

The Path of True Joy
Philippians 3:1-3
Sunday, February 23rd, 2025
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Scripture

Philippians 3:1-3

[1] Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

[2] Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. [3] For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Let's Pray

Introduction

How many of you have ever bought something that didn't do what a company said it would? I know I have.

Now, most of the time these companies are just trying to make a product seems a little better than it actually is. But sometimes, companies make outrages and false claims that are blatantly false, and therefore end up in court. For instance:

In 2014, Red Bull settled a class action lawsuit over claims that its energy drinks improved physical performance and reaction time.

In 2016, the FTC charged Volkswagen with deceptive advertising for promoting its "Clean Diesel" vehicles when they actually were cheating on emissions tests.

In 2009, the FTC found that Kellogg's claims that Rice Krispies boosted children's immunity were false and unsupported by scientific evidence.

And In 2012, Skechers agreed to pay \$40 million to settle charges that Shape-ups shoes helped people lose weight and tone their muscles.

All of these companies got in trouble because they promised that their products would deliver results that they just couldn't.

In a similar way, Paul is dealing with false claims in our verses for this morning. There is a group of people in Phillipi who trying to convince this Gentile church that their acceptance, satisfaction, and joy in God are not found in Christ alone, but in Christ plus their works.

So Paul, like the FTC (Federal Trade Commission), has to step in to correct their false teachings.

Now, you will notice that Paul's argument against their claims goes all the way through Philippians 3:11, but we are only going to focus on the first three verses today.

Because in Philippians 3:1-3, Paul gives us the foundation of his argument which is that true and lasting joy is found in Christ and Christ alone.

So this week we are going to set the stage for Paul's defense in Philippians 3:4-11 by first looking at Paul's call to joy in Philippians 3:1 and then how we should pursue that joy in verses 2-3.

Let's begin by looking at the Call to Joy.

The Call to Joy: We must rejoice in the Lord.

Philippians 3:1

[1] Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Now, you might notice something strange within this particular verse. The first word that Paul uses is the word "Finally."

That may feel strange to you because the word "finally" in Paul's epistles generally comes near the end of a letter to let us know that he is wrapping up.

However, this word which is "loipon" in Greek, can either mean "finally" with an eye toward wrapping up the letter, or it can mean something like "as for the rest," "furthermore," or "in addition," and is used to mark a transition from one section to another.

In this case, it's used as a transition, where Paul is looking to connect his specific commands in 2:28-29 to rejoice and to have joy when Epaphroditus returns to a general and overarching command to "rejoice in the Lord."

Now, this is actually the first time in this letter that he uses the specific phrase "rejoice in the Lord," but we know that it isn't the first time that he has talked about joy or rejoicing.

Rather this call to rejoice or to joy is one of the clearest and most consistent messages within this book.

Look with me at the following verses:

Philippians 1:3-5

[3] I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, [4] always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, [5] because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

Paul is communicating the joy he has in his prayers for them because they are partners with him in the work of preaching the gospel.

Philippians 1:18

[18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,

Paul is sharing how he rejoices even when Christ is proclaimed with false motives.

Philippians 1:25

[25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,

He is convinced that he is supposed to be with the Philippians again so that he can help them to experience joy in their walk with Christ.

Philippians 2:17–18

[17] Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

There should be mutual rejoicing between Paul and the Philippians as they both live out and fulfill the ministry and calling that God has put on their lives.

The point is that the theme of joy and rejoicing in the Lord is all over this book because it is an indispensable reality of our relationship with Christ.

We are supposed to be people who find our gladness in the Lord.

In fact, Paul believes that joy and rejoicing are so essential to the Christian life that he tells them in the second half of Philippians 3:1 **“To write the same things to you is no trouble to me, but is safe for you.”**

But why is joy so important to Paul that he is willing to write about it again? And why does he say it is safe for them, or as the NASB says, “it is a safeguard for them?”

For those answers let’s look together at Romans 15:13.

[13] May the God of hope fill you with all (complete) joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound (overflow) in hope.

When we experience the fullness of joy that God provides, it grows our hope and trust in the future that has been secured for us in Christ.

It helps us to believe that our faith is real and that God of hope will accomplish his promises to us in this life and in the eternity to come.

But it also means that the opposite is true. That when we waver in our joy and struggle to rejoice in the Lord, we are prone to experience a lack of faith or hope in Christ.

So Paul is willing to write about joy and rejoicing in the Lord multiple times because he believes that it will protect them.

It will protect them from wavering in their faith, it will protect them from putting their hope in something other than Christ, and it will help them to remain faithful to the God of hope even in the midst of their struggles.

They will be able to stand firm in Christ as they deal with persecution, infighting, division, and with false teachers in their midst, which we will talk about in a moment.

Application

But before we get there, I want us to take a moment to do a personal joy inventory this morning. And to do this, I am going to walk through the different reasons that Paul gives for rejoicing in Philippians and I want you to rate your level of joy or gladness in these areas on a scale of 1-10.

Now, this is your own inventory so you don't need to shout out your answers, but this will be something that will help you to understand where your heart is in relation to Christ this morning.

Are you satisfied by Jesus? Is your hope for today and the future firmly fixed upon him and his finished work for you? Or are you struggling to trust him, to rejoice in him, and to believe that he is actually with you and can satisfy the deepest longings of your soul?

So let's begin.

In Philippians 1:3-5 Paul talks about making his prayer with joy. On a scale of 1-10 how excited are we to seek God in prayer? 10 being very excited or 1 being not excited at all.

In Philippians 1:18 Paul rejoices whenever anyone preaches the gospel. For you, how happy are you when you hear about others being witnesses for Jesus?

In Philippians 2:2 Paul talks about the joy he will receive when the church seeks unity through service. On a scale of 1-10 how passionate are you about seeking unity in the church through serving one another?

In Philippians 1:25-26 Paul wants the Philippians to have a joy that flows from their trust in Christ. How well are you doing at trusting Christ this morning?

Now, if you put down low numbers, I want you to know that this exercise is not meant to condemn you or make you feel guilty. Because, even for me, there are ways that I wish my own personal inventory was higher.

But this is meant to be a starting point for us on **the path of finding our true joy in Christ**. And everything else that I am going to say this morning is meant to help move us along that path.

That we would become a people who are so supremely satisfied in Jesus that we can stand firm in our faith even amid the greatest trials and temptations.

So now let's turn our attention to what it actually looks like to walk the path of true joy in Christ.

The Path of True Joy: True joy rejects false substitutes.

Philippians 3:2

[2] Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

One of the first things you might notice when looking at verse 2 is the repeated phrase "look out."

Now, if you are familiar with the use of repetition in the Bible, you will note that when a biblical author repeats something three times, it's meant to catch the reader's attention.

And in this situation, Paul is repeating the phrase "look out" which means "beware" because he is trying to warn the Philippians about a serious threat to their faith that is present in Phillipi.

The threat is a group of false teachers known as the "Judaizers."

And the reason that they are called Judaizers is because they are known for convincing Gentile Christians that they also needed to follow the Jewish ceremonial laws in order to be truly saved.

Where Paul preached that we are saved by faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone. The Judaizers would say **"no, we are saved by faith in Christ and through keeping a set of rules."**

So Paul not only believed that this group was a huge threat to true saving faith, but he continually dealt with them everywhere he went.

Because the "Judaizers," would follow him around, and would try to convince the newly formed Gentile believers that they also needed to keep the law and be circumcised in order to be real Christians.

In fact, these false teachers caused so many issues for the Galatian church that Paul had to rebuke the Galatians for abandoning Christ and turning to a different gospel. (Gal. 1:6)

Now, it seems that the situation hasn't gotten that bad in Phillipi, but nonetheless, it is clear that the "Judaizers" present a threat to the Philippian's faith and so Paul wants to warn them about the false gospel they are teaching.

He does this in verse 2 by calling them **“dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of the flesh.”**

Look, I realize that we have a lot of dog lovers in this room, but “Dogs,” in the ancient world were seen as the scum of the earth. They were unclean and nasty; they would devour dead flesh and would lick up blood from the ground. **They were viewed the way we view rats today.**

So then the Jews, being God’s chosen people under the Old Covenant, took this term “dogs,” and applied it to Gentiles. Because Gentiles (non-Jews) were unclean outsiders, according to the Old Testament law.

We can see this in Matthew 15:24 and 26 when Jesus interacts with the Canaanite women and says,

[24] “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

[26] “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

But now, in a great reversal, Paul is saying that the Judaizers are actually the unclean outsiders. They are the “dogs,” who are not of the chosen family of God because they are preaching and promoting a gospel of works that can’t save anyone.

They are “evildoers,” who in the Old Testament are considered the enemies of God, even though, as Jews, they considered themselves God’s children. **Because they “mutilate the flesh.”**

When Paul says they **“mutilate the flesh,”** he is referring to the ritual of circumcision. In the Old Testament, circumcision was given to Abraham in Genesis 17 along with all future generations of Israelite men as a sign that they were the covenant people of God.

But now, under the New Covenant of Christ, being a part of the family of God doesn’t require physical circumcision. Rather it comes through faith in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our hearts. As Paul writes in Romans 2:28-29:

[28] For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. [29] But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Therefore, the Judaizers are outsiders and enemies of God because they are trying to make physical works (circumcision and observing the law) the benchmark of belonging to the people of God instead of faith in Christ alone.

And he uses the term “mutilation,” so that the Philippians would understand that the practice of circumcision, **as a means of getting right with God,** is evil and abhorrent.

It is a false substitute for Christ, it will not save them, and it will not give them the true joy that only God supplies. **It is a false gospel that they must “look out” for and “reject.”**

Application:

I can imagine that many of us in this room have either heard or been exposed to this kind of false gospel in our lives. You may have had a pastor, priest, parent, friend, or other family member who has tried to tell you that you need to believe in Jesus, but you also need the church or good works to be saved.

But by the grace of God, you rejected those beliefs, and your eyes were opened to the truth that salvation comes through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. **Which is why you are more than likely part of an evangelical church.**

But that doesn't mean we are immune to false substitutes.

Every day we are confronted with lies that tempt us to put our hope, our faith, and our joy in something else besides Jesus.

Maybe it's the financial advisor telling you that you need to save more so you can live a happy life in retirement.

Or it's the lie that tells you that you're a good parent and therefore a good Christian because your kids act right.

The lie that says you will be happy as long as you have the right job, the right relationships, the right kind of clothes, phone, car, or the right house, etc...

That productivity in your job or in the gym equals spiritual health.

Or that God will love you if you can just pray more, read your Bible more, and serve more.

Or one specific to me is that I must be doing well with Jesus if the church is happy and growing.

Each and every one of these lies is a false gospel and they are tempting us to become like the Judaizers. To add something to our faith as the means of our acceptance and joy in Christ.

But if we are serious about finding true and everlasting joy, then we need to reject these false gospels. We need to reject these imitations that can't save us or fulfill us. And we must turn back to Christ as our only hope for eternal life and as the only one who can fill us with his true and lasting joy.

As it says in 1 Peter 1:8–9:

[8] Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, [9] obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

True and lasting gospel joy always requires us to reject false substitutes. Because true joy only comes when Christ becomes our greatest hope and our greatest treasure.

The Path of True Joy: True joy comes from treasuring Christ alone.

Philippians 3:3

[3] For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Now, that Paul has given his scathing review of the Judiazers as “dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of the flesh,” he now turns his attention to giving a picture of what it looks like to be a true believer in Christ.

To be one who is not putting their hope in a physical ritual like circumcision, but one who has had their heart circumcised or transformed by the Spirit of God.

And he does this by giving the Philippians three characteristics or activities that should be present in the life of a genuine and joy-filled Christian.

Genuine and joy-filled Christians: Worship (live, walk, and serve) by the Spirit of God.

Philippians 3:3

[3] For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God...

Rather, than being accepted by God through doing a list of activities or rituals, the true believer has been saved and accepted, by God, through the shed blood of Christ and is now empowered by his Holy Spirit.

Which means that as believers, we no longer have to work for acceptance from others or from God. Instead, we are his accepted children, who have His Spirit living in us and working through us so that we can live in a way that honors him and reflects his greatness.

This is exactly what Paul told us in Philippians 2:13 when he said:

[13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Genuine and joy-filled Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God so that they would live a life that pleases him.

Genuine and joy-filled Christians: Glory in Christ.

Philippians 3:3

[3] For we are the circumcision, who... glory in Christ Jesus

Now, the word “glory” in Philippians 3:3 actually means **to boast or to be satisfied in something**. Which can seem strange to us, because in general, when we use the word boast it’s usually seen as a bad thing.

We don’t like it when people boast about themselves or their achievements because we associate it with excessive pride.

But in this context, glory or boasting means to have an excessive pride or satisfaction in Jesus.

For He is the one who created us, died on the cross for us, saved us from sin, redeemed us from the pit of death, has given us a future hope with God, and is the sole grounds of our acceptance with God.

Therefore, he is the one that we should boast about, he is the one that we should rejoice in, he is the one that deserves all of our honor and praise, and he is the one that we should turn to for our satisfaction and joy.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:31:

[31] **“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”**

Genuine and joy-filled Christians: Put no confidence in the flesh.

Philippians 3:3

[3] **For we are the circumcision, who... put no confidence in the flesh—**

In contrast to the Judaizers and to the Jews in general, Paul says that genuine believers won't put any confidence in rituals, national heritage, a family line, or any other works as grounds for their acceptance before God.

Because if we are saved by Christ alone, if we boast in and are satisfied Him, and if the Spirit of God lives within us to will and work for his good purposes, then we cannot put a single ounce of confidence in our own ability to make ourselves right with God.

Rather, we must remember what God says about all of **our self-justifying works**. They are what Isaiah calls a filthy rag or a polluted garment. As he says in Isaiah 64:6

**[6] We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.**

They will not lead to eternal life, they will not give us any standing before God, and they will not produce a life that is filled with the true and genuine joy that God provides.

Therefore, a genuine and joy-filled Christian cannot put any confidence in their works as a way to get the all-satisfying life that God provides.

And when we put all three of these activities together: Living by the Spirit of God, boasting in Christ, and putting no confidence in the flesh, a picture of a joy-filled life in Christ begins to emerge.

It's a life that's free of striving to be good enough. And instead, is centered on loving, honoring, and boasting in Jesus as the only grounds for our acceptance, satisfaction and hope.

This is what it looks like to have joy in the Christian life. A joy that comes, not from ourselves, but from living like the man in the parable of the hidden treasure.

Matthew 13:44

[44] “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. **Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**

The point is: True joy in the Christian life is only found when we treasure Jesus above everything else.

Application:

Do you remember when Jesus said in Matthew 6:21:

[21] For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

He said this because he knew something about the human heart. He understood that the things that we cherish and see as supremely valuable are the things that we will desire and seek after. They will become the center of our pursuit for fulfillment, hope, and joy.

So my question for us this morning is what are we cherishing? What do we hold as supremely valuable in our lives? What do we believe will give us the true acceptance and joy that we so desire?

Is it our accomplishments, our jobs, our wealth, our intellect, our social status, our families or is it truly Jesus?

For the Judaizers, they cherished their heritage and rule keeping because they believed that it would make them acceptable to God and would give them the hope and satisfaction that they desired.

But all it did was enslave them to a set of dead rules that couldn't save them or give them the true joy that Christ offers.

And if you are here this morning and you are hearing about this true joy for the first time, then I want you to know that it can be yours.

There is a God who sent his son Jesus Christ to die on the cross in order to pay the penalty for your wrongdoing. And if you come to him, believe in him, and put your hope in him as the only way to have a forever relationship with God, then you too can experience the full acceptance and joy that he gives to his people.

If this is you this morning, please come talk to me after service and I would love to help you begin your journey of finding your true joy in Jesus.

But if you are a believer this morning, then I want to encourage you to continue down the path of true joy.

Resist the temptation to put your hope, your faith, and your joy in something else besides Christ. Put no confidence in your ability to earn God's favor, and believe that you are fully loved and accepted by God because of Christ's work on your behalf alone.

Because real life, genuine hope and lasting happiness aren't found in your works, your possessions, or your circumstances.

Rather, they are only found when we put our faith in Christ and begin to live as if he is our all-satisfying treasure. Amen?

Let's Pray.