

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Not My Own Righteousness (Phil Johnson)

Scripture: Philippians 3:9

Code: TM11-4

Truth Matters 2011

In this hour we're going to look at Philippians chapter 3 and I want to introduce that by sort of reminding you of an incident at the end of Moses' life. Moses gathered the Israelites and gave them a series of long speeches. They had reached the end of those 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They were about to enter the Promised Land and conquer the Canaanites who lived there. They were going to take their possession of the land that God had promised to Abraham. And among the things Moses said to them was this, from Deuteronomy chapter 9. I'm going to read three verses and I want you to listen, you don't need to even turn there, but you listen to this and listen if you catch the phrase that's repeated in every one of these three verses. Deuteronomy 9, verses 4 through 6.

“Do not say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land.’ Whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you, not because of your righteousness, or the uprightness of your heart, or you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you and that He may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know therefore that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness. For you are a stubborn people.”

Now the principle that is summed up in those repeated words, three times Moses repeats it, “Not because of your righteousness,” that is the same principle that lies at the heart of the Apostle Paul's teaching on justification by faith. And you will see that clearly, I think, in the passage we are going to walk through in this hour. And I just want to walk through it with you. Some of you very kindly have told me you listen to my sermons on line and all of that. If you've ever listened to me preach very much, you'll know that one of the things I always do is stress the outline. I usually give you an outline and say, “Be sure you write this point down.” I'm not going to do that today because I took count and I realized you're listening to about twelve messages in three or four days and you're going to be fatigued with all of that. So what I want to do is walk through this chapter and I'm only going to give you one point that I want you to take away and write down. And when I get there, we'll stress it.

But we're going to look at the first nine verses of Philippians 3 and what I want you to do is try to follow the flow of Paul's logic in this really difficult passage, building to verse 9. Verse 9 is the key verse in this section. Here's a quick summary of the section we're going to cover, nine verses. Paul is

giving his testimony as a way of refuting his chief theological adversaries. These were some heretics and false teachers who insisted that salvation is not possible for anyone who did not adhere strictly to the Old Testament ceremonial laws, starting with and especially the law of circumcision.

Now Paul, of course, was the Apostle to the Gentiles. And as he planted churches throughout the Roman Empire, most of the people who responded to Paul's preaching were Gentiles. And these false teachers insisted that in order for these Gentiles to become true Christians, they first needed to become Jewish proselytes. They needed to submit to the ritual of circumcision. They needed to observe all the Old Testament feasts and dietary laws. And essentially they said you need to live under the restrictions of the Mosaic Covenant. And because that was the nature of their teaching, these false teachers are generally known as the Judaizers because they believed membership in the church should be limited to Jews, or at best proselytes to Judaism. In short, they said the Mosaic Covenants is the doorway to salvation rather than Christ alone. And Paul is answering them in this section. He does that by giving his testimony, by recounting how fastidiously he kept the Mosaic Law from birth and then he formerly and emphatically renounces everything he had gained through his own legal obedience. And in verse 9 he gives us one of the most powerful single-verse statements of faith recorded anywhere in Scripture.

I love verse 9 because it summarizes the very heart of the gospel message. Here is the gospel according to Paul. That's our theme this week. Here is the gospel according to Paul in a single verse. He wanted to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of his own, but the righteousness from God that depends on faith. And the point of verse 9 is simple. "The righteousness by which I obtain a right standing before God is not a righteousness of my own." Same thing Moses was telling the Israelites. It's not because you're so righteous that God has blessed you. It's not even because of a righteousness of your own. And that is the main point of the doctrine of justification by faith.

Let me read this whole passage starting with verse 1. Paul writes, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and it's 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 circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, though I myself might have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. 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 have 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, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

That little passage is, I think, the best window Scripture gives us into the soul of the Apostle Paul. It's an abbreviated summary of his whole autobiography. It's a full explanation of why he lived and ministered in the way he did, a man fully trained in Old Testament Law and totally devoted to the Jewish religion, but now he's the Apostle to the Gentiles, he is the principle nemesis to these men who were insistent on keeping the church kosher. He is an enemy to all who insisted Christians should practice the kind of religion Paul had spent his life mastering. And Paul powerfully explains why he was so strongly opposed to their teaching.

And then at the end of this section he gives us a beautiful synopsis of the Christian faith. This is a powerful statement of gospel truth and it is a brilliant summary of the principle that lies at the very heart of the gospel, the doctrine of justification by faith.

Now, in order to establish the context for you, let's see if we can step through the flow of logic as Paul moves from thought to thought. As I said, this is a difficult passage because it seems almost to jump from one thought to another with no connection. This whole section is actually something of an addendum to the Philippian epistle. Paul was writing to exhort them to joy and harmony. That's the theme of this epistle, joy. And you might not expect to read a passage like this in a letter urging the church to be joyful. Verse 2, for example, doesn't really set a joyful tone for the rest of the passage. "Look out for the dogs." My beagle might think that's joyful, but Paul didn't mean it that way. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh. That verse actually marks a very clear and abrupt change of tone in this epistle which up to this point has been an exhortation to joyfulness, even in the midst of great trials. Paul is telling them, "Don't let go of your joy. Be joyful."

Chapter 2 verse 17, "I am glad and rejoice with you all likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me." And then as chapter 3 begins, Paul seems like he is about to conclude. He actually begins a conclusion, verse 1, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord." That very neatly summarizes everything he said so far. Rejoice in the Lord, remember now, joy is the theme of this epistle. And throughout the first two chapters, Christian joy has been the central theme. In chapter 1 Paul talked about his own intense joy in the midst of his trials. And the word "joy" just do a count in your concordance, and you'll see that the word "joy" appears five times just in those first two chapters and the word "rejoicing" in one form or another occurs at least six times. So that's the theme. That's clearly the theme of this epistle. And then here at the start of chapter 3, as if he has reached his conclusion, Paul sums up the whole reason for his writing. "Rejoice in the Lord." And that single, simple command summarizes the message Paul is wanting to send to the Philippians, and he will repeat it again twice in Philippians 4 verse 4 when he finally does begin his conclusion to this epistle. There he writes "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice."

Now this idea of the Christian's joy in the Lord is a message Paul had probably preached in person many times to the Philippian assembly. You remember how that church started, with the conversion of the jailer and, you know, Paul in prison and all of that. So there were a lot of non-joyous

circumstances from the very beginning of that church. But Paul had always preached joy to them. He is clearly aware that they're going to think that he's harping a theme they have heard from him over and over. So at the end of verse 1 he says, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me, and it's safe for you."

He's basically saying I know you've heard this from me before, but I like to say this and it's good for you to hear it. Now he's clearly planning to conclude the epistle at this point. You know that because the phrase "Finally, my brothers," is how Paul always brought his letters to a close. Not like the preacher who says, "Finally," and then goes on for 30 more minutes. And I'm not talking about anybody in particular there.

But Paul would usually conclude his letters that way. For example, in 2 Corinthians 13:11, four verses before the end of that epistle, he writes, "Finally, brothers, rejoice." That's Paul signing off. It's the standard closing phrase in most of Paul's epistles and it normally comes, as it does there in 2 Corinthians 13, as an introductory phrase for the final few words of the letter. At the very end of Ephesians, chapter 6 verse 10, he writes, "Finally, my brothers, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." In 2 Thessalonians chapter 3, Paul launches the conclusion to that epistle by saying, "Finally, brothers, pray for us." And so that phrase, "Finally, my brothers," is a sort of signature ending for Paul's letters. He normally uses it to summarize and reiterate the main thrust of his epistle. If you want to really get to the heart of a Pauline epistle real quickly, find that phrase, "Finally, my brothers," and notice what he says right after that and that's really Paul's summing up the main message. And it means he has come to the end of his epistle, what he is writing. He's about to give one final profoundly important statement or command that more or less wraps up and sums up and punctuates what the whole epistle is about.

Now Philippians is the only one of Paul's epistles where you see that phrase two times. Here you find it in chapter 3 verse 1. So it sounds like Paul is finished. But then he suddenly has this change in tone and he adds a whole chapter plus. And then once more in Philippians 4 verse 8, he repeats that famous Pauline sign-off expression, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just," etc., "think about these things." And again, the theme is still joy. He's saying that's the key to a joyful heart, think thoughts that foster true joy, think edifying thoughts. Focus on the things we're joyful about.

And then after Philippians 4:8, Paul actually does write the concluding words of this epistle. So chapter 3 verse 1 is kind of a false start, a false start to his ending. It's not really a false start, it's a false ending, then, isn't it? But you know what I mean. He's beginning to close and then he doesn't. And so everything that comes between chapter 3 verse 1 and chapter 4 verse 8 is a parenthesis. It's a digression in the flow of Paul's thought. He was about to draw this epistle to a close when something made him pause and add this whole chapter and a half. It's actually pretty easy once you see that, to make sense of this passage and see how Paul's mind is working here. As he thinks about

their joy in the Lord and exhorts them for what he intends to be one final time, to be joyful and rejoice in the Lord, it occurs to him that there is a grave danger to that joy. There's a threat to it. And so he stops to warn them about that danger. As I said, it's a grave and serious danger, it's the danger of false teaching—bad doctrine that corrupts the truth of the gospel.

And he wants them to be on guard against that. Be joyful...yes. And whatever is true, and honorable, and all of that...think on these things, but as you're doing that, don't forget to guard the truth of the gospel. And that is what is behind this sudden change of tone between verses 1 and verse 2, "Rejoice in the Lord," he says, and then suddenly in verse 2 he brings up a subject that seems totally incongruous and almost contradictory to the principle of our joy in the Lord. Look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh. And there is no doubt whom Paul was talking about here. He's warning them about the Judaizers. These are the same false teachers who were causing trouble for Paul in the churches of Galatia. They are the same false teachers described in Acts chapter 15. Several of Paul's epistles address the error of the Judaizers in one way or another. And the book of Galatians, in particular, is an extended refutation of their teaching. And here we see that Paul was concerned about the influence of the Judaizers in Philippi as well...not close at all to Galatia. But the influence of the Judaizers had reached that far across the Mediterranean, so Paul writes to the Philippians to warn them about them as well.

Now Acts 15 gives us what I think is probably the best description of the Judaizers and their teaching. They were a sect led by some Pharisees who had professed faith in Christ and joined the Jerusalem Church, Acts 15 verse 1 says, "Some men came down from Judea," it's describing while Paul is ministering in Antioch, some men came down from Judea, that's where Jerusalem is, of course, Judea. And Acts 15 verse 5 says, "These men belonged to a party of the Pharisees." And so here you have Pharisees who have professed faith in Christ because they're affiliated with the Jerusalem Church, but they are still Pharisees at heart, classic legalists. And these men had taken all the errors of Pharisaism and they had blended them with Christianity. They were corrupting the gospel with legalism. And if you understand the self-righteous nature of Pharisee religion, you will understand what these men were teaching and why it was so deadly. They came to Antioch while Paul was ministering there with Barnabas and Acts 15 verse 1 says, "They were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now these men were very proud of their membership and their status in the Jewish nation. They were essentially saying to these Judaizers, unless you become proselytes to Judaism, Christ won't save you. They flaunted their heritage as if it made them worthy of some kind of veneration. They were especially drawn to the external features of the Old Testament ceremonial law. That was their area of main expertise. And they exaggerated those ceremonial things because they thought religious ceremony was the essence of righteousness, because it made them look righteous. Jesus described them this way in Matthew 23 verse 5, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best

seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplaces and they love being called “rabbi” by others.” So anything that honored them, they loved. In other words, Jesus is saying they literally wore their religion on their sleeves. Phylacteries, you know, were those leather boxes containing passages of Scripture and they would bind these on their arms with long leather straps, and they bound one on their forehead as well, with these big ostentatious leather straps, making the straps as wide as possible so that no one could miss the visible signs of their piety.

The external ceremonial elements of Moses’ Law were so important in their system that they insisted no Gentile could possibly become a true Christian without first embracing all the ceremonial aspects of Judaism, starting with circumcision. And so that became the key issue, but it wasn’t the only issue with these guys.

Now, keep that in mind and notice how Paul describes them. He uses three expressions that...let’s be honest, this would have been extremely offensive to the Judaizers. Paul is trying to be offensive to them here. He doesn’t care if he ticks them off. First he calls them “dogs.” That was the Jewish nickname for Gentiles, wasn’t it? In John Calvin’s commentary on this passage, he says this, “Paul calls them dogs, meaning that for the sake of filling their belly, they assailed true doctrine with their foul barking.” I love Calvin’s colorful language there. And like the Apostle Paul, Calvin was not one to mince words. He didn’t care if he made people mad either. And Paul does say in verse 19 that their God is their belly.

But if you’ll permit me to disagree with one of my favorite heroes from church history, I think Calvin missed the real point here of why Paul chose the expression “dogs.” I think this was an intentional insult aimed at these heretics who took pride in their Jewish heritage. By calling them dogs, Paul put them on the level of unbelieving Gentiles. Paul was suggesting that their religion, the Pharisee religion, this legalism that they were peddling is no better than the worst Gentile paganism. This was a pointed jab at everything the Judaizers regarded as precious. And to make it even more emphatic to clear up any confusion about whether he’s really trying to tweak these guys or not, he calls them evildoers. Now again, that was standard Jewish language to describe the rankest sort of paganism. The Old Testament constantly speaks of wicked unbelievers and pagans as evildoers. And Jesus Himself sometimes referred to reprobate but religious people as workers of iniquity...same kind of thing. Paul was employing an equivalent expression here.

Now think about this, this is, of course, not a brotherly expression. This is not a term any godly person would ever use to describe another believer. And so it’s absolutely clear that Paul regards these Judaizers as unbelievers. He believes they are enemies of the true God. He says so explicitly down in verse 18, “I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, they walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction.” He’s basically saying they’re going to hell.

And look at the third expression and I'm using the English Standard Version so the translation I read to you says, "Look out for those who mutilate the flesh." The New American Standard Bible says, "Beware of the false circumcision." And the King James version uses the word "concision." The Greek word is the word *katatome* that normal word for circumcision is *peritome* and the word translated true circumcision in verse 3 is just that one word, *peritome*, that's true circumcision.

But here in verse 2, Paul uses *katatome* which literally means flesh cuttings, mutilators of the flesh. It refers to the ceremonial mutilation of the flesh which was a common practice among pagan religions, but it was strictly prohibited by Jewish Law. Leviticus 21 verse 5 explicitly forbid the Jews to make any kind of cuttings in their flesh. And so by using this expression *katatome*, Paul was again placing the Judaizers in the same category as the rankest sort of pagans. He's using the strongest possible language to describe them and he's saying that they are not even authentic Christians. More than that, he's saying he doesn't even regard them as true Jews, which is consistent with Paul's theology.

In Romans 2 verses 28 and 29 Paul says this, "No one is a Jew who is merely on outwardly. Nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly and circumcision is a matter of the heart by the Spirit, and not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

And in Romans 4 verse 12 Paul says that "Abraham is the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father, Abraham, had before he was circumcised." Faith is the issue, not a ritual. Faith is what makes a Jewish person a true Jew. And faith is what makes a believer in Christ truly saved. It's not what he does to anything outward. The ritual, and the ritual of circumcision in particular, was only a symbol for what was really important, the cleansing of the heart, the purging of the heart, the purification of the heart. Even the Old Testament taught this. Look up Deuteronomy 10 verse 16 when you have time, it uses this expression as a command, "Circumcise your heart." And Deuteronomy 30 verse 6, "The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring." And Jeremiah 4 verse 4 makes it very clear that circumcision was supposed to symbolize a renewed heart. It says this, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts." And that's what Paul means in Romans 2:29, the verse I just read, when he says that the true circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit, not by the letter.

And so, he tells the Philippians, "We...you and me as believers in Christ. "We are the true circumcision because it's our hearts that are circumcised. We worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." He is drawing the line as clearly as possible between genuine believers in Christ and these Judaizers who in spiritual terms are dogs, evil workers, mutilators of the flesh, equal to the grossest kind of pagans, not even Christians at all. That's a harsh evaluation of these guys, right?

Now consider though what a monumental threat the Judaizer doctrine posed for these Gentile believers in the early church. The Judaizers were trained as Pharisees, knowledgeable therefore in Old Testament Law. They were religious leaders of great esteem in the Jewish establishment. They had apparently become extremely influential in the Jerusalem church even, and when Paul refers to them in Galatians chapter 2, he calls them certain men who came from James. He's referring there to James, of course, who was a towering figure in the Jerusalem Church, the same James who was the brother of Christ who wrote the epistle that bears his name, James. Who acts as a spokesperson for the whole church in Acts 15, he's the spokesman for the Jerusalem Church. And so he was an important leader in the church and these men apparently claimed to be his emissaries.

Now James' speech in Acts 15 makes it clear that he regarded the Judaizer doctrine as erroneous, but it seems for a while that wasn't really obvious to everyone. And so it's possible that these men did initially go to Antioch with the knowledge and the approval and perhaps even the encouragement of James and the Jerusalem Church before anyone fully realized what destructive false teachers they were. And, in fact, Galatians 2 suggests that even Peter was intimidated and confused about how to respond to the Judaizers when they first showed up preaching this legalism. Peter didn't respond rightly. And Paul rebuked him, you'll remember.

Now think about it and you'll, I think, realize it's easy to see why even Peter might have been intimidated by these guys. The Judaizers were Pharisees. They were experts in the rabbinical doctrines. They had studied them. They had the equivalent of advanced Doctor's Degrees. They were well trained in the Old Testament scriptures. The Apostles who lead the Jerusalem Church were a bunch of fishermen and unlearned men whose sole claim to authority was that they were hand picked and personally disciple by Christ for three years. And I suppose from a human standpoint, it was quite natural that most of the Apostles would feel a little bit intimidated by the Judaizers.

But not the Apostle Paul. He was a Pharisee himself. In Acts 22 verse 3, Paul is giving his testimony and he says he was trained at the feet of Gamaliel who was the most famous rabbi of his day...Gamaliel. If the Judaizers had any reason whatsoever for being proud of their heritage, their training, their mastery of rabbinical traditions, the Apostle Paul had every advantage over them, and he says so here. That's what prompts him to give this personal testimony that he gives in this passage. You know, one of Paul's hallmarks is he doesn't very often talk about himself. And when he does, it's only to defend some central gospel truth. And that's what he's doing here. In verses 4 through 6, Paul compares himself with the Judaizers to demonstrate that by the standard of the Judaizers, the record of Paul's life put them to shame. They were proud of their Jewish heritage. They were proud of their upbringing under the Law. They loved their legalistic, rigid obedience to the minutia of ceremonial Law. But Paul says, "If those things gave the Judaizers any kind of advanced expertise, or pious advantage, Paul had even greater reason to boast. And so he draws this autobiographical sketch for us, verses 4 through 6. "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 the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the Law a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the Law, blameless.”

Now I'm sure that's probably a familiar passage to most of you. But let's look at it systematically. I think John has referred to this passage in two of his messages already. So I know you've been here. But let's look at it really closely here.

Paul innumerates seven advantages that he enjoyed. He basically gives us a checklist of all the things he wants trusted to make him acceptable to God. And the seven advantages he lists fall into two categories. Four of them are advantages he inherited by birth, involuntarily. The other three reflect matters of personal conviction. These are Paul's own personal achievements. So let's look at them individually.

When Paul says he was circumcised the eighth day, he is underscoring two facts. One, that he was brought up from his infancy, according to the letter of the Law, and number two, he was no proselyte. He wasn't a late-comer to the Law. This matter of circumcision which was the Judaizers favorite complaint against the Gentile converts, Paul puts it at the head of his list of credentials, just to show that his credentials are impeccable. He was circumcised the eighth day, which is exactly what the Law prescribes.

The next he says, he belongs to the nation of Israel. That's a genealogical claim. Paul's saying, "Not only was he no proselyte, but neither were his parents, nor their parents, nor theirs, and so on." Paul's entire genealogy was traceable right back to Jacob himself. And furthermore he says he's of the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin, of course, was the son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. He was the only one of Jacob's children actually born in the Promised Land. His offspring were the noblest of all the tribes. It was a small tribe, but a very noble one. The tribes of Benjamin and Judah alone remained loyal to the House of David when the Kingdom divided in the Old Testament, and the city of Jerusalem was just inside the territory inhabited by the tribe of Benjamin. And so this was an especially honorable tribe. There was none more honorable.

Next, he calls himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Now in Paul's day there were what were known as Hellenistic Jews. They were called Hellenistic because they had accommodated their culture to a Greek thought and life style. Their primary language was Greek. Some of the extreme Hellenists, Jewish people, but they were blending pagan philosophy, Greek philosophy with the Jewish religion. And Paul had avoided all of those influences. By calling himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews, he's...he's telling us how different he was from this Hellenistic Movement. He wasn't a Hellenistic Jew, he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, which suggests that he spoke Hebrew or Aramaic as his primary language, rather than Greek.

We know that Paul came from Tarsus which is in Cilicia which is a Gentile nation. But don't get the idea that Paul had grown up in the midst of a Gentile culture. Paul's parents arranged for him to spend his youth and childhood in Jerusalem. Remember when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, there was a near riot in Jerusalem? This was the arrest that ultimately led Paul to Rome where he was put on trial and all of that. There was this riot and Paul made a speech to the people and Luke says Paul spoke in the Hebrew dialect, his native tongue. And Acts 22 records the incident and I'll read to you the first three verses of Acts 22, Paul addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying, "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense I now make before you. And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet and he said, 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the Law of your fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are to this day.'"

So it turns out Paul grew up in Jerusalem, speaking Hebrew. And notice that those verses from Acts 22 are exactly parallel to what Paul says here in Philippians 3.

Now look at Philippians 3 at the end of verse 5. Here Paul gets to that second category of advantages, those that reflected his own personal achievements as opposed to things he was born with. And by the standards of the Judaizers, these are a pretty impressive list of achievements. "As to the Law, a Pharisee." In Acts 23 verse 6 when he appeared before the Sanhedrin, he told them, "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisee," plural, not just a Pharisee, he was from a line of Pharisees, his father and at least his grandfather also were Pharisees. And as Paul explained to Agrippa in Acts 26 verse 5, the Pharisees were the strictest sect of the Jewish religion. And so as a Pharisee, Paul was bound to obey not only the Law of Moses, but also hundreds more laws that the Pharisees had added on and passed down by verbal tradition. Paul did all that.

And so, next he points to his well-known persecution of the church as proof of his zeal for the Jewish Law and Jewish traditions. At one time, Paul had been feared throughout the church because of his determination to persecute Christians. You want to talk about religious zeal? No one could be more zealous than Saul of Tarsus when he was in Pharisee mode.

Now you might ask, "Well why does Paul list this among reasons for boasting?" We know from 1 Timothy 1:13 that Paul was not proud of the fact that he had once been a blasphemer, a persecutor and an insolent opponent. Those are words he uses to describe himself. Not proud of it. But that's just the point. Paul was not proud of any of these things. These were things any committed Pharisee would most certainly take pride in, but when Paul came to Christ, he abandoned them all. More than that, he came to despise them. And he's going to explain all of that in a moment. But the point here is that his zeal, fiery even violent zeal was vivid proof of his commitment to the Law.

Notice the second half of verse 6. "As to righteousness under the Law, I was found blameless." Now that is an astonishing claim. It reminds us, doesn't it, of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:20 who claimed he had kept all the commandments from his youth up. That's basically the claim Paul is making here.

In what sense could Paul have thought that he had attained the standard of blamelessness? Remember, he is describing an era in his life, his old life, when he thought of the Law as primarily a standard for governing external behavior. John MacArthur mentioned this this morning. This is what he was saying, that the Law as Paul understood it in those days, in his pre-Christian life, the Law was a handbook to govern behavior. And the most important aspect of being a righteous person was the issue of what we look like to others. That's the way the Pharisees thought. And so Paul, like any typical Pharisee, took extra care to obey all the external and ceremonial aspects of the Law, right down to the very minutia. And it was in that respect that he was blameless. There was nothing visible in his life that anyone could ever point to in order to accuse him.

You remember that the Apostle Paul admits in Romans 7 that he struggled with covetousness. Saul of Tarsus surely struggled with covetousness as well. But he probably didn't see that as a disqualifying sin because covetousness is an internal thing. No one can see it and no one can point the finger of blame. And by attaining a veneer of blamelessness, Saul of Tarsus assumed that he had achieved a righteousness that was sufficient to please God. That was the basis of his hope for justification.

And that was the heart of the Pharisee's error. Their main obsession with the Law had to do with external and ceremonial matters. They focused on what others could see, not on what God could see. And they confused their high standards of external behavior with real righteousness. They believed that God would accept them because they kept up a righteous façade. That was what drove Saul of Tarsus. He believed that by obeying the Law as strictly as he could, he was earning a righteousness that would give him favor with God.

But something happened to change this proud Pharisee from Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle and humble tent maker. He met Christ. And he had his entire world view suddenly overhauled. Here is the part of his testimony Paul doesn't want us to miss. This is a contrast, a very pointed contrast between two ideas about righteousness, two contrasting flatly contradictory notions about what it takes for a person to obtain a right standing before God. This contrast also explains the vast difference between Saul of Tarsus and Paul the Apostle.

And here is the point of this entire passage. Here's what you need to take away. Paul is contrasting two kinds of righteousness. One that is fatal and one that saves. And, in fact, the distinction between these two ideas of righteousness is so fundamental, so important, that if you can grasp this point, you

will have understood the whole gospel. There are two kinds of righteousness. They are as different as night and day. One is a righteousness that belongs to man, and Paul calls it the righteousness of the Law. The other comes from God and it is by faith, he says. One is flawed righteousness that is the product of our works. The other is a perfect righteousness that is the product of what Christ has done. One is a righteousness we make for ourselves, that's why we call it self-righteousness. The other is a righteousness that is imputed to us. One is the righteousness of human merit. The other is the righteousness of divine grace. One is our own righteousness. The other is God's righteousness.

And what happened on the Road to Damascus was that Christ literally stopped Saul of Tarsus in his tracks and showed him that all his righteousness as impressive as it might have seemed by human standards, all of that fell short of divine standard and was totally unacceptable to God. And notice Paul's response to this, verses 7 and 8. "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 have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ."

In other words, Paul says he took all those earthly advantages, any hope he might ever have had about earning favor with God for himself, and he jettisoned all of that in favor of knowing Christ. And this is very strong language Paul uses here. In the King James Version, he says, "I count all these things as dung." And that is a fitting way of translating the expression, the Greek word is *skubalon* and it refers to the worst kind of filth, muck, excrement, sewage. I can't think of any other English equivalence that are polite enough to say from this pulpit. And I'm reading the English Standard version which tones it down considerably by saying rubbish, tones down the force of the expression, "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as manure."

This is shocking language from the Apostle Paul. And it is clear that he means to give his readers a jolt. He wants to state this as plainly and as powerfully as possible. He's just listed all the finest spiritual advantages available to any person. Remember that Judaism is a biblical religion. Paul is not describing some pagan notion of righteousness here. He has just outlined the highest level of person piety and privilege any human being can attain to. And then he says it's all nothing but *skubalon*, dung. Here's a whole difference between Paul the Apostle and Saul of Tarsus. In essence, Paul abandoned everything he had spent his whole life trying to attain. And he didn't just abandon it, he came to regard it as revolting, disgusting, *skubalon*.

Here's how John Calvin says, and this time I'm going to agree with him. Calvin says, "Paul declares that he not only abandoned everything that he formerly reckoned precious but that it stank like excrement to him." And this was all the more remarkable when you consider who Paul was. He represented a strain of Pharisaism that had elevated religion to an almost unattainable super human level. And let's be honest, you and I, we would never be able to adhere to the Law with the same rigor as Saul of Tarsus. I don't know that anybody could in the Internet age. In human terms, the Pharisees

had elevated personal righteousness to a level unattainable by most of us, they were super-spiritual, super-legalistic, absolutely fastidious holy men by all external standards. That's what they were and Paul who had reached the pinnacle of that system said it's all for naught. It was of no more value than if you took a shovel full of cow manure and decorated it like a wedding cake and tried to offer that to God.

Now remember what Paul's main point is here. This is the one thought he wants us to retain. There are two kinds of righteousness. One is *skubalon*, revolting, abhorrent, it's an offense to God no matter how wonderful it may be made to appear to human eyes. What is the other kind of righteousness? Paul mentions it in verse 9, he says that, "Now it is his great hope to 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, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

Now there's a wealth of great theology in that one sentence and I don't want you to miss it. The whole gist of the gospel message is summed up in that verse. What Paul is teaching us here is a very important doctrine. I don't hesitate to say it is THE most important doctrine in all of theology. It is the doctrine of justification by faith. Notice what this verse suggests. First, the only sufficient ground on which we can stand before God is a righteousness that exists outside of us.

Here's the truth that Saul of Tarsus finally came to grips with and we must come to grips with if we hope to gain eternal life. The righteousness that saves us is not our own righteousness. That idea is absolutely contrary to the whole belief system of the Pharisees. It flatly contradicts everything Paul had ever been taught and that's not all. This doctrine sets Christianity apart from every other religion known to man. Every religion you can name teaches that people must become righteous in order to be acceptable to God. Christianity alone teaches that God supplies on our behalf all the merit we need to please Him.

The lowest sinner, a thief hanging on the cross can be redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God all on the basis of a righteousness that is provided for him. Some people think Paul introduced this doctrine in Scripture. But that is not the case. This is what Scripture taught from the very beginning. John MacArthur quoted this morning from Genesis 15:6, which says, "Abraham believed God and righteousness was reckoned to him." Paul says that the Law which came centuries after Abraham did not nullify the promise of salvation by grace. In other words, he says that in Galatians 3, he's saying that the Law was never intended to be a means of earning favor with God. The Law was given to underscore the hopelessness of salvation by works, to show us what righteousness looks like, not to give us a pattern for trying to concoct some phony kind of self-righteousness.

The Law condemns those who break it. And if you break it at one point, you're guilty of all, according to James 2:10. So the Law was meant to keep us from trusting in our own righteousness by

condemning us every time we sin, which is exactly what Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount. He said that external conformity to the Law is not enough. One lustful thought carries the same guilt as a full-fledged active adultery. Being angry with your brother brings on you the same condemnation as a wanton act of murder. If you want to meet the Law's demands, it's not enough to be blameless on the outside like the Pharisees were, but you must be spotless on the inside. And Matthew 5:20 is the focal point of the entire Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:20, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

You see, once you understand the utter inflexibility of the Law, that should drive you to absolute despair. That was the purpose of the Law, to drive us to despair. But the Pharisees got it wrong. They decided if they could just obey the Law externally and be as blameless as possible in the sight of men, and just get as close to the standard as possible, that would be acceptable to God. But salvation is not based on a human standard. Jesus says our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. And, in fact, He went on to say that the only acceptable standard is the absolute perfection of God Himself, Matthew 5:48. Still hammering on this same point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

So the standard is divine perfection. Where are we going to get a righteousness that meets that standard? Not within ourselves.

Now look again at Philippians 3 verse 9 and notice where Paul found the righteousness necessary to justify Him before God. Two words, "In Him," in Christ. That is the theme that runs throughout all the Pauline epistles. This is his favorite way to describe the Christian, "In Christ." And it evokes the idea of our mystical union with Christ, a union that confers on us all the merit of Christ's obedience and clothes us in His perfect righteousness.

John MacArthur said this morning that Christ's act of obedience, the obedience He rendered to the Law in His life was a demonstration of God's righteousness, and that His passive obedience, the obedience He rendered on the cross, is likewise a demonstration of His righteousness. I'm going to add to that and say it's more than a demonstration. That is where the righteousness comes from that is imputed to you and me. Through our union with Christ, His righteousness justifies us. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Paul says this expressly in Romans 4 verse 6, "God imputes righteousness to believers apart from any works." And Romans 4:5, "To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."

In other words, before we do a single good work, the full merit of Christ's righteousness is transferred to our account so that God regards us as in Christ and therefore in perfect standing with Him. That is an amazing doctrine, isn't it? And I never tire of it. Christ's righteousness is reckoned to my account, just like my sins were reckoned to Him and He paid for them. He paid sin's penalty and we reap the

reward of His righteousness. That is the gospel in a nutshell. It's the one point Paul wants to convey to us here in Philippians 3.

Let's paraphrase what he's saying. There are these two kinds of contradictory, totally incompatible types of righteousness. One you earn, the other is given to you by grace. One is your own righteousness, and therefore it is flawed and imperfect. The other is the spotless, pure righteousness of Christ Himself. One resides in you and therefore it's tainted with your sinfulness. The other resides in Christ and is therefore as spotless as He is.

Which righteousness would you rather entrust your eternity to? You see why Paul gathered up all his own righteousness and threw it on the rubbish heap? He opted instead for another righteousness. Theologians sometimes refer to it as the alien righteousness. Alien because it's a righteousness that in no way comes from within us. This theme of alien righteousness was never far from the Apostle Paul's thoughts. The whole first half of the book of Romans is Paul's systematic presentation of the doctrine of justification by faith. And his focus is to show how an alien righteousness is imputed to those who believe.

The book of Galatians defends this doctrine against the error of the Judaizers. It is everywhere in the Pauline epistles. Normally when you see him use the word righteousness, it's a reference to the righteousness of God imputed to the believer.

Why was Paul so obsessed with refuting the error of the Judaizers because their error was precisely what almost cost him his soul. It's the very thing he turned away from when he turned to Christ. He knew very well that it is spiritually fatal to trust your own righteousness to any degree, rather than resting all your hope on the righteousness that is imputed by faith. And Paul says, "This was the whole reason most of Israel remained under the condemnation of God and outside of Christ," Romans 10 verses 3 and 4, "because being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to God's righteousness, for Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

Jesus taught exactly the same thing. You remember the parable of the Pharisee and the publican? The two of them went down to the temple to pray, Luke 18 verses 10 through 14. And Jesus tells that story and the publican, the guy who was wickedly sinful, just beat his breast, couldn't even look at heaven and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than that Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted."

Have you ever thought about the question, "How was that publican justified?" Jesus specifically says, "He went down to his house justified." What justified him? I'll tell you. There's only one possible answer. He received a righteousness that was not his own. It was an alien righteousness. It came to

him from an external source. Just like, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” That is the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God which depends on faith. That is the only ground on which any of us can ever stand before God. We can’t engineer a sufficient righteousness of our own. If Saul of Tarsus couldn’t do it, you and I for sure can’t. And that is exactly what Scripture tells us over and over again. We must seek a righteousness that is not our own, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith. Let’s pray.

Lord, the gospel is so clear and it’s only the sinfulness, the wickedness of our hearts and our pride and arrogance that causes us to think again and again that we could earn Your favor, we could somehow be righteous in and of ourselves. We confess, Lord, that is not the case. Forgive us for our sins, clothe us in the righteousness of Christ, and conform us to His image, we pray in His name. Amen.

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