

Sermon Summary #15

Dressed in His Righteousness Alone Philippians 3:1-11

Put aside your political affiliation for just a moment this morning, and don't let it interfere with my opening illustration.

Now, imagine that you just received a personal telephone call from President Barack Obama inviting you to appear in his presence at the White House. Air Force One will be sent to your home town to bring you and your spouse directly to Washington, D.C.

My suspicion is that the wife in your family will immediately respond by saying: ***"Oh, no, I don't have a thing to wear!"*** If not the man then certainly the woman in such a household will be greatly concerned about *physical appearance*: everything from shoes to outer garments to hairstyle. After all, the White House maintains very high standards and you don't want to appear in the presence of our President looking like a slob! Now, of course, all this is purely hypothetical. It's only an illustration.

But a day is coming, perhaps sooner than you think, when another personal invitation will come your way. This one isn't hypothetical or illustrative. It is all too real, all too literal. It won't come from the President of the United States but from the King of kings, our Lord Jesus Christ. *And it really isn't an invitation that one might choose to decline. It is a demand that all must obey.* And it isn't to the White House that you will be escorted but into the very throne room of Almighty God himself.

On that day also, what you wear will be far more than a matter of fashion. It will be of eternal importance. God's standard of dress is absolute perfection. Many on that day will stupidly and self-righteously adorn themselves in their best and most beautiful good works and earthly accomplishments. They will sew together for themselves what they are persuaded is a glorious garment, comprised of the cloth of virtue, the fabric of good intentions, and the threads of religious sincerity. Undoubtedly such a person will be impressive in the sight of other human beings, but to God all will be little more than filthy and repulsive rags.

With what will you be clothed, spiritually speaking, when that day comes? When God dispatches, not Air Force One, but the heavenly host of angels to bring you into his presence, what will you wear? What will God see?

The primary focus of my message today, indeed the primary focus of Paul's words to us in Philippians 3:1-11, is that ***there is only one garment that will avail in the presence of a holy God: it is the garment of the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself received by you and me through faith alone.*** I aim to be found in Christ, says Paul in v. 9, "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

But let's back up a moment and see how Paul finally arrives at this momentous conclusion. We need to start in v. 2.

Paul's Assessment of the Enemies of the Gospel of Grace

Maybe I'm getting soft and sentimental in my old age, but if you asked me for my opinion of false teachers in OKC who are leading people astray when it comes to the gospel, I would probably say something like: "Be alert to the presence of these sincere but misguided people. They probably mean well but they are leading you down a dangerous path."

Paul, on the other hand, comes straight to the point: ***"They are dogs! They are evildoers! They are the sort who mutilate the flesh! Watch out for them!"*** Why does Paul speak this way? What does he mean by these labels?

The word translated “dogs” is designed *less to describe and more to insult*. The Jews in the ancient world typically referred to pagan Gentiles as “dogs.” In a powerful twist of irony, Paul, himself a Jew, here turns the tables and hurls this derogatory slander back on the heads of those who corrupted the gospel of grace. Evidently these were Jews who had embraced Jesus as Messiah but insisted that if Gentiles wanted to be included among God’s people they must submit to circumcision and the Law of Moses.

So let’s get this straight. ***People who combine good works with faith as necessary for salvation, people who insist on certain religious rituals as necessary for acceptance with God, are dogs?*** Well, yes, in fact they are.

More than that, they are “evildoers.” Again, in a masterful use of irony, ***those who prided themselves on their doing of good are here denounced for their doing of evil!*** Paul doesn’t deny that they are active doers of religious deeds. But it is for evil that they labor, not in the sense of blatant sin or public scandal. Rather, in their self-righteous, legalistic reliance on works for salvation they threaten the free grace of the gospel of justification by faith alone. Their “doing,” therefore, is “evil”!

If that weren’t enough, they “mutilate the flesh.” Paul is referring here not merely to their practice of circumcision but to their confidence or trust in it as essential for gaining acceptance with God. What was in the OT an outward sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants has now become a source of pride and a reason to boast. It no longer points to the inward circumcision of the heart (see Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7), but has become an end in itself.

But as Paul makes clear throughout his writings, the external ritual means **nothing** when it comes to one’s standing with God. “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal. 6:15). What a person does to his/her own body, what marks they may bear in their physical frame, has nothing to do with whether or not we are in good standing with God. Those who submit to circumcision thinking that it gains favor with God have done nothing more than mutilate the flesh.

Again, don’t miss the irony in Paul’s denunciation of these false teachers. ***In thinking they are clean, they are in fact dogs. In thinking their deeds are good, they in fact do evil. And in performing a physical act, all they accomplish is mutilation of the flesh.***

Paul took time to describe and denounce these false teachers in order to set the stage for his glorious affirmation that acceptance with God comes only by faith in the righteousness that Jesus Christ provides.

In fact, those who are in good standing with God have been circumcised in their hearts; the condemnation of sin and guilt has been cut away within, or internally, or spiritually, not physically. These are the ones who worship under the guidance and power and prompting of the Holy Spirit, as over against those who put their trust in empty religious rituals that accomplish nothing. These are the ones whose only boast and glory is Jesus Christ. These are the ones who put no confidence in fleshly or earthly attainment. They put no trust in ceremonial, hereditary, legal, moral, educational, or financial accomplishments. As Paul will say in v. 8, such are nothing but a pile of dung!

Paul’s Resume as a Pharisee

But if all such earthly, religious, fleshly achievements and characteristics are of no saving value, *why does Paul bother to list his own, as he does in vv. 4-6?*

In all likelihood, he does it to answer the charge that his repudiation of such accomplishments is little more than sour grapes. In other words, his enemies would probably have said: “Oh, sure, it’s easy for Paul to denounce these religious works because he never had any himself!” Paul’s response is: “Not so fast! ***If you want to compare religious resumes, I’ll win hands down every time.*** If it were possible for someone to have grounds for boasting because of good deeds, it’s me. But in fact I regard all such achievements as utterly worthless!”

Let’s look briefly at these fleshly badges of honor.

(1) “circumcised on the eighth day” (v. 5a; see Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3) – Perhaps his enemies said, “Hey, the reason he denounces physical circumcision is because he’s really a Gentile!” No, says Paul. I too received the physical

mark in my flesh, and unlike pagan converts to Judaism who were circumcised as adults, I received this on the eighth day after my birth.

(2) *“of the people of Israel”* (v. 5b) – In other words, Paul belonged to the nation by birth and not by conversion (such as Lydia in Acts 16).

(3) *“of the tribe of Benjamin”* (v. 5c) – For numerous reasons I don’t have time to discuss, the tribe of Benjamin, although comparatively small, was highly esteemed in the Jewish world.

(4) *“a Hebrew of Hebrews”* (v. 5d) – With this Paul possibly intends to say that both his parents were Hebrews; unlike Timothy, for example, who had a Jewish mother but a Gentile father (Acts 16:1). In other words, there is no pagan or Gentile blood in his genealogy. Or he may mean that he speaks Hebrew and faithfully observed all the Jewish customs.

(5) *“as to the law, a Pharisee”* (v. 5e) – The word “Pharisee” first appeared in the middle of the second century b.c. and literally means “the separated ones.” The point was that these were committed to maintaining ceremonial and moral purity. They avoided defilement at all costs. Not all Pharisees were evil (remember Nicodemus?). Paul was a son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and was educated under the great Pharisee teacher Gamaliel (Acts 5:34; 22:3). So, this was not a label of reproach but of pride for Paul. He is saying that he was fully committed to complete obedience to the Law of Moses.

(6) *“as to zeal, a persecutor of the church”* (v. 6a) – See Acts 22:3-5 for Paul’s own description of how far his zeal took him! In essence he said, “I was willing to kill and be killed for the sake of my ancestral traditions and the Law of Moses.”

(7) *“as to righteousness under the law, blameless”* (v. 6b) – This of course describes how other people would have perceived him. No one could indict him for having consciously and willfully disobeyed the Law. But before God and in the eyes of divine omniscience, it was altogether another matter. Paul’s point, though, is that his conscience was clear when it came to obedience.

Let’s pause and put this into **contemporary terms**. It would be as if someone said, “My ancestors came to America on the Mayflower! I am a direct descendant of the founding fathers of this country. I was educated in the finest Ivy League university in the land, from which I have earned multiple graduate degrees. I serve as an Elder in my local church. I’m independently wealthy. As far as religion goes, no one does it better than I do. I memorize Scripture. I attend church every week. I give generously of my money. I serve in children’s ministry. I’ve even led a small group and preached on a couple of occasions.”

Now that’s quite a resume of religious achievement!

A New Creation in Christ!

“But listen to me well,” says Paul. “Whatever gain I had because of these privileges and achievements and fame that happily came my way, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ!”

Can you hear in Paul’s words *the echo of what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17*? There he declared that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” Yes, that’s right, if someone such as I used to be, a man who at one time put all his hopes and dreams in his earthly, fleshly achievements, if even someone like that “is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”

Think again in terms of a **ledger book**, with one side listing all your assets, all your possessions, all your personal holdings; with the other side listing all your liabilities and debts; everything you owe. Paul is saying that on the side of my assets one would find everything in vv. 4-6, and no doubt much, much more. And in that I took great pride. In that I placed my confidence and hope. On the other side, where one’s debts and liabilities would be listed, there was nothing. And it was the source of great personal pride in my heart.

But then I was captivated on the Damascus Road by the risen Christ. Ever since that day, everything that I formerly considered an asset or a credit shifted to the other side and is now a liability, a debt. ***That in which I used to take great pride is now an indictment against me and a threat to the welfare of my soul.***

And then, in one glorious act of divine mercy and love, God took the blood of Jesus Christ and wiped clean from the ledger of my life every deficit, every debt, every liability, every sin, and every failure. But he didn't stop there. Oh, praise God that he didn't stop there. He directed my eyes back to the asset side of the ledger and there I saw one word: ***Christ! He is my only asset! He is my only credit! He is my only hope! All my confidence and trust is now in him alone!***

Dear friend, listen to me. If there is but one event, a singular experience, one possession, one act of your own will, that you regard as an asset that stands equally with Jesus Christ on the ledger of your life, you are lost! If there is anything in which you are trusting other than Jesus, anyone you are claiming besides him, any righteous act or good intention beyond what is found in Jesus alone, you are lost!

Let me make several observations on how Paul proceeds to unpack this glorious truth.

First, note that what Paul once counted loss in the past, he still counts as loss into the present. In v. 7 he uses the past tense, "counted," but in v. 8 he uses the present tense, "count." *The past decision is still a present, on-going reality in his life. I have counted it as loss and I still count it as loss!* The settled decision I made when I first came to faith in Christ is still the ruling principle and power of my life.

Second, as we saw in our first study of this paragraph, the reason or ground or cause of Paul's transformation is . . . "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!" Paul embraced Jesus by faith because in comparison with all earthly praise and possessions he is of unparalleled excellence; he is of supreme advantage; he is of inestimable value.

Third, note that he does not speak merely of knowing "that" Christ is Lord or knowing "about" Christ as Lord. ***He knows Christ, my Lord!*** This is the language of personal relationship, the language of love and intimacy. Is it language that you can embrace as your own?

Fourth, he regards those things he once prized as something more than mere liabilities or loss. When compared with the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus he considered them "**rubbish**" (v. 8). Let me be as graphic as Paul intended to be. The Greek word translated "rubbish" (*skubala*) was often used to refer to table scraps or leftovers, and thus carried the connotation of rubbish or trash or something spoiled and deserving only to be cast aside and thrown away. Eventually it came to be used of piles of manure or excrement.

The force or sting of this incredibly vulgar term is designed to highlight in the most vivid way possible the totality of Paul's transformation, the radical extent of his embrace of Jesus above all else. It is as if he says, "I'm utterly sickened and nauseated by the things in which I used to put my hope and confidence. Now, all I have is **Christ!**"

Fifth, please don't misunderstand Paul. He's not saying that he's no longer a true descendant of Abraham or that he is no longer a member of the tribe of Benjamin. His education in the Law as a Pharisee isn't something at which he now scoffs. It is simply that none of these things are his treasure! He no longer trusts them. He has renounced confidence in anything other than Christ. He's not any less outwardly righteous than when he was a zealous Pharisee. He simply no longer invests his heart or his hope in such things to reconcile him to God. All he has now and forevermore is **Christ!**

Sixth, in v. 9 Paul says that now only one thing matters: to "be found in" Christ. Notice how he then unpacks that passion in *three crucial phrases*.

(1) "not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law" (v. 9a) – Don't forget what Paul said back in v. 6. He had righteousness that came from the Law, but it availed for nothing! It gave him no confidence in God's presence. But why not? Because no matter how much we may obtain, we can never know if it's enough! After all, God requires absolute and utter perfection. Furthermore, even if we may have succeeded in observing the law and performing good works in the past, there is no guarantee that we

will continue to do so into the future. And how would you even know whether the righteousness you think you have produced is precisely the righteousness that God requires? It's all hopeless! Our righteousness simply must come from another source beside and beyond ourselves.

(2) Paul longs for a righteousness “which comes through faith in Christ” (v. 9b) – He does not say we gain righteousness because of faith or on the basis of faith, as if faith were the God-approved substitute for good works. Faith is not an alternative way of earning God's favor. Faith is the very antithesis of merit. Faith is our confession that we are unable to do anything to win God's approval. ***Faith always looks away from itself and to its object, to that in which the human soul has placed its trust and hope and confidence.***

(3) The third crucial phrase is found in two words: “from God” (v. 9c). The righteousness on which Paul and you and I must depend comes “from God” as a gift of his grace.

Clearly, then, ***Paul conceives of two sorts or righteousness.*** On the one hand is that righteousness which a person achieves through good works. On the other hand is that righteousness which God gives through faith. On the former he pours contempt. It is the object of his most intense and fervent hatred. Those who promote it he calls dogs and evildoers (v. 2). On the other Paul heaps effusive praise. For it he gives thanks to God, and on it he has staked his eternal life.

Seventh, as a result of this new found relationship with Jesus Christ, Paul wants to experience the very power that raised Jesus from the dead (v. 10; cf. Eph. 1:19ff.; Rom. 8:11). This word “know” doesn't mean merely to understand with the mind but also to experience in the heart. He wants to feel and be energized by this power so that he can say No to sin and temptation and devote himself fully to the worship and service of Christ.

Paul isn't saying he wants to know more *about* the resurrection of Jesus, as if he were hungry for knowledge about its circumstances or the people who witnessed it. He is saying, ***“I want to feel the power by which Christ defeated death and sin and Satan! I want to live daily in conscious awareness of and dependence on this power that now works in me.”***

Eighth, lest you think that Paul is some sort of *crass triumphalist*, notice that he also wants to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (v. 10b). Wow! ***From power to persecution! From the strength of the risen Christ to the suffering of the crucified Christ!***

Paul's desire is to live in such vital and inseparable union with Jesus that the same abuse and persecution that fell on his Lord might now fall on him as well. It isn't that Paul wants to experience the redemptive and saving sufferings of Jesus. That's impossible. He simply means that he wants to stand in precisely that relation to the world in which Christ himself stood, such that whatever affliction the world sought to impose on Christ might yet fall on him. If the world hated Jesus, then by all means let it hate me. If the world rejected Jesus, then I am willing to endure its rejection as well.

Conclusion

Please, do not let this moment pass by. Hear the words of Holy Scripture. Hear the words of your Creator. One day you and I will stand in his presence. We will be clothed, either in the so-called righteousness of our own making, or in the glorious righteousness of Christ Jesus. Those are the only two possibilities.

And the so-called righteousness or goodness of your own making is worse than nakedness. It is filthy rags. It is a repulsive garment that brings only death and condemnation. Renounce your trust in it! Renounce and turn from your confidence in anything other than Christ.

Invest yourself wholly in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done in his sinless life and what Jesus endured on the cross and what Jesus achieved by his resurrection from the grave. Make the words of that old hymn, *The Solid Rock*, your own:

“My hope is built on nothing less

Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found;
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand.”

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