

**Philippians: More than Flesh**  
**Sermon 10-28-18**  
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**Philippians 3:1-11**

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.<sup>2</sup>Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! <sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—

<sup>4</sup>even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. <sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

<sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

**Message:**

\_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ = \_\_\_\_\_. What are those blanks? By the end of this sermon, I promise you, you will understand those blanks. Maybe you're thinking that 2+2=4. That would be a sound math conclusion. Or maybe you're thinking 3+3=6. Or maybe you're thinking 2+3=10. Of course, you'd be wrong on that last one, mathematically speaking. But keep thinking about this equation as I explain our text.

At the beginning of our passage Paul makes it pretty clear why he's about to say these things. "Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard." So what he's about to say is to warn the Philippian people. Remember that this is primarily a gentile town of retired Roman soldiers and citizens. These words of

caution are not because the Philippian people are participating in these beliefs and actions. “<sup>2</sup>Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!” Who are these people who “mutilate the flesh?” Mutilation of the flesh was usually associated with pagan priests who would cut themselves. For instance, if you remember back to 1 Kings 18 when the prophet Elijah was having a throw down with the Baal priests to prove which God was real. The Baal priests try many things to get fire to come upon the altar by their god Baal. In a last ditch effort in verse 28, “<sup>28</sup>Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them.” If you know the rest of the story, the Baal priests failed and the God of Elijah, our God, prevailed. So mutilation is usually associated with worship of false gods. But here, Paul flips this idea around. What exactly is Paul referring to? “<sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—<sup>4</sup>even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.” He’s naming circumcision as “mutilation of the flesh.” Why would Paul still affirm circumcision by saying, “...we who are the circumcision...?” Because he’s talking about circumcision in a different sense. He’s talking about a group of people, including himself, who “...have no confidence in the flesh...” He’s talking about circumcision in the spiritual sense. Circumcision of the heart. Paul speaks about circumcision of the heart more elaborately in Romans 2:28-29, “<sup>28</sup>For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. <sup>29</sup>Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.”

Paul has REASON for confidence in the flesh because he’s circumcised and is a Jew by upbringing. “If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” If anyone should be upholding this practice of circumcision it should be Paul. Remember Paul was fervently a Jew and a Pharisee. He strictly adhered to the law. He did everything he was supposed to do, according to the law, to be right with God. To the point of even killing many who believed in Jesus Christ. It wasn’t until that incredible move by Jesus, in Acts 9, to blind Paul on the Damascus Road, telling him how wrong he was to persecute Jesus by killing these followers, that Paul finally got it. Paul lived in righteousness according to Jewish law and yet he wasn’t righteous before God until he met Jesus.

“<sup>7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value

of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.” Paul is denying that circumcision is the path to righteousness with God even though he is one who is circumcised. He counts that practice as rubbish. According to a group of Jewish Christians, commonly called Judaizers, they believed that once one came to faith in Jesus Christ that they had to come under the law and follow all of its commandments. And if they didn’t follow all these commandments in addition to belief in Christ, then they were not right with God. Judaizers are trying to bring old covenant into the new covenant. And in defense of the Judaizers, they didn’t know any different. How do you shed centuries of belief of adhering strictly to the law to take up this less structured belief in believing only in Christ? The law has been engrained in this culture to make them right with God. It has given them a false sense of security. So according to the Judaizers, if we go back to our equation, they’d say, Christ + Circumcision=Righteousness. Or Christ + the Law=Righteousness, rightness with God. What’s Paul’s argument? “...I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.” So Paul’s corrective equation is this: Faith in Christ + nothing=Righteousness. Faith in Christ + nothing=Righteousness or Salvation. In fact, Paul would say that to believe Faith in Christ + something, actually equals nothing. Faith in Christ + something=nothing. It’s like saying 2 + -2. What’s 2 + -2 equal? Zero. Nothing.

Paul’s point is this: to say that you need something in addition to faith in Christ nullifies belief in Christ. To say that you need something in addition to faith in Christ nullifies belief in Christ. Paul explains his privileges as one who would be “righteous” under the law, because he realizes that without Christ he isn’t righteous at all. And in fact, his righteousness in the law has led to many horrible things. Namely, persecuting/killing other believers in Jesus Christ. So he’s warning that if the Philippian community hears that they must adhere to the law in addition to faith in Christ, they will be led down the wrong path and may end up doing things that are in opposition to Christ. Now, saying all that, don’t misinterpret Paul here. He’s not saying that the law is evil. In fact, if you cross-reference with Romans 7, you’ll find that Paul explicitly says the law is not evil or sinful. The law is holy and good. What Paul does say about the law in Romans 7 is that it’s ineffectual because of the weakness of our flesh. In other words, we can want to will ourselves to follow the commandments and the laws, but we will ultimately fail. It’s important to strive for goodness and better ways of living

through the law, but it's actually only Christ who can make us righteous. It's only by His sacrifice on the cross that we may know the saving grace of God through Jesus.

Going back to that equation and bringing this closer to our time and place, what do we wrongly say that we need to do in addition to faith in Christ? Maybe we say that you need to read your Bible. Maybe we say that you need to pray more. Maybe we say that you need to attend church more. If you just do these extra things, then you will be right with God. Now, we might not outright say those things, but sometimes we imply them. We might even say that you need to help with Nutrolls. All of these extras though do not resolve your rightness with God. In fact, if you believe you need to do these extras with God to earn His affection, you nullify your faith in Christ. God's love for you is free because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins. He loves you no matter whether you make 200 Nutrolls or not. That's not why we participate in that kind of service. It's not about the "supposed to." We study scripture, we pray, we attend church, we make nutrolls, because of the righteousness that we find in the resurrection of our savior Jesus Christ. So if we were to tweak the equation, it might look something like this: Faith in Christ + nothing=Salvation → Something. Not exactly a perfect equation, but the idea is that the extra things we do in the name of Christ comes from a place of abundance. It comes from overflow. It comes from gratitude. We are so FULL with the life of Christ, so full of God's Spirit, that it just flows out. It comes from the freedom and salvation that we have in Christ. Not to earn rightness with God.

To look at this passage from a different angle, circumcision symbolizes insiders. If you're circumcised, your inside the group. If you're not, you're on the outside. And again, I have some sympathy for this mentality because to the Israelites they were chosen as God's people through the Abraham covenant. They were God's people intended to be a light to the world. Meant to be a beacon to all the other nations. But in order to be the beacon, the light, they had to get on the inside by circumcision and following the law. This is how they changed the world through being what others are not. But then Jesus flips this upside down. Insiders became outsiders and outsiders became insiders. In fact, Jesus wanted to make a third way as Christ followers. That both Jews and Gentiles would follow Jesus together. Does this sound familiar to some of our mentality sometimes? Yes, we are meant to be the light to the world. We are meant to be the light of Christ to the nations. We are meant to "...shine like the stars." But the fine line is when we use that mentality to keep outsiders outside, we further insulate ourselves, and keep the insiders inside. God blesses Abraham so that he can be a blessing to the world. What are we doing now as a church to further insulate ourselves? To wrongly continue to build an insider culture? What do we fear from outsiders? How can

we build a Christ-like culture here at Providence that pushes us outside the inside so that we can build the Kingdom of God all the more? I'm not sure who originally coined this phrase, but it's a pretty common reference among some Christian circles. Among many churches, we operate under this equation: Believing→Behaving→Belonging. In other words, we check peoples beliefs at the door. Do you believe in Jesus? Can you behave the way we expect you to? Dress in your Sundays best. Will you make sure your children sit still during the worship service? If you can check all the things off our checklist then you can belong in our community of faith. Faith in Christ + Something=Nothing. And I think that's how many Jewish Christians operated in the ancient world. This is partially what Paul is speaking to. But let's flip that equation around. What if we accepted people for who they are when we meet them or when they walk through the door? What if we withheld opinions and judgment? What if we extended an extra amount of grace and love upon first meeting? And then as we get to know them we gain trust with them. As they participate in worship or as they participate in our small groups or in our service opportunities, they begin to be shaped in a Christ-like walk. They absorb that light and love which we are all extending so graciously and so generously. They experience the overflow, the blessing, the abundance, of our faith in Jesus. And eventually, they come to belief in Christ. They come under Christ's authority and they start to understand more deeply what it means to walk in faith in Jesus. And because of this loving relationship with Jesus, they want to know God more by reading scripture. They want to have a greater intimacy with God by praying. They want to extend the same blessing they've experienced to others around them. Unlike the Judaizers, Paul wants communities like Philippi to function under Belong→Behave→Believe. Biblical Scholar, Morna Hooker, references the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation leader, Martin Luther, saying something similar, "...Luther expressed the same idea somewhat differently when he said that the nature of a Christian does not lie in what he or she has become, but in what that person is becoming."

Paul ends our passage by saying, "<sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." The power of the resurrection is at work in Paul and it is at work in us. If we try to attain righteousness or perfection by means of the law, we will fail and we will nullify our faith in Christ. Faith in Christ + Something=Nothing. To believe that we must follow the law to earn God's affection is of the flesh. And these mortal bodies will eventually fail us. As much as we want to will ourselves to obedience to God, we will fail. This is why we need Jesus and we need Jesus alone. Faith in Christ + Nothing= Righteousness/Salvation. This is why the people around us don't need us to continue to make it difficult for them to join the faith. Unlike the Jewish

Christians in Paul's day and unlike controlling Christians in our day, we need to have an attitude of loving and caring for those who may be different than us. Who aren't like us. We need to aide them in helping them feel like they belong. So that they may eventually come to belief in Jesus Christ. We are meant to be the light of the world because Jesus is in you and He's in me. If we keep putting up barriers to the cross, we are nullifying the work of the cross. We don't do these extras in our faith: read the Bible, Pray, Serve to earn our salvation/right relationship with God. We do them because of the abundance of love and grace that we've experienced from Jesus Christ. Let's be about more than the things of the flesh. Let's stop implying that people need to do more than have a relationship with Jesus to be right with God. Let's stop trying to protect ourselves by making ourselves more insular and instead have more faith in our God. That as we move outward God will bless us and God's Kingdom will be blessed. Let's proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to outsiders, not to bash them over the head, but to help them to see and to know the love of Jesus. To help them experience the beauty, the awe and the wonderful nature of our God. Let Jesus flow out of you and out of me so that the world may know the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith in Christ + Nothing=Salvation. Amen.