

Phil 3:1-9
Righteous in Christ
Tim Anderson 16/7/17

Last week we were talking
about working out your salvation with fear and trembling.
And I said that it's important that we work out our salvation
not work for our salvation.
That is, our salvation can only come as a gift,
it can never be earned.
But once the gift is given,
then we respond to God's generosity,
by using the gift in our lives.

Most of us know that our salvation comes by grace through faith.
It's a gift.
It is not earned.
But sometimes we start our Christian lives with the gift,
and then want to continue them by works.
But no.
Even though we work hard,
even our ongoing Christian growth is a gift.
Again as we heard last week,
"It is God who works in you,
to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose."

So the Christian life starts with God's grace
and it continues with God's grace.
And for the apostle Paul,
the great danger for the Christian church
is drifting away from relying on God's grace
to relying on human works.
There are all kinds of dangers
that might seem more spectacular than that.
Sexual impropriety is the headline grabber.
Financial impropriety is second on the list

when it comes to attention grabbing ways to fail.
Relying on your own good works.
That one seems quite innocuous.
But for Paul, it gets his blood pressure right up there.
And that's where we are today.
The apostle with a significant head of steam,
so much so
that we polite Christians are a bit embarrassed by his venom.
But Jesus likewise embarrassed us by his lack of politeness.
So we'll need to listen to Paul,
and put our embarrassment to one side.

"It's no trouble for me to write the same things to you again.
And it is a safeguard for you."

These matters Paul is about to speak of
are matters that he instructed the Philippian Christians about
while he was with them.

But he's going to write about them
even though he's repeating himself.

Why?

Because this stuff is just too important to be left to their memories.
He needs to get it on paper and drive it home.
So what is it?

"Watch out for those dogs,
those evil doers,
those mutilators of the flesh!"

Wow. That's strong language,
who are these dogs, these evil doers,
these mutilators of the flesh?

They were people who were trying to persuade the church
that they needed to come under the Jewish law.

In particular that their men needed to be circumcised.

We call these people Judaisers,
because they wanted the church to become Jewish in its customs.
There's no suggestion that they wanted the church

to give up faith in Christ.

No. They only wanted to add a requirement to follow the Jewish law.
That's it.

That's the sum total of their offending.

And Paul is warning against it in the strongest possible terms.

Notice how the terms Paul uses to warn
are turning Jewish boasts back onto themselves.

Jews used to call Gentiles dogs.

Dogs were unclean animals

because they were known to scavenge through the garbage.

So Gentile dogs were unclean people

you wanted to have nothing to do with.

Jews used to call Gentiles evildoers

because they didn't follow God's law as set out in the OT.

Here Paul calls them evil doers.

Jews used to call themselves 'the circumcision'.

Circumcision was a marker of being God's chosen people.

The people of the covenant.

But Paul says,

No they are not 'the circumcision',

they are 'the mutilation'.

That's still a word that's used today

when people want to describe circumcision

in a way that takes away any aura of religious advantage

and focuses on the physical harm that is done.

So in some Muslim cultures female 'circumcision' has been practiced.

And human rights campaigners have renamed it 'genital mutilation'.

They are (likely unknowingly) taking a lead from the apostle Paul.

Paul calls these Judaisers 'mutilators of the flesh'.

Why is he so against them?

Because they place their confidence before God

in their observance of religious ritual.

And they are trying to thrust that expectation onto the Philippians.

They want the Philippians to come under the same requirements

they place themselves under.

And Paul says, "No way."

Here's the key verse. It's verse 3.

"For it is we who are the circumcision,
we who serve God by his Spirit,
who boast in Christ Jesus,
and who put no confidence in the flesh."

We are the circumcision.

That is not to say that the Christians were physically being circumcised.
No. He means Christians have that privileged status
of being God's chosen people,
the people of the covenant.

That was what circumcision was,
the marker of being God's covenant people.
And it is we Christians not the Jews
who are God's covenant people.

Now we need to state the implications of that very carefully.

At various times in Christian history,
the fact that Christians are now God's covenant people
has been used as an excuse for anti-Semitism.

Even great Christian leaders like Martin Luther have stumbled here.
But Paul will have no part in anti-Semitism.

On the contrary,
he longs to see his brother Jews
once more be part of God's covenant people
by embracing the gospel.

Because if they put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah,
then once more they are part of the covenant,
accessing the same righteousness that Abraham obtained
by virtue of exercising the same faith that Abraham exercised.

However at other times in Christian history,
people have claimed that it is possible for Jews today to be saved
by faithfully practicing their religion.

But that's wrong.

There's only one way to be saved.
And that is by faith in Christ Jesus.

The Jewish religion places its confidence in the flesh,
confidence in the flesh will not save you.
We boast in Christ Jesus and place no confidence in the flesh.

At other times in Christian history,
people have claimed
that there is significance to the modern state of Israel.
That somehow the Jews returning to their land
will be a sign of the return of Christ.
Let's be clear,
there is no theological significance to the modern state of Israel.
We are the circumcision.
The promises that were made under the old covenant about the land
have been given to us.
And we look forward to that land
our heavenly home.
That is the only land with theological significance today.
The state of Israel has no more significance than the state of Victoria.
Putting confidence in a piece of dirt
is no more beneficial than placing confidence in the flesh.
We boast in Christ Jesus and place no confidence in the flesh
or in pieces of dirt.
As Christians we love the Jews,
we want to bless the Jews,
and the way we do that is by sharing the gospel with the Jews.
Free them from their slavery of placing confidence in the flesh,
bring them into the freedom of serving God by his Spirit.

Now for many of you,
the nuances of how we as Christians view the Jews
is a matter of minor significance.
We live a long way from that part of Melbourne where most Jews live.
But Paul's strong warnings against putting confidence in the flesh
are still very applicable to us.
The Jews looked to circumcision as a marker of religious performance.
We can look to our religious performance

as a marker of how well we are doing in our Christian lives.
That is putting confidence in the flesh in just the same way.
Do you feel like if you've read the Bible today and said your prayers,
that you are a good Christian,
and if you've neglected your Christian duties,
that something bad might happen to you?
Or that God might view you
as only part of the way there as a Christian?
Do you feel superior to other Christians
because you've stayed faithful to one spouse,
or you've successfully brought up your children
to practice the faith as adults?
Or perhaps you feel inadequate as a Christian
because you haven't managed to do these things?
That, my friends is confidence in the flesh.
And there's a pair of twin dangers
when you have confidence in the flesh.
If you have achieved the hurdles you set for yourself,
you can become self righteous.
If you have failed to achieve those hurdles,
you can become depressed.
Either way,
you won't be rejoicing in the Lord.
Notice how Paul starts this section
urging the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord.
It seems like such a standard thing to tell Christians to do,
that you might miss how it connects with the rest of what he says.
But here's the connection.
If you are thinking about the flesh -
whether you are getting self righteous because you've done a good job,
or whether you are getting depressed because you've done a bad job,
you will be concentrating on yourself.
What you have done or not managed to do.
But we don't want to be focused on ourselves.
Trust me, looking in the mirror won't do you any good.
It will make you depressed or it will make you vain.

Or it will make you vain when you are young
and gradually depressed as you get older.
Don't hold up a mirror to your religious performance.
It will make you self righteous or spiritually depressed.
Fix your eyes on Jesus.
Look at him.
Rejoice in the Lord!

Did you ever notice when you were at school,
that the kids who said they couldn't be bothered doing their homework,
were the same kids who couldn't have done it if they tried?
And the kids who said they couldn't be bothered with sport,
were the kids who couldn't catch a ball if they tried.
I used to say, "What's the point of being able to draw?
We've got cameras."
But it was just a cover.
I couldn't draw if I wanted to.
I wonder if Paul is like that?
Does he say,
"Don't put your confidence in the flesh?"
Because actually his religious performance is sub par
and he wants to distract people's attention from that
by saying it doesn't matter?

Not at all.
In fact if you were measuring religious performance
according to the criteria of the Judaisers,
then Paul's religious performance would be second to none.
He was circumcised when he was a week old.
He was a Jew brought up in Jewish culture.
His family hadn't compromised with the Greek culture around,
they spoke and used the language of the Hebrews.
He was a member of the strictest religious group amongst the Jews.
If he had stayed a Jew,
then he would have had everything going for him.
Paul is not saying he puts no confidence in the flesh

out of sour grapes.
He's saying it because it's really true.
He weighs up all of the things that would have made a Jew proud.
On this side, circumcision, a genuine Hebrew, a Pharisee,
a persecutor of the church.
On the other side what?
That he's a tireless worker for Christ, a sacrificial evangelist.
No.
On the other side Christ.
Christ alone.
All this stuff.
It's a loss compared to knowing Jesus.
All this stuff.
"I consider everything else a loss
because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."
Wouldn't you like to be able to say that?
His heart is not trying to demonstrate his goodness.
He clings to Jesus' goodness.

In fact not only does Paul not cling
to those things that his contemporaries would have praised him for.
Not only does he not look to them to validate himself.
They actually aren't there anymore.
He's lost them to gain Christ.
Of course he lost persecuting the church.
He had to give that up when he became a Christian.
But he's also effectively lost his circumcision.
The mark on his body is still there.
But his contemporaries won't treat him
as a member of the covenant people any more.
The Pharisees won't regard him as a fellow Pharisee any more.
He's given it all up.
All the things he used to be praised for.

I met a Chinese woman last year.
Emily is her name.

Her family was so proud of her.
She had qualified as a dentist.
A good respectable profession where she could make lots of money.
An ideal daughter for her non Christian Chinese parents.
Then she became a Christian.
That's OK -
she can still be a success right?
But no.
She met a man and got married.
The man is Korean -
I wonder how the Chinese parents feel about that?
He's training to be a pastor.
And she cuts back her Dentistry to a couple of days a week
to help with the ministry in her church.
Whatever were her gains,
she now considers them loss
for the sake of Christ.

Well it's a challenging story.
But Emily would not go the next step that Paul goes.
Not because she's unwilling to sacrifice for the gospel.
But because she was never trusting in her dentistry for salvation.
But about his Jewish marks of attainment, Paul says,
"I have lost all things.
I consider them garbage,
that I may be gain Christ,
and be found in him,
not having a righteousness of my own that comes through the law -
but that which is through faith in Christ."
I'll tell you a little secret.
That word garbage.
It's not an accurate translation.
Our Bible translators didn't want to scandalise you.
But think what the doggies leave behind.
He considers the things he used to put confidence in
Yep that.

Well what are you relying on to make you right in God's sight?
You might have been a bit confused,
and have been putting confidence in the flesh.
Your confidence might have been in something you do for God.
Don't trust in that.
You'll either get self righteous or depressed.
Everything else is a loss compared to knowing Jesus.
That's where your confidence needs to be.

On the other hand you might have been a well schooled Christian.
You might have read Philippians many times,
and you might be able to show me that salvation is by faith
from half a dozen other books of the Bible too.
But day to day, you still might rely on your religious performance
for your sense of validation.
It might be your performance
that gives you the comfort that you are the real deal as a Christian.
Well please continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling
like we said last week.
But don't rely on that for your sense of self worth.
Find your sense of self worth in Jesus and him alone.
Rejoice in the Lord!
I will say it again.
Rejoice in the Lord!