

# Philippians 3:2-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phil/phil-3/philippians-32-7/>

*Paul warns about teachers who seek to lead the Philippians away from the truth of Christ's finished work on the cross. These were likely teachers who sought to add to Christ's gospel, telling Gentiles to rely on religious practice to become righteous. But Paul points out that he is the most Jewish of Jews and yet he does not count on religious practice gaining him benefit in the sight of God; only faith in Christ gains us justification in the sight of God, and only the obedience of faith in Jesus pleases God, and gains us rewards from Him.*

Now Paul begins to admonish his beloved Philippian disciples to *Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision*. Paul might be speaking of Jews who teach that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey Jewish religious rules in order to be saved. In this case, they could be referring to justification salvation (to be born into the family of God, being delivered from eternal separation from God).

Paul's letters to the Romans and to the Galatians address directly the topic of seeking to be justified through religious deeds. After he left them, Paul's disciples in Galatia accepted and believed the false teaching of the kind of *dogs* and *evil workers* he warns the Philippians to avoid. In following the false teaching of the *dogs* and *evil workers*, the Galatians were "seeking to be justified in Christ" (Galatians 2:17). In "seeking to be justified" in the sight of God through their own religious observance, the Galatians were saying, in essence, "Jesus's death on the cross is not sufficient, I have to add something."

This is why Paul said to the Galatians "...if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you" (Galatians 5:2). Paul's point was that they would be relying on themselves rather than Christ, so would have no reason to walk in faith in obedience to Christ. If they relied on their own actions to be justified, then the mindset of chapter 2 would apply – they would be focusing on the wrong thing. Paul adamantly asserts throughout his writings that no human can add a single thing to Jesus's finished work on the cross. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul asserts that every sin was "nailed to the cross":

"When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."  
(Colossians 2:13-15)

In his letter to the Romans, where Paul defends this gospel of grace against those who would require circumcision and adherence to religious ritual as a necessity for salvation, Paul asserts that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). This means that Jesus' death on the cross covered every sin, for all time, and His grace abounds to cover every sin. This of course means that nothing can be added to Jesus' work on the cross. In order to adopt the

mindset of radical obedience that Jesus adopted, we have to believe that we are already fully accepted into God's family through the work of Christ on the cross. That is the foundation from which we can then make a choice to adopt the mindset that it is in our best interest to lay aside everything and endure anything in order to gain the greatest rewards from Christ.

The *dogs* and *evil workers* could also be falsely teaching that religious observance brings sanctification. Our sanctification is the deliverance from the power of sin in our daily lives. Through sanctification, we escape the negative consequences of sin, both now as well as at the judgement seat of Christ. In this case, obsessing over religious observance directs our focus on how we appear before other people, rather than focusing on the great day when we will stand before Christ. When we focus on pleasing Christ, it leads us to prioritize serving others in love. When we focus on religious ritual, it leads us to prioritize comparing ourselves to others.

Paul considered the teaching that circumcision and religious ritual delivered anyone from sin in any context as *evil*.

In light of this reality, Paul now asserts *for we are the true circumcision*. *Circumcision* was a ritual God provided to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, or contract, that God had made with him and his descendants, the Hebrews. Circumcision was like an ordinance, it was a physical sign that represented a spiritual reality. God chose Abraham and accounted, or reckoned, Abraham as being righteous in His sight because Abraham believed God (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was justified in the sight of God solely because of faith, and this took place many years prior to the time when God asked Abraham to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant.

Circumcision then is not required to be justified in God's sight. Rather it is a part of walking in fellowship with God. It is an action that provides a reminder of a covenant relationship with God, and what God has promised to His people. God promised great blessings to Abraham if he would walk in obedience. Part of that obedience was to practice circumcision (Genesis 17:1-12).

Paul claims that now *the true circumcision* is no longer those who have mere physical circumcision. Now the *true circumcision* is those *who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus*. In our current age, Christ has freely given to all people the opportunity to join His family through simple belief in Him (John 3:14-16). This is the same way Abraham was declared righteous; Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

The Philippian believers had believed; we know this because Paul referred to them as "saints" (Philippians 1:1). This means they were already justified in the presence of God. Paul then admonished these believers to choose the same mindset Jesus chose, and walk in radical obedience to God. This was not necessary in order to be justified in God's sight, because that only comes through faith. Rather, choosing the same mindset as Christ was needed in order to gain the greatest benefit from our covenant relationship with God. That is why Paul admonishes believers to adopt a mindset that God's rewards for obedience will be worth the difficulties to be endured.

Paul infers that the equivalent of physical circumcision, from the age of the Old Covenant, is in this Age of Grace worshipping *in the Spirit of God and glory in Jesus Christ*. Just as physical

circumcision was a reminder of God's covenant relationship with Israel, worshiping *in the Spirit* is a reminder for New Testament believers of our relationship with Christ through the new covenant in His blood (Luke 22:20). We gain intimate fellowship with Christ through a daily walk of faithfulness, walking in the Spirit. Rather than following religious ritual, we are to serve others as Jesus served. Rather than seeking glory from the world, we are to walk in the *glory of Jesus Christ*.

The *dogs* and *evil workers* who would mislead them are actually the *false circumcision*, which is why Paul warns the Philippians to *beware* of them. If the Philippians seek self-justifying religious observance, they will not be adopting the mindset that Jesus adopted. Jesus confronted and opposed those who focused on religious ritual at the expense of walking in the true spirit of the Law (Matthew 23). To follow the *false circumcision* will be to follow in the path of those whom Jesus chastised. It will be the opposite of adopting the mindset that Jesus chose, as described in Chapter 2.

In Acts, we learn that Paul gained the agreement of the leading Jewish church authorities in Jerusalem that Gentiles were not to be burdened with circumcision and religious rituals (Acts 15). Notwithstanding that, there were still Jews following behind Paul and overturning Paul's teaching of grace, teaching legalism in place of grace. This is likely what Paul is warning his Philippian disciples against. Paul is using a twist of irony, noting that the physically circumcised Jews who advocate the necessity of physical circumcision are the *false circumcision*, while the physically uncircumcised Gentile believers are the *true circumcision*.

There are two actions that express the *true circumcision*. One action is to *worship in the Spirit of God*. When believers *worship in the Spirit of God*, it is an out-working of the new covenant we have with God. The new covenant, or contract, is one that is written on our hearts, as God had promised He would do, through the prophets (Jeremiah 31:27). The indwelling Holy Spirit seals believers into the new covenant (Ephesians 1:13). This is similar to physical circumcision, which was a seal of the covenant Abraham had with God (Romans 4:11). It is a sign that "we are His people."

Paul adds a second sign to *worship in the Spirit of God*, which is the phrase *glory in Christ Jesus*. Paul's idea of how to *glory in Christ Jesus* likely includes adopting the attitude Paul admonished believers to adopt in Chapter 2. It is to live a life wholly dedicated to please the Lord, trusting that His ways are for our best. It is a complete trust in the benevolent intent of God toward us. This attitude leads us to rejoice in all circumstances. Choosing to *glory in Christ Jesus* is to choose a perspective that says, "If I follow the Lord's direction, that will work out best for me, no matter what my senses might be telling me."

As Paul will say shortly, "I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). *To glory in Christ* is to consider any distraction from radical obedience as rubbish. Paul's point is that these are the true signs of obedience to the new covenant in Christ. It is not religious observance to rituals like circumcision. It is the spiritual worship of complete obedience, and commitment to follow the example of Jesus.

A part of adopting this perspective is to also *put no confidence in the flesh*. In this case Paul says *we put no confidence in the flesh*. By the use of *we*, Paul includes the Gentile Philippian believers together with himself, a believing Jew, as well as his mission partners. Paul asserts that the *true circumcision* consists of those who trust Jesus' work on the cross and also live in the obedience of faith. In living by faith, they *put no confidence in the flesh*. By *confidence in the flesh*, Paul is likely thinking of religious rules, such as *circumcision*.

It is important to note that Paul was physically circumcised. He will mention this shortly. He had Timothy circumcised after he joined Paul's ministry. He did this because Timothy's mother was Jewish, and Paul did not want Timothy's lack of physical circumcision to be a stumbling block in witnessing the gospel of Christ to the Jews (Acts 16:1-3). Further, Paul continued to observe Jewish religious customs during his entire ministry (Acts 28:17).

But Paul did not have *confidence* that this action *in the flesh* had anything to do with either his or Timothy's relationship with God. Paul was not keeping religious rituals in order to in any way be justified in the sight of God; that comes solely through faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. Neither was Paul trusting religious ritual to be sanctified; that comes through the obedience of faith, adopting the same mentality of obedience that Jesus chose (Philippians 2:5-10). Paul was, however, attempting to be a faithful steward, that he might please Christ with his service, and receive great rewards.

As Paul states in 1 Corinthians:

"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it."  
(1 Corinthians 9:22-23)

Later in Chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes clear that he is buffeting his body, his flesh, like an Olympic athlete. Paul desires to win the greatest prize of life, to please God through the obedience of faith. It is in this way he will "overcome" and gain the greatest victory of life, as Jesus overcame (Revelation 3:21).

In stating all this, Paul makes clear the distinction between being justified in the sight of God (being accepted into God's family) versus gaining rewards for faithful service. Being justified in the sight of God is a gift, freely given. It only requires enough faith to look upon Jesus on the cross, hoping to be healed of the venomous poison of sin (John 3:14-16). Jesus does all that work. We do none.

On the other hand, gaining the greatest rewards of living a faithful life requires the radical obedience of Christ. That is why Paul gladly endures persecution, even to death at the hand of Emperor Nero. He is copying the example of Jesus, who learned obedience, even to death on the cross, and as a result was exalted by His Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

That Paul calls these *evil workers* "dogs" is quite an insult. *Dogs* were second only to pigs as unclean animals in Jewish culture. By calling them *dogs*, Paul is stating that their religious works

are actually the opposite of what they claim. Rather than making them righteous, their works are making them unclean. This makes sense, given that the *evil workers* are teaching falsely.

Paul will now make the case that if anyone could trust their own religious actions to justify themselves in the sight of God, it would be Paul. Paul says *I myself might have confidence even in the flesh*. The phrase *confidence in the flesh* refers to having faith in religious practices and credentials. Paul asserts that *If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more*. In stating this, Paul is making the point that he is more religiously qualified than any other Jew.

Paul actually kept Jewish customs throughout his ministry (Acts 28:17). But he will also make the point that this means absolutely nothing in terms of gaining righteousness in the sight of God. Paul relies wholly on the finished work of Jesus to be justified in the sight of God.

These statements of Paul about having *confidence in the flesh* could also apply to sanctification, and gaining God's rewards. We do not please God through acts of religious ritual. We please God through serving others, and obeying Jesus' commands. Religious ritual can be of benefit to prepare us to serve and minister. But they are a means, rather than an end. Paul relies wholly on pleasing God with the obedience of faith, adopting the same mindset of radical obedience in order to be sanctified, or set apart for great rewards by pleasing God. He relies not at all on his religious credentials.

Paul now lists his religious qualifications. This is what he would rely upon were he to trust his own efforts, either to be justified or be sanctified. He is asserting that if anyone is qualified to be deemed righteous by virtue of religious practice, then it would be him:

- Paul was *circumcised the eighth day*. This means he was born a Jew and was circumcised on the *eighth day* of his life, according to Jewish Law (Genesis 17:12). This means he had religiously observant parents.
- Paul was born *of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin*. Paul could trace his lineage and had a pedigree of being Jewish. In this period where many Jews were scattered around the world, it might have been that not all would have such a pedigree.
- Paul was *a Hebrew of Hebrews*. The term *Hebrew* is another term for someone of the nation of Israel. He was the most Israelite of the Israelites. The following list of qualifications demonstrates that Paul was the best of the best, in terms of following Jewish religious rituals:
  - *as to the Law, a Pharisee*. The Pharisees were defenders of the Jewish faith. They were strict adherents to the Mosaic Law. They had been God's instrument to save Judaism from being wiped out, and had led a revolt that resulted in Israel being freed from Greek rule. The Pharisees believed the Bible and were generally well thought of by working-class Jews. Jesus recognized the validity of their authority and teaching (Matthew 23:1-3). Jesus castigated them for abusing their favor with the working-class Jews, and exercising their interpretations and traditions (such as their oral law) which violated the spirit of the Law of God (Matthew 23). But in doing so, Jesus acknowledged their great influence with Jews.
  - *as to zeal, a persecutor of the church*. Prior to meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul himself had exercised what he then thought was the mantle of

defending the faith, and persecuted those who did not adhere to the rules perpetuated by the Pharisees (Acts 8:1; 9:1-2). This means he was a serious keeper of religious rules.

- *as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found* Paul kept all the religious rules. No one did it better.

So, what does Paul say all these religious credentials gained him? Nothing he values any longer. Paul asserts, *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.*

The *sake of Christ* is the obedience of Christ, following the attitude, mindset or perspective that Paul admonished believers choose in Chapter 2 (verses 5-10). Jesus left His abode in heaven in order to obey His Father. He did not consider Himself to be entitled to remain in His high station in heaven. He did not complain, or insist someone else give up their place in heaven and come to earth. Jesus considered that His best was always served through obeying His Father. He gave up the most comfortable and prosperous circumstances imaginable, and took on the role of a servant, in order to do His Father's will. In a similar way, Paul states that *whatever things were gain to him*, whatever things made him comfortable or gave him status among men in his prior role, he has *counted as loss*.

Just as Jesus set aside the comforts of heaven in order to take on the form of human flesh, Paul has set aside the privileges of his religious credentials in order to serve as a minister of the gospel of Christ. And, just as Jesus did, Paul trusts the benevolence of God, that God's rewards will make anything he gives up in this life more than worth the cost.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>2</sup> Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; <sup>3</sup> for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. <sup>7</sup> But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.**