paul says, *“The Jews all know the way I lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country and also in Jerusalem.”* Paul was the poster child for growing up following all the Jewish traditions.
5. Pharisee—To become a Pharisee was to reach the highest level of devout legalistic Judaism. It was to be a member of an elite and highly respected group of men who were fastidious about knowing obeying the Jewish law.
6. Persecutor of the church—After Stephen’s martyrdom, the book of Acts says that Paul *“began ravaging the church, entering house to house, dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.”* (Acts 8:3) He persecuted the church because of his zeal to follow the Jewish traditions.
7. Faultless—By all outward appearances, Paul was a model Jew who lived an impeccable life according to the Jewish Law.

So that was his pedigree. If anyone could ever have been saved by good works, it would have been Paul. Now, verse 7.

*<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.* (Phil 3:7-11)

But everything Paul could have counted as a means of earning God’s favor, all his good works, all his years of self-discipline to keep every jot and tittle of the Jewish law, all of that he considered loss for the sake of Christ. Compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ, Paul considered everything else a loss.

The Greek word for surpassing worth refers to something of incomparable value. Paul’s language brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the hidden treasure. Jesus said, “The

kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought the field.” (Matt 13:44)

No cost was too great to invest. The treasure buried in the field was worth everything to the man! Jesus himself is that hidden treasure. Hear me well church: Nothing compares to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus.

The Greek word for knowing that’s used in verse 8 and verse 10 means to know experientially. This is more than knowing in an academic sense. Paul is talking about having a personal, intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of his past religious accomplishments were considered by Paul to be garbage compared to gaining Christ. The Greek word for garbage in verse 8 is much stronger than the editors of the NIV have allowed. It’s a word that could be translated waste, dung, manure or excrement. You get the idea. Paul is expressing in the strongest possible language his utter contempt for all the religious credentials he previously used to try to impress God.

Righteousness is right standing with God. In verse 9 Paul recognizes that no matter how good he became following the law, he could never have achieved right standing—righteousness—with God. Why? Because God is holy! God is perfect and no matter how hard we try, this side of heaven we’ll never be perfect. Goodness knows Paul tried!

But then he discovered a righteousness not of his own that could not come from obeying the law. Look again at verse 9. Paul discovered “the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” You might underline that phrase in your notes.

This righteousness is God’s gift to us. And it comes by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This transaction is summarized in 2 Corinthians 5:21. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In other words, God the Father placed our sin on his sinless Son—Jesus. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us. So that in him, so that by placing our faith in Jesus’ sacrifice, by accepting his gift of forgiveness, we might be declared righteous by God.

In response to this incredible gift of being declared right with God, in response to God’s lavish grace, in verses 10 & 11, Paul sets his sights on four priorities.

<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:10-11)

1. He wants to know Christ. Once again, the word for know is much more than academic knowledge. The word means to know in an experiential way. This is to know Christ deeply and personally.

2. Paul wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection. Ephesians 1:19 reveals the power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work within us who believe.
3. Paul wants to share in the Lord's sufferings.
4. He wants to be resurrected with Christ in the end. The way Paul writes in verse 11 is not meant to convey doubt, as if he doubted that he would get to heaven. Rather, it expresses his amazed humility that, by God's grace, even he would be included in that final resurrection.

In this magnificent passage Paul says twice that he wants to know Christ. You might underline both of these in your notes. In verse 8 he says, "*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...*" And in verse 10 he says, "*I want to know Christ...*" This is what I want us to focus on today. I want us to consider: What does it mean to know Christ?

As I was working on this message, I spent several hours pondering this. After all, Paul was already a Christ follower. On one level he already knew Jesus, just like I can say that I already know the Lord. But a clear implication in the text is that however deeply Paul knew Jesus at the time he wrote the letter, he still yearned for more. You can almost feel the passion in his heart as he writes: "*I want to know Christ!*"

The more I pondered this the more I kept coming back to my marriage with Pam. In a few weeks we celebrate our 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. On one level I can say that I've known Pam for a long time. But on another level, I can say that I'm just getting to know her. One of my favorite things to do with Pam is to sit and have what we call a lingering conversation. Sometimes we will sit for hours and talk. It's even better when we can watch a sunset. We've been married for 45 years and we're still discovering amazing things about each other.

I think that's part of what it means to know Christ. Knowing Christ means we discover new things about him, we fall more in love with him, we allow him into permeate new corners of our lives. And it's wonderful when that happens!

And I'd like to close today by giving us an opportunity to do just that: to know Christ more deeply, to feel his love more fully.

I've asked Lucho to choose a song to sing over us as we melt into the arms of Jesus. Feel free to close your eyes and allow God's love to envelop you in a fresh way. Paul says, "*I want to know Christ!*" The amazing thing is that Jesus wants to reveal himself to us. He wants us to know him. Open yourself to him now as we listen.