

“Rejoicing in the Lord”

Philippians 3:1-11

You may remember from high school history class learning about the ‘Copernican Revolution’ of the 1500s. Nicolaus Copernicus was an astronomer and a mathematician who proposed a theory that the planets revolve around the sun. Up to that time, astronomers and scientists thought that the Earth was the center of the universe, that the Sun revolved around the Earth. It makes perfect sense to the observer. The Sun rises in the east, travels across the sky, and sets in the west faithfully each 24-hour period. If the Earth was standing still and not rotating, logic would say that the Sun must be revolving around the Earth. Copernicus proposed that the Sun’s daily “rising” and “setting” was not because it revolved around the earth every 24 hours. Rather, the Sun was the center of a planetary system, of which the Earth was a part, and the Earth was rotating on its axis every 24 hours while also revolving around the Sun, completing one revolution every year. And so what Copernicus proposed—which was eventually proven—was nothing short of a major scientific revolution that changed human understanding forever. It is a fitting illustration of what we learn from this passage. You will never know what life is all about until the Son of God is at the center of everything. Christianity isn’t about adhering to a set of rules; it is all about delighting in a Person. You can adhere to a strict set of rules and not have a relationship with Jesus. That’s what legalism does. You can think that somehow by going to church, by doing good deeds, you are scoring up ‘brownie points’ with God. That’s what religion does. Christian living is about finding the proper center of life and then letting life revolve around that center. Paul says here, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.” (Read)

What we rejoice in says a lot about what we value most in life. To rejoice in something is to delight in something, it is to exalt in something, or to celebrate something. We look to a lot of things in life in which we expect to find joy. And yet the things of this world are only temporary. They do not provide any lasting satisfaction. For that

reason, you and I must always rejoice in the Lord. And it is something which Paul clearly explains for us as we come to the third chapter of Philippians. How long has it been since you sat down and took a good hard look at your life to evaluate the things to which you are giving your time, talents, and treasures? In other words, those things that my life tends to orbit. Can you honestly say that the things which most occupy your attention are really the most important things? Well, our passage this morning will greatly challenge us in the area of our rejoicing and what we truly trust in for our salvation.

1—A joyful word of REMINDER (3:1)

“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.”

When Paul says ‘finally’ here in verse 1, it does not mean he has come to end of the letter. We’re only at the midway point. Like a good preacher, he still has a couple of more points to make before he closes. Like the little boy who whispered to his dad in church, “What does the preacher mean when he says ‘in closing?’” His father responded, “Absolutely nothing, son.”

The word ‘finally’ means ‘now then,’ or ‘furthermore.’ He’s coming back around to the main idea with which he writes, and that is the joy which is ours in Christ. And that joy can only be experienced by those whom Paul refers to as ‘my brethren.’ As in those who are in the family of God, those who’ve come to know Jesus as Savior. An unbeliever can know happiness as an emotion, but they don’t have joy as a lasting possession. The Christian possesses joy unlike anyone else in the world. If you were to ask the average person, they would assume that the opposite is in fact true. Christianity with all of its ‘do’s and don’ts’ is miserable and drains all of the fun out of life. Sadly, a lot of professing Christians have given the world this kind of impression. Joy doesn’t seem to characterize their life and witness. I heard about a couple who were driving home one Sunday after church. The wife asked her husband, “Did you

notice the pastor's sermon was kind of weak today?" He said, "No, not really." Then she said, "Well, did you hear that the choir was flat?" He responded, "No, I didn't." She said, "Well, you certainly must have noticed that your couple with their kids right in front of us, with all the commotion they made the whole service!" He said, "I'm sorry, dear, but no." So finally in disgust, she said, "Honestly, I don't know why you even bother to go to church!" That's a joyless attitude.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones — *"God's people are meant to be people who are always rejoicing in the Lord."*

The subject of the believer's joy

There are no qualifiers made by Paul here in verse 1. As Christians, you and I are to rejoice in the Lord. Period. At all times. In fact, the grammar of the text shows us that the verb he uses is in the:

- Present tense which means we are always to be rejoicing no matter the season
- Active voice which means we must take action rather than be passive
- Imperative mood which means it is a command to be obeyed
- Plural in number which means it applies to each one of us as believers

You can literally translate verse 1, "I command you to be always making every effort to be rejoicing in the Lord." It isn't something that is novel, but is a reminder of what he has been saying all along. Joy has been his main theme. For instance:

1:4— "...making my prayer with joy."

1:18— "...Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice."

2:2— "Complete my joy by being of the same mind."

2:17— "I am glad and rejoice with you all."

The source of the believer's joy

Joy in the Lord Jesus, this is Paul's emphasis. That's why the word 'joy' or 'rejoice' is used 14 times in four chapters. He lays down this very simple principle that our rejoicing is connected to a relationship—"Rejoice in the Lord." It is not referring to an emotional high that is associated with some event. It doesn't say, "Rejoice because of what the Lord has given you." It doesn't say, "Rejoice because of what the Lord has done for you." It simply says, "Rejoice in the Lord." It is the joy that is associated with a relationship. He is reminding them about joy, but here Paul adds for the first time the little phrase "in the Lord." It is the sphere in which our joy exists. Only in Him is true joy experienced and nowhere else. And it is this very emphasis to which he turns once again in verse 1. The subject and source of joy, and then he says something about:

The safeguard of the believer's joy

To remind them of this truth is no trouble for him, and it is a 'safeguard' for them. Think about that. We need to always be reminded of basic truth that we tend to take for granted.

2 Peter 1:2-15—"May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises...Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have."

He goes on to say, "And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things." Repetition is necessary for recollection. There is a sense in which a preacher ought to repeat the same things over and over again, in a way that is helpful and intentional. Ministry of the Word of God is not one of novelty, but of repetition. It is a mistake to think that you must always be novel in teaching the

Bible. The men of Athens in Acts 17 were always very interested with novelty, and they liked to sit around and talk about every new idea. And we can become like that in the church if we're not careful. We cater to the itching ears of people. In a subtle way, people begin to complain, "Listen, don't tell us that stuff again! We know that stuff. We would like something new. We would like something different." Well, what is the faithful preacher to do? I think he follows the example of Paul here in verse 1, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you." In other words, you and I never move away from the gospel basics. It seems like every generation comes up with some type of fad which it thinks is revolutionary to Christian experience.

- The Prayer of Jabez
- WWJD bracelets
- Unhealthy preoccupation with prophecy

Can I encourage you to beware chasing fads, of thinking that the answer to your Christian life is in finding something new? I realize there are times whenever we make fresh discoveries, and we can celebrate that. And when we first begin the journey of the Christian life, everything is new, and we become very familiar with truth over time. But what we need more than anything is the Spirit of God to come and bring freshness to what we already know. The Holy Spirit lets us see just how much sweeter and how more precious is the truth of God's Word than we ever knew. He matures us from a superficial knowledge to a deeper and more intimate understanding of the truth. And so we are to grow in our understanding of the gospel, but we are to never, ever move away from the simplicity of the gospel. Because this was the threat that the Philippians were facing, which Paul turns to next. So in addition to this word of reminder, notice in verse 2 that he gives:

2—A needful word of WARNING (3:2)

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

Paul follows his word of reminder with a word of warning. It was important that the Philippians be on the look out for the spiritual threats which would seriously undermine their joy. Notice the words ‘look out’ which he repeats three times in verse 2. It means beware, take heed, be on the look out. Paul is warning them about those who argue that salvation isn’t a matter of faith in Jesus but adherence to ceremonial law and tradition. They were known as the ‘Judaizers’ who insisted that their works gave them standing with God. It was ‘Jesus plus something else.’ And so notice that Paul refers to these false teachers in three ways:

Their character — *“Look out for dogs”*

He doesn’t refer to ‘dogs’ in the sense of someone’s pet. I know some people whose dogs are taken better care of than some folks take care of their kids. Those of you who have ‘fur babies’ know what I’m talking about. The kind who puts sweaters on their dogs and pushes them around in strollers. Let me tell you, that’s nowhere close to what Paul has in mind here. The ‘dogs’ to which Paul refers in his day were scavengers, flea ridden disease carriers that spread illness. He uses them as a metaphor to describe the character of those who were corrupting the doctrine of the church. They were smuggling their legalism into the message of the church, twisting and distorting the gospel into something entirely different.

Their conduct — *“Look out for the evildoers”*

Paul calls these men ‘evildoers.’ The reason was due to the fact that they were insisting on legal observance as a qualification for grace. Ironically, they were claiming that good works gave them standing with God. But Paul says that they are evil. Now, Paul, throughout all of his writings, has been absolutely clear in refuting this. For example, in Romans 3:19, he says, “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says

to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteousness in His sight”—that is, in God’s sight—“by observing the law; rather, it is through the law we become conscious of sin.” It’s not that this is a secondary issue that isn’t too harmful, just a matter of opinion. What we have is a head-on collision with the gospel. Paul has made it clear that no one will ever be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law. And these ‘evildoers’ are deceiving the Philippian church and saying, “If you don’t do this, and you don’t adhere to that, and you don’t subscribe to this, you will never be declared righteous in God’s sight.”

Their claims — *“Look out for those who mutilate the flesh”*

The requirements that they were laying down were those of human achievement, those of outward ritual. They claimed that one had to become a Jew before they could become a Christian. And all of the emphasis on human achievement and outward ritual was diverting attention away from Jesus Christ, thereby denying the sufficiency of His death upon the cross.

Now, all of this brings up the question, what about the law?

The standard by which God’s judges the sinner is His own holiness which is revealed in His moral law. On more than one occasion, Paul had been falsely accused as being anti-law. His opponents had accused him of undermining and seeking to subvert the law of God, which was certainly not true. He deals with this accusation in Romans 6, where he says that the one who has faith in Christ is no longer under law but under grace. Is grace a license for sin? Paul says, “No way!” But it is important that we clarify what is meant by this. There seems to be some confusion as it relates to a Christian’s relationship with God’s moral law. What’s the relationship?

Maybe you’ve been hiking and found yourself on a narrow mountain ridge. In the mountains where I grew up, there was a ridge that we used to reach on the upper part

of our family property. You could walk this ridge for a good ways. In some places, it was very narrow and steep on both sides of the ridge. If you weren't careful, you could slip off either side into a steep drop down the mountain.

In a lot of ways, our relationship to the law of God is like that. On one side, we can fall into legalism which makes too much of the law. Legalism is preoccupied with our own performance and thinks that we gain a better standing with God by it. On the other side, we can fall into license which makes too little of the law. License totally disregards God's moral commands and uses grace as an excuse. Legalism sees the law as being ultimate. License sees it as being irrelevant. Legalism says, "I'm a Christian because I keep the law!" License says, "I'm a Christian because I don't keep the law!" In either case, you define your Christianity by the law rather than saying, "I'm a Christian because I'm united to Christ by faith." The law cannot save anyone, a point Paul makes in Romans 3:20, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

Why so much misunderstanding when it comes to the law? Part of the issue stems from the fact that we live in a very lawless society. The individual is supreme. Anything that would seem to infringe upon our liberty as individuals must be bad. We push back against any instruction that would compel us to live or to behave in a certain way. Any emphasis on moral imperatives is quickly frowned upon as 'legalistic.' Grace frees you from the law's demands, but it doesn't free you from moral imperatives. It doesn't make you an outlaw or your own moral guide. Grace gives you a heart that truly loves God and others and desires to obey His commands. So that the change grace brings about in a person is from the inside out. Legalism tries to change you from the outside in, which never works. Which is why it is only is concerned with externals.

What purpose did God have in giving His law in the Old Testament? It is important that you and I understand this as it relates to Christian living. Theologians often refer to the 'three-fold use' of the law:

- the civil function

God's law exists in a civil realm to restrain evil and promote right living. Again, Romans 3:20 says that God's law gives us knowledge of sin. The basis of civil law in our nation is the natural law of God that He has built into human design. The legal system of our country began with the conviction that there's a transcendent principle of right and wrong to which all human beings are subject.

- the tutorial function

This comes from a Greek word, 'pedagogus.' In Roman society, the 'pedagogus' was a household servant who was responsible for taking his master's children to school.

Galatians 3:24—"Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith."

God's law has a 'tutorial' function in that it leads us to put our faith in Jesus Christ. It shows me how much I need Him as my Savior. Like a mirror, it shows me my sin and need for grace. But a mirror can't do anything about what it show you. That's not its purpose.

- the practical function

How else would we know what God desires for humanity apart from His law? The law is merely an expression of His original intention. The Ten Commandments serve as the basis of God's moral law and reflect His original blueprints for human life and society. In that sense, God's law is still operative in that it reveals His character and expectation for humanity made in His image. When Romans 6:14 says we are not under law but under grace, does this mean that God's law has been abolished? Paul answers his question in the same way with the same emphatic statement—"By no means!" What then does it mean when he says that we as Christians are no longer 'under' law? Paul explains this in his letter to the Galatians.

We are not under law as a way of justification. The Bible says:

Galatians 3:11 — “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

No person has ever been saved by keeping the law, and it wasn't given for that purpose. It is faith alone that justifies. And so we are not under law as a way of securing our own justification. For that, we need grace. We come in faith to Jesus Christ and God justifies us on the basis of that faith.

We are not under law as it relates to legislation. The Bible says:

Galatians 5:1 — “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

He's not setting aside God's moral imperatives. Rather, it is simply pointing out that all those ceremonial aspects of Judaism no longer have any hold on our lives as Christian men and women. The civil and ceremonial requirements have all been fulfilled. They have served their purpose.

We are not under law as the dynamic of sanctification. The Bible says:

Galatians 5:18 — “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

In other words, we say no to sin and yes to righteousness, not as a result of struggling in our effort to keep the law, but by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Our motive in sanctification doesn't come from the law. Rather, it is as we understand the love of God for us in Christ that we find ourselves delighting in God's law as we have experienced the new birth and God has given us a new heart which is now in fulfillment of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31). Now, that is important because works matter, not as the basis for your salvation, but as the evidence that you possess the kind of faith that saves. The apples on a tree prove life, but they don't provide it. The apples are merely the evidence of life already there! The fruit of Christianity is produced by the life

of Christ. We are to mark and avoid anyone who would say otherwise, such as those who were falsely telling the Philippians that they needed faith plus circumcision or ritual. If grace required something from us, then it would cease to be grace. The gospel of grace tells me that Jesus paid it all!

3—A helpful word of DISTINCTION (3:3)

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

There is a word of reminder in verse 1, a word of warning in verse 2, and now there is a helpful word of distinction in verse 3. Paul wants believers in Jesus to know that we are the true circumcision. That is, the person who has faith in Christ is the child of God. Salvation is not a matter of an outward mark but of an inward change. Circumcision was the external symbol depicting the need for a deep total cleansing from sin. But these Judaizers had reduced it to nothing more than a tattoo, having no spiritual significance. He says, “Look out for these,” verse 2, and he describes those who are still holding on to ritual and ceremony, and religion on the outside. They are dogs, evil doers, they are those who mutilate the flesh. Then on the other hand, he says in verse 3, “We are the circumcision.” And how are we identified? As those who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. That’s the distinction. And so it is a distinction between what is real and what is false.

This verse might be my favorite description of a Christian. What is a Christian? We could say he’s a believer. What is a Christian? We could say he’s a child of God. What is a Christian? We could say he’s a disciple. We could say he’s a follower of Jesus. But if we distilled it into a single verse, there’s no better verse than Philippians 3:3 which says a Christian is someone who worships in the Spirit of God, glories in Christ Jesus, and puts no confidence in the flesh. These are three fundamental differences between authentic faith and dead religion. The Bible has not left us without a standard by which we can measure the genuine believer. Because here in verse 3

are three characteristics of an authentic believer—they worship by the Spirit of God, they glory in Christ Jesus, and they put no confidence in the flesh. So that what we find in this verse is a set of objective criteria to designate, or set apart, a true believer.

We worship by the Spirit of God

Remember the words of Jesus in John 4 to the woman at the well when she asked about worship? She said, “Do you have to worship here or do you worship in Jerusalem?” And Jesus says, “Woman, a time is coming and has now come when those who worship the Father will worship Him in spirit and in truth, for those are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.” In other words, it’s not about ceremony and externalism. It’s not about location. In Christ, the old age of ritual and ceremony and of special sanctified places is gone. A Christian is someone who worships God by His Spirit who now lives within them.

We glory in Christ Jesus

We don’t boast in our report card. We don’t boast in all we have achieved for ourselves. A Christian recognizes that he can do absolutely nothing to save himself, and that Christ has done absolutely everything for them. Friend, that is what it means to “glory in Christ Jesus.” This is what Isaac Watts was getting at when wrote the powerful lyrics:

*When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died;
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood!*

We put no confidence in the flesh

We're not resting in our achievements, but in the finished work of Jesus. When it comes to your salvation, where is your confidence? At the end of the day, before you go to sleep at night, in that little window of opportunity when you think about things—if you think in that instant, “You know, maybe when I go to sleep, this will be the last time? What if my number is called and I wake to stand before God?”—in that moment when you think that way, what do you say to yourself to bolster your confidence as you fall asleep?

If what you say is, “I’ve had a very good week. Therefore, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I have been meticulous in my Sunday attendance. I’ve given to 10-10-10. I’ve done this, or I’ve done that”—you know what? You better not fall asleep. You better get up and go get your Bible. Because you’re relying on the wrong thing. But if you know Jesus, before you fall asleep, and you think about your life, you say, “I’ve had a lousy day. In fact, this is the fifth lousy day in a row that I’ve had. But I’m going to fall asleep. And if I sleep the sleep of death, I will wake up in the presence of Jesus!” Why? Because of what He has done, not because of what I have done. In other words, we put no confidence in the flesh, no confidence in our human effort. I’m not putting any confidence in my upbringing, my natural qualities, my gifts, my possessions, my traditions, my education. All of these things are rubbish when it comes to our standing with God. Our faith is not in what we do, but in what Jesus has already done. That is the gospel. Christianity isn’t spelled “DO,” but “DONE.”

Does our world revolve around us or the Son of God? In whom do we make our boast? Legalism in all its forms is an enemy of the gospel. When Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, do you remember how the prodigal had wasted his substance with “riotous living?” In the pigpen, he came to his senses, and decided that he would come back to his father and confess to him that he didn’t deserve to be a son. But his father responds in such a wonderful way—he gives him a new robe, gives him a ring,

gives him new shoes, and throws a lavish party for him. And there was singing and there was dancing. However, his older brother, who'd been out in the fields, comes and hears it going on. A servant comes to the elder brother and tells him, "Your brother is come home! And your father has decided to have this wonderful party!"—the servant presumably assuming that the brother would say, "This is fantastic! Let's celebrate!" But the elder brother is a picture of the legalistic Pharisee. Jesus tells the story in response to their self-righteousness. The elder brother represents them. And Jesus tells the story to make it clear. When his father comes out to him, he says, "It's right that we do this. It's important that we do this." And the elder brother says in Luke 15:29, "Look! All these years, I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders."

Doesn't that reveal a lot? That's legalism talking. That's the Pharisee. They don't understand grace. They don't understand redemption. They don't understand why it is that God redeems sinners. And so their response is, "All these years I've been slaving for you, and I've kept all of your rules! My attendance has been perfect. My tithing has been top notch. How can you celebrate a sinner like this?" What the elder brother has may be religion, but it is not Christianity. He's light years away from the heart of the father, even though he was in the house. Proximity does not mean intimacy.

What kind of message would it have been to the prodigal in the pigpen, what kind of 'good news' would it have been to the prodigal if we were to say, "Hey, prodigal! I have good news for you." And he looks up and meets your gaze, and you say to him, "Just double down and do your best." Do you know that that is exactly what some people think the message of Christianity is? "Do your best. God helps those who help themselves, so I better help myself, and then maybe God will help me." The good news is not, "Do your best." Because the reality is that my best is never good enough! How could that be good news? No, the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ has done all the necessary work for me to be saved. I must simply look to Him in faith, trust in Him alone, and be saved by His grace. That's what it means to rejoice in the Lord!