

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Rejoice; Beware the False Teachers

Philippians 3:1-6

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the sufficiency of Christ and the gospel against every attempt to add human credentials or works of law as the basis of our standing with God. Paul confronts the Judaizing teachers who insisted that faith in Christ must be supplemented by circumcision and law-keeping. His response cuts to the root, the true people of God worship by the Spirit, glory in Christ, and put no confidence in the flesh. This sets up the great statement of righteousness through faith in the next passage. Be ready to teach clearly that nothing we bring, no heritage, no record, no performance, can establish us before God apart from Christ, and that the Old Law has been fulfilled and brought to its goal in him.

This passage is also searching in its formational aim. Most of your students do not face Judaizers, but every one of them is tempted to put confidence in the flesh in some form, to lean secretly on their own discipline, background, giving, attendance, or moral record as the real ground of their acceptance. Paul's dazzling resume, paraded only to be counted as loss next week, holds up a mirror. The aim is to expose the quiet self-righteousness that hides even in devout people and to redirect their confidence and their joy to Christ alone.

So aim at both targets. Strengthen your students' grasp of the gospel's sufficiency and their discernment against anything that adds to it, and at the same time press gently on the credentials they secretly trust, leading them to rejoice in the Lord and to put no confidence in the flesh.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, "rejoice in the Lord," and calls it "a safeguard for you" (3:1). What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord rather than in circumstances, and how does this kind of joy actually protect us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul commands joy, and not joy in general but joy in the Lord. This is the recurring drumbeat of the whole letter, written from prison by a man whose circumstances offered little to rejoice in. His joy is anchored in something his chains cannot touch, the Lord himself. This is the only joy that survives hardship, because its source never changes.

Notice Paul calls this rejoicing a safeguard. Joy in the Lord is not a luxury or a mood, it is protection. A heart anchored in Christ is far harder to deceive and to discourage. The false teachers about to be named trade in fear and inadequacy, and a believer secure and glad in the Lord is fortified against their appeal.

Help students distinguish joy from happiness. Happiness depends on what happens, it rises and falls with circumstances. Joy in the Lord rests on who God is and what he has done, realities that do not change with the weather of our lives. Paul has both feet planted on the unchanging Christ.

Press the connection to the warning that follows. Joyless religion is vulnerable religion. People who have lost their joy in Christ go looking for security in rules, credentials, and added requirements, which is exactly what the false teachers offered. Joy in the Lord guards the gospel in the heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Joy anchored in the Lord rather than in changing circumstances
- Rejoicing in the Lord as a safeguard and protection, not a mere mood
- The difference between happiness, which depends on events, and joy, which rests on God
- Joyless religion as vulnerable to error and added requirements

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord rather than in circumstances?
- How does joy in the Lord actually protect a believer?
- Why does the loss of joy leave a person open to false security?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about where your joy comes from in a normal week. Is it anchored in the Lord, or does it rise and fall with your circumstances, moods, and successes? What would it look like to root your joy more deeply in Christ himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to trace the actual source of their joy. Most of us discover, when honest, that our joy tracks our circumstances closely, good news lifts us, bad news sinks us, and the Lord is somewhere in the background.

Help students notice the symptoms of circumstance-based joy, the emotional whiplash of a life tied to outcomes, the inability to rejoice when things go wrong, the way a single piece of bad news can darken everything. This is the joy the world offers, and it is fragile.

Point them toward the deeper anchor. Joy rooted in Christ does not deny circumstances but is not ruled by them, because its foundation is who Christ is and what he has secured, realities untouched by the day's events. This joy can coexist with sorrow, as Paul's did in prison.

Encourage one concrete practice this week. The deliberate rehearsing of who Christ is and what he has done, perhaps each morning, retrains the heart to find its joy in him. Ask students to name one circumstance currently stealing their joy and to set Christ deliberately above it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Tracing the actual source of our joy
- The fragility and whiplash of circumstance-based joy
- Joy rooted in Christ that coexists with sorrow
- Rehearsing who Christ is as a practice that retrains the heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your joy actually come from in a normal week?
- What circumstance is currently stealing your joy?
- What practice could help root your joy more deeply in Christ?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul issues a sharp warning against the false teachers, "look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (3:2). Who were these teachers, what were they adding to the gospel, and why did Paul treat the threat so seriously?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's language is jarring, three times he says look out, and he calls these teachers dogs, evildoers, and mutilators of the flesh. These were the Judaizers, teachers who followed Paul's mission insisting that Gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be fully acceptable to God. They did not deny Christ outright, they added requirements to him.

Notice the sharp irony. These teachers prided themselves on circumcision, and Paul calls their insistence on it mere mutilation of the flesh, a cutting that now accomplishes nothing spiritually. The terms once reserved by the proud for outsiders, Paul turns back on those who trust in the flesh. The point is severe because the error is severe.

Explain why Paul took this so seriously. Adding to the gospel is not a minor adjustment, it is a different gospel that destroys the real one (Galatians 1:6-9). To say Christ plus circumcision, Christ plus law-keeping, Christ plus anything as the ground of acceptance, is to say Christ is not enough. That steals the believer's security and dishonors the sufficiency of Christ's work.

Help students see that Paul's harshness is protective love. He is fierce because the sheep are in danger. A faithful shepherd warns sharply about wolves. Discernment that names error clearly is not unkindness, it is a form of love for the people who would be harmed by it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Judaizers adding circumcision and law-keeping to faith in Christ
- The danger of any gospel of Christ plus a human requirement (Galatians 1:6–9)
- Adding to the gospel as denying the sufficiency of Christ
- Paul's sharp warning as protective love for the endangered
- Clear naming of error as a form of love, not unkindness

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly were the false teachers adding to the gospel?
- Why is Christ plus anything a denial that Christ is enough?
- How is Paul's sharp warning an expression of love?

Question 4

Student Question:

We rarely face the exact error Paul faced, but we feel its pull. Where are you tempted to add something to the simple gospel, a rule, a tradition, a performance, as though Christ were not quite enough?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question translates the ancient error into the student's own heart. Few face Judaizers today, but the impulse to add to Christ is universal. We attach our own conditions, often respectable ones, and quietly treat them as the real basis of our standing.

Help students surface their personal additions. For some it is a standard of moral performance, for some a tradition or style they equate with faithfulness itself, for some an experience or feeling they think they must produce. Each of these whispers that Christ alone is not quite enough.

Be discerning here. Paul is not against obedience, rules rightly understood, or godly traditions, the whole letter calls for holy living. The error is not having standards but trusting them, making them the ground of our acceptance rather than the fruit of it. The question is what we lean on, not whether we obey.

Press for honesty about one specific addition. Where does the student feel acceptable to God when they perform and rejected when they fail? That swing reveals where confidence has shifted from Christ to self. Name it, and bring it back to resting in Christ alone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universal impulse to add conditions to Christ
- Common additions: moral performance, tradition, required experiences
- The difference between having standards and trusting them for acceptance
- The swing between feeling accepted when we perform and rejected when we fail

Discussion Prompts

- What are you tempted to add to the simple gospel?
- Where do you feel acceptable to God only when you perform?
- How is trusting a standard different from simply obeying?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says the true people of God are those who “worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). What does this teach us about the real identity and worship of God’s people under the New Covenant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a stunning claim. We are the circumcision, he says, the true people of God, marked out not by a physical rite but by three things, worship by the Spirit, glorying in Christ, and no confidence in the flesh. The defining marks of God’s people have shifted from the external to the spiritual and Christ-centered.

This reflects the move from the Old Covenant to the New. Under the law, the people of God were marked by physical circumcision and the rituals of the old system. In Christ, the true circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit (Romans 2:28–29; Colossians 2:11). The external sign has given way to the spiritual reality it always pointed toward.

Draw out the three marks. God’s people worship by the Spirit, not by mere external ritual but in spirit and truth. They glory in Christ Jesus, finding their boast and identity in him rather than in themselves. And they put no confidence in the flesh, in human achievement or pedigree. These three together describe authentic New Covenant faith.

Help students locate their identity here. Their standing as God’s people does not rest on their bloodline, their religious performance, or any external badge, but on their union with Christ and the indwelling Spirit. This is both humbling, since we bring nothing, and securing, since our identity rests on Christ rather than on our shifting performance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The true people of God marked by the Spirit and Christ, not external rites

- The move from Old Covenant signs to the New Covenant reality (Romans 2:28–29; Colossians 2:11)
- Three marks: worship by the Spirit, glorying in Christ, no confidence in the flesh
- Circumcision of the heart fulfilling what the physical sign pointed toward
- Identity as God's people resting on union with Christ, not performance or pedigree

Discussion Prompts

- What now marks out the true people of God, according to Paul?
- How does this reflect the move from the Old Covenant to the New?
- What does it mean to glory in Christ rather than in yourself?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where do you catch yourself putting confidence in the flesh, in your own performance, discipline, or religious activity, rather than glorying in Christ? How does that subtle confidence show up in your attitude?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the third mark, no confidence in the flesh, into the student's daily attitude. Confidence in the flesh is subtle in devout people precisely because it hides behind genuine religious activity, prayer, study, giving, service, all good things wrongly leaned on.

Help students detect the attitudes that betray misplaced confidence, a quiet sense of superiority over less disciplined believers, irritation when our efforts go unrecognized, despair when we fail, comparison and scorekeeping. These are the fingerprints of glorying in self rather than in Christ.

Clarify the cure. The answer is not to stop praying, studying, or serving, but to stop trusting these for our standing. We do them because we are accepted in Christ, not in order to become accepted. The activity stays, the confidence shifts back to where it belongs.

Press for one concrete instance. Ask each student where their religious performance has become a quiet source of pride or a measure by which they rank themselves above others. Naming it begins the work of returning their glory to Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confidence in the flesh hiding behind genuine religious activity
- Symptoms: superiority, comparison, despair at failure, scorekeeping
- Keeping the activity while shifting the confidence back to Christ
- Serving because accepted, not in order to become accepted

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your religious activity become a source of quiet pride?
- How does misplaced confidence show up in your attitude toward others?
- How can you keep serving while glorying in Christ rather than self?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul lists his own credentials, circumcised the eighth day, an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous, blameless (3:4–6). Why does Paul parade this impressive religious resume, and what point is he setting up?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul lays out a resume that would have impressed any first-century Jew. He covers everything, his inheritance from birth (circumcised the eighth day, an Israelite, of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews) and his own achievement (a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of the church, blameless under the law). No one could out-credential Paul.

Paul does this deliberately. He is establishing that he is not criticizing confidence in the flesh because he lacks grounds for it. If anyone could win the game of religious credentials, it is Paul. He plays the game only to show, next week, that he has thrown the whole pile away for the sake of Christ. The boaster renounces his boast.

Notice the two kinds of credentials, those received by birth and those earned by effort. Paul had both the right pedigree and the right performance. This covers the two ways people still seek standing before God, what we inherited and what we achieved. Paul will count both as loss.

Help students feel the setup. Paul is building tension on purpose. The higher he stacks his credentials, the more shocking the reversal will be when he calls them rubbish for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. The point is not that credentials are worthless in themselves but that they are worthless as a basis for standing before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul's resume covering both inherited pedigree and personal achievement
- Paul establishing grounds for confidence only to renounce them
- The two ways people seek standing: what we inherited and what we achieved
- Deliberate tension built to set up the great reversal of the next passage

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul parade credentials he is about to discard?
- What two kinds of credentials does his list cover?
- What reversal is Paul setting up by stacking these so high?

Question 8

Student Question:

If you wrote out your own version of Paul's resume, the things that make you feel spiritually accomplished or respectable, what would be on the list? How tightly do you hold these things?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to write their own version of Paul's list, and the exercise is revealing. Everyone has a resume of things that quietly make them feel acceptable, accomplished, or superior, even in spiritual terms.

Help them be specific and honest. The list might include years of church attendance, a moral record, a family heritage of faith, theological knowledge, ministry roles, generosity, a clean reputation. None of these is bad, but each can become a credential we trust.

The diagnostic question is how tightly they hold these things. Ask, what would it feel like to lose this, to have it discounted or unrecognized? The strength of our reaction reveals how much weight we have placed on it. What we cannot bear to lose, we are probably trusting.

Move toward the gospel. The aim is not to despise these things but to loosen our grip on them as the ground of our standing, so that, like Paul, we can hold them with open hands and find our real confidence in Christ. Invite students to name one item they hold too tightly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming our own resume of spiritual credentials
- Good things (attendance, knowledge, heritage) becoming trusted credentials
- The strength of our reaction to loss revealing where our trust lies
- Loosening our grip without despising the things themselves

Discussion Prompts

- What would be on your version of Paul's resume?
- Which item would be hardest for you to lose, and why?
- What does that reveal about where your confidence rests?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul could claim that "as to righteousness under the law," he was "blameless" (3:6), the very best the old system could produce, and yet he will count it all as loss. What does this teach us about the difference between self-righteousness built on our own performance and the

righteousness God actually requires, and about the place of the Old Law now that Christ has come?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax of the lesson, so give it room. Paul claims to have been blameless as to righteousness under the law. This is an astonishing claim, the highest the old system could produce, and Paul is about to call it loss and rubbish. The best human righteousness, by the highest standard available, is still not the righteousness that saves.

Draw the crucial distinction between two kinds of righteousness. There is a righteousness built on our own performance, our law-keeping, our record, which Paul calls his own (and which he will reject in 3:9). And there is the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ, which the next passage will unfold. The tragedy of self-righteousness is that even at its blameless best it is the wrong kind, a righteousness of our own rather than God's gift.

Teach carefully the place of the Old Law. Paul is not saying the law was bad, it was holy and good and given by God. He is saying that the law was never the final ground of righteousness, and that now that Christ has come, the Old Law has done its work and reached its goal in him. The Old Covenant was fulfilled in Christ, its commandments and shadows pointing forward to him and now brought to completion (Colossians 2:14-17; Hebrews 8-10; Matthew 5:17). Christians live under the New Covenant in Christ's blood, not under the law of Moses.

Guard against two errors. One is legalism, the attempt to establish our own righteousness by performance, whether by the law of Moses or by any other self-made standard, the very thing Paul renounces. The other is lawlessness, the false conclusion that since law-keeping cannot save, obedience does not matter. Paul holds neither. He renounces self-righteousness while everywhere calling for the obedience of faith. The righteousness God gives produces a transformed and obedient life, it does not excuse a careless one.

Land it on the heart. The most religiously accomplished person in the world, by their own performance, still stands in need of a righteousness they cannot manufacture. This humbles the proud and comforts the struggling alike. Our standing before God was never going to rest on our resume, and that is good news, because the righteousness we need is offered to us in Christ as a gift to be received by an obedient faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two kinds of righteousness: our own by performance, and God's gift through faith (setting up 3:9)
- Even blameless law-keeping being the wrong kind of righteousness to stand on
- Self-righteousness and legalism as the attempt to establish our own standing
- The Old Law as holy and good, yet fulfilled and brought to its goal in Christ (Colossians 2:14-17; Hebrews 8-10; Matthew 5:17)

- Christians living under the New Covenant in Christ's blood, not the law of Moses
- Against lawlessness: rejecting self-righteousness does not excuse disobedience; God's righteousness produces an obedient life

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between a righteousness of our own and the righteousness God gives?
- Why is even blameless law-keeping not enough to stand on before God?
- How has the Old Law reached its goal in Christ, and what covenant are we under now?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul calls you to rejoice in the Lord, to beware of anything added to the gospel, and to stop trusting your own credentials. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, whether toward deeper joy, sharper discernment, or a loosened grip on your own record.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. The passage offers three doors, joy in the Lord, discernment against anything added to the gospel, and the surrender of confidence in the flesh. Help each student walk through the one Christ is opening.

Press for the specific. Not I want more joy, but I will rehearse who Christ is each morning over the circumstance stealing my joy. Not I want less pride, but I will stop ranking myself by my attendance or knowledge. Formation lives in the particular.

Connect the response to the coming passage. This entire lesson is the setup for the great reversal of 3:7–11, where Paul counts everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. The grip we loosen here is what frees our hands to take hold of Christ there.

Close in prayer, asking God to root your class's joy in Christ, to give them discernment against every counterfeit gospel, and to pry loose their confidence in the flesh so they can glory in Christ alone. Invite one concrete step this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gathering the passage into one specific, personal response
- Choosing the particular step over the general intention
- This lesson as the setup for the great reversal of 3:7–11
- Loosening our grip now to free our hands to take hold of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which door is Christ opening for you: joy, discernment, or surrender?
- What one specific step will you take this week?
- What credential is he asking you to hold with open hands?