

Turning the Tables

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bible reading now, and we're in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Josh has been leading us through this for the last few Sundays, and we're going to be reading this morning the first half of Philippians chapter 3, beginning at verse 1 and down to verse 11.

That's page 981, if you have one of the church Bibles. Let me read it, Philippians chapter 3 and verse 1. Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.

To write these same things to you is no trouble to me, and is safe for you. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers.

Look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the real circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

[1 : 31] But whatever gain I had, I counted 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. I 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.

A righteousness from God that depends on faith. 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. Amen. And may God bless us.

His word. Well, do please open your Bibles again to Philippians chapter 3 and follow along as we work through this.

[2 : 51] A couple of weeks ago, when we started our study in Philippians, I used the contrast between that which is real and authentic with that which is counterfeit. We saw that Paul uses a principle that's similar to money being printed as the proof that Philippians were the real thing.

Money is printed from plates. The paper goes in and comes out bearing the distinct marks of the template. Quite deliberately, counterfeit money is noticeably different from real notes.

There'll be similarities. But when lined up with the printing plates, when handled with the real deal, they can be written off. They can be exposed. And likewise, Paul is saying that Jesus is the template.

And so all true believers bear his marks. They fit the mold. We saw last week in Jesus what the authentic thing looks like.

The theological pattern that runs throughout this whole letter is the Lord Jesus' example. His model of sacrifice and selflessness. His model of service. That's the DNA that runs through his family.

[4 : 06] That's the DNA that runs through those who truly belong to him. As God, he was high, but stepped down to the lowest place of all.

The creator stepped into creation and into all of its fallenness. And more than that, he died a slave's death, a traitor's death. But from that lowest place, he was then raised to the highest place.

And that same future-mindedness is present in Paul. It's present in Timothy. It's present in Epaphroditus. All the examples throughout this letter, they embrace the lowliness in the present life, just like Jesus did, walking his path after him, so that at the day of Christ, they may share with Jesus in his exaltation.

And Paul has been saying that the Philippians fit the mold too. In chapter 4, their sacrificial offering bears the hallmarks of Christ's pouring out of his life.

They pour out their wallets to partner with Paul, despite their limitations and trials. And so now, having seen the blueprint, the template last week in the Lord Jesus, we get to the point in Philippians where the counterfeiters appear.

[5 : 28] And this distinction between the authentic and the counterfeit is at the heart of what's going on in Philippians. There are lots of examples of the real thing, people who fit perfectly on top of Jesus.

But this week's passage is dealing with those who don't. Those who, whilst acting like the real thing, and telling people that they are the real thing, and declaring that to be the real thing, you need to be like them, well, they're actually declared by Paul to be as false as can be.

And so in verses 1 to 3, we see the nature of these opponents come to light. So firstly, verses 1 to 3, we see that their nature is folly. Folly.

Putting confidence in any idea outside of Paul's gospel, and so putting confidence in any action outside of Jesus' cross, is the path towards exclusion.

It's folly. Now, exclusion is a stark word to use here. But Paul is, in effect, turning the tables on his opponents.

[6 : 37] For whilst they talk of what it means to truly belong to God's people, Paul is saying it's they who don't belong. Look at verse 2. At first glance, it might seem that we don't really learn very much about the opponents from this.

You can see Paul doesn't regard them. He uses three rather scathing phrases to describe them. Dogs, evildoers, mutilators. But notice that he says each time to look out for them.

I think that is Paul preparing the church for the arrival of these opponents. They're not yet here, but they're coming. Philippians is one of the later letters.

And by this point in Paul's ministry, he has experience of people arriving after he's left to try and derail churches. He's got experience of the circumcision party following him around, trying to mutilate, as he says, the true church, trying to Judaize them.

Which means that in their teaching, they're going to insist that to be properly one of God's people, one must be a Jew with all their customs. Particularly, it meant embracing circumcision as the sign of being one of the true people of God.

[7 : 54] And so their teaching insisted that we can make ourselves part of God's family. By what we do. It's important to note here, there is a difference between embracing what these Judaizers were pushing and embracing God's law in the right way.

By this time in the first century, the faith of Israel had largely been distorted from the true faith that was revealed to Moses and the other prophetic voices. We see the sort of thing that this produces in Jesus himself.

He says in Mark 12 to the religious leaders of the day that you are wrong. You knew neither the scriptures nor the power of God. The religious leaders, they didn't know the scriptures nor the power of God because things have been so badly distorted.

Theirs was a mere external religion that was marked by what we might call self-righteousness. And this perverted Jew of Judaism that was so often peddled to God's precious church in the New Testament, it's a big danger.

And so those seemingly impolite words used in verse 2, they're not just simple insults. Paul is using words that would resonate with a Jewish-influenced audience. So look again at verse 2.

[9 : 16] He calls them dogs. That's not the equivalent of me calling someone I'm not too fond of a dog in some way, or maybe worse.

He's using dog there very intentionally because it has the connotation of being unclean to a Jewish mind. Gentiles were dogs. They were outsiders as far as the people of God were concerned.

And the word evildoers in there in verse 2, that isn't being used as a generic term for doing things that are wrong. Rather, despite great claims to keeping the law, Paul is saying that they're doing no such thing.

Their attempts at keeping the law were evil. Perhaps encapsulated by Isaiah's words that all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. For mere external works cannot be clean.

And then the third phrase, verse 2. That's the turning of the screw by Paul. Paul turns the opponent's word around on them.

[10 : 25] They might be called the circumcision party, but the truth is that they are the mutilation. The only thing that their insistence on circumcision leads to is needlessly cutting off the flesh.

Needlessly mutilating. It's the very essence of folly. Whereas the truth is, says Paul, verse 3, that we are the circumcision. The church, those who put their trust in Jesus and Jesus alone, are the true circumcision.

At the last day, when we stand before our maker, when we stand before our judge, what is our defense? When faced with a docket of how we've fallen short, not just of what we would expect of ourselves, but of how we've fallen short of what God expects, then what will our defense be?

Yes, mighty creator of heaven and earth, I know I did all of those things wrong, but I've got a standing order every month that goes out to my church and to various charities. Overlook my discrepancies because I do good things.

Yes, almighty judge, I can see that I've not just done wrong, but in doing so, I've deeply and gravely attacked you and your nature and your character and your name. But I do serve in a ministry at church, or I did for a couple of years.

[11 : 50] I was baptized as a baby, I was circumcised, I was a good family man. I've read every Tim Keller book going. Everyone I know considers me to be a good person.

I spent my life fighting for social justice. Paul says, verse 3, The true people of God, the true circumcision, are those who put no confidence in the flesh, but say on that day against their own docket, I have no defense other than that Jesus Christ is my Savior and Lord.

He is my righteousness. He makes me not guilty. In joining me to himself, he joins me to you, gracious judge. In joining me to himself, he makes me one of your children.

And so notice the difference between the counterfeits and the true people of God. Paul said, verse 2, that they were evildoers, that's all that they could do.

However, God's true people can honor him. They can worship him. They can live righteously as his people because, verse 3, they worship by the Spirit.

[13 : 09] They can do righteous things because it's the Spirit within them producing them. Paul is clear. These opponents are wrong. They're dangerous.

Paul calls them, verse 18, enemies of the cross. Because when a church or a Christian is given to self-righteousness, to pointing to what they've done, they're asserting that the cross is not required. They stand in opposition to all of its significance. Paul perhaps gives another clue as to how deep this problem was and just how much folly the opponents are in back in chapter 2.

In verse 15, Paul urges this dear church to be blameless and innocent, to be children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. These words are a quote from Deuteronomy 32.

But Paul changes the phrasing slightly. In Deuteronomy, it is Israel who are the crooked and twisted generation and it's said of them that they are no longer children of God without blemish.

[14 : 22] Whereas Paul seems to be saying to the Philippian church that they are true children and so to live up to it. And thus by inference, the Judaizers are the crooked and twisted generation.

Circumcised they may be, but they are every bit the same as unfaithful Israel of generations past. Paul's point in these verses is that the counterfeiters can make all the noise that they want.

They can chop off all of the skin that they want. But that will never make them God's true people. The Philippians are every bit the true people of God because they've embraced Paul, his gospel, his pattern as he models it on Jesus.

And so Paul goes on to show from his own experience how he knows the folly of the opponents and how he came to faith. And that's our second point. Number two, faith.

Verses four to nine. The authentic people of God are marked by a faith that counts anything and everything else in this world as nothing compared to Christ.

[15 : 37] Faith itself is following Christ's pattern of humbling himself. Paul begins this section in a slightly odd way. He's almost boasting about his own achievements.

He said that no confidence should be put in the flesh. Then he says, verse four, he would have plenty of reason to put confidence in the flesh. And then he goes on to spell out his rather impressive looking spiritual CV.

It's a CV of so-called righteousness. And really, he's exposing that it's not enough. So Paul spells out firstly in verses five and six what his CV entailed.

He begins with the things that he had by merit of his birth, what he was born into and so inherited. And then he progresses in verse six from things that were conferred onto him to things that he chose.

And each step in these verses builds a picture of just how righteous Paul would have been in Jewish eyes at this time.

[16:46] So we look at verse five. Paul had been circumcised, but notice that he wasn't circumcised randomly at a whim. No, he was circumcised on the eighth day.

This was a properly faithful Jewish circumcision done to the letter of the law. It wasn't a rogue, pagan thing. No, Paul was circumcised as a good Jew on the right day.

Verse five again tells us he was of the people of Israel. His heritage has always been Israel. He wasn't a convert. Paul was an uncontaminated and thoroughbred Jew.

Continuing verse five, he wasn't just Joe average Jew. He wasn't from any old tribe. He was a Benjamite. One of the two leading tribes.

Still verse five, even though he'd grown up in the midst of a strongly Roman culture, he'd preserved his cultural and ethnic heritage. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, trained and taught in Jerusalem itself.

[17:54] Paul's formation and education had seen no corners cut and no watering down. Then he moves on to things that were his own choices.

The last thing in verse five, his studies of the law shaped him into becoming a Pharisee. He was a leader in the Jewish tradition that perhaps took the law most seriously.

It was strict and highly respected. He took his role as a Pharisee incredibly seriously, so much so that verse six, he was a persecutor of the church.

He could see the threat that this band of Jesus followers boozed. So he wasn't going to stand around and let it happen. He was going to jolly well do something about it. And so stones were to be thrown.

That's quite the CV that Paul lays out. And then he finishes it off, verse six, by saying that under the law, he was blameless. That is, there could be no charge leveled against him.

[18:59] It wouldn't fit that Paul is claiming that he was in any way absolutely perfect. Everything else in this list that he puts out is verifiable. And so again, he's saying, you can check my record.

No one has anything against me. So Paul is saying, trust me, I didn't abandon this CV because I thought I was a failure.

I didn't abandon it because other people thought I was a failure. Paul can't be written off as a failing Jew who was easily swept up by a new cult.

No, he had an impressive history, but look at what he thinks of it, verse seven. He says, whatever gain I had, I counted it as loss.

He's saying that his previous life wasn't just worth nothing. He's saying it was a loss. It disadvantaged him because he spent so long clinging to what he now sees as empty self-righteousness.

[20:01] Righteousness. Verse eight, he now counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. And this is where Paul begins to draw particular attention again to Christ's pattern.

Paul refers to Jesus as my Lord using that title Lord. It's the very title that God granted to Jesus as he was exalted in chapter two.

Jesus' lowliness throughout his earthly life led to his exaltation and to having a name that is above every other name so that every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Chapter one tells us that Paul fits Christ's template his life bears the marks of sacrifice humility for the benefit of others. And in continuing to talk of his own experience Paul uses language that reflects Jesus' pattern.

Jesus is my Lord. And then look at 2.6 back to last week's chapter. Jesus did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

[21:23] Paul uses the same words of himself in 3.7 and 8. Paul counted any gain as loss for Christ and counts everything as loss in order to gain Christ.

2.8 Jesus was found in human form and chapter 3.9 Paul was found in him.

in fact as well as seeing the similar words he uses of both himself and Jesus if we look at the pattern we see it even more clearly.

Just as Jesus starts at the very highest place of privilege being God and steps out of it so Paul starts in the very highest place of privilege in terms of spiritual looking things and he suffers the loss of them all.

He steps out of them. Both Jesus and Paul doing so in order that they would have an exalted future. Paul wants us to see that Christ's pattern isn't just the pattern for life as a Christian.

[22 : 32] It's not just the path that we walk. We don't start to gain this DNA once we've become a Christian. Paul is showing us that Christ's example is actually the very means of taking hold of Christ.

It's how we become a Christian in the first place. It's what sets us on the path in the first place. We humble ourselves. We empty ourselves of any role we have to play in being saved.

We empty ourselves of all achievement and all sense of righteousness. We take anything that we might have to offer and toss it aside saying only empty hands can come to Jesus.

Faith itself is emptying ourselves. It's stepping down from any perceived position we might have and saying that before the Lord Jesus it is all rubbish. It's all dung, feces.

That's the strength of the word that Paul uses there. It's possible that in using that word rubbish in verse 8 that it is another prod at the Judaizers. The word is thought to derive from the same word Isaiah uses to describe filthy rags.

[23 : 46] Righteous deeds are filthy rags, a soiled cloth, a polluted garment. Something only worthy of being thrown to the dogs. Another jab in the eye of these Judaizers.

Paul is being as clear as day with the Philippians. when these dogs come, make no mistake. We gain perfect righteousness, a righteousness which we could never earn or produce ourselves only as we, verse 9, have faith in Christ.

It's only with him because it's his. With him we gain a righteousness that isn't our own because we've emptied ourselves of any vestige self-achievement and then we can be filled with Christ's righteousness.

A righteousness that comes from God. Paul is desperate for this precious church in Philippi to stick with him, to persevere, to keep going.

There's always a temptation for us to lose sight of everything that we have in Christ, to lose sight of the humility that marks this life, to strive for things that we can achieve, things that we can boast in.

[25 : 01] Boasting is such a powerful thing. Who here doesn't want to draw attention to themselves? Who here doesn't want to show off the good things they've done?

Boasting is powerful, but it certainly ruins any sense of harmony that a church might have. That's why Paul made such a big deal of that last week in chapter two, harmony and unity together.

you can guarantee that partnership in the gospel, partnership in a church will not flourish where people are busy trying to tick boxes to show how good they are.

I recently watched the dramatization of the UJ Simpson trial. I found it interesting the competitiveness that was at play between all of his lawyers. They were a team, competition, but this competitiveness threatened to undermine their whole defense.

Regularly, lines were trotted out like, make sure my name is written on the brief. I want to be first chair. I want to be the one that speaks to the press. If I don't get my way, I'm not going into the room.

[26 : 15] That's the kind of thing that self-righteousness will lead to in a church. competition, competition, competitiveness, division. And so that's why Paul makes such a big deal out of unity and harmony.

Paul wants to give this church everything possible to resist the counterfeit gospel. These verses are not just about Paul's journey to realizing the emptiness of self-righteousness.

They're about equipping the Philippians to see what is true, to be joined together in emptying themselves in order to gain Christ.

But he's doing something else too. There's a classic storyline that you'll see repeated, I'm sure, in various films and TV programs. The former master counterfeiter is recruited by the FBI or whoever it is to help them catch fraudsters, to help them identify what's authentic and what's fake.

Who knows better than someone who's been fully engrossed in the industry? Who knows better than someone who's been touching, working with that which is real and that which is fake?

[27 : 28] Well, Paul is showing himself as something akin to this. He's establishing his credentials. He's saying to the Philippians, trust me, I know what I'm talking about. In terms of Jewishness, Paul

was elite.

And so he wants the Philippians to know clearly that this plea isn't from ignorance, quite the opposite. He had moved from the folly of the opponents to faith and they must stick with him. And because he'd done that, he could see what's at stake in all of this. The future's at stake. Verses 10 and 11, our third point.

The future. Belonging to the true people of God means longing above all to share with Jesus in his resurrection.

The future comes up again and again in Philippians. And whilst we saw last week that Christ's lowliness led to his exaltation, Paul makes clear now that the pattern is the same for Christians.

[28 : 36] Look back at verse 1. Paul begins this section with another of the common themes in Philippians. He says, rejoice in the Lord.

And he goes on to say that what he is writing to them, he's doing for their safety. Paul links rejoicing with what he's writing about and he's concerned for their safety in light of these enemies that are coming.

And so it's new stretch that to say that for Paul, safety comes from rejoicing. And in the context of Philippians, it seems clear that being safe means reaching the day of Christ.

He said in chapter 1 that he's sure that the Philippian church will reach that day. He prays that that would be the case as they continue to partner with him. And then we see that this is the chief concern in our passage today.

In verse 11. Paul's faith is put firmly in Christ and not his own achievements and his heritage because by any means possible he wants to attain the resurrection of the dead.

[29 : 50] And so I take it that the rejoicing that Paul speaks of is rejoicing in their citizenship that's in heaven. I take it the rejoicing is rejoicing in their sure and certain future.

the future that will be theirs because Christ is exalted and one day we'll share his experience with him. But notice that Paul commands rejoicing.

He does it in verse 1 here but he also repeats it in chapter 4. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice. And rejoicing is an act not a feeling.

It's important to be able to see what is promised to us what we've been given. It's important for us to see what our future really is. But that takes work on our part.

When the lowliness of life as a Christian in this world is testing we'll need to force ourselves to see what is true. To see what Christ has given to us. To see what awaits us in him.

[30 : 55] Or to put it another way to rejoice in it. Paul is saying that for their safety they must look to the future that awaits and remember it. To ponder it. To think about all that's glorious about it.

To explore their hope. To never let it out of their sight. So that the longing for the resurrection that they have can't be outweighed by anything in this world. So that the resurrection to glory will never be diminished in light of a fleeting ephemeral sense of glory now.

Look at verse 10. Paul longs to know the power of Jesus resurrection but he knows that that means sharing his sufferings, his death, dying to this world, dying to self and what we can offer and living a life that's marked by Christ's pattern.

It seems absurd in light of this that lopping off a bit of flesh would be the means of belonging to Christ. Paul says the true people of God don't cut off a foreskin.

They cut off their whole lives. Clinging only to Jesus because nothing else is needed and nothing else will do.

[32 : 18] because embracing him means sharing with him in the most glorious of futures.

Embracing him means resurrection. It means gaining new bodies that will no longer be riddled with sin and temptation.

Bodies that will no longer endure suffering and pain. And it means an existence where there's no threat to our faith. Where we don't have to be on guard anymore.

Paul says that those who put confidence in their lives, their good works, their achievements, well they are, verse 18, enemies of the cross.

Their end is destruction, verse 19, and their minds are set on earthly things. But Paul's encouragement to precious churches like the Philippian church, his encouragement to churches like ours, is that our citizenship is in heaven, verse 20.

And from it we await a savior. And when he arrives, we will take hold of that resurrection. Because empty handed faith leads to an exalted heavenly future.

[33 : 36] So Paul says, stick with me. Let's pray. Lord, we rejoice that you have raised Jesus to the seat of highest honor.

We rejoice that he reigns and rules. And one day he will return to see these things spread to this whole world perfectly. So we ask that you would help us to see that gaining this whole world now is forfeiting our souls.

And so help us to cling to Jesus with empty hands. Amen.