

Joy in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said at the beginning of the service, welcome to all of you. Those of you coming back, good to see you again. We have some visitors here with us who used to be a part of our church and have moved away but are now back visiting, so nice to see you all.

And then some of you are maybe here for the first time. There's a lot happening in our society right now, a lot of things that we can spend time on.

There's continuing to grieve and mourn and try to make sense of Orlando, the lives lost there. There's the vote in the UK, this historic Brexit vote, trying to make sense of that.

There's Donald Trump as just a whole conversation unto itself. There's all kinds of things that we could talk about, and I think it's easy when we have so much going on, it's easy to get taken away.

And one of the things that's really important for us to do from time to time, and actually one of the things that our study of Philippians is going to lead us to do with this time, is to actually come back to the very foundation of our faith.

[1 : 0 7] You know, times like this, when there's so much happening, it's good to remember the basics, to spend a little time reflecting on what is the very core for those of us who are Christians, for those of us who follow Jesus.

What's the foundation of that relationship, and what's it based on? We've been studying this letter to the Philippians that Paul wrote from house arrest in Rome, and he wrote it 10 years after he planted the church, and some stuff is going on in the church, and it's generally an upbeat letter, and he talks a lot about joy and the joy that's possible when you have faith in Jesus Christ.

He talks in the opening verse of our passage, chapter 3, verse 1, he says, finally my brothers rejoice in the Lord. But then he gets angry, and he uses some pretty strong language.

And the reason is because his anger is motivated by love. He sees something happening where the very foundation, the very core of their faith is being threatened. And so he wants to root it out, because he recognizes it for the threat that it is.

And his words, even though they were written a long time ago, they will be just as relevant to us, because the very same issues exist in our church today, exist not in just the church, but in our church, in my own life, as I've experienced the potential to fall into this trap.

[2 : 2 9] And so this is what we're going to talk about, what's happening in the Philippian church, and how it's relevant to us. And this passage shows us two things that we need to understand in order to be clear on the foundation of our faith, in order to have the kind of faith that produces joy.

Two things. First, we need to understand this, that our faith is futile, any faith is futile if it exists apart from Christ.

So the futility of faith apart from Christ. And then the second half, or the other side of the coin, is this, the worth of faith in Christ. As Paul says, the surpassing worth of faith in Christ.

So those are the two things we'll look at. Let's pray for the Lord to lead us. Heavenly Father, we do recognize that we're here, and there are so many things that are cause for anxiety and thought and speculation, and so many things that have affected our lives and the lives of people we know and love.

But we pray that right now our attention would be turned to the very core, the very foundation of our relationship with you, because that is the wellspring of life, of joy, of freedom, of hope, things that we desperately need.

[3 : 40] And we pray that this would happen not by human wisdom, Lord, but rather by the power of your Holy Spirit through your word. And it's in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. So the first thing we see as we begin to get into Philippians chapter 3, and the first few verses is this.

Paul begins to make it very clear that any faith, any faith that exists apart from Jesus is futile, meaning it is empty. He says this in verse 2.

I told you strong language. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

So what's he talking about? Well, the Philippian church was made up entirely of Gentiles. In other words, people who didn't grow up Jewish. And all of these people had heard the gospel preached.

The gospel essentially is the announcement of God's free grace, God's free salvation that is available through Jesus. That means that all we have to do is accept it, put our faith in Christ, and we can have a relationship with God.

[4 : 56] And they had heard this and thought it was tremendous. It was the best news they had ever heard. Many of them had come to faith. A church had been born. And this, from reading this letter, we know it was a joy-filled church.

They were a generous church. They were a church filled with gratitude. It was the kind of church that any one of us would love to have been a part of. And yet, false teachers had come into the church, and they were attempting to convince the Philippians that faith in Jesus wasn't enough.

In other words, that's a good first step. But real spirituality, a real relationship with God, real faith requires more than that. Namely, it requires that you continue to adhere to the law of Moses.

And more specifically, you need to get circumcised. Now, that doesn't have much cultural relevance for us today. But when Paul hears it, we'll understand why in a second.

It infuriates him. And so he calls these teachers dogs. And you've got to understand, when he says dogs, do not think of your golden retriever that you grew up with. That's not what he's talking about here.

[6 : 04] Think of a rabid, diseased, dangerous kind of scavenger. That's what he's talking about. And he's obviously very angry.

And it begs the question, why is Paul so angry? This just seems like a little theological issue. And why has he so been out of shape? Well, let me tell you a story. See if this helps clarify it. It's actually a true story.

A couple of years back, the story broke about a guy named Dr. Fareed Fada. Does anybody remember this story? He, a doctor in the Detroit area, all the reviews said he was a world-renowned cancer doctor.

And that he was one of the go-to experts in the world. And so what Dr. Fada did is he started coming to people who were physically healthy. And he would tell people who were perfectly fine that they had cancer.

That they had terminal cancer. And that their only hope was to start these expensive treatments. A lot of times it was chemo right away. And so these people would start taking these treatments.

[7 : 09] And they would get desperately sick from the treatments. As many of you may know, the treatment for cancer will make you sick in and of itself. So people's teeth would rot and fall out. And they would become weak and emaciated.

And he did this in order to make kickbacks. And so you say, well, okay, well, what did he do this? Just a handful of times. Well, actually, in the, this case just went to trial.

He did this to some 553 people. And he made \$17.6 million off doing this. So when I tell you that story, just take a moment.

How does that make you feel? And if you wrote a letter to Dr. Fata, what would you call him? Dog, evildoer, probably something a bit worse.

See, this is exactly how Paul feels. And in his mind, the false teachers are doing something very similar to what Dr. Fata did. Fata came to people who were physically healthy, who were perfectly fine.

[8 : 09] And he convinced them to take unnecessary treatments. And actually, those treatments made those people sick. And in the same way, these false teachers were coming to people who had a relationship with Jesus.

Through Jesus, they were spiritually alive and well. They were thriving. And these false teachers convinced them that they needed other additional practices. And Paul recognized that these practices would actually do spiritual harm to these people.

And so he's furious about it. But this begs the question, what is the harm of adding something like the law? What is the harm of adding something like circumcision into their faith?

And the harm comes from this fact. That the greatest threat to our joy, the greatest threat to our spiritual well-being, the greatest threat to our salvation, does not come from atheism.

It does not come from radical Islam. You know, it does not come from secular humanism. It doesn't come from limits to religious freedom. No, the absolute, the greatest threat that all of us face right now is the threat of self-reliance.

[9 : 31] Self-reliance. The idea that I can do it on my own. The idea that it all depends on me. What you might call terminal self-reliance.

See, this is what Paul's talking about when he talks about confidence in the flesh. So the false teachers in Philippi came from a long tradition that had come to view circumcision and keeping the standards of the law as kind of boxes to be checked.

And the thinking went, well, if we do our part, if I check the boxes, and I do my part for God, then God will do his part for me. And it had become very transactional.

I do what is required of me, and then God will do what is required of him. And kind of a quid pro quo relationship with the Lord. And the reason this is relevant to us is we don't talk a lot about supervision, but think about it.

And some of you may have been here for a while, and some of you maybe you just moved here. D.C. is full of really good people. You know, it's one of the reasons I say this a lot. It's one of the reasons I actually love being in D.C.

[10 : 33] is because you're around amazing people who are not necessarily here because they want to make a lot of money. It costs a lot of money to live here. But they're the kind of people who, they're willing to live in a group home and make 22 grand a year with six roommates because they want to have an impact.

They want to make a difference. They want to do something in the world. Right? People here are very concerned about global issues. They want to make the world a better place. Really good people.

And so D.C. is full of people like this. And so you end up, I have a lot of conversations with people in this city, and you ask them about their faith, and do you believe in God, and what do you think, you know, where do you think you stand with God?

And a lot of times people will say this. Well, relatively speaking, I'm a pretty good person. I mean, relatively, if you think of all the people out there, I'm a pretty good person. Surely if there is a God, then God would have someone like me.

Compared to most people, I'm one of the better people I know. So that would be having confidence in the flesh. And see, this doesn't just exist outside the church. I think it exists inside the church. This is a tendency that exists in my own heart.

[11 : 44] I mean, I regularly talk to people. I regularly talk to people who, you know, they say they're a Christian. I asked, yeah, I grew up in a Christian home. You know, went to church growing up and all that. Kind of faded away in college, but then came back strong.

And now I'm kind of wanting to plug back into my faith. And, you know, checking the church out. And I say, okay, well, tell me. So tell me about your faith. What makes you a Christian? And many times I hear some version of this.

Well, you know, I think Christianity is really just about being a good person. God wants us to love people. And so it's about loving people well. It's about helping people. It's about leaving the world better than how you found it.

It's about the golden rule. You know, treat others the way you want to be treated. And I mostly try to do that in my life. And so those are the things that kind of make me a Christian. It would be interesting if we could hear what the Apostle Paul would say in response to that.

How he would engage that. Because he would probably say something like this. Your soul is never in greater danger. You are never further from God than the moment you utter those words.

[12 : 54] You cannot be further from God than the moment you utter those words. See, murderers, drug dealers, adulterers, people who lie or cheat or steal, those people are standing on the very threshold of the kingdom.

They may not know it. But they're right there. Because all they need is one moment of clarity.

They need a fraction of a second to see the truth about themselves and to realize that they are morally bankrupt. And all they need is that moment of clarity.

And as soon as that comes, the gospel will make sense to them in a way that it never otherwise could. That's all they need. So why do you think that Jesus spent so much time with sinners and tax collectors and adulterers and prostitutes?

It's because of what he says in Luke chapter 5, verses 31 and 32. And just to paraphrase it, he says this. He says, listen, people who think that they're well don't need a doctor.

[14 : 03] They don't go to the doctor. They don't value a doctor. It's the people who know they're sick. Those are the kind of people who go to the doctor. So I, Jesus, I didn't come for the people who think that they're spiritually well.

I came for people who know that they're spiritually sick. Who know that they're spiritually dead. Those are the people I came to call.

And he says to call them to repentance. And see, repentance doesn't mean what we often think it means. We think that repentance is I'm sorry for the bad stuff and I'm going to, and now I'm going to try and I'm going to try harder than I've ever tried before and I'm going to commit to doing better.

That's just another form of self-reliance. That's just another form of confidence in the flesh. Repentance actually means abandoning our efforts to live apart from God and abandoning our efforts to save ourselves.

It means abandoning that entire project and instead throwing ourselves on God's mercy, which means knowing God doesn't owe me anything. He doesn't owe you anything.

[15 : 10] And it's appealing to God on the basis of His mercy, His desire to do for us what we don't deserve and can never repay. And it's realizing that in Jesus, God has given us everything and there's nothing more that we can have.

As Ephesians 1 says, that in Jesus we have every spiritual blessing. It's ours. So we need to understand the implications of this first point before we move to the other side of the coin of the futility of faith apart from Jesus.

So for most of us, what keeps us from understanding the gospel, what keeps us out of the kingdom, what keeps us far from God is not actually our wickedness.

It's our perception of our own goodness. That's the most dangerous thing. Just to kind of drive this point home, and the whole conversation of hell is its own conversation, but typically in our country, there's been this kind of quasi-Christian idea that there's a heaven and there's a hell and the good people go to heaven and the bad people go to hell.

And so hell is filled with murderers and drug dealers and all those kind of people. I think that if Paul were here and if you were to ask him about hell, he would probably say that it's going to be filled with people who were just doing their best to live by the golden rule.

[16 : 39] And it will come as a great shock when you look around the kingdom of heaven to see what kind of people ended up there. So this leads to our second point because the more we come to see the futility of faith apart from Christ, the more we begin to recognize, as Paul says in verse 8, the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, which is the cornerstone of a joyful faith.

And Paul begins this second point in an interesting way. He kind of gives us his spiritual resume. If you read verses 4 and 5, he sort of lays out his qualifications. And it's an amazing resume.

He gives us his pedigree, his credentials, his experience. And again, culturally, we need to understand that what he's saying here, he is a paragon of religious virtue.

So he's the first century Jewish equivalent of the kind of person you might meet here who graduated top of their class from Harvard Law, they're clerking for the Supreme Court, and they're ending world hunger and working on a cure for cancer in their spare time.

It's the kind of person that you meet and you think, this is a ridiculous, you're not even real. And you meet people like that here. Well, Paul, religiously speaking, would have surpassed all of those people. And then look at what he says in verse 7.

[17 : 59] He says, but whatever gain I had, in other words, whatever positives, whatever good stuff was on my resume, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, he says, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.

Rubbish is, as the Bible tends to do, for whatever reason, a very sanitary word. What he's actually talking about, the word literally translates human excrement. It's essentially a four-letter word, a bomb that he's dropping in the middle of this passage.

And it's the kind of word that if your average first-century Jew were to read it, they would be offended. They would be shocked. They would say, Paul, there was a line that's back here and you crossed it.

We know that you're worked up, but you do not have to go that far. And Paul would say, no, I do, because you need to understand, you need to understand that there's no other word to describe everything else compared with the worth of knowing Jesus.

[19 : 12] I need to use the most extreme word I can. And the reason, why is it so valuable to know Christ? Well, the reason is simple. It's because God doesn't read resumes the way we do.

To use that metaphor of a resume as representing your entire life, God doesn't read resumes the way we do. What do I mean by that? Well, God doesn't have two columns, you know, where this is the kind of pro column and this is the con column, you know, and he doesn't list all of your positive traits and accomplishments here and all your negative stuff here and then sort of step back and sort of tally it up and make a decision on you based on how it comes out.

That's Islam. That's how Islam works. When God looks at the resume of our lives, there's only one thing that matters.

Whose name is on it? Is it just your name all by itself? That's confidence in the flesh. Or is Jesus' name on there?

And that's the only thing that matters because as you see in Paul's life, Paul had a massive realization when he came face to face with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

[20 : 32] When he realized who Jesus was, when he looked at the life that Jesus had lived and then he looked at his own resume and then he looked at Jesus and then he looked at his own resume. He had a massive realization that all of the good that he thought he had done for God, all the things that he thought had impressed God, all the ways that he thought he had lived up at least to God's minimum standards, that all of that was actually crap.

Because there's only one resume good enough to gain access to God and his kingdom, there's one life that passes muster and that's Jesus. And that's when Paul finally began to understand the gospel and came to faith.

Because the gospel is not about me beefing up my resume. It's not about you beefing up your resume, doing less bad stuff and doing more good stuff. It's not about that. People say, hey, I want to get serious about my faith.

I'm going to kind of shape up. I'm going to drink less. I'm going to exercise more. I'm going to go to church. I'm going to get involved. No, no, no, no, no. You're beefing up your resume. That's not what it's about. The gospel is this, that Jesus lived a perfect life.

If you think that you're good, compare yourself to him. People say, well, I follow Jesus. He's the example. He sets the example for me. Jesus is a horrendous example. Try to follow his example and see how it goes for you.

[21 : 53] Jesus lived a perfect life and then he died on the cross to pay for all of the sin, all of the ways that we fall short of that and then he rose to life again and then he extends this invitation. Here's the invitation of the gospel.

Take your resume, take all the bad stuff, but also all of the good stuff. Take your greatest accomplishments, all the orphanage that you started in Africa, all the things that you've done, take all of that, crumple it up, throw it in the trash and then what he does is he puts your name on his resume.

Your name goes on there. This is what Paul means when he talks about in verses eight and nine, he says that he wants to gain Christ and be found in him.

What that means is that when the father looks at you, he doesn't see just you. He sees you in Christ. In other words, you have one resume between the two of you.

Your lives have merged. All of your good, bad, and ugly is gone. It's eradicated. And what replaces that is Jesus' life. And Paul says, I want to be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.

[23 : 06] In other words, not having my own resume, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, that depends on faith. And once Paul realizes that, he comes to see that there's only one thing that really matters in life, and that is knowing Jesus Christ.

Knowing him, even as we are in him, knowing more of him, experiencing more of him. So this is why he says in verse 10 and 11, he says, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

What's he saying here? I want to become what my resume says I already am. How amazing is that? That if you're in Christ and you read, you look at this incredible life that Jesus lived and continues to live, this incredible ministry that he had, the incredible way that he interacted with people.

When you look at all of that, the kind of patience and kindness and yet single-minded devotion to the truth and love and generosity, the kind of humility, the kind of sacrifice, and you look at those things and you say, I want those things to be true of me because this says that they are.

This is how God sees me. I want to experience myself the way God sees me. That's what Paul's saying. So this is why Christians make our lives about loving and serving other people.

[24 : 41] It's why we try to cultivate virtues like humility and kindness and gentleness and other-oriented love. This is why we gather together for worship.

This is why we read the Bible and try to conform our lives to it. We don't do these things to impress God. God's not impressible.

We do these things because these are things that allow us to become and to experience what our resumes already say we are. We're trying to experience what is already true.

These are things that draw us closer and closer to Jesus and help us become more and more like Him. So we do what we do out of gratitude to God and it's the joy that comes from knowing that no matter what we do, you could go out of these doors and absolutely screw up.

Use your imagination. Or you could go out and sell all that you have just like the Bible says and quit your job and move and spend the rest of your days loving and serving the least of these and God's not going to love you one degree more or one degree less than He loves you at this very moment.

[25 : 59] Do those things. They're great but you're not doing them to gain God's love. You're doing them because you have God's love and you're wanting to experience the full meaning of that in your life.

So this has implications for all of us. I think it has implications certainly for Christians but also for non-Christians alike because for those of us who are Christians, I think that it is so easy especially when we are part of a church where we have a lot of we use a liturgy, there's lots of back and forth, there's lots of outward symbols and signs and sacraments that we use to form ourselves and this is a part of our spirituality but with all the external aspects of our worship it's so easy to think that that's what it's about.

That God's somehow keeping track of how often you come to church and that His approval is based on that. It's so easy to fall into this mentality to begin thinking well I do my part I do the minimum standard and then I hope that God does His part.

And listen, that kind of religion is very popular. There are a lot of people in our country who I think think that they're Christians and that's how they would define their faith. And it's very attractive because it fits into your life pretty well.

We're DC people we have really busy lives there's not a lot of room for religion and so this kind of faith will fit in just right next to the internship and the classes and the job it fits in it doesn't ask too much of you it's something that you can kind of leave and come back to depending on how much time and energy you have to give it but it'll never change your life.

[27 : 37] You'll never even taste the kind of joy that Paul talks about and you'll never actually have a relationship with any real God you'll have a relationship with a kind of divine imaginary friend.

So if you're not sure to what extent you may have slipped into this mindset just consider some diagnostic questions. First of all what motivates you in your faith?

What motivates you? Are you motivated by a sense of obligation of duty of guilt of fear or are you motivated by gratitude?

Does your faith feel like it restricts you or do you have a sense of freedom? Do you only pray when you want something? Do you only pray to petition God or are there ever times when you pray just to be in God's presence just to know His presence?

When things go wrong do you get angry? Do you say God you let me down I did my part now why aren't you doing your part? I did all these things for you I even prayed in the right way that I'm supposed to pray and still nothing?

[28 : 46] Or do you struggle through that hardship but do you struggle knowing and trusting that God is in control and that's a good thing? Right? When people criticize you how do you respond to criticism?

Does it devastate you? Do you work hard to defend and justify that idea that people have of you the person that they think that you are? Do you prop that up and make sure that it's unassailable?

Or have you had the kind of breakthrough that Paul had where he realized that he's completely morally and spiritually bankrupt? That his entire identity is something that's been given to him by Jesus and because of that his true identity is unassailable.

So these are things that we as Christians should be thinking about. Lastly just for those who may not be sure what you believe what we're talking about here this evening this is actually the thing that makes Christianity unique.

This is actually the thing that this is the reason why Christians not because we want to be closed minded or not because we want to be intense about these things but just working out the implications this is why Christians believe that salvation is only possible through Jesus.

[29 : 55] And it's simply this that if you compare this to other religious approaches most other religions say some form of the same thing. They say I obey therefore I'm accepted.

I do the things and then I'm embraced by God or I attain nirvana or enlightenment or whatever. I obey therefore I'm accepted. The gospel says the opposite.

It says I'm accepted therefore I obey. I'm accepted I'm embraced and in fact we believe that the only way that I can even begin to approach obeying God is if I'm doing it in the context of his embrace in the context of his love.

That that is the place where the Christian life is meant to be lived in the embrace of God. God has made this amazing way for us to know him and to know his love right here and now not by committing to getting your life back together but by simply coming to him throwing away your resume and asking Jesus to add your name to the countless others who have been taken into his body into his identity being grounded in that and then beginning to figure out what that means about your life.

So this is what Paul is saying here and this is the foundation of our faith. The more we come to see the futility of faith of any faith apart from Jesus the more we will then come to see the surpassing worth of faith in Christ Jesus and the more that happens the more we will actually begin to experience the joy that comes from knowing Christ Jesus.

[31 : 39] Lord we ask you as these are words that have to be empowered by your spirit and driven into our hearts we ask that you would do that.

Paul recognized that so much hangs on us understanding the gospel for what it really is. I pray that you would give this power that whatever is from you you would take it and you would drive it into our hearts as deep as it can go and that it would begin to produce life there that it would set us free from guilt or sin or obligation those of us who struggle with that or that it would shake those of us who are complacent that it would shake us out of our complacency that we would recognize the import of this opportunity and that Lord we would respond in full faith.

We pray this in the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.