

Misplaced Confidence

Philippians 3:1-11

Many of you have met my dog, Wagner, who turned three a couple weeks ago. Like many of you, I am a dog person, and in our culture, our dogs become almost part of the family. We certainly treat them like that. So when I am at home, including all the hours I spend in my office, Wagner is always with me. If he isn't playing some form of game with his toys or tennis balls, he sleeps contentedly next to my desk or chair or bed, wherever I am.

I say all of that in order to emphasize a great contrast. When the Bible speaks of dogs, it refers to a far different thing than what many of us think of. In our text this afternoon, the reference to dogs conveys a strong warning to stay away from them. "Beware of dogs." For dogs were ceremonial unclean animals. Even more deeply, they were despised and scorned by the Jews, considered the most miserable of all creatures. They were loathsome scavengers, savage and ugly pariahs who prowled in herds about their cities, without homes or owners, feeding on the refuse and filth of the streets, quarreling among themselves and attacking the passerby.

When I went to Mexico a number of years ago on a week-long mission trip, I observed the presence of such dogs in the little third-world village in which we organized and led a vacation Bible school class. And that is the image for us here. But to whom is Paul referring in verse 2? Who are the dogs?

We call the group of false teachers that he is attacking the "Judaizers", a group within the church who insisted that in order to be a true Christian, you had to first be circumcised.

Actually, the Jews would commonly use the name dogs as an epithet to insult the Gentiles, but here Paul addresses that racial slur to the Jews who taught that it was necessary to add to faith in Christ faithfulness to the Old Testament ceremonial law, including circumcision. These false teachers evidently insisted on legal observance as a qualification for grace.

And that contradicted the gospel! As Paul had so clearly declared,

Rom. 3:20 "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

And so Paul would teach the church in Galatia that to add circumcision to the work of Christ was not to enhance it but to destroy it.

Gal. 5:2 "Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. 4 You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

Strong words, words directed to a group of people with misplaced confidence. They had confidence in their own good works and external law-keeping as the basis of their relationship with God. And these verses in Philippians are,

I. A GREAT WARNING AGAINST SUCH FALSE CONFIDENCE.

Paul is still writing with joy, the joy known to those whose confidence is not in themselves but in Christ. And so he writes, v.1-3

This is a safeguard intended to protect their joy and freedom in Christ, freedom from the external forms of the Old Covenant. Let me put it this way.

A. Those who cling to the external forms of the Old Covenant are putting confidence in their own works.

That's what it had come down to. Those who depend upon their circumcision for salvation are really depending upon their own efforts. And Paul doesn't mince words. Their own efforts are faulty. He calls them evil workers!

And in a play on words, he calls their circumcision a mutilation. Not a sign of salvation but a sign of destruction. Again to the church of Galatians, speaking of the same group of Judaizers, Paul says,

Gal. 5:12 "I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!"

Paul is saying quite graphically to those who insist upon circumcision, "I wish they would go all the way and emasculate themselves." He's serious! I'm trying not to offend your senses, but Paul is almost to point of being distasteful in his language. For a good reason. If any believer in Jesus Christ ever begins to cling to external forms as the basis of his standing before God, he is ultimately trusting in himself. And therefore denying the gospel!

The issue for us is not limited to Old Covenant ceremonial regulations, but can be made even broader. Any external religious form, even good ones, that you claim as the basis of your accept before God, is faulty. Let me put it this way, in the form of a question, "If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?', what would you say?"

Let me emphasize the word "why" in that question. WHY, what is the basis upon which God will give anyone entrance into his kingdom?

I still remember considering that question as a young boy, and with no understanding of what it meant to be saved, I remember thinking to myself, "If I go to church, I will go to heaven." I knew that certain good things went along with going to church. Giving some money. Reading the Bible. Even praying. I was trained to do all those things, and left with the idea that those things determined who would and would not get to go to heaven.

Yet for several years, I remained dead in my sin, separated from God, for my own self-righteousness and external obedience did nothing to atone for my sin. The Lord brought me to salvation only when I heard and understood that I was a sinner who needed a savior. I was told about Jesus Christ and invited to receive him and to believe upon his name. By God's grace, I did. And I learned quickly that my works played no part in God's work of justification. I was saved by faith, not by works, so that I could never boast. And I never will.

So beware of the dogs! Beware of those who believe and teach that external forms of law-keeping are the basis of your right standing before God. Beware of those whose religion and worship of God emphasizes what is external, for as Paul addresses the church here,

B. Those who cling to the external forms of the Old Covenant are denying the spiritual nature of true worship.

v.3

Don't miss that first expression. "We are the circumcision." He is saying, "We who believe in Jesus Christ, we are the true Israel of God, the true people of God. We who are Christians are now true the Jews."

We who worship not according to ceremonial ritual, but in spirit. And, I might add, in truth. This gets right back to that issue the Samaritan woman at the well raised with Jesus when she didn't want to talk about her many husbands.

John 4:20 "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. 22 "You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 23 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24 "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

God is Spirit. And the essence of worship is spirit. That's why we have no visible images of God as part of our worship. That's why the elements of our worship service do not include physical props, other than the sacraments which God himself has designed and instituted for us. We worship in spirit, not according to external forms. That's what Paul is saying here.

v.3

Indeed, to worship God in spirit IS to rejoice in Christ Jesus. And therefore, to worship God is to have no confidence whatsoever in your own works as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. We are the true people of God, we who have no confidence in the flesh.

Paul knows that because he has experienced it! He has experienced life as a man committed to an empty, external form of religion. And he has experienced the saving power of God that put an end to that false confidence in his own works of righteousness. Then he gives us his own,

II. PERSONAL TESTIMONY OF FALSE CONFIDENCE.

He's boasting--at least speaking about what he used to boast of.

v.4

Paul is essentially saying this, "If anyone could be saved by his own fleshly works, I could." But he turns it around by declaring that these things of which he used to boast are not sufficient. The works of the flesh are not sufficient to obtain and maintain a right relationship with God. He knew personally the futility of trying to attain salvation by means of good works.

First, he mentions,

A. Ceremonial purity is not sufficient for a relationship with God.

v.5 "Circumcised the eighth day."

Just like the law required. All of his ceremonial Jewish credentials were in good order. And his ethnic heritage.

v.5b "...of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews."

He was in the right lineage, a biological and genetic descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He belonged to the chosen people of God, the people of the covenant, and this purity of descent was especially important in a day when there was a lot

of intermarriage between Israelites and non-Israelites. Nothing to hide in Paul's line, though.

Even his tribe was Israel's elite, its highest aristocracy, holding the place of honor. The tribe of Benjamin, the son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel, whose birth caused his mother's death. But rather than name him "Son of my Sorrow, Ben Oni, Jacob had called him "son of my right hand," Benjamin.

Indeed, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. And proud of it. But it wasn't enough.

B. Genetic purity is not sufficient for a relationship with God.

Likewise, with regard to the law,

C. Legalistic righteousness is not sufficient for a relationship with God.

Paul had that, too.

v.5c-6

Let me give you some background. The Pharisees were a religious party that developed during the four centuries between the Old and New Testaments. That's why they are never mentioned in the OT. Their origin was good--a reaction against the excesses of those careless and indifferent Jews who had imbibed the Hellenistic spirit of the age with all its immoral aspects. Their high regard for the law of God deserves admiration. They were separatists, not unlike the Puritans who reacted against similar religious and moral abuses in the church of England in the 1600's.

For the Pharisees, however, their great mistake came when they began to build a legalistic interpretation of the law, burying the law itself under the load of their own traditions. And then think

that by observing those human traditions, they could bring about the coming of the Messiah and assure themselves a high standing in his kingdom.

With that pride, they became the very definition of hypocrisy and self-righteousness. But Paul's point is that he, as a strict observer of the law, could boast before God. And he did.

Just look at his zeal! He persecuted the enemies of God, the church! He claimed to be blameless, given his external understanding of the law.

And all of that was inadequate! Paul learned of that inadequacy when the Lord came to him on that road to Damascus. After God blinded him with that appearance of a great light, we read,

Acts 9:8 "Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus."

No longer would he speak confidently of his own good works. Instead, he gives us the perfect example of,

III. THE END OF FALSE CONFIDENCE.

v.7-9

Let me say it plainly and clearly, in general terms that apply to every one of us.

A. We must renounce all of our own efforts to obtain righteousness.

As Paul does.

v.7

“I have written them off.” In the plain language of an accountant, “What used to be in the credit column I have put in the debit column.” Those things that I use to count upon as my defense before God, I know consider my shame!

That shame is made very evident in the next verse, again with language that is again almost distasteful.

v.8

The loss of all things refers to his abandonment of all that he has just boasted in. And he describes those things as rubbish. Actually, the word is more graphic than that. The King James uses the word dung, and that, I believe, is more accurate. Human excrement. And there is no intention here of being vulgar, such as the profanity which is so common today in popular expressions that refer to this. But the image is intense. That’s how thoroughly he renounces his own efforts at works-righteousness and works-salvation.

He has come to understand what Isaiah taught so plainly in the Old Testament,

Isaiah 64:6 “But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.”

For,

Rom.3:23 “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

But notice the glorious consequence for those who recognize their own sinfulness.

v.8

The knowledge of Christ Jesus comes only to those who have a knowledge of their own sin, who consider their own good works to be rubbish. They, and they alone, will gain Christ, and,
v.9

And so,

B. By faith, we must cling to the promise of Christ’s righteousness.

It is such an absolute and ultimate contrast. The two things are mutually exclusive. You must renounce any claims to your own righteousness. And you must “be found in him.”

Now, what does that mean? It means, what Jesus Christ did is credited to you. It means that the righteousness of Jesus Christ, his law-keeping, is credited to your account, just as if a rich benefactor walked into your bank and deposited a million dollars into your checking account. It’s yours.

And that’s what we cling to. Theologians call it the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Let me explain it with a biblical illustration.

Rev. 4:4 “Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.”

White robes. That’s the righteousness of Jesus Christ that we put on ourselves! The white robe is a very common image in the book of Revelation.

Rev. 7:9 “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ...13

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" 14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

Also,

Rev. 3:18 "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed."

And,

Rev. 3:5 "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."

By faith, clinging to the promise that you have received the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, you are a millionaire. And the invitation of the gospel might be given with that provocative question, "Who wants to be a millionaire?"

Who wants to be made righteous before God? Who wants to be made acceptable to God? Who wants to be made worthy to partake of the Lord's Supper?

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will have all those things! And you will have life.

C. By faith, we are raised from the dead and given life.

v.10-11

As Sinclair Ferguson wisely points out, the words "if, by any means" do "not denote Paul's doubt whether Christ can do this

but amazement that he will do it in one like himself, full of imperfection and weakness."

It will happen. He will attain to the resurrection of the dead. He will be raised incorruptible. Immortal. For he whom God has justified, these he also glorified. It's a direct connection between the imputation of Jesus' righteousness and the assurance of eternal life. That life begins when you come to know Christ, as it says in verse 10, to know him personally, intimately, experientially. And that is what life is all about.

Paul gave up everything in order to obtain that knowledge. He considered everything of himself to be rubbish, that he might know Jesus Christ.

And, as Jesus says,

John 17:3 "...this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

I don't want this to be ivory tower theology, for this is as down to earth and practical as it can possibly be, because every one of us has a problem. We're dirty. We're filthy. With the stains of sin.

When it comes to this Lord's Supper, every one of us has a problem. We're unworthy. Not one of us is worthy, in ourselves, to partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Not one of us! Not one of us is worthy to stand in the presence of God and live! Not in ourselves. Not one of us. Not in our own righteousness.

But that is all different when we speak about the righteousness of Jesus Christ which is credited to us, the righteousness "which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith."

So where is your confidence? Where is your confidence before God? Where is your confidence as you prepare to partake of the Lord's Supper? If it is in yourself or in your own good works, in any way whatsoever, then don't take this sacrament, because you're not ready.

But if your only hope is in Jesus, if your only possible hope of being found righteous and acceptable in God's sight is by faith in the work of Jesus on your behalf, then come, take and eat. For you are dressed in white robes.