

The Rock: 05-02-2021

Philippians: The letter of Joy

First reading:

Title: In Christ alone

Scripture: Philippians 3:1-11

Theme:

The warning to Philippi is the same today. Law bound and confident in themselves, They struggle to understand that God is calling a people to Himself in His way at in His timing.

Introduction:

There is not any of us here who wouldn't at one time or another agree with this statement: Life would be so much easier and better were it not for people.

Perhaps we find that a bit amusing, perhaps hurtful and or shocking. Perhaps, if we think it through, if I am thinking that at times about others, others are thinking that about me.

Unproductive and arrogant in thinking, and all too quickly I find myself, and maybe you do too, empty of grace, and full of self-righteousness.

Paul, in turning a corner here in chapter three, is very careful to map out for us that we can be just one decision and boast away from being the people he is confronting here. Therefore, we must always be careful to never cheapen grace by using it as an excuse to continue to sin, but also never minimize it in giving it to others.

Again, at any point in life, we can be that very person we would typically be agitated with. If we see what Paul does here, he re-directs his "frustration" as it were, and instead of focusing on these dogs, as he calls them -

He looks to Jesus and how we are all under His grace and glory -equally undeserving and no matter how good we are, it does not matter in the economy of God. What matters is our hearts and our focus.

The Story:

With all that said, there is a concept we must never avoid or forget, or think doesn't exist. I have never met a Pharisee who thought themselves a Pharisee.

Epictitus, a Greek philosopher and stoic, said this: It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows.

This is why frankly, Jesus pushes those who ought to know, but don't more than anyone else he ever encountered.

In the gospel of John, Jesus had just healed a man born blind and caused quite a stir in the temple. After all who cares that this guy was blind, but now he sees, Jesus had the nerve to violate the work mandate of the Sabbath.

He always seems to be picking a fight, isn't He? Really, Jesus could have waited till the next day, right. But he didn't, he picked the Sabbath and draws attention to the "perfect ones".

It doesn't matter that a miracle happened, that an image-bearer was healed, made whole. You didn't follow the rules, and that makes you and it wrong!

The guy healed is called before the council and proceeds to school them:

"The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

-John 9:30-33 ESV

Their arrogance doesn't allow them to see God moving. No pun intended. Having confessed that Jesus is the "Son of God", the savior, the Pharisees are even more offended.

A constant pattern actually- perpetually offended and miserable. Now, don't go: "Oh man, I know someone just like that!" Don't do it.

Instead, ask yourself: "Am I just like that?"

Because they make the mistake of asking Jesus:

"Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains."

-John 9:40-41 ESV

In other words, Yes, yes you are blind, and your blindness is keeping you from seeing me and growing in a way that glorifies the very God you profess.

Now, what does that have to do with Paul's letter and chapter three. Everything actually, because Paul is going to give us an inside look at that group and how quickly we can take the

good things in creation that God gives us- and turn them into badges of self-justification.

Becoming then, the means by which we compare ourselves to others and worse, think we are saved and justified before God.

It is not that the obeying of the Law and God's commands is bad. To think that way is foolish and cheapens grace.

When, however, we think that is how we are justified and accepted by God, that is when it does become bad. It becomes that badge of self-righteousness.

(in Christ alone -lyrics)

Before his Damascus road encounter with Christ, Paul the Apostle, was a miserable, performance-based, Pharisee. Going about as unhaappy as one could get, imprisoning and even approving of the killing of these crazy grace-filled Christians.

Paul can say here in verse two what he says because he was one:

"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh."

-Philippians 3:2 ESV

Nobody knows better how to be that guy, than Paul does, but not anymore!

It is not that what he does, or what we do, (work of the flesh) doesn't matter- it does. BUT, we ought not to put our confidence for salvation in our performance or our out-performance of someone else.

That immediately puts us and keeps us in a defensive posture of me versus you, or us versus them. Making us always at odds and seemingly enemies.

Paul says: NO! Doing that will make you perpetually miserable! Instead, Paul says:

"For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh-"

-Philippians 3:3 ESV

By His spirit we worship to the glory of Jesus. It's not that what these miserable people are doing is wrong, its HOW and WHY, Paul says that's wrong.

It's the wrong posture to take before God, and Paul now begins to walk us through his personal journey of discovery to teach us and to help us.

"...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:"

-Philippians 3:4 ESV

Listen, these guys think they have the market cornered and want to demand of you that you be just like them and do exactly as they say and do -Well, buckle up, because I've got way more and have found it to be useless.

He then takes off down the road of reason and qualifications:

"...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; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

-Philippians 3:5-6 ESV

I am, (notice he doesn't was) a Pharisee! A Jew to the core, even marked out in my flesh, just like them. All the way back to the beginning, I know who I belong to. Benjamin's tribe. Obedient to the letter.

Blameless as verse six makes clear. In Zeal -well outdid them in that too. Ravenously persecuting the church, like a

wolf on the hunt for food, I went everywhere to find these people.

Paul oozed hatred for them, for those who said Jesus was Messiah. The blameless Law bound man -full of judgment and hatred. Not love of God and man.

Let's pause for a minute here to see the radical other worldly change in this man. Paul is giving an honest glimpse into his heart, where there was bitterness, wicked, blackness of heart of his heart, before the Damascus road.

If anyone thinks for a moment that a couple of self-help books and some positive thoughts, along with some life motivating quotes changed this man from the inside out, needs to really look at humanity and the whole of history.

Doesn't happen! Ever! You know why there are hundreds of new self-help books written every year? Because they don't work! That's why.

No, a change like this -a CONVERSION of HEART, only happens when we, like Paul, are knocked off of our high horse of self-righteousness and self-confidence by an encounter with the risen and living Jesus!

Paul understood this to his very core. That's the hinge of verse seven:

"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

-Philippians 3:7 ESV

If and when we come face to face with Jesus, none of us, not a one, has anything worth boasting about. We all have strayed, we all have fallen short, we all miss the mark -everyday.

But that's ok. That is why God sent His son -not to condemn the world, but to save it through Him:

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

-John 3:17 ESV

If verse seven isn't sufficient for us, Paul continues to paint the word picture the world needs to see:

"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."

-Philippians 3:8 ESV

Listen, everything I ever did is nothing compared to me encounter with Jesus and knowing (acknowledging) him as Lord!

If that's not enough, well, I've suffered the loss of everything- reputation, prestige, position, power. All he had and would have kept had he not acknowledged Jesus. And miserableness to frost that cupcake.

To gain Jesus Christ as savior, the KJV captures the actual word there the best when it says: "I count them as dung!"

No disrespect here this morning, but what Paul is saying in verse eight is that none of these things is worth a pile of...in light of what Jesus did for me and gave to me.

Paul could not have been more clear as he combats these people who are less than helpful and continue to follow him and his ministry team around, complaining that Paul is too wishy-washy and too grace bound.

Paul says -it's all a load of crap. All of it is worthless. I am accepted in the beloved because of Jesus. So, I do what I do (action and working out my salvation), I suffer and lead as I do, not to be accepted, but because I already am accepted.

...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—"

-Philippians 3:9 ESV

Saved by faith through grace. By faith working this salvation out, my focus is now this little Jewish carpenter named Jesus! My faith in Him, in His work, in His resurrection has literally transformed me into a new man.

The Law points to Him, but my righteousness, well, that comes from Him.

My goal in life, Paul says, is not to be like these dogs -quite the kind and delicate man. He is so harsh and clear because we need to get this. Nobody has more bragging rights before God than does Paul.

That's what he is saying. But it didn't make a bot of difference. I was still knocked down off my horse, blinded and told I was persecuting God Himself (Jesus) in my law-bound state. Self-righteous and spiritually blind.

WOW! That was then, but this is now:

"that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his

sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

-Philippians 3:10-11 ESV

I have nothing to offer but me. My obedience, my willingness to suffer, to be like Jesus:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

-Romans 8:28-29 ESV

God took it all and used it for His glory and conformed Paul to the likeness of Jesus. That’s the goal for us all.

This is the hard work, the dying to ourselves and living for Jesus. We tend to want all the benefit with little to no effort. I want to weight 195 again, but I also want that forth piece of blueberry pie.

Can’t have both!

Now, one last observation here about Paul that is helpful for us: Notice what he is working to attain. It’s important. It’s

not heaven! No, Paul actually is striving for the ultimate goal and heaven is thrown in with it.

The resurrection from the dead. While heaven may be A GOAL, it is not the goal. Paul says it's the resurrection at Christ's glorious return. That's why he makes it clear in his letter to the Thessalonians that those who have fallen asleep (died) will return with Him and be raised / glorified first.

"For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first."

-1 Thessalonians 4:15-16 ESV

Just as an aside, this is why we should be spending far less time looking for what the Devil is doing in this world and looking to the clouds for the return of our King.

Be less worried about what the devil may do, and be more focused on what Jesus will find you doing when he comes back to glorify His church.

For there will be a day when God will bring judgement and healing to this world. The hope for its destruction and our deliverance into heaven is to miss the point of why we are here at all!

Paul wants everyone to have what, or rather WHO he has -Jesus Christ of Nazareth -Messiah, Savior, and soon coming King.

I close with N. T. Wright speaking of these verses:

"Better to have the Messiah and to follow Him through the cross and resurrection, than to have anything or anyone else in the world."

-NTEE Pg. 121

I count it all dung because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus as my Lord.