

philippians : putting the gospel first philippians 3v1-14

Philippians is all about putting the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ and all that means – first in your life. In chapter 2, Paul explains what it will look like for the Philippians to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ. In chapter 3 Paul talks about boasting in our achievements or our background, and shows that it is all worthless when compared to Jesus.

verses 1-4

In the first few verses of chapter 3, Paul gives the Philippians both an exhortation and a stern warning. He tells them to “rejoice in the Lord” (v1) – he has already talked about his joy, but here he begins to say more about it. And he warns them against a group who would threaten their ability to rejoice in the Lord. Paul calls them “dogs,” “evil doers” and “mutilators of the flesh” (v2). Paul then goes on to say that they (Paul and co) are “the circumcision,” but they boast in Christ and not in what has been done to their bodies. The “mutilators of the flesh” he is talking about are obviously a group who think the Gentile Christians in Philippi need to be circumcised to be true Christians. (These people are sometimes called “Judaizers,” because of their belief that Christians needed to be more Jewish).

Circumcision was a ‘minor’ operation which showed that Jewish men were part of God’s people. It was an important part of Jewish identity, and of the identity of God’s people. If you want more information on circumcision, be careful how you google it! Feel free to email Gareth if you need help (he did a biology degree, so he won’t be embarrassed!).

Why is this important? In telling Christians to be circumcised, they were adding something to the gospel, as if they need Jesus *plus* an operation to be accepted by God. Paul hates this thinking, which is why he refers to them so harshly. And he spends the next part of his letter smashing their distortion of the gospel to pieces.

verses 4-6

Paul attacks what the false teachers are saying by talking about his own life. If anyone had a reason to boast in being Jewish, it was Paul. He was a Jew, circumcised according to Jewish custom, and part of the people of Israel (specifically the tribe of Benjamin). He was a Pharisee, and expert in keeping the Law. He was so enthusiastic about his beliefs that he used to persecute the church by rounding up and even killing Christians. If righteousness was based on

keeping the Law, Paul could describe himself as “faultless” (v6). Whatever the false teachers can boast in (such as their circumcision), Paul can go much further.

verses 7-11

But now Paul feels differently. All of these things, which he would once have been proud of, he now considers “loss for the sake of Christ” (v7). In fact, he considers everything a loss, but not because he thinks the material world is bad in some way. Rather, he recognises Jesus for who he is. And compared to knowing Jesus, anything else is rubbish.

He has ditched everything he used to be proud of so he can have Christ. And his righteousness no longer comes from his own works – he has the (far superior) righteousness of Christ, which comes from faith in Jesus. Now he wants to know Christ, but he is obviously aware of what that will mean. To know Christ is to know the power of his resurrection in our lives, but it will also mean sharing in his sufferings (as he has already hinted in 2v29). But behind their sufferings there is still the promise of resurrection.

verses 12-14

Having said all this, Paul is blunt with them – he has not already obtained this. He knows he still has some way to go. He uses the idea of an athlete in a race. He is focussed on his goal, and strains towards it. Paul is not just waiting for something to happen – he is pressing on towards the goal, forgetting what is behind (his past, with all of his “achievements” which he now sees as worthless), and pressing on towards the goal – knowing Jesus more and becoming like him, even in his death.

Once we start adding extra requirements to the gospel, we are seeking to build our own righteousness, rather than trusting Jesus to give us his. And that is a sure way to kill off joy. Living as a Christian becomes a burden, as we take on the pressure of pursuing God’s perfect standards. When we do well, we will be proud. When we do badly, we will despair. But we will never manage it. The grace of God, paid for by the death of Jesus, is the only thing which will release us from that. This week, pray hard that you will help your small group to see “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (v8).

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questions

Remember, these are **suggestions** – feel free to add, remove or change them!

for starters - a discussion question to get you going.

What things in your life make you acceptable for God?

Imagine a friend of yours becomes a Christian. What things would you tell them they need to start doing?

discover

v1-4

Why doesn't Paul mind telling them to rejoice?

From the way Paul talks about them, what can we work out about the "dogs" Paul talks about?

v4-6

Imagine you are writing Paul's CV. What could you put on it?

v7-11

What does Paul think about his achievements?

v12-14

What is Paul trying to communicate by using the image of a runner to talk about his life?

understand

v1-4

Why was this false teaching so bad?

What does Paul say in response?

v4-6

Why is each item on Paul's "CV of Righteousness" important? What point is he trying to make by pointing these things out in relation to the false teachers?

v7-11

How does Paul feel about his achievements now? What has changed his perspective?

v12-14

What keeps Paul 'running'?

respond

v1-4

How would you feel if someone told you Christians have to be circumcised?

Are there any rules or activities we demand of Christians in a similar way?

v4-6

What kind of things would you be tempted to put on your own "CV of righteousness"? What makes you feel good about your ability to please God?

v7-11

How should what Paul says about Jesus affect the way we think about our own efforts to be good?

Look at v10-11 again. Could you say the same?

v12-14

Is this how you think of your life? Have you already made it? Are you even in the race?

things to ponder

How would the legalism of the Judaisers get in the way of rejoicing in the Lord (v1)?

Does the "surpassing worth of knowing Christ" affect the way you think about yourself and your achievements?

Do you need to pray that God would help you to see the worth of Jesus more clearly?

As a small group, do you communicate the free grace that is on offer in Jesus to new and non-Christians, or do you expect Christians to add other things to the gospel?

What effect should the all surpassing worth of knowing Christ have on the way you communicate the gospel to your non-Christian friends and coursemates?