

Philippians 3:1-16 • Confidence in the Flesh

Introduction

It's probably a natural outgrowth of the society we live in that we evaluate people's skills, education, background and a myriad other factors to determine to what degree they're "qualified". I've heard Jews state, for instance, that they would never personally read Scripture by their self---only their rabbi was "qualified" to interpret Scripture correctly and therefore guide them correctly. The analogy they provided was, "For legal advice I seek a lawyer, for medical advice I seek a doctor---why would I not rely completely on a professional for spiritual advice?" Well...there **are** "qualifications", but they're according to **God's** standards---not man's. But they're qualifications for each of us personally.

¹Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; ³for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, ⁴although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

⁷But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

[Read v.1-11]

Q: How does Paul begin this section? That is, what does Paul tell the Philippians in verse 2?

A: He gives a warning. In verse 1 he states that he is providing for them a "safeguard."

Q: Of whom does he warn?

A: "Dogs", "evil workers", "false circumcision".

Here is a quote from the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

"(They are)...those who dogged the trail of the apostles and endeavored to compel Gentile converts to submit to circumcision and other Jewish practices in order to be saved. Three epithets designate them. 'Dogs' denotes the wild, vicious, homeless animals that roamed the streets and attacked passersby. Used figuratively, it was always a term of reproach (cf. Deut 23:18; 1 Sam 17:43; 24:14; Prov. 26:11; Isa 56:10, 11). Jesus used it in reference to opponents of God's truth (Matt 7:6), and Jews often used it similarly to Gentiles. Paul turns the figure back upon the Judaizing teachers and castigates them with the very term they probably used of others. 'Men who do evil' is literally 'the evil workers'. If the word 'workers' is stressed, the epithet may emphasize their energetic labors and perhaps their concentration on performing deeds of law rather than trusting God's grace. In the term 'mutilators of the flesh,' literally 'the mutilation,' Paul deliberately parodies the Judaizers' insistence on circumcision by sarcastically calling it mutilation.... For those who had lost the significance of circumcision and insisted on it as a rite for Christians, it was nothing more than a mutilation of the flesh."

Application: Who ought Christians be warned about today?

Q: In verse 3, what does Paul mean by "we are the true circumcision?"

A: See Romans 2:25-29. The sign of circumcision identified God's chosen people, those with whom He made an unconditional covenant (promise) based on faith. The outward sign is no longer needed. The sign of the circumcision is now a heart changed by faith.

"For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." --Romans 2:25-29

Q: In what way were the Judaizers putting “confidence in the flesh”?

A: They relied upon external things to establish or confirm their relationship with God. That is not the way of faith. Faith does not need an outward sign. The only sign that will be seen is the fruit of the Spirit; that is, a changed life.

Application: *In what ways do Christians today rely upon “external things” to base their relationship with God?*

⁴although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

[Re-read v.4-6]

Q: What is the point Paul is making in verses 4-6? What does putting confidence in the flesh mean? Were the things Paul listed bad?

A: That if anyone had a right to put confidence in the flesh, it was Paul. Putting confidence in the flesh means using anything as a substitute for faith. For the Judaizers, it was, amongst other things, circumcision. For sabbatarians, it may be worshiping only on a certain day of the week. For others, it may be what they do not do, such as drinking or dancing. For still others, it may be insisting that the KJV is the only “right” Bible translation. The things Paul listed were not “bad”; they were just no longer necessary to be known by God.

Application: *Sometimes the things of God are mis-used by people to represent a doctrine or concept not intended by God. It is one of the visible indicators given to us in order to discern the “dogs”, “evil workers”, “false circumcision”.*

⁷But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,

[Read v.7-8]

Q: In verse 7, what import did Paul give to his past credentials? How do they compare to knowing Christ?

A: They pale in comparison. Knowing Christ is the only thing that is needed.

⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,

[Read v.9]

Q: In verse 9, what is put in contrast to “works of the Law,” such as circumcision?

A: Faith. Faith is an act of the will that establishes a personal relationship with Christ. The outward signs, such as circumcision, are actually the indication of a *lack* of faith; that we must **do** something in order to get right with God as a substitute for following Him from the heart.

Q: In spite of the fact that Paul counted “all things as loss” referring to his past, did his past serve him well in the redemptive process through which God used Paul?

A: Yes. Paul is saying that all the achievements of the past were meaningless when compared to knowing Christ personally through faith. Yet, God used his past to be able to reach the Gentiles, to defend against the Judaizers, to spread the gospel, and write the portions of the NT that he wrote. In other words, those accomplishments meant nothing when it came to the issue of salvation, but were important when it came to service.

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Application: Although some of your past seems meaningless, has God redeemed any of it in order to serve Him more effectively? How?

Q: On the basis of what did Paul achieve righteousness?

A: On the bases of faith, not of law.

[Read v.10-11]

¹⁰that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; ¹¹in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Q: What are the three things Paul wants to “know” in verse 10?

A: He wants to know Him, he wants to know His power, and he wants to know His sufferings, even to the point of death.

Q: Of the three, where does the average Christian stop wanting to “know”?

A: Probably after 1 or 2.

Application: How can we know the “fellowship of His sufferings”? What does that mean?

[Read v.12-16]

¹²Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. ¹³Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; ¹⁶however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Q: In verse 15 we see the phrase, “...have this attitude...” Where have we seen that phrase before, and what was it in regard to?

A: See 2:5 regarding humility.

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,”
—Philippians 2:5

Q: Who do you think Paul was referring to in verse 15 when he says, “...as many as are perfect”?

A: Those who feel like that have “arrived” spiritually and are looking down on others who they perceive don’t have their spiritual act together.

Q: In verse 12, what do you think is the thing Paul is trying to “lay hold” of?

A: See verse 14. He wants to lay hold of “*the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” The upward call of the God in Christ Jesus most likely refers to that point when physical death comes and his spirit is called upward into full fellowship with Christ, no longer seeing through a mirror darkly, but face to face with Jesus. See 2 Tim. 4:8. [Some believe that this upward calling could refer to the rapture, but that is unlikely as the words used here are not typically the words used in that discussion.]

“in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”
—1 Timothy 4:8

Application: In what ways ought we as believers press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God?