

Philippians 3.1-3 Sermon / COB / 12.18.16

Introduction

- † **[1: Lemke]** When I was in Little League, I played with a boy name Mark Lemke. Mark was a year older than me and he arguably was the best player in our league. I was a starter, playing shortstop, and I could get on base and steal second, I even did some relief pitching, but I was in awe of players like Mark, who excelled beyond my skills in all aspects of the game and made it look easy.
- One day, I was talking with friends on the team about my dream of someday being in the Major Leagues, when my coach walked up. He said something like, “Give it up Groben! Even Mark Lemke isn’t good enough to make the majors; what chance do you have?” Now the ironic and fun part of this is that Mark did become the starting second baseman for the Atlanta Braves and even won a World Series ring with them. But my coach’s assessment of my skills was correct: I was not good enough. No matter how hard I tried, I could only get so far on my own skills.
 - And even Mark Lemke needed some breaks to make it: someone had to see him play in high school and convince someone else to draft him in the twenty-seventh round; that baseball even had twenty-seven rounds in the draft was an act of grace for Mark, as most other sports have far fewer; and then he still needed coaches who would believe in him and develop him; he had to avoid injury; and as a hitter, the difference between being good and mediocre comes down to one more base hit per week, so just once a week having a blooper drop in gets you fame and riches, but one weekly diving catch by the fielders keeps you from ever making it.
- † **[2: Tebow]** Let’s shift to another sport, football. Let’s say the goal here is to be the starting quarterback for the team that wins the Super Bowl. Did Tim Tebow accomplish that? No. But here is a man that deserves it if anyone does, right?
- I mean, first of all, he is the son of missionaries and a good Christian man. He was willing to attract all kinds of antagonism for showing his faith during nationally televised football games and for openly talking about his faith in interviews. Even other Christian athletes were shocked and offended by Tebow’s open proclamation for Christ! I think the apostle Paul would have liked Tebow in that respect.
 - And what about his achievements? He won the Heisman Trophy – the top honor in college football – as a sophomore. The next year, he was the MVP in the national championship game, when he led the Florida Gators to victory. He broke the Southeastern Conference’s all-time records in passing efficiency and rushing touchdowns, and is second all-time in passing efficiency for all college players. When he started playing for the Denver Broncos in the NFL, they were 1-4, but he led them to win their division and even to victory in the first round of the playoffs.
 - So Tebow has merit as a good Christian man and as an incredible athlete. But he will never achieve his dream of being a Super Bowl winning quarterback. Despite all his merit, Denver replaced him, traded him away, and nobody else ever gave him the chance to be the starter again. He did not get the breaks he needed at the professional level, and in the end his coaches decided he was not good enough.
- † **[3: Romans 3]** As human beings, especially as Americans, most of us want to trust in our own abilities and be self-reliant. We are independent, we don’t like to ask for help or admit failure, we

like to believe that the good will be get their just rewards and the bad their just punishment, and we usually think we are among the good.

- These attitudes are not entirely bad, but they are dangerous when it comes to spirituality. Some people think they are good enough to get to Heaven or at least that it is possible to be good enough, that we should work toward that goal. Others think they are born into entitlement and righteousness, that if they were born into a Christian family, if they were baptized as a baby in a specific denomination, if they grew up in a Christian society, then they are automatically in good with God and will get to Heaven.
- But the Bible says in **Romans 3.23 NET**, **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. None of us measures up to God's standard. Furthermore, **Romans 3.20** says, **For no one is declared righteous before him [God] by the works of the law**. In other words, we cannot deserve Heaven, we cannot merit salvation, because we can never be righteous enough in our own power, even if we try to be obedient.
- The situation actually is hopeless for us! Or it would be, except for Christ. **Romans 3.24 NET** says [we can be] **justified** [declared righteous by God] **freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**. So would you rather rely on the righteousness you can earn or be given absolute righteousness as a gift? Will you trust God's grace or your own efforts?
- If you like, you can open your Bible up to Philippians 3. I encourage you to pull out the handout; it has blanks you can fill in and a little graphic. I encourage you to use this, because it will provide you with an easy reference later, should you want to refresh your mind on these concepts or teach them to someone else.

Exposition

- † **[4: 3.9]** We are going to study Philippians 3.1-3 today. But before we begin, let's skip down to **Philippians 3.9 NASB**: [Paul says, "I want to] **be found in him [Christ], not [by] 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...**
- † Contrast these two types of righteousness. The one Paul does not want is what he can earn himself, that which is derived from obedience to the Mosaic Law. We could generalize this today, to say this is how righteous we can be based on our obedience to Scripture or based on how good we are as a person, as a Christian. This is how righteous we are on our own merits, based on our own efforts. Paul says this is *not* what he wants!
 - The other type of righteousness is what comes through Christ, through his faithfulness to die on the cross for us and our faith in him as our savior. Paul wants a righteousness that is given to us as a gift of grace. We sometimes call this "imputed" righteousness, which means God accounts it to us, even though we did not earn it.
 - Why would Paul prefer imputed righteousness over works righteousness? We'll come back to that. But first, let's take a look at our text.

[5: 3.1-3] **Philippians 3.1-3 NET: Finally, my brothers and sisters [in the church], rejoice in the Lord! To write this again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials...**

- † That first word can be confusing, because this is not Paul's final thought in the letter. The NIV translates it as "further"; the NLT says, "Whatever happens"; I would translate it as "henceforth." Skip it! Paul's first point is that the Philippians should rejoice in the Lord!
- Now keep in mind, Paul has acknowledged that they are suffering for Christ because of persecution, and that he is suffering for Christ in a Roman prison; and he says that they should seek to emulate Christ, Paul himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus in their willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel... this hardly seems cause to rejoice, right? Yet Paul tells them they can and should rejoice in the Lord! How can this be? We will come back to that question also!
 - **[6: write again]** We will come back to it, because Paul is about to tell them why they can and should rejoice in the Lord despite their suffering. And we see in 3.1 that what he is teaching them is not new to them. In fact, since these are essential truths related to the gospel and salvation, Paul surely taught the Philippians these truths when he planted their church and when he revisited them later.
 - It is no trouble for him to write the same thing. After all, he lives for Christ, will do anything for the gospel mission, loves teaching God's revelation, and loves the Philippians like siblings.
 - And he knows these truths will safeguard them. Why is that? Why do they need safeguarding? Remember we discussed before that there was a cult teaching false doctrine to the Philippians believers.
- † **[7: chart]** In 3.2, Paul describes his antagonists in unflattering terms. He says: **Philippians 3.2 NET: Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!** That sounds like something out of a comic book: "Beware of the Mutilators!"
- Before we consider each of these insults, let's look at a chart showing how Jews and Gentiles in Philippi were in four groups at this point. Before Christ, there were simply Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles were almost all pagans and the Jews almost all at least believed God existed, whether or not they were obedient.
 - In Paul's day, there were now four groups. At the top of the chart, there were Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah-savior, they did not believe in him; they continued practicing their form of Judaism. They were not saved, but they were not causing anyone trouble either.
 - At the bottom of the chart, there were Gentiles who were still pagans and did not believe in Jesus. These were the people who were persecuting the Philippian believers, causing the suffering Paul mentioned earlier in the letter.
 - A third category were Jews and Gentiles who believed the gospel and put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah-savior. These were the Christian church in Philippi, to whom Paul was writing.
 - The fourth category were Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, but did not understand what he had taught. They were trying to live by the Mosaic Law and believed that their obedience would make them righteous. These were the antagonists, who were pressuring the church in Philippi to reject the gospel Paul taught, the gospel of grace and imputed righteousness, to adopt a works righteousness gospel instead.
 - These antagonists were living by the Mosaic Covenant God had with the nation of Israel. The people in the church believed the New Covenant age had dawned, since Jesus said he would usher in the New Covenant with his blood. The Jewish prophets in the Old Testament had

foretold that God would establish a New Covenant to replace the Mosaic Covenant, including the Law. The antagonists were deceived and now they were deceiving people in the church.

- † **[8: Beware]** So Paul told the church to beware of these antagonists with their false gospel based on works righteousness.
- Back in 1.27-28, Paul commanded the Philippians to stand firm for the gospel, not being intimidated by their opponents. Now he says they should “beware” of these antagonists and their false teachings.
 - Paul repeats the Greek verb βλέπω three times: beware, beware, beware! He is emphasizing this heavily, it is a major concern for him.
- † **[9: mutilate]** Paul described the antagonists with three ironic insults. Those of you who in the flesh once enjoyed shredding people with your tongues will find this amusing, as do I.
- The third insulting name is the one that really tells us who these antagonists are: Paul calls them “those who mutilate the flesh” or the “false circumcision” as it says in the NASB.
 - Jews were referred to as “the circumcision,” because their boys were circumcised since circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and their ancestor Abraham and was codified in the Mosaic Law. The antagonists were ethnically Jewish, so they were circumcised.
 - In Greek, the word for circumcision is περιτομή. Paul calls the antagonists κατατομή which means a “mutilation” or “cutting in pieces.” You ever notice that if you are in a group watching a ball game or a movie and some guy on TV gets hit low, that every man in the room cringes? That would be the effect here: think about circumcision, now in that context think of the doctor performing a mutilation! And that is not the worst of this insult!
 - Paul himself was a circumcised Jew, so we should not think he had racial prejudice; what he was against was their false gospel. This was not an ethnic matter, it was a faith matter. The antagonists believed Jesus was the Messiah, but they had a legalistic gospel and relied on fulfilling the law of Israel for righteousness. They were relying on their human credentials.
 - All the apostles leading the church were Jewish. But they had declared that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be Christians, they did not need to become Jewish or adhere to the obsolete Mosaic Law. The Jews in this cult did not agree with what the apostles taught about this or about the gospel, so they were pushing circumcision and obedience to the Law as the path to righteousness and God’s blessing.
 - So Paul referred to them as the κατατομή instead of the περιτομή; as the mutilation instead of the circumcision. Israel had been “the circumcision,” God’s people, but true Jews now followed Jesus as their Messiah and accepted his gospel. Those who rejected that gospel, even if they said they followed Jesus [and we have groups like this today], in Paul’s eyes were no better than the pagan flesh mutilators who were condemned in the Old Testament scriptures of the Jews.
- † **[10: evil workers]** That’s a big insult. Paul also called the antagonists “evil workers.” This one does not need much explanation; any of us would be offended at being called this.
- It was especially insulting, however, because the antagonists were promoting self-righteousness through works of the Law. They were being obedient to the Law, doing good works, and so they thought of themselves as workers of righteousness. But Paul says they are workers of evil,

because they promote a false gospel, they exult and trust in their own works instead of exulting and trusting in the gospel of grace which Christ taught.

- † **[11: dogs]** The first insult was that Paul called them dogs. How many of you like dogs? How many of you own dogs? Do you let them in the house? Do you let them sleep on your bed? Do you snuggle them, pet them, even let them lick you? So this is a strange insult to you, right?
- Yet sometimes we insult people by calling them “dogs,” don’t we? We say, “you dog!” or we insult a woman by calling her another word for female dog. I am not sure how these words came to be insulting in our society, but in Paul’s day, this was a well-defined insult.
 - **[12: sniffing]** Think about how dogs behave. They sniff each other’s butts; they lick their unmentionables; they will eat garbage, they will eat their own vomit, they will eat dead and half decayed animals, they have been known to eat human corpses. So the Jews in ancient Israel despised dogs for being into unclean things, things Jews were not supposed to touch. And Jews would insultingly refer to Gentiles [non-Jews] as dogs because they were into unclean things, since they were not trying to obey the Jewish purity laws.
 - Paul is turning this insult around to say that the real dogs who are into unclean things are the antagonists, the Jews who believe in Jesus but are still trying to earn righteousness and be “clean” under the Mosaic Law. They think they are earning righteousness, but really they are making themselves more unclean by relying on their own effort instead of on Christ’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit.
- † **[13: choice]** Paul used three *nasty* ironic names as insults: he was adamantly opposed to these people who insisted you must follow the Mosaic Law to attain righteousness before God, who taught you could earn righteousness before God in any way. This was a false gospel.
- In summary, the antagonists say you earn righteousness by what you do. We call that bottom line thinking: relying on your own flesh surely is a fleshly way of thinking.
 - Paul knows God’s top line revelation; he says you have no righteousness without Christ, no matter what you do... and when you are saved in Christ, God considers you as righteous as Christ, because God accounts [imputes] Christ’s righteousness to you.
- † **[14: circumcision]** In 3.3, Paul says we are the true circumcision, we are the true people of God. Paul was Jewish, most of his readers were Gentiles, but Jews and Gentiles who accept the gospel of Jesus Christ in faith are now one group in Christ, called Christians. Christians – both Jewish and Gentile – are truly God’s circumcised, his chosen people in the New Covenant.
- **[15: worship]** We are those who worship [or serve in a worship capacity] by the Spirit of God instead of by only our flesh. The verb for worship, λατρεύω, was used in the Greek version of the Jewish Old Testament to describe Israel’s service to God as his covenant people before the Messiah came. This worship is now given by Christians, those who believe in Jesus as the Messiah-savior and his gospel of imputed righteousness. We have the New Covenant gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are Holy Spirit guided, empowered by him, not just following rote traditions; and we do good to offer worship by the Spirit, not for our own benefit.
 - **[16: exult]** We are those who exult [or boast in] Christ Jesus instead of ourselves, because we know we are saved by his grace and his work in the crucifixion and resurrection. In contrast to the antagonists who are legalists, trying to achieve righteousness by relying on their own efforts,

we rely on Christ's work for us. We trust in God's grace given through Christ to make us righteous in God's eyes.

- **[17: confidence]** We are those who put no confidence in the flesh; we do not trust in our own merits, in our birthright, in our privileges, or in our fleshly works, not even in physical circumcision, to help us attain righteousness before God or to contribute to our salvation. Instead we rely entirely on God's gift of grace through faith in Christ.

† **[18: prefer]** So why did Paul prefer imputed the righteousness given by God to the righteousness he could earn? Another way of asking that is, why did Paul rely on grace instead of his own merits?

- First of all, we can never be good enough to earn salvation or earn our way to Heaven. As we saw earlier, Romans 3 makes that clear: all of us have sinned, all of us fall short of God's holy standard of perfection. You can never be 100% pure and perfect.
- On the other hand, when we put our faith in Jesus as our savior, God accounts us to be as righteous as Jesus! He accounts or imputes to us the very righteousness of Christ. Instead of considering us as guilty as Adam, God considers us as righteous as Jesus, because Jesus paid for our sins. That's the redemption we mentioned.
- God justifies us, which means he declares us to be righteous. This has nothing to do with our obedience or goodness, it is a gift of grace from God the Father, based on the purity of Christ and his sacrifice for us. And since it is a gift of grace, based on Christ, not based on anything about us or what we do, we cannot lose it; we can rest easy that we are going to Heaven if our faith is true.

† **[19: rejoice]** And that is why the Philippians could rejoice in the Lord despite all their struggles. And that is why we can rejoice in the Lord despite all our struggles!

- If we know our failures in life and struggles with sin will not affect our status with God, if we know he loves us unconditionally and promises he will one day deliver us fully out of all this, into Heaven to be with him, then we can have peace and joy inside even when life is hard.
- Paul in person had taught them they could rejoice in Christ, because of the gift of salvation and imputed righteousness; now he repeats that teaching again to safeguard their faith and hope with truth. They must choose to rejoice despite their suffering and not misinterpret that suffering, they must commit to the true gospel and pursuing the gospel mission, to safeguard them against despair and the influence of the antagonists.
- Paul mentions joy or rejoicing a dozen times in this letter, but always in the context of suffering. He is saying we should rejoice through these sufferings, despite these sufferings, even because of these sufferings if they are for the gospel, because we have the gospel gift of imputed righteousness that leads to salvation!

† To rejoice is a choice, not an emotion. We have to choose to rejoice, rather than despair or complain. When Ben Bacon preached here one time, he told us that psychological studies show it is hard for us to be truly objective. He was talking about how we think of other people, that we either tend to see them a little more positively than they deserve or a little more negatively. It is the same for our life circumstances.

- You can see your glass as half empty or half full. I have been moving around like a little old man, because I was in so much pain most of the time that I could barely stand up straight. I have

been in pain most of the past couple of years. Many of us have physical problems; and we struggle with sadness and frustration, relationship problems, increasing costs and decreasing income, too much to do and not enough time or energy... all this could get us down.

- I was thinking about this during my vacation. I am cynical and analytical and a problem solver, so I tend to focus on the negative in my life and let that dominate my thoughts and drive down my mood. But what if I made a conscious choice to change my outlook? After all, there is a lot of good in our lives too: at the least, we have each other, loving friends who will help us and encourage us; we have a good church, most of us have enough to eat and a place to sleep; we might struggle with health but we still have life and some enjoyments in it, like reading biblical Greek... And even if all that was gone, even if we were in a pit of self-loathing because of our sinfulness, we would still have God's love and his promise of salvation, because of imputed righteousness.
- And that can be enough, if we let it be! We can choose to rejoice! If we focus on rejoicing in God and his provision, that will safeguard us against what could rob us of our joy or turn us away from God, things like fear, doubt, doublemindedness, discouragement in life, or false teachings. We need this safeguard given the hardships and antagonists we face in our lives.
- Let's pray . . .