Your Biggest Spiritual Problem

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[0:00] Well, good morning. Our sermon text today is Philippians chapter 3, verses 1 through 11. I think that's page 922 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there.

As you turn there, let me pray, and then I'll read for us. Lord, indeed, how we need you. Lord, we need you for absolutely everything.
It's in you that we live and move and have our being. We depend on you each moment of every day, and we depend on you right now in this moment as we come to your word. That by your spirit, you would open our hearts and our eyes and our minds and our ears and our wills to receive what it is you have to say to us.
So speak, we pray, God, through your word once again. Give us hearts that hear, for Jesus' sake. Amen. All right, Philippians chapter 3, let me read verses 1 through 11.
Paul says,
[2:25] Well, as we come to a new chapter here in the book of Philippians, it's worth taking a second and getting our bearings of where we are in this book.

In chapter 1, after giving thanks for what God is up to among the Philippians, Paul tells them about his own situation in prison. He gives them an update of how he's getting along. Then at the end of chapter 1 and right into chapter 2, Paul's main exhortation of the book comes.
Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Christ, the one who laid aside all of his heavenly privileges, became a servant, died on a cross, and who was exalted to the highest place. Live a life worthy of this good news. Shine like stars in the midst of the world. Hold fast to the word of life. And then at the end of chapter 2, Paul holds up Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of what he's talking about.
Examples of Christ-like service. Lives worthy of the gospel. Worthy of our imitation. And so as chapter 3 opens up, it looks like Paul is sort of about to wrap things up.
[3:33] Finally, brothers, he says. But then, surprisingly, he goes on for two more chapters, right? If you've been reading along in the D.A. Carson book on Philippians, Don Carson jokes, One child allegedly asked his dad what the preacher meant when he said, Finally, and his father muttered in reply, Nothing.

Well, the reality is the word finally here probably doesn't mean this is the last thing I'm going to say. It was a bit of a connecting word in Greek that could often mean something like, So then, or as I was saying.
And as Paul was saying back in verse 18 of chapter 2, we're meant to rejoice in the Lord. But quickly, Paul moves to his next subject. And this is something we see here that apparently he had gone over before with the Philippians.
Perhaps when he was with them in person. This is something he had taught them before. You see, some lessons, some spiritual truths are so important that we need to hear them again and again. Paul says, There's no trouble for me. And ultimately, it's for our good, for our safety, he says even. And what Paul is about to tell us is this. That your biggest spiritual problem isn't what you think it is.
[4:55] The biggest threat to the church, the biggest threat to your soul, isn't what you think it is. You know, if you were to take stock of your sort of moral or spiritual resume, what would you see as your greatest liabilities?

What do you think is hindering you the most from entering or thriving in the kingdom of God? What is it that keeps you from Christ? Well, perhaps you would think about your moral failures.
You'd think about your besetting sins. The ways you just don't seem to have enough self-control. The ways you keep falling short. But this passage is telling us that our greatest threat isn't our moral failures or our besetting sins.

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It isn't your sins that ultimately keep you away from God. It's your righteousness. It's not all the things you've done wrong. It's all the things you've done right that threaten to kill you spiritually. And if you can understand the danger of what we're going to call self-righteousness, if you can understand the danger of that, then maybe for the first time you'll really understand what the gospel is all about and what it means to really know Christ.
[6:21] So to get there, I want to look at our passage in three parts. First, we're going to look at what self-righteousness looks like. Second, we're going to see why it's empty.

And third, why knowing Christ is so much better. So what it looks like, why it's empty, and why knowing Christ is better. So let's start by seeing what self-righteousness looks like.
And we see this in verses 2 through 6. Paul starts by saying, look out for the dogs. Now, in the first century church, there were Jewish Christians who held and who taught that in order to be saved, to be in a right relationship with God, and to be a part of his people, you had to be circumcised.
We read about this earlier in the service in Acts 15. Their argument most likely went something like this. From the days of Abraham, God commanded Israel to be circumcised as a sign of his covenant with them.
That was how you knew who was in and who was out of the people of God. And so, Gentiles, you must be circumcised too, or else you can't be saved.
[7:33] No circumcision, no salvation. It's as simple as that. Just read the Old Testament. But Paul, along with the rest of the apostles and church leaders in Acts 15, disagreed entirely.

In light of the gospel, the good news of what Jesus, the Messiah, had done, the church came to see that circumcision was a temporary external sign that pointed to the radical inward work that God would do through the Spirit when the Messiah came.
There was nothing wrong with getting circumcised. Paul and many other Jewish believers in Jesus were happily circumcised. But circumcision did not and could not put someone in a right relationship with God.
And thereby, it could not define the people of God anymore. Only Jesus could do that. Who through his death, resurrection, and outpouring of the Spirit brought about forgiveness of sins and new life for all who believe.
Thus, Paul will say, the true circumcision, that is, the true people of God, the truly cleansed ones, couldn't be found among those who insisted on a surgical procedure.
[8:53] Those who, he says, mutilate the flesh. But the true people of God, the true circumcision, were found among those who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus. Because true circumcision is of the heart.

And the heart can only be cleansed through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. So when Paul says, watch out for the dogs, he's being heavily, heavily ironic.
Because law-abiding Jews, what they would do is that sometimes they would call those kind of unclean Gentiles, they'd call them dogs or evildoers. But Paul, you see, is turning the tables.
He's saying, if you insist on circumcision as a requirement for salvation now, that makes you the unclean one. In fact, to do that means it's not even true circumcision anymore.
Now, you can't tell this in our English translations, but Paul is actually doing a play on words here at the end of verse 3. In Greek, you see, the word for circumcision is peritome. But Paul says these false teachers are so far from what God intended that what they're promoting is nothing but katatome.
[9:59] It's not circumcision. It's mutilation. Strong words, isn't it? But they're strong words because so much is at stake.

And yet, how about for us? It's so much at stake today in all of this. You know, we may not be tempted to find our status through circumcision.
I doubt anyone here is tempted to say, you know what I need to do to be saved in addition to believing in Jesus? I think I need to be circumcised. I haven't met anyone like that in over a decade of ministry.
But that doesn't mean that we're immune from what Paul calls confidence in the flesh. That is basing our identity, basing our status before God and the people of God, basing it on something that we find in us.
Now, lest we think that Paul is disagreeing with a circumcision party just because he can't measure up to their standards, he goes on in verses 4 through 6 to say, look, if anyone has a spiritual

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resume worth boasting in, it's me.
[11:13] You know, it's not like Paul's the kid who made fun of the school band because he couldn't play an instrument, right? He's not the kid who sort of says that sports are stupid because he got cut from the team. No, Paul can play this game better than anyone else.

But as he unfolds his sort of moral resume, what we find is that these verses start to give us something that's like an anatomy of self-righteousness.
We see as Paul unfolds his spiritual resume all the ways in which we too are tempted to base our status on something that's found in us, to place our confidence in the flesh.
It's interesting that sociologists will distinguish between three categories of social status. There's a scribed status, something that sort of is yours by birth.
There's achieved status, something that you get through the doing. And then there's sort of master status that sets you apart from everybody else. And Paul here in verses 4 through 6 actually sort of mentions all three.
[12:16] Now, as we said, a scribe status is something that you inherit or that you receive. And Paul starts out by saying that he was circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.

In other words, when it came to his parents, when it came to his pedigree, when it came to his heritage, his was impeccable. He was no mere convert to Judaism.
No, he was circumcised on the eighth day just like the law said. He could trace his lineage back through Hebrew parents, back through the tribe of Benjamin, that one tribe that stuck by Judah and the house of David in ancient Israel.
He could trace his heritage back through the patriarchs and Jacob. No one could dispute with Paul's pedigree, with his ascribed status. Now, I wonder, is that where you find your status, your worth?
In your family name, in your spiritual heritage. Perhaps you can trace your family tree back to a great saint or a great missionary. Perhaps your parents or your grandparents or even your great-grandparents were great men and women of faith.
[13:27] Or perhaps they were great upstanding leaders in their communities, that you come from a family that's done much good, very respectable, very honorable, very worthy, and you carry their name.

And for you, it's a great source of dignity. Now, of course, there's nothing wrong with being proud of your heritage. There's nothing wrong with celebrating and enjoying your family, your cultural identity.
Yes, we should do that. But is that what you lean on? Is that where your ultimate confidence lies? Paul goes on.
He doesn't just talk about his ascribed status, his parentage, his pedigree. He talks about his achieved status. Now, achieved status is something that you enjoy by virtue of kind of your personal accomplishments. As to the law, Paul says, I was a Pharisee.
Now, the Pharisees were the Jewish party in the first century who were the most attentive, the most scrupulous in keeping the law of Moses. And not just the law, but the traditions of the elders too.
[14:31] You know, the Pharisees were sort of like the group to be a part of. They were like the inner circle if you wanted to be serious about God's law. And many people in the first century looked at the Pharisees as the heroes, as the good guys, because they took it all very seriously and they actually tried to do it.

You know, there were lots of Jews in Paul's day who could say they were circumcised on the eighth day, yada, yada, yada. But only some had the achieved status of being a Pharisee. So what's your achieved status?
Is it a degree on your wall with a well-known name attached to it? Is it a neighborhood or a size of home that you've been able to move into?
Or perhaps more subtly, is it a group of friends, a social circle that you've been accepted into? Is it a political party or cause that you align with?
Is this where you're finding your worth, your confidence, your status? Is this what you think defines you? And do you look down ever so slightly, maybe, on those who don't share this status or this party affiliation with you?

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[15:51] Or if you don't look down, maybe you do find yourself thinking at times, man, I'm so glad I'm not like those other people. But Paul doesn't just list his pedigree.

He's a Hebrew of Hebrews. He doesn't just name his party. He's a Pharisee. He goes on to talk more deeply about his performance. Beyond acquired and achieved status, there lies what sociologists would call one's perceived master status.
Paul says, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.
Now, on the surface, this feels like the most extreme thing on Paul's spiritual resume, right?
This is the thing that makes him most unlike ourselves. We think, whoa, Paul, you've like totally gone off the rails now, right? But, you know, I think more of us are like Paul in this respect than we realize.
Of course, I don't think any of us would boast in persecuting the church, right? But we do consider it a virtue to be zealous for the right causes. And when Paul says he's blameless under the law, he doesn't mean that he was sort of sinlessly perfect.
[17:11] No, he means that he kept the law as best he could, and when he failed, he kept to the sacrifices and ceremonies in the law that were in place to atone for sin. So in that sense, he was blameless.

He did what the law asked. And when he failed, he took advantage of what the law provided. He did. It's just like us today. No one of us would say that we're perfect, right?
But many of us would say that, you know, we're good people. We do our best. And in that sense, we think we're blameless. Ironically then, when we look at our own hearts, we all carry around a sense of our own master status.
That we're on the right side of the issues, and we're basically good people. And that's where our confidence so often lies. We may not put too much stock in our pedigree, our acquired status, as sociologists say.
We might not put too much weight in our party affiliations or our accomplishments, our achieved status. But, you know, we all have this unshakable sense at times of our own master status.
[18:28] That when it comes to God and when it comes to others, we have a righteousness that meets the mark. We think that God will accept us based on our performance.

So this is what self-righteousness looks like. You know, it doesn't look like being a sort of self-absorbed jerk, always looking out for number one.
No. It looks like simply placing your confidence, finding your status or your worth in your own pedigree or accomplishments or performance. And that means that it's probably the most natural thing in the world.
And it describes all of us. And yet our text goes on. Not just to show us what this looks like.
It goes on to show us why it's totally empty. Self-righteousness might be the air that we breathe, but in reality, it's a vacuum.
[19:28] Let's look again at verses 7 through 8. Paul says, but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, 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. I remember when our kids were little, for a time, they were into Thomas the Tank Engine. Are you familiar with Thomas the Tank Engine? It's this great British show about different colored talking trains that live on this island and every episode they get into some sort of trouble and they have to help each other out and it always works out in the end and it all takes only about 10 minutes.
It's great. And of course, like any good kids show, you don't just watch the show, you also buy the toys and the merchandise, right? So for a while, we had quite a collection growing.
Some through our own purchases, many through the generosity of others who had outgrown Thomas the Tank Engine, we had quite a collection growing of little Thomas the Tank Engine toys, little trains and little tracks that you could put together and it was quite fun actually.
[20:43] And then one weekend, we decided as a family to go to the town of Essex, just east of here in Connecticut. And in Essex, they have a real working steam engine, a legitimate steam train and you can go for a ride.

So one weekend, we thought we're into trains. Let's do this. So we did. And you know, when that steam engine started up and we got to see firsthand the sort of massive amounts of steel and coal

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and smoke and fire and when it started to move and we could feel its power and you could hear the pressure of the wheels and you could feel the blast of the whistle.
You know, I realized anyway that up until that point, even though I had watched hours upon hours of Thomas the Tank Engine and it had played for hours more, I realized at that point, I had had no idea what a steam train was really like until I was face to face with one.
And the real thing made all the other toys seem like toys. And that's what Paul is saying here.
He's saying that when you are confronted by the reality of Jesus, Jesus, the truly righteous one, when we get a good look at him, then all of our own righteousness, anything we might have considered gain in our eternal bank account is suddenly revealed to be what it truly is.
[22:32] Nothing. Look at Jesus revealed in the pages of the New Testament. Look at how his interactions with others are always marked by perfect patience and unflinching truth and ceaseless grace.

Look at how Jesus' obedience to the Father never wavers. His obedience never wavers, not just when the crowds are gathering and his fame is growing, but even when he's betrayed and abandoned by his closest friends.
Even when he's condemned by his own people and handed over to the Romans to be unjustly executed. Look at how in his resurrection, he doesn't return and sort of shame or condemn his lapsed disciples.
No, he comes and he restores them. And look at how in his ascension to the Father's right hand, even now, he continues to intercede perfectly on our behalf, never wavering, never tiring.
When you get a glimpse of the truly righteous one, we see that our emptiness, our righteousness is empty.
[23:42] It's nothing. And for Paul, he goes on to say, you know, it's actually less than nothing. He says, for his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ.

Now, here's a deep spiritual truth, friends. You see, our self-righteousness isn't neutral. It's negative.
If it's the thing we're resting our life on, then it's the very thing that keeps us from Christ. Why? Because if we are confident in our own pedigree, or our own performance, then we simply don't have much need for Christ.
Why would we need a redeemer if we're fully capable of saving ourselves? Why would I need a new status? Why would I need a new life if my life's okay?
You see, the reality is there's no middle ground. there's no both and between holding on to self-righteousness and truly knowing Christ.
[25:03] You have to let go of one to really have the other. Jesus is Lord, and he will be truly known in no other way.

you can't have Jesus merely as an example. You can't have Jesus merely as a sidekick to sort of prop up your own agenda of self-righteousness.
you have to know him as Lord or you don't know him at all. If you want to know Christ and enter into a life-changing relationship with him, as Paul says, to gain him, to be found in him, then you have to transfer your trust.
You have to step out from depending on your own righteousness, your own pedigree, your own performance, and you have to place your trust in him alone. You have to consider that stuff as less than nothing compared to who he is.
But is it worth it? I mean, make no mistake about it, what Paul is talking about here is a radical shift in identity and it is a costly shift.
[26:23] I've suffered the loss of all things he says. Think of the friends that Paul lost. Think of the the security and the social networks that Paul lost.

Some people speculate that Paul, given that most Jewish men in his time were married, and he never talks about his wife in his letters, some people speculate that Paul maybe even lost his spouse, that she walked away from him because he was a follower of Jesus.
What losses might it mean for you? A loss of intimate friends? A loss of career prestige? Is knowing Christ really better than just sticking with our self-righteousness and getting on with life?
Well, at the end of our passage, Paul explains why Christ is better. He's shown us what self-righteousness looks like. He's shown us why it's empty and now in verses 9-11 we see why

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Christ is better.
Let's pick up reading at the end of verse 8. Paul says, for his sake I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ.
[27:39] The righteousness from God that depends on faith. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and share his sufferings becoming like him in his death that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

So Paul mentions two great gifts that come to us when we are united to Christ by faith. The first is Christ's righteousness the second is Christ's resurrection power.
In verse 9 Paul tells us about a new righteousness a new status a new acceptance that we receive. But look at how different it is. Our old righteousness comes from the law.
Our new righteousness comes from God. Our old righteousness depends on us keeping the law. But this new righteousness depends not on our works but on faith.
That is it doesn't depend on our own performance. It depends on the performance of another. Jesus perfectly kept the law. Jesus was the only completely righteous one. And through faith in Christ we're vitally united to him like a husband is united to his wife and that means what's true of Christ is now true of us.
[28:57] And when God looks at us he sees the righteousness of Jesus because we're united to him through faith. Can you imagine the sort of peace you would have if you knew that you're standing before the only judge who really matters God himself if you knew that you're standing before that judge was utterly and finally settled that you were totally and completely accepted once and for all forever because of the finished work of Jesus.

Can you imagine if you had nothing to fear no condemnation or shame to dread that God looked upon you and wasn't weighing your good or bad deeds but was utterly accepting you.
And because there was nothing you did to earn that righteousness there was nothing you could do to lose it either. And if that brings peace oh imagine the joy it would bring into your life.
Imagine the joy of knowing that your status is secure before God. That God's love for you will never change. That it won't go up and down depending on whether you've had a good day or a bad day. That's why Paul can talk so much in Philippians about joy. That's why this whole chapter starts by saying rejoice in the Lord. You know legalism self-righteousness it never leads to joy.
[30:23] But receiving the righteousness of God through faith in Christ that's the wellspring of joy. Because it doesn't move and it doesn't change no matter what hardships come.

No matter how many times we fail. There's joy. But Paul says Christ doesn't just give us his righteousness and with it all the peace and all the joy.
In verses 10 and 11 Paul talks about knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection. You see when we trust in Christ we don't just receive a whole new status before God. That is Christ's righteousness.
We also receive a whole new principle of life within. The same power that raised Christ from the dead now lives in us. What does that mean?
Well it means that our lives look more and more like his. As we follow him confident in our status before God we launch out to live the life that Christ has for us in his power.
[31:28] And as we share in his sufferings our lives display more and more of his character. Through the power of Christ in us by the Holy Spirit this resurrection power rather than growing harsh we become patient.

And rather than growing resentful we become gentle. And rather than growing fearful we become bold. This is what we mean by the term sanctification.
Becoming more and more like Christ throughout our lives. And the end point of sanctification is what we call glorification.
Being totally made new in the resurrection. resurrection. That's where our text ends. Becoming like him in his death Paul says verse 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.
Other translations like the NIV they put verse 11 this way they say and so somehow attaining to the resurrection of the dead. Some even read if perhaps I might attain to the resurrection of the dead.
[32:36] Now okay at first that doesn't sound too confident does it? It's almost like Paul saying well I might not make it. Okay but when Paul says if somehow he's not actually expressing doubt or

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anxiety he's expressing humility.

It's not as if Paul doubts whether God will raise him for Christ's sake. He's very confident in that. We read that all over Paul's letters. Go back to the first chapter of Philippians. Paul says look if I die I'm going to be with Jesus.
It's a done deal. So Paul isn't expressing a doubt here about whether God will raise him for Christ's sake. Rather what Paul is expressing here is the fact that he doesn't deserve it.
Which puts Paul right back in the place of trust. Trust not in his own resume but in Christ. Placing no confidence in himself. Placing all confidence in Christ.
And this is the same for us. In ourselves we don't deserve the resurrection power of Christ. Either in this life or in the life to come. But Christ graciously gives it to us.
[33:56] He gives us not just the great gift of justification of being righteous but he gives us the wonderful gift of sanctification. being made more and more like him. Again imagine what your life would be like with that.

Imagine what hope you would have in the face of discouragement or despair if you knew that your present and your future weren't simply going to be the product of your own strength.
but you knew that you were a participant in the power of Christ's resurrection and that God would use even hardships and trials to bring about transformation in your life.
Promising that even on the far side of death there was indestructible hope. Imagine how much hope that would give you for change in the present that you're not stuck anymore.
And imagine how this would change how you view your fellow believers too. You know if we live inside a paradigm of self-righteousness then our capacity and power to change lies solely in us.
[35:06] It's a totally closed system. And in that paradigm after a while you start to lose hope that people can actually change don't you? But if the power of Christ's resurrection really does live in us.

if together we've left behind that self-righteous paradigm and we've considered knowing Christ to be what's most important and his power lives in us then there's always room for hope.
So the surpassing worth of knowing Christ really is better. It's better than clinging to our performance and pedigree and all the sort of privileges that come with that because those things can never really bring what Christ gives righteousness and life.
As Tom mentioned in his pastoral prayer today's Reformation Sunday. It's kind of the Sunday of the church year when we remember the Reformation. And the message of this passage is really what the Reformation was all about.
That righteousness and life before God come by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. You know if God called your life to account today what answer would you give him for your life?
[36:34] He created you. He made you. He sustains you. He cares about your life so much that he will one day call you to account for it. Where would you put your confidence before his throne?

Would you hand him your resume and hope that it was enough? Would you point to your performance or your pedigree? Or would you say in the words of the old hymn, nothing in my hands I bring simply to the cross I cling.
There's only one way to be right with a holy God and that's through the perfect righteousness of Christ and it's given to everyone who believes. And if that describes you Christian, what's keeping you from knowing Christ more and more?
Is there still some area of pride that you cling to? Still something that you try to put alongside Christ for your identity, your status, your worth?
If so, lay it down. Count it as loss. Stop making it your confidence because there's nothing better than knowing the surpassing worth of Christ Jesus our Lord.
[37:45] let's pray. Our Father in heaven, as the first verse of this passage commands us, we want to take a moment and rejoice in you, to be glad and give you praise for the gift of Jesus and the gift of knowing him.

Lord, fill our hearts with the confidence and joy and peace and hope that come from knowing the free gift of righteousness and life that are found in our Savior.
And God, open the eyes of all of us in this room to behold Christ and to trust him more deeply. and for those who haven't yet placed their trust in him, oh God, would today be the day of salvation for them.
Call them to yourself, I ask. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.

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