

BROKEN CHAINS
The Philippians Series #10
Philippians 3:1-14

(ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY)

AVOID THIS MISTAKE

Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Simon Stylites? In his day many Christians considered him to be the epitome of spirituality. People who heard about him could not help but admire his godliness, and they, in comparison, thought of themselves as being greatly inferior to such a spiritual giant. Who was Simon and what was it about him that caused so many Christians to hold him in such high esteem?

Simon spent the last 37 years of his life in the Syrian desert. What made him so spiritual in the eyes of other Christians is that he lived on top of a pillar. Yes, you had better read that again to make sure you saw it correctly. Simon stuck a 12 foot tall pillar in the ground, climbed to the top of it and lived there for 37 years. Actually, his admirers provided a taller pillar that might have been as high as 45 feet, with a small platform on top of it. Simon Stylites (the Greek word style means pillar) lived for 37 years on top of a pillar and never came down. He treated his body harshly, and what little food or water he consumed was lifted up to him from his admirers below. He was so respected and admired that Roman Emperors sought his counsel and Christian pilgrims traveled for miles just to see him and to ask for his prayers. In the years following Simon Stylites' death other Christians followed his example and lived on pillars, although none achieved his fame or could match his endurance.

This all sounds bizarre, doesn't it? But Simon's lifestyle was brought about by his desire to be godly, to avoid sin and to achieve spirituality. He saw how easily Christians compromised with the worldly influences of the decaying Roman Empire and he determined that he would be spiritually pure. This was happening at the same time other Christians were withdrawing from the world and giving birth to the monastic movement (living in monasteries separated and isolated from the world). Simon, who was born in 390 and died in 459, had plenty of company.

When we consider this kind of unhealthy thinking we can not help but be amazed at how mistaken people can be about what true spirituality is. I hope we all agree that spending 37 years living on top of a 45' pillar is not what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose*" (Philippians 2:12b-13).

We must be careful, however, not to dismiss Simon Stylites as some crackpot who lived so many centuries ago that his excesses and errors have nothing to do with us. I believe false forms of spirituality abound in Christian circles today, and they are every bit as unbiblical as anything Simon did. They are harder to detect because they exist within our own culture.

Before looking at some current versions of false spirituality, we need to understand why it matters. Paul wrote to the Philippians to encourage them to rejoice. Paul was aware that as Christians we can do some things that undermine the process which leads to joy, along with peace and contentment. For example, in Philippians 2:1-4 Paul called on the Philippian Christians to improve their relationships with one another (see especially 4:2-3) and to be more Christlike. To allow those relationships to be marked by disunity and pride would hinder their joy. In the passage we are considering here (Philippians 3:1-14) Paul warned about another impediment to joy; false spirituality.

Every Christian should desire to be spiritual. In our Christian vocabulary we use the word spiritual to describe someone who is close to God. Simon Stylites wanted to be close to God (no, not by living 45 feet higher than everyone else, but by avoiding things he thought would make him apathetic toward God). We know Simon went about it in the wrong way, but we can at least respect his dedication. The word spiritual is a biblical term (see Galatians 6:1; I Corinthians 3:1) and is related to the Holy Spirit. To be spiritual is to be in step with the Holy Spirit. It is to be near to God and to live a life pleasing to Him. Every Christian should want this to be his or her personal experience. Paul wanted the Philippians to be spiritual because spirituality (the real thing, not the distortions) can lead to **BROKEN CHAINS**. Unfortunately, false spirituality creates even heavier chains.

Now consider Philippians 3:1-3 ...

*Finally, my brothers, **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.
Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil,
those mutilators of the flesh.
For it is we who are the circumcision,
we who worship by the Spirit of God,
who glory in Christ Jesus,
and who put no confidence in the flesh.*

Paul was sounding a very strong warning. The dogs he was referring to were Judaizers. The Judaizers were Jews who also professed to be Christians. They were in the habit of telling Gentile Christians that circumcision and other Old Testament laws were to be observed by Gentiles or they could not be Christians. The Judaizers probably commended the Gentiles for believing Jesus had died for sin and had risen from the grave. But they would also tell the Gentiles that they were required to do more. They had to

be willing to live as Jews. When Paul called the Judaizers dogs he wasn't resorting to name-calling. Jews of the first century commonly referred to Gentiles as dogs. This was more than mere racism, it was spiritual pride. The Jews considered themselves to be superior because God has chosen Israel to be His special covenant nation, and God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Judaizers were teaching that for Gentiles to be truly spiritual they had to conform to Jewish ways. This was a big problem in the early church and Paul saw it for what it was; false spirituality and a killer of true joy.

I love studying church history, but it is with more than just historical curiosity that I have taken note of the false spirituality of the Judaizers and Simon Stylites (by the way, my best guess is that Simon should be seen as having been a genuine Christian with some very confused ideas. The Judaizers were, in Paul's estimation, very bad news). There is a direct connection between false spirituality and an absence of true joy. It wasn't just the Judaizers or Simon Stylites who got it wrong. The entire 2,000 year span of church history has been marked by individuals or groups who have been wrong about spirituality. Mistakes are still being made today and bad doctrine is still being taught, so we must be vigilant.

What is the nature of the relationship between joy and spirituality? It is very significant to know that according to Galatians 5:22-23, joy is a part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These two verses provide one of the best single definitions of true spirituality that can be found in the entire Bible. The fruit (love, **JOY**, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control) are character traits that the Holy Spirit produces within the life of the believer who is yielded to God and is genuinely seeking to live a life which is holy and pleasing to God. We don't produce this fruit by tapping into our own strength and resources, we receive them from God.

Take a close look at the list of fruit. Do you see how these traits are characteristic of the Lord Jesus Christ? Add all this together and we can come up with this definition:

Genuine spirituality is the state of being surrendered and committed to the Lord so that the Holy Spirit has free reign in our hearts. In this condition we become recipients of the fruit of the Holy Spirit and our character is transformed in such a way that we become imitators of the character of Christ.

How does joy (and **BROKEN CHAINS**) tie into all of this? Since joy is included in the list of the fruit of the Spirit, it is proper to say that joy is a gift that comes from God to us. Is this a contradiction with earlier statements in this commentary where I indicated that joy is something we choose? No, not at all. Joy is a perspective we choose, a way of looking at things. But remember, it is not just any perspective or something we choose randomly, it is the perspective God commands us to have and the details of that perspective are revealed in God's Word. Our will is involved, but God Himself is the ultimate source of our joy.

Although we have not yet arrived at Philippians 4 in this commentary, take a look at 4:5 and 4:7. Two of the things mentioned in those verses are gentleness and peace, both of which are on the list of the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22-23. So there you have it; joy, gentleness and peace are a part of the fruit of the Spirit and are a part of the promises of Philippians 4. Since we have already said that Galatians 5:22-23 is a classic definition of genuine spirituality (or “Spirit”-uality!) we can say that genuine joy comes from genuine spirituality. To whatever degree I lack joy, to that degree I am unspiritual. Practicing one of the many false forms of spirituality will keep me captive to my chains.

I began this chapter by mentioning Simon Stylites and the Judaizers. They are helpful illustrations of false spirituality because they stand out as obvious extremes. This is due in large part to the fact that they are many centuries removed from our contemporary setting and are so foreign to us that their errors are easy to spot. But what about the false spiritualities of our day? Without going into detail, I would place them in three categories.

1. Legalism

This is the false spirituality of rule-keeping. True spirituality is committed to keeping God’s commands, but legalism is something different. The legalist often invents rules that go beyond Scripture. They might be good rules such as “I won’t go to the movie theatre because I don’t want to support a corrupt industry”. The problem with the legalist is that he thinks keeping his own rule makes him spiritual and that other Christians who don’t follow the same rule are automatically to be viewed as being un-spiritual. Legalism existed in Paul’s day too, and is described in Colossians 2:20-23.

2. Antinomianism

The Greek word for law is *nomos*. Anti-*nomos* or antinomianism is the opposite of legalism. It is a spirit of no rules, no restrictions. The antinomian looks down on the legalist and then goes to an extreme in the opposite direction. Many antinomians are people who were once legalists. Having seen the error of legalism, they over-correct and do away with standards that ought to be preserved. This is a main feature of what today is called **the emergent church**. They think of themselves as being spiritual precisely because they are not legalists. Somewhere in this process a reverence for the holiness of God is muted. Taken to the ultimate extreme, antinomianism will actually justify sinful and immoral behavior and say it doesn’t matter because God’s grace covers it all (Jude 4).

3. Mysticism

One of the key elements of mysticism is its claim to have special knowledge or insight into the character and workings of God. Mysticism might not openly reject Scripture, it does, however,

minimize Scripture in comparison to a higher authority - human experience. Try explaining to someone who have been “slain in the Spirit” at a Benny Hinn meeting that there is absolutely no biblical warrant for such activities and that Benny Hinn regularly twists the teachings of Scripture almost beyond recognition. Such an individual is difficult to reason with because he has had an “experience”, and that experience means more to him than anything you can show him from a careful study of Scripture. This mindset is very common in the American church and is a symptom of the hold that postmodernism has on Western culture at large. The dangers of mysticism have been present in the church from almost the very beginning:

*Do not let anyone who delights in false humility
and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.
Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen,
and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.*
Colossians 2:18

The legalist, the antinomian and the mystic would all claim that their path is the way to **BROKEN CHAINS**, but they would be wrong. As Paul wrote to the Philippians from a Roman prison while in chains and facing a trial that could lead to his death, he was rejoicing. How was this possible? It was because Paul was not a legalist (although he did have high personal standards). He was no antinomian (although he did champion the liberty given in the grace of God). He was no mystic (although he did have a deeply intimate experience with the supernatural God of the miraculous). Paul experienced the promises of God because he rejected false forms of spirituality and chose to submit his perspective and his will to the Sovereign God who in turn filled Paul with the fruit of the Spirit.

BROKEN CHAINS

DIGGING DEEPER

1. If you had to guess, what do you think was the particular misunderstanding Simon Stylites had about what makes a person spiritual? _____

2. Every Christian is susceptible to false ideas about spirituality. In what way have you been wrong in the past? _____

3. How could being unduly influenced by the Judaizers have hindered the Philippians and kept them from experiencing **BROKEN CHAINS**? _____

4. If joy is a part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that God gives (Galatians 5:22-23), where does our will and our choices fit in? _____

5. Based on what can be observed in the contemporary church of America, can you give an illustration of legalism? Antinomianism? Mysticism? _____
