Blameless Before God?
Philippians 3:6 in Context

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Paul's statement in Philippians 3:6 that he was blameless 'with respect to righteousness in the law' before his conversion has been the focus of much discussion in debates over 'covenantal nomism' and 'works righteousness' in the writings of Paul and first century Judaism. This article will examine in particular the problems that this verse raises with respect to: (1) the basis of Paul's confidence before God, and (2) universal human sinfulness and inability to keep the law. It will be argued here that Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included his obedience to the law. A summary of the views of two representatives of those who object to the argument will be presented before presenting the main support for this argument.

OBJECTIONS TO THE ARGUMENT FOR PAUL'S PRE-CHRISTIAN CONFIDENCE IN HIS OBEDIENCE

The views of Krister Stendahl and E.P. Sanders will be summarised as two of those who object to the view that Philippians 3:6 presents Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God in his obedience to the law.1 For varying reasons, both scholars argue that this verse highlights the possibility of keeping the law. Thus, in their view, Paul already had acceptance before God. The problem according to these scholars was not 'self-righteousness' but 'new righteousness'. The views of Krister Stendahl will be summarised briefly before turning to those of E.P. Sanders.

In recent decades Krister Stendahl has drawn attention to Philippians 3:6 in the context of debate over Paul's conversion/call. This text forms a key plank in Stendahl's argument against a reading of Paul that portrays Paul's conversion in the manner of an Augustinian-Lutheran agony of conscience.2 Stendahl argues that individuals could, in

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fact, keep the law. The problem according to Stendahl was that although individuals could keep the law, Israel as a whole failed to keep the law. Therefore the law was abandoned in light of the salvation-historical new covenant in Jesus. As mentioned above, one of the keys to Stendahl’s argument that individuals could keep the law is Paul’s apparent testimony of his own genuine blamelessness in Philippians 3:6. Thus, Stendahl argues that Paul was equipped with a ‘robust conscience’ rather than the ‘introspective conscience’ that has been anachronistically read back on to Paul by Western readers.

E.P. Sanders has been the most influential scholar of recent decades to draw attention to the relationship of Philippians 3:6 to Pauline teaching on universal sinfulness. Sanders argues that Paul does not teach that it is impossible to observe the law. According to Sanders, Paul attacks a position that is Torah-centred, nationalistic and excludes Gentiles, rather than a position that centres on ‘works-righteousness’. Since ‘works-righteousness’ is not the problem with the position that Paul attacks, Paul’s own position does not involve an argument for the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly. Sanders supports his view by arguing that Philippians 3:6 provides evidence that one could live in perfect obedience to the law. In his view, the possibility of human blamelessness in Philippians 3:6 is in conflict with passages such as Romans 5:12. According to Sanders, Paul only reveals in Romans 5:12 that he is aware of a view that recognises that everyone sins. Paul, however, does not ‘make use of that argument in the principal debates about righteousness’.

Sanders also argues that in the context of Philippians 3:2–11, Paul does not charge himself with ‘the attitudinal sin of self-righteousness’. Thus, the description of this ‘righteousness’ as ‘my own righteousness’ in Philippians 3:9 is not to be thought of as ‘self-righteousness’. According to Sanders, this interpretation must be read in to what Paul is saying by imposing Romans 3:27 and 4:2 on Philippians. In contrast to the argument that ‘my righteousness’ equals ‘self-righteousness’, Sanders argues that just

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3 Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, 80–81.
8 E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 24.
10 E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 44.
as the phrase, ‘their own righteousness’, in Romans 10:3, is merely a righteousness that belongs to Israel, so the phrase, ‘my own righteousness’, in Philippians 3:9, is merely ‘the righteousness peculiar to’ (Paul) as a Jew, according to which he was blameless (3:6). \(^{11}\) Thus, Paul’s ‘righteousness according to the law’ is merely ‘the peculiar result of being an observant Jew, which is in and of itself a good thing’. \(^{12}\) The boasting, therefore, in this context, is not one of self-dependent pride in accomplishments, but is confidence in the privileges of God’s covenant people who possess the law. There is no fault with this old righteousness – his boasting after all was in things that were ‘gain’ – it is simply not the new one. \(^{13}\) The problem is merely a salvation-historical one; his confidence is now to be placed in Christ. \(^{14}\) In summary, Sanders’ two arguments with regard to Philippians 3:6 are that ‘the passage lends support neither to the view that Paul regarded the law as impossible to fulfil, nor to the view that he regarded fulfilling it as wrong because it leads to self-righteousness.’ \(^{15}\)

For various reasons, therefore, both Stendahl and Sanders argue for the possibility of keeping the law and that Paul was not guilty of the sin of ‘self-righteousness’. Apart from the difficulty of relating this position to Paul’s teaching on the universal sinfulness of humanity, this position also affects how the ‘works/grace’ contrast is to be understood in Paul – specifically, whether or not Paul argues against boasting in personal obedience. The following section will examine the phrase in its context to determine whether or not Paul gives evidence of boasting in personal achievement, and whether or not this suggests that Paul had ‘acceptance’ before God on the basis of this righteousness.

**PAUL’S MISPLACED PRE-CONVERSION CONFIDENCE IN OBEDIENCE**

As mentioned above, the argument of this paper is that this phrase shows that Paul’s (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included his obedience to the law. Primary support for this argument will be found in the immediate context of Philippians 3:6. The evidence will be grouped under two main headings: confidence in personal achievements; and, human sinfulness and inability to keep the law.

**Confidence in Personal Achievements**

First: Against Sanders’ general thesis that Paul was only opposed to boasting in Jewish privilege and status, Paul argues (in Phil. 3:4–6) that his former confidence in the flesh was based on both Jewish privilege (circumcision, people of Israel, tribe of Benjamin,

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\(^{11}\) E.P. Sanders, *Paul on the Law, His Opponents, and the Jewish People in Philippians 3 and 2 Corinthians 11*, 79.

\(^{12}\) E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44–45 (emphasis original).

\(^{13}\) E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44, 139–41.

\(^{14}\) E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44.

\(^{15}\) E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*
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Hebrew of Hebrews\(^\text{16}\) and personal accomplishments (Pharisee,\(^\text{17}\) zeal, blamelessness).\(^\text{18}\) In fact, in Paul's order of argumentation, the personal achievements climax the list with ever increasing intensity so that righteousness in the law, as the final item, 'brings the catalogue to its climax; everything else is pointing here'.\(^\text{19}\) Räisänen\(^\text{20}\) and Watson,\(^\text{21}\) building on Sanders' position, draw the false dichotomy that the list in Philippians 3:5–6 must be either privileges or achievements and therefore subsume the achievements under the general category of privileges.\(^\text{22}\) Räisänen, in fact, has to rewrite Paul's text to 'what he ought to have said' had Paul written in a more straightforward manner and reduced his list to simply renounce 'the biblical covenant'.\(^\text{23}\) Contrary to Räisänen and Watson, however, Paul provides evidence here of the tension in first century Judaism between boasting in national privileges and in individual achievements.

Second: As Gundry has observed, several 'attitudinal' terms in the context draw attention to the fact that Paul is highlighting 'the attitudinal sin of self-righteousness';\(^\text{24}\)

1. 'we who ... boast in Christ Jesus' (3);
2. 'we who put no confidence in the flesh' (3);
3. 'if anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh' (4);
4. 'to me (moi) in connection with 'gain' (7);
5. 'I consider these things loss' (7, 8);
6. the indication that these achievements are superior to his opponents 'as though there is a contest over who can boast the most' (εγώ μαλλον in 4b);
7. 'the following denial that he now considers himself to have arrived' (12–16); and
8. the exhortation to think similarly about these things (toute phronōmen; 5).

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\(^\text{16}\) R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', 13, includes 'Hebrew of Hebrews' among the group of personal accomplishments. However it seems best to identify this as either part of the group of privileges that belongs to those who are born Hebrew or, as Fee suggests, a 'swing' term that sums up the preceding three and sets the stage for the final three. Gordon D. Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 307. The three-fold repetition of káto further suggests that the final three should be grouped together.

\(^\text{17}\) The phrase, 'according to the law, a Pharisee', may refer to a status that Paul took upon himself and thus is representative of a lifestyle and a particular interpretation of the law as opposed to other interpretations of the law (such as Sadducean). Or, the phrase may refer to the strictest approach to the law and highlight personal achievement even further. Either way, the phrase belongs to the second grouping of personal activities as opposed to national privilege.

\(^\text{18}\) R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul', 13–14; Sanders mentions this kind of structure (he omits 'Hebrew of Hebrews' and 'Pharisee' in his structure) as one of the arguments for the 'traditional view'. He then seems to admit that this is indeed the structure of the passage but denies that Paul thought there was anything wrong with it because these things were 'gain.' Cf. E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 44.

\(^\text{19}\) Gordon D. Fee, Paul's Letter to the Philippians, 309.

Thus, contrary to Sanders, understanding ‘my righteousness’ in 3:9 as ‘my individual righteousness’, based on ‘the performance of good deeds, which leads to boasting’ does not depend on a conflation of Philippians 3:9 with Romans 3:27 and 4:2 and a misunderstanding of ‘boasting’ as ‘boasting in one’s individual performance’ rather than ‘boasting in the special status of Israel’. Rather, this reading is based on the many phrases that highlight an attitude towards both individual performance and privilege in the context of Philippians 3 itself.

Third: In addition to Gundry’s observations above concerning evidence for Paul’s pre-conversion ‘attitudinal self-righteousness’, in the immediate context Philippians 3:9 adds further confirmation by elaborating on the different kind of righteousness Paul receives from knowing Christ. The righteousness that Paul receives from knowing Christ is different in its origin (ek theou; from God), in its basis/ground (dia pisteos Christou; as an objective genitive – through faith in Christ), and in the means of receiving it (epi tēi pistei; by faith). Thus, the problem is not simply that there has been a salvation-historical shift so that the ‘old righteousness’ must be replaced with the ‘new righteousness’. The two different kinds of righteousness differ in that the ‘old righteousness’ was centred on moral achievement and was said to be ‘a righteousness of Paul’s own’, whereas the ‘new righteousness’ centres on a right relationship with God.

Fourth: If Paul is merely boasting in national privileges here, why did he not describe his previous ‘righteousness’ as ‘our righteousness’ rather than ‘my own righteousness’ (3:9). The context indicates that Paul speaks of his own ‘righteousness’ due to the fact that he is making a comparison (ego mallon in verse 4b) with his opponents – fellow Jews who shared his ‘national privileges’.

22 Cf. J.D.G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 370, who also denies that the final three items are ‘self-achieved’.
24 The following observations are drawn from R.H. Gundry, ‘Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul’, 14.
25 E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 44. Cf. Seyoon Kim, The Origin of Paul’s Gospel, 2nd ed., WUNT II/4 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1984), 354, for the fact that Sanders and Räisänen misread the phrase ‘their righteousness’ in Romans 10:3. Kim asks why, in their view, ‘does [Paul] criticise the Jews for seeking that righteousness which, as [Paul] himself admits, the Jews alone are privileged to obtain?’
26 The following observations are drawn from Peter T. O’Brien, The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 394, 396. Although O’Brien prefers to take dia pisteos Christou as a subjective genitive, this does not affect the argument.
Finally: It must be acknowledged that in Sanders' discussion of Philippians 3:6, his primary opponent is Rudolf Bultmann. Sanders is right to insist that Bultmann's view that boasting is wrong in and of itself is to be rejected — Paul himself commends boasting in God (1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17). Sanders' view, however, that the problem is merely the object of boasting rather than the fact of boasting is both reductionistic and misses the primary point being made in Philippians 3. As Schreiner notes,

Paul discouraged boasting in the works of the law because this inevitably led to a pride in one's own self, in one's own devotion to, and performance of, the law. To boast in Christ or God, however, is not to boast in one's own accomplishments; one merely exults in what God in Christ has done.

Thus, contrary to the claim that Philippians 3:6 does not refer to 'self-righteousness', the immediate context of Philippians 3:6 (rather than an imposition of Romans 3:27 and 4:2), suggests that Paul's (misplaced) pre-Christian basis of confidence before God included confidence in his obedience and personal achievements as well as confidence in Jewish privilege.

**HUMAN SINFULNESS AND INABILITY TO KEEP THE LAW**

The following four points argue that Philippians 3:6 does not contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere concerning universal human sinfulness and inability to keep the law.

First: Sanders' argument that righteousness by the law is attainable neglects the implication of verse 4b ('if anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more') that Paul is speaking from the perspective of a false human evaluation. Thus as Gundry suggests, Paul is not implying that except for the better righteousness in Christ, God would have been satisfied with Paul's righteousness. Likewise, Sanders' repeated refrain that Paul's righteousness according to the law was not only attainable but good 'in and of itself' because it was 'gain', misses the significance of Paul's additional 'to me' in verse seven (hatina ἐν moi kerdē, 'whatever was gain to me'). Once again, Paul is speaking from the perspective of a false human estimate, rather than real 'gain' before God.

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29 E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 44, 63 n. 133, 134.
32 Schreiner, 'Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law, 262 n. 26 (emphasis original).
34 R.H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works, and Staying Saved in Paul,' 18.
35 E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 45.
Second: the meaning of ‘blameless’ (amemptos) in Philippians 3:6 is not necessarily ‘sinlessness’ before God. Although not weighty as individual arguments, the following, taken cumulatively, argue against a ‘sinless’ view of amemptos. (1) As Seifrid has argued, a combination of claiming blamelessness with regard to the law, while at the same time being aware that one’s own response to the law was at times one of disobedience, was not inconsistent with first century Judaism and may be found in the Community Rule of Qumran (e.g. 1 Q5 11:10) and Psalms of Solomon (e.g. Ps. Sol. 3:6–8).36 (2) The self-inclusive portrait of Romans 7:7–13 seems to indicate that knowledge of the law brings knowledge of sin – in Paul’s case, it seems that he was aware of coveting before conversion.37 (3) The term ‘blameless’ (amemptos) is unlikely to mean ‘sinless’ in light of its use to refer to observable behaviour elsewhere (cf. the reference to Zechariah and Elizabeth in the context of Luke 1:6). Although largely an argument from silence, Schreiner is probably right to note that ‘Zechariah’s sceptical response to the message of Gabriel was presumably not the first time he sinned (Luke 1:18–20).38 Fourth: Even the possibility that Paul means to include the sacrifices required by the law acknowledges the presence of sin.39 Other contexts indicate that the law may indeed be a burden (Acts 15:10) in light of the struggle against the Yetzer HaRa (the ‘evil impulse’).40

Third: in addition to the previous observations, the context of Philippians 3 itself suggests that ‘blameless’ (amemptos) does not necessarily mean a denial of sin. The immediate context of Philippians 3:4–6 indicates that Paul’s emphasis is that ‘by the standards of practising Pharisees he had an exceptionally good performance record’.41 Paul does not argue in this context that he had never sinned but that his record of law observance is as undeniable as his zeal in persecuting the church.42 Thus, in this context,

36 Mark A. Seifrid, Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 151, cf. also 97–98, 122–27; E.P. Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People, 24, also notes this. Sanders, however, suggests that Paul may have held both views without realising they were ‘mutually exclusive’.
37 Mark A. Seifrid, Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme, 150, 174.
39 Schreiner, Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law, 261. As Kim argues, however, it is unlikely that Paul has in mind the provisions in the law for sin in this context as something to boast in. His Jewish opponents would also have had such provisions. The context, shows that a greater performance (egς malon in 3:4b) than Paul’s opponents is intended. Cf. Seyoon Kim, Paul and the New Perspective 149–50.
rather than claiming sinlessness, Paul is merely saying that ‘his devotion to and observance of the law were extraordinary.’

Fourth: in light of the above observation, contrary to Stendahl, the meaning of ‘blameless’ is also not to be psychologized as referring to an internally ‘robust conscience’. In this regard, Stendahl is as guilty of psychologizing Paul’s conversion as the Lutheran position he claims to refute. Stendahl claims that in Philippians 3:6 ‘Paul speaks about his subjective conscience’ and that Paul ‘experiences no troubles, no problems, no qualms of conscience, no feelings of shortcomings’. On the contrary, Paul does not refer here to his conscience as either ‘robust’ or ‘troubled’.

Thus, contrary to the claim that Philippians 3:6 provides evidence for the possibility of keeping the law and a denial of universal human sinfulness, the context indicates that Paul is speaking of a record of obedience to the law from a (false) pre-Christian perspective that does not deny the reality of sin.

CONCLUSION

Philippians 3 shows that some Jews would have taken encouragement from their personal achievements as much as from their heritage and status. This is indicated in the way that Paul attacks his adversaries by showing that he was better than them in both ‘pedigree and performance’. This demonstrates, however, Paul’s pre-Christian basis of confidence. According to a Pharisaic interpretation of the law, his record of law observance was exceptional. After meeting Christ, however, he realised this ‘so-called’ righteousness, as a basis of confidence, was inadequate. Thus, Paul does not claim sinless perfection in Philippians 3:6, and he does not contradict Romans 5:12. As Seifrid succinctly states, Paul’s ‘claim to having been “blameless according to the righteousness in the law” represents his preconversion self-estimation, which his post-conversion soteriology exposed as less than adequate.”

44 Mark A. Seifrid, Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Justification (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 27.
45 Krister Stendahl, Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, 13, 81.
47 Schreiner, ‘Paul and Perfect Obedience to the Law’, 262.