



"Where is your confidence?"

Paul writes,

2 Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— 4 though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

As we know by now, Paul is around the middle of his letter, even though he starts off saying, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!" (3:1). As we noted two weeks ago, he wants to stress that joy is found "in the Lord." "It is no trouble for me to write," he says, "the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you" (3:1). What he is saying is, I've mentioned this before, but I think it would be really helpful if I remind you. Then he warns them about a group of people that he is worried about. In the words Paul uses he is referring to Judaizers, a group who taught that people must be circumcised to assure their salvation. For Paul and indeed for anyone who correctly understands the gospel, this is heresy although it was apparently not an immediate issue in Philippi, but Paul wanted to be sure that the Philippians wouldn't be led astray. We read words used by Paul that perhaps catch us off guard as they don't seem like the usual phrases that Paul would write.

Strong words concerning those who taught a salvation by works—dogs, evil-doers, mutilators. He used the Gentile argument against circumcision—that it was a mutilation of the flesh.

Paul didn't seem to have a problem with Jews circumcising Jews, but in this letter, writing to what would have been a mainly Gentile church, he felt free to use the Gentile perspective. Throughout human history countries and races have had names for each other. Some have been inoffensive such as us calling the Australians the Aussies. They in turn often would call the English or more generally the British, "Poms." A term that no one is too certain of, some believing it is a contraction of the word pomegranate which is meant to rhyme with the word immigrant or that when British people come to Australia the sun burns them the colour of a pomegranate! Others have suggested that it comes from the phrase, prisoner of Mother England, but no one seems too sure. It is easier to find words that are harsh and nasty and obviously others that are racist in their nature too, and for obvious reasons I won't go in to those names.

"Dogs" was Jewish slang for Gentiles in Paul's day. The question then is asked. Why does Paul refer to the Judaizers by their slang word for Gentiles? The reason is believed to be quite obvious; he considers them not truly the people of God, not part of the true Israel. "For it is we who are the circumcision," he writes (3:3)—and by saying "we", he is showing those who read his letter and are Gentiles that, he is including them too. Although they are not physically circumcised, they are part of the true circumcision that Paul spoke of in Romans 2:29: "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. Those who have faith in Christ have the circumcision that counts, the circumcision of the heart."

Paul was trying to tell them that they were the true followers of Jesus Christ, not the Judaizers, that as Jesus's followers they were the ones to have the true worship: "we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh" (3:3). The hope of salvation that we have, he says, is not based on our body, on our flesh, anatomy or genealogy. Our confidence is in Christ alone. Past performance is worthless. If salvation were based on our genes and Old Testament laws, Paul would be at the top of the class. However he places no confidence in all that his former life believed as important because Christ fulfills all that went before.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

It is true that Christ did not come to destroy or to abolish the law or the Prophets. Every jot and tittle or last letter of the law is still in effect, but Jesus makes it very clear that what He came to do, is to FULFILL them. Fulfill: ful.fil', v.i.-fulfilled, fulfilling. To accomplish or to carry into effect, as a Prophecy or a Promise; to meet or satisfy the requirements; to bring to a finish or completion; to bring the conditions of a law to realization; to bring to a consummation.

By fulfilling the law Christ satisfied it's requirements in our place. In other words, the 'required' obedience is accomplished in Him. Therefore, in Christ we keep all of the law faithfully, and cannot be accused. In this way, we are no longer judged by any of the everlasting laws, for we are under the Grace of God. The law doesn't condemn us.

Romans 8:1-2 "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death".

The law stands, but it cannot condemn us because we are made free from the law in Christ, in whose righteousness we stand.

New Testament Christianity doesn't do away with the Old Testament laws, it stands in the revelation that the Messiah came to fulfill those laws, or to make complete, or to accomplish what was required that those laws not condemn us. He brought the law to completion, having stood in for us a substitute that the strength of sin (the law) not condemn us. Let me if I can use an old though slightly flawed illustration to help us understand this better. Let's suppose that an Old House represents the Old Testament Law, and a New House represents the New Covenant and Christ's ministry and the New Testament. Christ does not demolish the Old House, but he keeps it intact. Instead, he builds his New House next to it or even connected to it, sharing the same divine foundation. Christians live in the New House, which is grander and taller and has newer furnishings.

They are allowed to visit the Old House.

That is, they may read Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, histories, the Torah, and so on.

They may be edified and encouraged by the stories and principles found there, just as a visitor to the grand Old House can learn a lot from and enjoy the old furnishings and old-style architecture.

But the Old House does not hold them in.

They live in the New House.

And that is where we should find ourselves today.

Living in Jesus Christ, the one who has set us free from the power of the law.

The one who has brought us into a new relationship.

We are no longer subject to the law but rather we are covered by Grace.

This doesn't mean that we live our lives whichever way we want because the law no longer has power over us but rather we live grateful lives in a new and eternal relationship with Jesus. Paul in writing to the church in Philippi realised that because he wasn't with them in person, there was always an element of danger that someone would try to mislead the people. "You don't want to do that, this is what you want to do!" The people would not have been able to lift their new Testaments and say, "Oh no, it says here that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. Nothing else. I don't need to be circumcised." They couldn't do this since there were no New Testaments! But with each letter Paul was writing to them there came another section of what we have as our New Testament.

So Paul's letters were of utmost importance to the early church as indeed they are for us today.

So the danger for these young Christians in this instance was that they would be led astray by those who still held that to be a real Christian you have to be circumcised.

This was flawed theology.

It was unnecessary.

Granted it would not affect their salvation if they were to go ahead and be circumcised but that wasn't the point.

If they felt that this was something they had to "DO" then it took from Jesus what he has already done for us.

Jesus' work of Salvation is complete.

There is nothing we can add to it, nothing we can take away from it.

It is perfect, it is so much more than we could ever have hoped for and infinitely so much more than we deserve...

There is another danger associated with this dangerous thinking that Paul was worried about.

For us today there is the danger of thinking, well I wouldn't actually call myself a Christian...but

I don't do anyone any harm, in fact I am involved in quite a bit of charity work.

I help out with some of the organisations in church.

I help some of my elderly neighbours.

I go to church almost every Sunday.

I'm a good person, the things I do in life testify to this.

And no one is disputing that you are a good person, not for one moment...but the problem is that Satan wants you to believe that is sufficient for salvation, that it boils down to you living a good life.

You are a good person, therefore you must be pleasing God, therefore you shouldn't worry whether or not when you die God will accept you.

You should be ok.

Have you heard those lies?

Are you by any chance believing those lies?

If this is what you are basing your hope of Heaven on, then I am so sorry because it is my duty to tell you that it's not enough. If in fact you have never turned to God for forgiveness of your sins, if you have never realised that your sin, yes even if you are a lovely person there is still offensive sin in your life as there is in my life, and that sin is like a barrier between you and God. If you have never genuinely ask God to forgive you for that sin, if you have never trusted Him with your future by asking the Holy Spirit to come and dwell within you to give you wisdom to live your life for God's glory, then you are living a life that will ultimately not finish with Jesus.

There is no truth in believing that the good, right and proper things you do in this life will assure for you the hope at least of being considered for Eternal life with God.

What you will be asked on that day is not "what did you do?" but rather what did you do, with Jesus?"
Did you ignore Him or did you accept Him?

Friends I speak to you today as one who loves you, in much the same way as Paul love the good folk of Philippi, and in love I warn you to carefully examine today where your confidence lies. Are you mildly confident that you are doing ok with the life you are living outside of true Christianity or do you have the wonderful assurance that because you are living a life in Christ as a branch is attached to a vine, Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you in Heaven?

Let's pray.