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## Righteousness and Joy

### Philippians 3:1-7

**Intro:** Ch3 of Philippians is probably the most beloved chapter of the letter. Here Paul lays out many of the essential doctrines of the Christian life and opens his heart to reveal his own personal desire to know and serve Jesus better. What we should understand is that these doctrines aren't included here so much for their own sake but to show us how they are a natural outgrowth of Paul's challenge to the Philippians to be joyful. The implication of our text today is that, unlike happiness, joy isn't determined by circumstances but is founded to a large degree on sound doctrine.

Joy is something every believer should have because Jesus promised it to those who followed Him. The angel who announced His birth to the shepherds said, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all the people. (Lk 2:10). Jesus said, These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full (Jn 15:11). In Jn 17:13 Jesus prayed to the Father that they may have My joy fulfilled in them. This joy is the birthright of all true believers. It's this joy that Paul wished to see in the congregation at Philippi.

What is joy? It's a supernatural delight in God and His goodness. It's completely different from happiness. Every Christian virtue has a counterpart virtue in the world. The world has sex; we have love. The world strives for security; we have trust. The world seeks self-gratification; we know peace. The world seeks happiness; our counterpart is joy. Happiness comes from the Latin word fortuna, and is closely related to chance. So, if things happen to work out the way we expect them to, we're happy. If they don't, we are unhappy. Happiness is circumstantial, joy isn't. Joy is an inner quality of delight in God that springs up in the Christian regardless of the trials or blessings of this life. Let's see how Paul will lead us to this conclusion.

**1-2** – Finally – This didn't mean Paul was about to wrap up the letter; the word actually means "as for the rest" and it introduces a new section. The finally in 4:8 will begin his concluding remarks. This one just means he is gearing up to launch into a different theme and his emphasis here is on joy

– rejoice in the Lord! Paul begins to elaborate upon the principle of being able to rejoice *in* the Lord. Paul doesn't suggest that believers should rejoice in circumstances or situations but – in the Lord who is able to work all things together for good to those who love God. This abiding joy is fitting for the believer because it shows that we really do trust in a God whom we believe is in control. When we believe this, it shouldn't be a surprise that we are then filled with joy!

Strangely enough, as soon as Paul exhorts the believers in Philippi to rejoice in the Lord, he immediately extends to them a stern warning – a triple warning at that! To whom is Paul referring to in this warning?

The answer takes us back to the early days of the church. From the very beginning, the gospel came to the Jew first, so much so that the first 7 chapters of Acts deal only with Jewish believers or Gentiles who were Jewish proselytes. In [ch8](#), the Gospel went to Samaria but that didn't cause too much of a fuss because the Samaritans were partly Jewish. But, when Peter brought the gospel to Cornelius' house, this caused an uproar because the Gentiles in [ch10](#) had become Christians without first becoming Jews and this was a whole new thing for the church. Peter was called on the carpet but explained that God had directed him to preach to the Gentiles, so the issue seemed to be settled.

But it wasn't settled for long. Paul was sent out by the Holy Spirit to minister especially to Gentiles. It didn't take long for the strict Jewish believers to oppose Paul's ministry by going to Antioch and teaching that it was necessary for the Gentiles to submit to Jewish rules before they could be saved. Of course, Paul wasn't having any of that and this disagreement led to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. The result of this was an approval of Paul's ministry and a victory for the gospel of the grace of God. Gentiles didn't need to become Jews in order to become Christians!

But, not everyone was happy with that conclusion; the dissenters were not content. They then took it on themselves to follow Paul around wherever he went to try and steal his Gentile converts and the churches he established. This group of false teachers who tried to mix Law and grace are known today as Judaizers. The letter to the Galatians was written primarily to combat this false teaching. It is exactly this group that Paul is referring to here and he uses 3 rather harsh terms to describe them: dogs, evil workers

and mutilation!

dogs – this is a term the orthodox Jew would use for a Gentile; yet Paul uses it to identify these orthodox Judaizers. This term doesn't have quite the impact for us in our modern, Western, dog-loving culture. In ancient times, packs of dogs would prowl around the city, without a home or owner, feeding on the garbage and filth of the streets, fighting among themselves and attacking any who happened to pass by. Paul's not just calling them names, he's comparing these false teachers to the dirty scavengers that were so detestable to decent people. Like dogs, these Judaizers snapped at Paul's heels and followed him around barking their false doctrines. They were trouble makers and carried a dangerous infection.

evil workers – These men taught that sinners were saved by faith plus good works, especially the works of the Law. Paul says their good works are actually evil works because they're done in the flesh and not the Spirit and they glorify the worker and not Jesus! The Bible makes it clear that nobody can be saved by doing good works, not even religious works. A Christian's good works are the result of their faith, not the basis for their salvation.

mutilation – Paul uses a pun for circumcision here. The Judaizers taught that circumcision was essential to salvation but Paul didn't see their insistence on circumcision as being something beautiful or noble, he saw it simply as an ugly example of a mutilation! What they were holding up as a badge of honor and a necessity for salvation, Paul referred to as a mere bodily cutting on par with pagan practices forbidden in the OT. The true Christian has experienced a spiritual circumcision in Christ and has no need of any fleshly operations. Circumcision, baptism, the Lord's Supper, tithing or any other religious practice can't save a person from their sins. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do that.

The use of each of these terms for the legalist Judaizers leads us to one obvious conclusion. In their misguided attempt to force Gentiles Christians to adopt and follow Jewish regulations, they were in essence casting doubt on the sufficiency of Christ's gift of salvation. In doing so, they had actually become exactly what they most abhorred – people who deny the works of God. They had become Gentiles in every way but name.

**3** – The Jewish legalists believed themselves to be the ones truly

circumcised and right with God but Paul declares that he and all those who trusted in Jesus Christ by faith were the true circumcision. He then lists 3 undeniable prerequisites that mark the truly circumcised: their worship, their joy and their confidence.

The first characteristic of the true circumcision is that they worship God in the Spirit as opposed to the fleshly and external worship emphasized by these Jewish legalists. The word worship is the translation of the Greek word referring to the service of Jehovah by His peculiar people, the Jews. A Jew would be scandalized by the application of this word to any Gentile and yet, Paul insists that the truly circumcised are those who do not depend on their own good works which are only done in the flesh, regardless of their genetic or religious heritage.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> characteristic that marks true circumcision is that they rejoice in Christ Jesus. People who depend on religion usually rejoice in what they are able to accomplish within that religion. The true Christian knows they have nothing within themselves to rejoice in or to boast about. Their joy is not found in their own ability to be justified by the Law or by their law-keeping. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is both the cause and the source of their joy!

The 3<sup>rd</sup> characteristic of the true circumcision is they have no confidence in the flesh. They don't trust in their own ability to be righteous before God through external works of the flesh, their only confidence is in Jesus. The Bible has nothing good to say about the flesh and yet most people today depend almost entirely on what they can do to please God. Flesh only corrupts God's way on the earth; it profits nothing as far as the spiritual life is concerned. It has nothing good in it. To rely on anything else but Jesus is to demote His work by implying that it's incomplete.

**4-6** – Paul wasn't speaking from an ivory tower. The ironic fact was that Paul himself could claim to be much more successful in keeping God's Law than any of those who were now trying to force it on his Philippian converts! He knew he was more qualified to be justified by keeping the Law than they ever would be but he also personally knew the futility of trying to attain salvation by means of good works. In fact, Paul had learned to count all human effort as loss when it came to spiritual realities, especially the reality of his relationship with Jesus Christ.

To illustrate these truths Paul uses the idea of a balance sheet, one showing assets and liabilities. He says that he has learned to reckon all the assets he had earned before he knew Christ as liabilities and to enter into his new column of assets the name of Jesus Christ alone. What Paul is declaring, what these Judaizers were missing was the truth that human righteousness is nothing when measured against the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and that God is right to insist upon His standards.

To start with, human righteousness falls short of the standards set by God, and anything short of those standards is unrighteousness. Righteousness, like perfection, loses its entire meaning if you try to divide it. Perfection is a whole. Righteousness is the same. You're either completely righteous by God's definition or you're not righteous at all. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). That's God's standard. All fall short of it, and in falling short of it, they miss it all completely. No matter what good deeds we do, even the best of them are contaminated by sin and sin always breaks forth into death. That's why even the noblest ideas of human reasoning always lead away from God.

Paul now illustrates this from his own experience. Humanly speaking he had acquired all the assets that anyone could imagine. He was a Jew, and the Jews had always had a special place in God's dealings with the human race. He had real advantages. But in terms of salvation Paul came to realize that all of these things had actually kept him from God. Paul goes on to list 7 achievements that fall into 2 categories—those inherited and those earned.

The inherited assets was that Paul had been born into a Jewish family; had been circumcised according to Jewish law on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of life. He was a pure-blooded Jew, born of Jewish parents. Plus, he was an Israelite. Israel is the covenant name of God's people, of which Paul was a member. He was also of the tribe of Benjamin - the one tribe that stood with Judah when all the rest rebelled. Benjamin remained loyal to the house of David. Paul took justifiable pride in this ancestry.

Then, Paul cites the advantages he had won for himself. He was a Pharisee. This was a matter of choice. The Pharisees constituted the most faithful of all Jewish sects in their adherence to the law, and Paul says he was blameless where the law was concerned. Paul was also a zealous

Pharisee, seen in the fact that he persecuted the church. In fact, Paul was so zealous for the law that he killed people who disagreed with his conception of it.

7 – Paul has given us a list of assets from a human perspective. But the day came when Paul saw what this was in the eyes of a righteous God. Vs7 begins with the very important word: but. It marks Paul's experience on the road to Damascus when he met Jesus and learned what God's righteousness really was. Before this, he thought he had attained righteousness by keeping the law. When he saw Jesus he knew that all his righteousness was as filthy rags.

That's the work of God in the human heart. Paul came to the point where he opened his ledger book. He looked at what he had accumulated by inheritance and his own efforts and realized these things actually kept him from Christ. He then took the entire list and placed it where it belonged—in the liabilities column. He called it "loss," and in the asset column he wrote, Jesus Christ alone. He did this because it's only Jesus that meets every need of the soul. The work Jesus accomplished on the cross satisfied God, as such, it will also satisfy all who trust in Him.

Now, you may be saying to yourself that this is all well and good information but what does it have to do with joy? I said at the beginning that Paul was challenging the Philippians to be joyful. Sadly, it's impossible to talk about the blessing of Christian joy without noting at the same time that many Christians fail to experience this joy on a regular basis. Circumstances get them down and instead of the victory they should experience, they suffer from anxiety and depression. This shouldn't be. Instead of depression we should have joy in the Lord beyond our circumstances. But, How can this joy be sustained?" God has a remedy for the lack of joy and the answer is in His Word.

The 1<sup>st</sup> principle of Christian joy is you must be a Christian. This seems obvious, but there are 2 groups that need to face this squarely. The first group is those who aren't Christians and know it but think the fruit of Christianity can be grown without the life of Christ. These people need to recognize that joy is supernatural and is only given to those who have surrendered their lives to Jesus. The 2<sup>nd</sup> group is those who aren't Christians but think they are. They think they're Christians, but they don't

understand the gospel and have never committed their lives to Jesus. Thus, they can't understand their failure to experience the fruits of that commitment. To experience Christian joy you must begin by becoming a Christian.

Before you're a Christian, you stand before God as one who's fallen short of His standards. You come to Him with your good works and best intentions. But as you stand before God you realize that even the best of these things is imperfect and as such, a failure to God. God says, You come to Me with all that is human; but what is human is tainted by sin, and that is a foundation upon which I cannot build. You must turn from it. You must lay these things aside; count them as loss, and come to the cross to receive God's righteousness. You must admit that everything you do falls short of God's standard, and agree with God's verdict on it. You don't deserve anything from God and you come to Him empty handed so that you might receive what He has promised to give through faith in Jesus. You come to receive His righteousness. You come to receive the Holy Spirit who will give you the power to live the Christian life. If you've done that, you've taken the 1<sup>st</sup> step to experiencing the joy of the Christian life.

2<sup>nd</sup>, to experience God's joy, you must first know His righteousness and peace. This means a life of holiness and faith are necessities. The order is given in **Rom 14:17**: For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Many Christians don't know this joy because their lives aren't holy or they don't really trust God for their future. We have a tendency to follow our own desires in our own wisdom. That is sin and sin keeps us from God, who is the source of joy. Anxiety works against joy too. Instead of sin and anxiety, believers should experience a life of holiness and peace. They will realize God's peace as they submit all aspects of their present and future to Him.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> step to a life of continuous, supernatural joy is to immerse yourself in the teachings of the Bible. Notice how often joy is associated with a mature knowledge of God's Word. David said, The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart (**Ps 19:8**). **Ps 119:14** says, I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. Jesus said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you and that your joy may be full" (**Jn**

15:10-11). These verses teach that joy is found in the knowledge of God's character and commandments and these are found in His Word. If you've not experienced much of this joy, the reason may be a neglect of Scripture.

In this life, none of us will ever master all the great truths of Scripture. The Word of God is inexhaustible, like God Himself, and if our joy depended on such mastery, we'd never actually experience it. Instead, our joy depends on our relationship to God and our life with Him. But, if there's to be the joy in the Christian life that there ought to be, there must be a deep and growing experience of the basic truths on which this life is founded. We need to understand the nature of the atonement made for us by Christ. We must strive to know God better and to love Him. We must attempt to live obediently before Him as his children.

There is a great deal of unrest in this world, and there will always be that for those who don't know Jesus. Apart from Him there is no true peace, no joy, and no real happiness. This should never be the case with a Christian. If you're a Christian, you should draw close to God, you must feed on Scripture, and God will fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him. (Rom 15:13). 😊