



Making the Cut

Introduction

Philippians 3:1-11

At the end of World War I, General Pershing sent word to the troops in Europe announcing a victory parade through the streets of Paris. There were two requirements for the soldiers to qualify to march in the parade: They had to have a good record; and, they had to be at least 186 centimeters tall. Word came to one company of American soldiers and the excitement built about how great it would be to march in that victory parade. Being Americans, no one knew for sure just how tall 186 centimeters was. But the men began comparing themselves, lining up back to back to see who was the tallest. The taller men in the company were ribbing the shorter ones, "Too bad for you, Shorty! We'll think of you when we're in Paris!"

Then the officer came to find out if there were any candidates for the parade. He put the mark on the wall at 186 centimeters. Some men took one look at the mark and walked away, realizing that they weren't even close. Others tried, but fell short by a small amount. Finally, the tallest man in the troop stood up to the mark and squared his shoulders. But he discovered that he was a quarter of an inch shy of the mark (6' 1/2"). When those men compared themselves with themselves, some thought they were tall enough to qualify. But when the standard came, it proved that none qualified.

It is commonly thought that the way to get into heaven is by being a good person. People who believe that compare themselves with others and think, "I'm good enough because I'm better than my no good neighbor who drinks beer and watches sports on TV every Sunday. I usually go to church; I don't get drunk (at least not on Sunday); I don't gamble (sure, I buy an occasional lottery ticket, but I don't gamble as much as he does). I don't hit my wife (we yell a lot, but I've never hit her!). I pay my taxes (well, at least most of what I owe; nobody declares everything!)." That's the way people justify themselves and convince themselves that they're going to get to heaven. They compare themselves with others and figure that they're in the top half that's going to make it.

How good does a person have to be to get into heaven? Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). In that sermon, Jesus hit at the Pharisees, who thought that they were good enough to qualify for heaven. They had never murdered anyone. But Jesus said that if we've been angry with our brother, we have broken God's law and are guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (Matt. 5:22). The Pharisees prided themselves on never committing adultery. Jesus said that to lust after a woman in our heart is to break that commandment (Matt. 5:28). The absolute righteousness of God, not just in our outward behavior, but in our thoughts, is the standard we must live up to if we want to get to heaven by our good works.

God's Ten Commandments are like a ten-link chain that holds a boat to a dock. It only takes one broken link to cause the boat to be swept away by the current and dashed to pieces by the waterfall just down stream. Some, who are pretty good people outwardly, may look at someone who has broken every link in the chain and think, "I'm better than he is." But one broken link is just as effective as ten broken links in plunging that boat to destruction. That's why Paul concludes in his argument in Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Or, as he puts it in Galatians 2:16, "by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified."

In spite of the repeated clear teaching of God's Word, the error persists that everyone who by human standards is a decent person, will get into heaven on the basis of his good deeds. At the root of that persistent heresy is pride, which is what keeps most people from Christ and the gospel. As we saw in our last study, Paul was plagued by a group of false teachers, called Judaizers, who infected the churches he founded with a subtle error that appealed to pride. They did not deny that a person must trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. But they added works, especially the Jewish rite of circumcision, to faith in Christ as an essential requirement for salvation. Paul strongly warns the Philippians to beware of this subtle, but damnable, error (3:2).

In our text, he goes on to argue that if ever there was a person who could be right with God on the basis of keeping the Jewish law, it was himself. He had the credentials by birth; he had the track record by experience. But on the Damascus Road he came to realize that all those things he was counting on for right standing with God were worse than worthless. He threw them all on the trash heap and laid hold of Christ through faith. In warning us against this counterfeit Christianity, which still persists today, that mixes faith in Christ with faith in good works, Paul shows that...

True Christians count all human merit as loss in order to gain Christ through faith.¹

Open it

1. Describe a time when you had to interview or try out for a spot on a team or in a group? How was the experience? Did you make the cut? Why or Why not?

Read it

Philippians 3:1-11

Explore it

2. Who should the Philippians be careful of?

3. Prior to his conversion where did Paul find his confidence in?

¹ Cole, Steven J.. Philippians: Enduring Joy (Riches From the Word Book 1) (p. 159). Unknown. Kindle Edition.

4. After his conversion how did confidence change?
5. What did Paul seek to gain instead according to verse 8?

Apply it

“These Are the Times to Remember”

Paul never seems to be at a loss for words, and he doesn't mind repeating himself. He has already told the Philippians four times to rejoice. By the time he's finished, he will say it three more times. That's a total of eight times, including this verse! He didn't seem to have any fear that the Philippians were putting their hands over their ears, scrunching up their foreheads, and screaming, "Enough already!" He also says he doesn't have any trouble repeating himself because he knows the reminder will serve the purpose of making them aware again of the essentials and foundation of the Christian faith: being joyful regardless of their circumstances.

At that point, if his readers had been in the room with him, he most likely would have rattled the chains that encased his hands and legs as a reminder of how anyone can choose to rejoice even when they are stuck in bad circumstances. It never hurts for any of us to review the basics of our Christian beliefs because it guards our hearts. The Bible is our safeguard against wrong thinking. Reexamining the foundational principles keeps us strong and able to respond with trust in God to the attacks of Satan when he tries to make us distrust God's faithfulness.²

6. Paul has just finished up telling the Philippians that their beloved friend Epaphroditus has nearly died during his visit to see Paul, which is another indication of the ongoing difficulties these believers faced. Yet Paul begins our text with an exhortation for them to “rejoice”. What does it mean to “rejoice in the Lord” when life is difficult? How does this make life a bit sweeter?
7. Paul seems to be a broken record when it comes to exhorting the church to be filled with joy. What are some strengths and weaknesses to such an approach? What things should a church be active in sharing over and over again?

² Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3523-3533). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

“Storm Front”

Paul uses very strong language to identify a group of teachers who were trying to persuade the Philippians of a theology different from Paul's. He called them “dogs” and “evil workers.” No wonder Paul didn't want the Philippians to believe those false teachers; if they did, they could never be certain that their works were “enough” to earn salvation. They would always be wondering and feeling stressed. When Paul called these false teachers “dogs,” he wasn't writing about the favored and lovable pets in our culture. In Paul's time, dogs were scavengers who roamed the streets eating whatever they could find. As a result, they were “unclean animals” because they ate the foods that Jews were forbidden to eat. They often traveled in packs and were dangerous. These evil teachers may have thought they were teaching the truth, but Paul clearly believes they were dangerous because they turned people away from believing in Jesus's death as the only way to gain a right standing with God.³*

8. While the promotion of circumcision for religious purposes has run its course, what false teachings today are promoted under the heading of Christianity?

9. Circumcision in Paul's day was used by false teachers to show others how devoted they were to the faith. What things do people use to wrongly prove their devotion to God? Why do such things fail to accomplish anything?

10. Three times Paul tells us to look out for false teachers. What steps are you taking to discern whether something is Biblically solid when false teaching is so prominent in what is labeled Christian music, books, preaching and programming? What happens when we fail to do this?

³ Miller, Kathy Collard. Paul and the Prison Epistles (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3569-3577). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Galatians 6:15-16(ESV)

15 For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

11. Instead of outward things what are the markings of a true Christian according to verse 3? How are these markings to be fleshed out in everyday life?

“Big Shot”

Paul was not speaking from an ivory tower; he personally knew the futility of trying to attain salvation by means of good works. As a young student, he had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the great rabbi (Acts 22:3). His career as a Jewish religious leader was a promising one (Gal. 1:13–14), and yet Paul gave it all up—to become a hated member of the “Christian sect” and a preacher of the gospel. Actually, the Judaizers were compromising in order to avoid persecution (Gal. 6:12–13), while Paul was being true to Christ’s message of grace and as a result was suffering persecution. In this intensely autobiographical section, Paul examined his own life. He became an auditor who opens the books to see what wealth he has, and he discovers that he is bankrupt.⁴

12. Paul lists seven areas of fleshly confidence that he took pride in prior to experiencing salvation? What might a person today put on their list?

13. How do each of these things fall short of what is necessary when it comes to a right standing with God?

⁴ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Joyful (Philippians): Even When Things Go Wrong, You Can Have Joy (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 100). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

“My Life”

My parents recently brought me four tubs of stuff that I used to value. The contents included baseball cards, trophies, a letterman’s jacket, and more sports-related material. They were tired of having my former treasures fill up their storage space. As I looked through the things, I was at first excited. Then I stepped back and evaluated the whole. Here was 18 years of my life placed into four plastic tubs. It was pretty sobering. I used to spend countless hours playing sports and trading baseball cards. While I’m thankful for my childhood days and for my days playing sports, I really wish I had some different goals growing up. I wish I had lived with Philippians 3 in mind.⁵

14. Growing up as a kid what activity or asset did you treasure? Does that activity or asset still have a special place in your heart as an adult?

15. What things had caused Paul’s change of heart regarding what was important in his life? How about for you?

“Somewhere Along the Line”

Paul begins, "But whatever things were gain to me..." (v 7). This is a reference to everything he has previously listed on the asset side of the ledger representing his life— everything in which he once trusted to commend himself to God (v 5-6). All of those things Paul listed before— self-effort and religion, upbringing and nationality— all of these were the things in which he earlier put his trust, and which he once thought would gain him acceptance with God. But they were not gain in the eyes of the Almighty. And so, having encountered Jesus, "those things I have counted as loss" (v 7). This word "counted" is used three times in verses 7-8. Paul has added up the numbers and come up with a bottom-line calculation. Those things that he once counted as gain, he has come to see as loss. Everything in his life in which he once trusted to give him acceptance with God he has written off the asset column. He sees the bankruptcy of them. He has re-listed them on the liability side as a loss. In the moment when he met Christ, he rendered everything as loss: "All of the cherished treasures in his gain column suddenly became deficits."⁶

16. How can we blur the lines between right living and being righteous? How can one promote boasting and the other promote humility?

⁵ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (p. 131). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith (God's Word For You Book 18)* (p. 157). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

“You Can Make Me Free”

Faith is not something we must work up; it is simply the hand that takes what God freely offers. Salvation does not depend on our faith, but on Christ and His faithfulness. Faith does not save us or make us righteous; Christ saves us and God declares us righteous based on what Christ did on the cross. Faith is simply receiving what God has promised. It looks to God, not to itself, and not to any human merit or works. Even faith is the gift of God, so that we cannot boast in it (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29).⁷

- 17. Salvation that saves us is one that is found in the grace and mercy of God which is so gracious and kind. Why then do so many people “put confidence in the flesh” and try to save themselves through good works?**

J. I. Packer put it well: “Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord” (Knowing God, 34).⁸

- 18. Paul wants to participate in Christ's suffering. What does this look like for us living in America where we experience little suffering for our faith? How do we “know Him and the power of his resurrection” on a daily basis?**

⁷ Cole, Steven J.. *Philippians: Enduring Joy (Riches From the Word Book 1)* (p. 166). Unknown. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Philippians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (p. 144). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups