

The Book of Philippians

Lesson 7: Rejoice; Beware the False Teachers -- Philippians 3:1-6

Paul turns a corner here, and the turn comes with a command that sounds almost too simple. Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. Then, in nearly the same breath, his tone sharpens into a warning so blunt it can startle a reader. Look out for the dogs. Joy and warning, side by side. It seems like an odd pairing until you realize that Paul is guarding something precious, and you only post sharp warnings around things that are precious.

What he is guarding is the gospel itself, and the joy that flows from it. There were teachers following Paul around, insisting that faith in Christ was not enough, that Gentile believers also had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be truly acceptable to God. Paul will not have it. He calls these teachers by harsh names, not out of cruelty, but because what they teach steals the joy and security that belong to people who rest in Christ alone.

Then Paul does something remarkable. He says, if anyone wants to play the game of religious credentials, I can win it. And he lists his own resume, circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, zealous, blameless under the law. There was no more impressive religious pedigree in the ancient world. Paul had it all, the bloodline, the training, the zeal, the record.

He lays out this dazzling list for one reason, to set up the great reversal we will study next, where he counts it all as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. But before we get there, this passage asks us a probing question. What are we leaning on? Where do we secretly look for confidence before God, in our performance, our heritage, our religious record? And have we learned, like Paul, to put no confidence in the flesh and to rejoice in the Lord alone?

Group Discussion: Paul commands, “rejoice in the Lord,” and says writing this is “a safeguard for you” (3:1). How can joy in the Lord actually protect a believer, and where have you seen joylessness leave someone vulnerable?

Personal Reflection: Paul warns against putting “confidence in the flesh” (3:3), trusting our own credentials before God. What is one thing about yourself, your record, your background, or your achievements, that you are quietly tempted to lean on for your standing with God?

Read Philippians 3:1-6

Study Questions

1. 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?

2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 5:1–6, standing firm in freedom and not submitting again to a yoke of slavery, for in Christ what counts is faith working through love; Jeremiah 9:23–24, not boasting in wisdom, might, or riches, but in knowing the Lord; Luke 18:9–14, the Pharisee and the tax collector and the danger of trusting in our own righteousness; Romans 2:28–29, true circumcision being of the heart, by the Spirit; Colossians 2:11–14, the circumcision made without hands and the record of debt nailed to the cross.