

The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Chapter 3

Verses 1-11—Righteousness Through Faith in Christ:

Paul had found another righteousness, quite unlike his previous self-righteousness. Now he sees that he does not have a righteousness of his own: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3.20).

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was at one time a budding lawyer who tried to live a righteous life. Much to his father’s disappointment, he became a monk. He fasted for days, spent sleepless nights in prayer, and beat himself to get free of his bodily desires. Yet he was still plagued by how one could stand in holiness before a righteous and demanding God. Then one day, as he read his New Testament, he understood what Paul meant by the righteousness of God. He wrote afterwards:

I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans.... But a single word in Chapter 1.17 “in it the righteousness of God is revealed”...had stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God”... I had been taught to understand [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience...[until] I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith...here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me...

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.

This insight that God justifies us by faith is our objective ground of confidence before God and boldness before other people.

~ Nicky Gumbel

Paul sets down what we might call *the indestructibility of Christian joy*.

With us the dog is a well-loved animal, but it was not so in the East in the time of Jesus. The dogs were the pariah dogs, roaming the streets, sometimes in packs, hunting amidst the garbage dumps and snapping and snarling at all whom they met.... He takes the very name the Jewish teachers would have applied to the impure and to the Gentiles and flings it back at themselves.

Long before this, the great teachers and the great prophets had seen that circumcision of the flesh is by itself not nearly enough and that there was needed a spiritual circumcision. In *Leviticus* the sacred law-giver says that the *uncircumcised*

hearts of Israel must be humbled to accept the punishment of God (Lev 26.41). The summons of the writer of *Deuteronomy* is: “Circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn” (Deut 10.16). Jeremiah speaks of the uncircumcised ear, the ear that will not hear the word of God (Jer 6.10). The writer of *Exodus* speaks of uncircumcised lips (Ex 6.12).... The Jew placed his confidence in the physical badge of circumcision and in the performance of the duties of the Law. The Christian places his confidence only in the mercy of God and in the love of Jesus Christ. The real circumcision is not a mark in the flesh; it is that true worship, that true glory, and that true confidence in the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

So Paul sets out his credentials, not in order to boast but to show that he had enjoyed every privilege which a Jew could enjoy and had risen to every attainment to which a Jew could rise. He knew what it was to be a Jew in the highest sense of the term, and had deliberately abandoned it all for the sake of Jesus Christ.

The tribe of Benjamin had a special place in the aristocracy of Israel. Benjamin ...alone had been born in the Promised Land (Gen 35.17-18). It was from the tribe of Benjamin that the first king of Israel had come (1 Sam 9.1-2). When the kingdom had been split up...Benjamin was the only tribe which remained faithful with Judah (1 Kings 12.21). The great feast of Purim, which was observed every year with such rejoicing, commemorated the deliverance of which the Book of Esther tells, and the central figure of that story was Mordecai, a Benjaminite... It would be the equivalent in England of saying that he came over with the Normans or in America that he traced his descent to the Pilgrim fathers.

There were not very many Pharisees, never more than six thousand, but they were the spiritual athletes of Judaism. Their very name means *The Separated Ones*. They had separated themselves off from all common life and from all common tasks in order to make it the one aim of their lives to keep every smallest detail of the Law.

The basic thought of this passage is the uselessness of Law and the sufficiency of knowing Christ and accepting the offer of God’s grace. The very language Paul uses to describe the Law—excrement—shows the utter disgust for the Law which his own frustrated efforts to live by it had brought him; and the joy that shines through the passage shows how triumphantly adequate he found the grace of God in Jesus Christ

~ William Barclay

Verses 12-21—Straining Toward the Goal:

Paul stresses that he is not already perfect—he is still involved in the struggles of life in a fallen world and hence he still sins; the full glory of the resurrection remains in the future. There is a balance of faith and works, of God’s call and the believer’s response.

While Paul is not yet perfected, he is confident enough in his Christian walk to ask the Philippians to “join in imitating me” and other mature Christians. Much Christian growth comes through imitation of other Christians.

~ *ESV Study Bible*

Paul is saying that he is not by any means a complete Christian but is for ever pressing on. The word he uses for *reaching out* is very vivid and is used of a racer going hard for the tape. It describes him with eyes for nothing but the goal. It describes the man who is going *flat out* for the finish. So Paul says that in the Christian life we must forget every past achievement and remember only the goal which lies ahead.

~ *William Barclay*

It is not wrong to have ambitions for marriage, family life, career, work, and ministry. Indeed, it is entirely appropriate that we should; but all such ambitions must be subordinated to our ambition to know Christ. He is our first priority in life and nothing in our life should conflict with that ambition.

In this passage Paul tells us that everyone is on one of two paths. There are two destinations: one is heading for heaven, the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of our bodies to be like “his glorious body.” The other is heading for destruction (v. 19). There are two powers at work: the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit (v. 10) and the power of bodily appetites (v. 19). There are two possible lifestyles: those willing to share in His sufferings, and those who want a lifestyle of ease and comfort. There are two possible attitudes to Jesus: either friendship at an intimate level, or enemies of the Cross. Ultimately, there are only two possible ambitions: either His glory (Philippians 3.3), Jesus-centered ambition; or our own glory, self-centered ambition. Paul says, in effect: “I have changed my ambitions. Now I am Jesus-centered. Will you join me?”

~ *Nicky Gumbel*