

Book: Philippians
Series: Rejoice in the Lord!
Lesson 11: Gospel Joy: “Rejoicing in the Lord”
Text: Philippians 3:1-11
Date: November 24, 2013

Colonial Hills
Baptist Church

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

Book: Philippians
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Text: Philippians 3:1-11
Date: November 24, 2013
Next Lesson: Philippians 3:12-21



TEACHING TIP

We couldn't have picked a better passage to consider before thanksgiving. Consider starting the class period by praying this prayer, entitled “Joy,” from *The Valley of Vision*.¹

*O Christ,
All thy ways of mercy tend to and end in my delight.
Thou didst weep, sorrow, suffer that I might rejoice.
For my joy thou hast sent the Comforter,
multiplied thy promises,
shown me my future happiness,
given me a living fountain.
Thou art preparing joy for me and me for joy;
I pray for joy, wait for joy, long for joy;
give me more than I can hold, desire, or think of.
Measure out to me my times and degrees of joy,
at my work, business, duties.
If I weep at night, give me joy in the morning.
Let me rest in the thought of thy love,
pardon for sin, my title to heaven,
my future unspotted state.
I am an unworthy recipient of thy grace.
I often disesteem thy blood and slight thy love,
but can in repentance draw water
from the wells of thy joyous forgiveness.
Let my heart leap towards the eternal sabbath,
where the work of redemption, sanctification,
preservation, glorification is finished
and perfected for ever,
where thou wilt rejoice over me with joy.*

*There is no joy like the joy of heaven,
for in that state are no sad divisions,
unchristian quarrels,
contentions, evil designs,
weariness, hunger, cold,
sadness, sin, suffering,
persecutions, toils of duty.*

*O healthful place where none are sick!
O happy land where all are kings!
O holy assembly where all are priests!
How free a state where none are servants except to thee!
Bring me speedily to the land of joy.*

INTRODUCTION

Paul writes in Philippians 3:1, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.” The word “finally” is simply a word of transition that Paul uses here as he returns to the underlying theme of his letter—joy. Although he’s already touched on this theme (1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 28-29) and even commanded rejoicing (2:17-18), it’s “no trouble” for him to remind them, for that is what would be “safe” for them (cf. 2 Peter 1:12-13; 3:1).

In this section (3:1-4:4), Paul adds a vital and foundational aspect to his call for us to rejoice—we should rejoice “in the Lord.” What does this mean? As we’re going to see from this passage, it means something very specific and simple. It is not merely putting on a happy face because we are, after all, Christians. It is not just trying to think positively about a situation because we have this religious optimism. It is not coping through a difficulty because we have this vague sense that “it will all work out in the end.” It is not even attempting to fuel our happiness by seeing the good in a situation. None of that is “rejoicing in the Lord.”

To “rejoice in the Lord” is to chose joy based on something much more foundational, much more personal, and much more reliable. “Rejoicing in the Lord” is certainly different from mere happiness which is temporally and circumstantially based.² “Rejoicing in the

Lord” is also much, much different from the above responses (i.e., trying to be happy, think positively, muster optimism, see the good, etc.), in that it is a logical, rational, reasonable response even in the midst of great suffering. Complementing that volitional response, it is also a supernatural product of God’s working in us “both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:12), for it is a “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22).

So, we’ve seen what “rejoicing in the Lord” is not, but what exactly is it—what does it mean to “rejoice in the Lord”? Our passage answers this in detail (cf. 3:1; 4:4). Here, we will see that “Paul connects rejoicing to a relationship...The sphere in which their joy exists is in their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.”³ “Rejoicing in the Lord,” then, is what we will call “gospel joy,” for in the accomplishment of the gospel, “the Lord” Jesus provided a way for us to be restored to God, and in the announcement of the gospel, “the Lord” Jesus applied His work to you and me directly through faith and “brought us back to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Thus, the gospel is simply the summary of who “the Lord” is, what “the Lord” has said, and what “the Lord” has done. Truly, then, it is because of the gospel that we have ample cause to chose joy and that such a choice is reasonable and reliable.

So, “rejoicing in the Lord” is the joy that comes from the reality and experience of our relationship with “the Lord” Jesus. As one commentator puts it, “The Lord Himself is both the *occasion* and *source* of [our] joy.”⁴ Another commentator wonderfully builds on that:

The command which Paul gives in 3:1 acts as a bridge between what he has taught and what he is about to teach. Jesus has been glorified as God, Saviour, Example and Lord. So then, rejoice in the Lord. He is about to be displayed as the Christian’s pride, choicest possession, ambition, pattern, possessor, the crucified and coming Saviour. Should we not, then, rejoice in the Lord?... the command Rejoice in the Lord means, ‘Let the Lord be the One who makes you happy,’ ‘Find your joy in Him and in Him alone.’⁵

Paul maintains that this kind of joy—rejoicing “in the Lord”—is “safe,” that is, “by definition a bulwark against all manner of dangers’ (Bockmuehl).⁶ This is what Nehemiah meant when he comforted in Nehemiah 8:10, “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” This kind of joy, then—joy “in the Lord” or “gospel joy”—is vital for Christian stability and success.

Illustration: Consider a science fiction movie, like *Star Trek*. All of the spaceships or starships in that film, like the USS Eterprise, have an advanced shields system that would deflect incoming missiles and protect the ship’s structure. Whenever those movies show an inside shot of that shielded spacecraft being hit by a missile, the camera jostles violently back and forth, everyone in the bridge or command center is shown grabbing on to whatever they can in order to stabilize themselves, alarms begin to blare, sparks fly, and pipes burst. They are certainly knocked around, but the spaceship is still intact and flies on. Those shields don’t keep the ship from feeling the power of the enemy missiles, but they do protect it from the destruction of those missiles.

In a similar fashion, “rejoicing in the Lord” is like that shields system. It doesn’t keep us from getting attacked, experiencing suffering, or being knocked around in life; but it does protect us from the discouragement, despair, and destruction of those pressures.⁷ This “joy (because it is ‘in the Lord’) is independent of adverse circumstances.”⁸

For most of us, our concept of joy is directly linked to our circumstances, and when “missiles” hit, we struggle to maintain it—not only are we jostled, but we often do crash and burn. However, “gospel joy” actually flourishes in those times of pressure and loss, for its thinking goes like this:

Although all else may be taken away, the gospel teaches me that nothing of eternal import has changed (cf. Hebrews 10:34-36). I am suffering much, and I may lose much, but “because [the Lord] is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Psalm 16:8; Acts 2:25). I am shaken, but “the Lord” my Shield and Lover is not. Actually, in this moment of ashes, the gospel gives me hope as it speaks to

me of One who can bring beauty out of ashes (Isaiah 61:1-3; 42:3). Yes, indeed, because I am “in the Lord” and He is in me, I shall not be shaken, but instead I will “with joy...draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3).

If our joy is in the gospel—that is, if we are “rejoicing in the Lord”—then, even as Paul (and Timothy and Epaphroditus) has modeled in this epistle, we may (and will) be pressured, but we can keep moving forward with purpose and pleasure (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18). (**Illustration:** Consider/discuss the Phelps’ response to the accident.)



Discussion: Armed now with this simple understanding of what it means to “rejoice in the Lord” (which will be fleshed out below), consider and discuss the following statements that were made above:

- “To ‘rejoice in the Lord’ is to chose joy based on something much more foundational, much more personal, and much more reliable.”
- “‘Rejoicing in the Lord’ is...much, much different from the above responses (i.e., trying to be happy, think positively, muster optimism, see the good, etc.), in that it is a logical, rational, reasonable response even in the midst of great suffering.”
- “Paul maintains that this kind of joy—rejoicing “in the Lord”— is “safe,” that is, “by definition a bulwark against all manner of dangers’ (Bockmuehl)...It doesn’t keep us from getting attacked, experiencing suffering, or being knocked around in life; but it does protect us from the discouragement, despair, and destruction of those pressures.”

Now, at the end of this introduction, we’ve admittedly shown our hand a bit. We already know that Paul uses the phrase “rejoice *in the Lord*” to demonstrate that our joy should be rooted in a saving and unchanging relationship. However, we still have an entire passage in front of us in which Paul gives more definition to this concept of “gospel joy.” He does so by way of a pointed warning in verses 2-3 and a personal testimony in verses 4-11. These two sections are like two sides of the same coin and teach us what it means to “rejoice in the Lord.”

**THE POINTED WARNING: GOSPEL JOY REPUDIATES
RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH WORKS (vv. 2-3).**

Paul uses striking language in verses 2-3 to describe those who preach “another gospel” (cf. Galatians 1:6-9; 2:16-21; 3:2-14, 22-25; 5:1-4, 11-14; cf. Ephesians 2:8-9). As Jews, these false-gospel preachers proclaimed that works (i.e., adherence to the Mosaic Law, especially circumcision) needed to be added to faith in Christ in order to secure one’s salvation (Acts 15:1). Theirs was a works-righteousness, a self-salvation. Their teaching was in direct contrast to and confrontation with the true gospel (i.e., Alistair Begg, “It wasn’t a matter of marginal debate”⁹), and Paul has no time for it (nor did the Jerusalem Counsel, cf. Acts 15:1-29). His “rejoicing in the Lord” militated against all that which undermined the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ (cf. Colossians 1:15-23; 2:6-23). Says Alistair Begg, “Adding circumcision to the work of Christ is not to enhance it, but to destroy it” (cf. 2 Timothy 2:17).¹⁰ To clarify the difference between his position and that of the false teachers, Paul describes them in verse 2 and identifies himself in verse 3.

1. False teachers (v. 2)

Paul warns against “those who would add to Christ other factors and conditions as necessary to salvation [i.e., frequently called Judaizers]. This is the first and greatest threat to a true joy in the Lord.”¹¹ In verse 2, Paul describes these false teachers with three terms, heading each one with an urgent exhortation to “look out” or “beware.”

a. False teachers are “dogs.”

This derogatory term (cf. Deuteronomy 23:18; 1 Samuel 17:43; 24:14; 2 Samuel 9:8; 16:9; 2 Kings 8:13; Psalm 22:16; Revelation 22:15) was what Jews usually called Gentiles (cf. Matthew 15:26-27). This word refers to “coyote-like scavengers who fed on roadkill, carrion, filth, and garbage—they were vivid images of

the unclean. So for the Jews, a dog was a perfect metaphor for those who did not keep Israel’s dietary laws, and thus a powerful metaphor for Gentiles and lapsed Jews.”¹²

Now, however, in a touch of abrasive irony, is calling these Judaizers, “dogs.” Notes MacArthur,

*[Paul] warned the Philippians to beware of those who call others dogs, but in reality are dogs themselves. The apostle’s description is fitting. Are dogs unclean and filthy? So are the false teachers. Are dogs vicious and dangerous, and to be avoided? So are the false teachers. So are all those who teach salvation by works.*¹³ [cf. Matthew 7:15; Acts 20:29]

b. False teachers are “evildoers.”

These false teachers prided themselves on their own righteousness, for they were “doers of the Law”; yet in all biblical reality, they were morally bankrupt (cf. Romans 3:19-20)—they were not who they thought themselves to be. Again, in a twist of remarkable irony, God calls them here “evildoers” (2 John 9-11). “Paul states that their ‘good works’ are really *evil* works because they are performed by the flesh (old nature) and not the Spirit, and they glorify the workers and not Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

In 2 Corinthians 11:13, Paul demonstrates that he doesn’t see them as misguided, but as malicious in their deception and disguise. Like their Pharisaical counterparts, they would “travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matthew 23:15).

c. False teachers are “mutilators.”

Paul calls these people, thirdly, “those who mutilate the flesh” or, more literally, “the mutilation.” When God instituted circumcision as the distinguishing mark of His covenant with His people Israel, He always intended for it to be an illustration of a spiritual reality. MacArthur explains:

Circumcision graphically illustrated man’s depravity, which is nowhere more manifest than in the procreative act, because it is then that the sin nature is passed on to a new generation (Ps. 51:5; 58:3). Circumcision was a symbol, picturing man’s need to be cleansed from sin at the deepest root of his being....

Like baptism in the New Covenant, circumcision was to reflect an inward reality. God commanded the Israelites, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart” (Jer. 4:4; cf. 9:26; Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Ezek. 44:7, 9). Sadly, by Paul’s day circumcision had become a mere outward ritual, bereft of its intended spiritual significance [Romans 2:25-29]....

No ritual—not circumcision, baptism, communion, or any other—can transform the heart. And only those with transformed hearts can please God.¹⁵

The spiritual reality that God intended for circumcision to reflect, was absent in these “evildoers.” Therefore, employing another striking play on words, Paul says that what they thought to be an important ceremonial (and saving) cutting, was in reality a mere “mutilation” of their flesh and a “mutilation” of God’s intent. Since it didn’t reflect a transformed heart and certainly couldn’t produce a transformed heart, these false teachers were “not praiseworthy religious people

doing their best to please God. They are purveyors of demon doctrines (1 Tim. 4:1), who hold ‘to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power’ (2 Tim. 3:5). Believers are to ‘avoid such men as these’ (2 Tim. 3:5).”¹⁶

2. True believers (v. 3)

In contrast to those deceived and destructive false teachers who preach another gospel, “we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” The NASB helpfully inserts “true” before “circumcision” to help us understand what Paul is doing here. Paul is again using irony to make his point. Having already shown that the false teachers are not what they think they are, Paul paradoxically applies this term, “circumcision,” to believers (some of whom were uncircumcised Philippian gentiles) to show that they, in fact, are God’s people. In contrast to those who merely mutilate themselves in physical circumcision, believers are the “true circumcision” (NASB).

This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote in Romans 2:28-29, “For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something that is outward in the flesh, but someone is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit and not by the written code.” When he wrote to the gentile believers in Colossae, he wrote, “In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11). Thus, in calling himself with these Philippian believers, the “circumcision,” he is demonstrating that they are the true believers, the true people of God. The rest of this verse provides three characteristics of true believers.

a. True believers worship by the Spirit of God.

First, true believers “worship by the Spirit of God.” This phrase teaches that God’s Spirit generates worship in the heart of His people. The worship of true believers is not rote, but real (cf. Isaiah 29:13); not ritualistic, but responsive; not natural, but supernatural. Begg puts it this way, “[For true worshippers,] worship is not a chore...it’s something that God does—He makes you a worshipper.”

In John 4, Jesus teaches us that true worship is not location-bound (vv. 19-21—thus, there are no longer “sanctuaries”), is a personal response to knowing Him, especially His salvation (v. 22), arises internally from the heart (vv. 23-24), and is oriented around and governed by God’s Word (vv. 23-24). The woman, upon becoming a believer, experienced that very worship (cf. John 4:25-30, 39-42). God is seeking these kind of worshippers, and thus their worship is “by the Spirit of God” (cf. Galatians 4:6).

MacArthur takes this a step further:

Latreuō (worship) might best be translated “to render respectful spiritual service.” True worship goes beyond praising God, singing hymns, or participating in a worship service. The essence of worship is living a life of obedient service to God. “Do not neglect doing good and sharing,” exhorts the writer of Hebrews, “for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Heb. 13:16). True worship involves every aspect of life.¹⁷

Illustration: We can get a sense of what this looks like by considering a sports fan sitting on his couch, watching a game as it comes down to the wire at the end. When victory is claimed at the buzzer or when defeat is handed to his team at the last minute, his response arises naturally from within him. You can’t get it out of him.

That’s a picture of true worship. It doesn’t wait for permission; it doesn’t delay until a worship service; it isn’t restricted by a form or tradition. No, for the Christian, every hour is a worship service, and every place, a sanctuary. True worship arises naturally from the heart of one who is rightly related to God and viewing all of life through that lens.¹⁸ “True Christians are not simply marked by attending church or performing religious duties, but by a worshiping heart.”¹⁹

With this understanding of worship in mind, read Psalm 8, 95 and Galatians 4:1-7 and discuss how those passages reflect this kind of worship.

b. True believers glory in Christ Jesus.

True believers have absolutely no cause for glorying in their own religious achievements and self-righteousness, for they agree with the divine evaluation of themselves. They agree with 1 Corinthians 1:26-31—

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Therefore, like Paul, they magnify Christ in their talk. They honestly and humbly say, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10) and “In Christ

Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God” (Romans 15:17). Cf. Jeremiah 9:23-24; Romans 3:27; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 10:17; Galatians 6:14; Ephesians 2:8-9

c. *True believers put no confidence in the flesh.*

True believers know that “the flesh is no help at all” (John 6:63), for “nothing good dwells...in my flesh” (Romans 7:18, 25). They, therefore, “put no confidence in the flesh,” in stark contrast to the false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:18). They understand that “to set the mind on the flesh is death [also, hostility to God, v. 7, and displeasing to God, v. 8], but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6), and so their daily practice is to “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4).

In other words, such people are genuinely and regularly repentant, turning from self-justification and self-approval and self-confidence and turning to the justification and approval of God that are confidently known only through the Spirit’s application of Christ’s work to one’s life. True believers repentantly repudiate any confidence in their own ability to merit God and His grace, and instead worshipfully respond “in spirit and in truth” to the One who has qualified them (Colossians 1:12-15), the One in whom they glory.

Application: Dear Christian, you and I will frequently disappoint ourselves, let alone others and God. We will have tremendous difficulty living up to our own standards, let alone God’s. And, when we do, we will discover that it was never God’s standard, and that He is not pleased. God wants our joy to be grounded, not in our “adequate” attempt to live righteously and avoid evil, but in the sufficiency of Christ to have done that for us completely and clothe us with it graciously. “Gospel joy” dwells independently of works-righteousness, for any joy that is based

on our performance will be inconsistent, incomplete, and inadequate. God envisions that His people know “fullness of joy,” but that is at His right hand (i.e., the arm of His salvation, Psalm 98:1-3 and Isaiah 52:10) and not ours (Psalm 16:11).

Friend, if you are trusting in your ability to cope through a bad situation, your ability to keep your head up during pressure, your ability to maintain guiltlessness against temptation’s onslaught, your ability to please God by “working out your own salvation,” your ability to deserve God’s compassion, your ability to save yourself (from _____)—then you will forfeit your joy. Instead, God wants you to repudiate works-righteousness, to repent from relying upon your performance, and to joyfully rest in the One who has done it all and who does not change.

This is what it means to “rejoice in the Lord.” As we said in our introduction, “It doesn’t keep us from getting attacked, experiencing suffering, or being knocked around in life; but it does protect us from the discouragement, despair, and destruction of those pressures.” Because Christ is our Treasure and because He is a Shield, we can “chose joy” and allow Him to fill us with a satisfied and peaceful contentment, even when life is storming around us. We can run to and cling to Christ,²⁰ and find in that Source a “gospel joy” that no one and nothing can take away from us (John 16:22, 24).

Transition: Beginning in verse 4, Paul flips the coin over (as it were) and speaks even more clearly and more confidently about the nature of “gospel joy.” Themes that he began in his pointed warning in verses 2-3, he now elaborates on by way of personal testimony. In these verses we discover that not only does “gospel joy” repudiate righteousness through works, but it also rests in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

THE PERSONAL TESTIMONY: GOSPEL JOY RESTS IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST (vv. 4-11).

In verses 4-6, Paul shares with us his own personal testimony to show how he had come to the point of unwavering “gospel joy” “in the Lord.” And, for him, too, it started with our first point—a repudiation of righteousness through works, or what most people today simply know as “religion.”

1. ***Religion (vv. 4-6)***

According to verses 4-6, Paul was a tremendously religious man. His list briefly summarizes a man that was devoted to a religious system as the means of his spiritual security.

a. ***The nature of Paul’s confidence (v. 4)***

Having just mentioned that true believers “put no confidence in the flesh” against the masses of humanity who are doing just that, Paul affirms that if anyone had a reason to put their confidence in their own ability, it was him. Paul, speaking from the lips of his old self for a moment, uses words that are both arrogant and honest: “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” The then substantiates that claim with specific details.

b. ***The details of Paul’s confidence (vv. 5-6)***

Verse 5-6 delineate the many factors that Paul could have “put his confidence in” for spiritual worthiness and security. We can summarize them under five headings:

- ***Tradition*** — He says that, in keeping with the Mosaic tradition, he had been “circumcised on the eighth day.”

- ***Heritage*** — Paul’s Jewish heritage was undeniable and unadulterated.²¹ He was a part of the privileged people of God, “Israel” (cf. Romans 3:1-2; 9:3-5), and from “the tribe of Benjamin,” that favored tribe that boasted the holy city of Jerusalem (cf. Judges 1:21). Yes, Paul affirms, he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” as he clung to the language, customs, and ideologies of his people (cf. Acts 26:4).
- ***Devotion*** — Paul notes thirdly that he had been religiously trained, even under the great Rabbi Gamaliel (cf. Acts 22:3). Thus, Paul could say, “[I was], as to the law, a Pharisee” (Acts 26:5). He was even a second generation Pharisee (Acts 23:6). Apparently, his religious devotion was evident at even a very young age, for he reminisced in Galatians 1:14, “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”
- ***Sincerity*** — “As to zeal,” says Paul, “[I was] a persecutor of the church.” Viewing followers of Jesus as blasphemers and false-god worshippers, Paul began a violent crusade against them (Acts 8:3; 9:1-2, 21; 22:4-5; 26:9-11; Galatians 1:13; 1 Timothy 1:13). “In terms of zeal, Paul went the Judaizers one better. They only proselytized the church; he had persecuted it. His zeal for God led him to relentlessly, unsparingly, and mercilessly try to stamp out” what He viewed to be a blasphemous sect.²²

- ***Morality*** — Paul states lastly, “As to righteousness under the law, blameless.” He would affirm, similarly to the rich young ruler (Luke 18:21), “All these I have kept from my youth.” There was no denying that this was a very moral individual, who lived in astonishing conformity to an ethical standard.

Paul wasn’t lying, then, when he affirmed, “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” His religious credentials were remarkable, and yet, they produced no lasting joy for him, and they certainly didn’t earn him any favor with God. His personal testimony doesn’t end there, however. For when Christ broke through His blindness and gave Him a vision of Himself and His sufficiency, Paul’s life was completely changed (Acts 9:1-31). It was that experience with Christ and its resulting relationship that would enable Paul to reasonably chose to rejoice, even when it seemed so unnatural. This is “gospel joy,” and as Paul now testifies, it simply rests in a saving, unchanging, and unending relationship with God. And so, his testimony began with joyless religion in verses 4-6, but now it is replaced with a joyful relationship in verses 7-11.

2. ***Relationship (vv. 7-11)***

The key verse here is verse 7—“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” All those things he listed in verses 4-6 as being “reason[s] for confidence in the flesh”—those things that the natural man would regard as “gain” in the balance of spiritual accomplishment and value—Paul recognized in the moment when he met Christ that they were in all reality “loss.”

These things were “loss” for at least two reasons. First, Paul understood that in the sight of God, these religious accomplishments actually warranted God’s anger for they

were the tools of rejecting Him. Therefore, again in a twist of irony, we could illustrate this idea of “loss” with a concept from the banking world—not only were those religious accomplishments not credits, but they were actually debits. Secondly, and more germane to our passage, these spiritual achievements were “loss” in comparison to something (i.e., Someone) that far outweighed them in value and significance. They paled in comparison to such a degree, that to cling to them instead of this other, would truly be to make the ultimate sacrifice and experience devastating “loss.” Therefore, Paul gladly “suffered the loss of all [those] things” as a source of spiritual confidence, and evaluated them as equivalent to “rubbish”²³ in saving his soul, making him acceptable before God, and satisfying him with true and lasting joy.

So, Paul does the spiritual math here (i.e., the word “count” refers to reasoning through and evaluating) and concludes that, in a formula, “Christ > Paul’s religious accomplishments.”²⁴ Whatever he had achieved and had put so much “confidence” in, he learned to repudiate when introduced to the Man, Christ Jesus. Yes, “Whatever gain [he] had, [he] counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” In the following verses, Paul relates why He found Christ to be of “surpassing worth.” He summarizes it with three phrases.

a. ***We can “know Christ” (vv. 8a, 10a).***

Paul personally testifies in verse 8 to “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Jeremiah 9:23-24 proclaims,

Thus says the LORD, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows Me.”

Building off that, the New Testament continues to herald the amazing reality that God wants to be known—personally, relationally, experientially—and that He wants to know us that way, too.

The New Testament frequently describes Christians as those who know Christ. In John 10:14 Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me.” In John 17:3 He defined eternal life as knowing Him: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” To the Corinthians Paul wrote, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6), while in Ephesians 1:17 he prayed “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.” In his first epistle John declared, “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). Salvation involves a personal, relational knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵

It is for the very reason that Christ has promised such a real and genuine relationship with Himself that Paul exclaims later in verse 10, “That I may know Him”! The pleasurable pursuit of knowing Christ doesn’t end, and each “level” is better than the one before (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the believer’s lifelong pursuit.

Notice also the way Paul addresses Christ—as “Christ Jesus my Lord.” He is the promised Messiah (i.e., Christ) and “salvation” itself (Matthew 1:21), and He is “my Lord,” Paul writes. What beautiful balance in

these three titles! The promised Savior had become Paul’s Master; thus, Paul life of indebted servitude (cf. 1:1) was based on “gospel joy”!

b. We can “gain Christ” (v. 8b).

According to verse 8b, Paul counted his religious accomplishments as “rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.” His standard was corrected now, so that he could evaluate “gain” appropriately. He measures his previous gain against this standard: “in [Christ’s] presence there is fullness of joy, [and] at [His] right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). Understandably, then, all he wants to “gain” now is “Christ.” The Old Testament concept of “portion” is the way in which the ancient believers would express this corrected evaluation.

c. We can be “in Christ” (vv. 9-11).

Paul breaks out one of his favorite gospel truths in verse 9 when he writes, “[I want to] be found in Him.” Paul gloried in this foundational aspect of the gospel that we typically refer to as our “union with Christ.” Over 75 times in his epistles, Paul uses the picturesque phrase “in Christ” to reference it. This doctrine reminds us that “believers are inextricably intertwined with Christ in an intimate life and love bond.”²⁶ This simply means, then, that the benefits and accomplishments and privileges of Christ become ours. Paul lists four of those here.

- **Righteousness (v. 9)** — Whereas there is only condemnation (again, not a credit, but a debit) for those who pursue works/self-righteousness (i.e., “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law”; cf. Romans 3:19-20; 10:3; Galatians 2:16; 3:10-13; 5:4), God offers His very own righteousness (i.e., “righteousness from God”),

earned through the obedience of His Son, to us as a complete and everlasting spiritual “credit” (cf. Romans 3:21-26; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). As far as our part goes, it is accepted (i.e., “that which comes through faith in Christ...that depends on faith”), not achieved.

- **Power (v. 10a)** — “In Christ” we can “know...the power of His resurrection.” This is good news for weak sinners! The resurrection was the greatest display of God’s power, for not only was a man raised from the dead, but our greatest enemy was defeated as victory was literally seized from the jaws of defeat (cf. Colossians 2:14-15). We have already experienced this power in salvation (Romans 6:4-5; notice the logical progression in Ephesians 1:18-20 and 2:5-6), and it is that very power that “works in [us], both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13; cf. Ephesians 3:20; 6:10-13). How, then, can we not victoriously “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).
- **Fellowship (v. 10b)** — In verse 10, the word “share” is the same word that we’ve seen several times in Philippians and translated “participate,” “partner,” or “fellowship.” Paul rejoices that His union with Christ privileges him to “share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.”

When he met Christ, Paul gained a companion to be with him in his suffering—One who endured far more intense persecution and suffering than anyone else who ever lived, all of it undeserved.

The deepest moments of spiritual fellowship with the living Christ are at times of intense suffering; suffering drives believers to Him. They

find in Him a merciful High Priest, a faithful friend who feels their pain, and a sympathetic companion who faced all the trials and temptations that they face (Heb. 4:15). He is thus uniquely qualified to help them in their weaknesses and infirmities (Heb. 2:17). That blessed, comforting truth led Paul to exclaim, “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).²⁷

In this point in particular, then, we discover the uniqueness of “gospel joy.” Because it is grounded on an established, unwavering, and unending relationship, it can never be moved; therefore, “the joy of the Lord is our strength”!

- **Glory (v. 11)** — In verse 11, Paul basks in the guarantee of the gospel—“in Christ” he would “attain the resurrection from the dead.” Notice the unworthiness that Paul conveys at the beginning of this verse. He knew that “resurrection from the death” into the gloriously and eternally near presence of God was nothing he deserved (1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:8), and yet he so desperately desired it and so confidently hoped for it (1 Corinthians 15:51-53; Romans 8:23).

Application: Consider again these “riches”—righteousness, power, fellowship, and glory. No wonder, then, that “whatever gain [Paul] had, [he] counted as loss for the sake of Christ” (v. 7).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps you're at a crossroads. Maybe you're wrestling with the same question of what you're going to rely upon in order to secure spiritual confidence and divine favor. Will you let Paul's testimony help you abolish your own evaluation standard and accept the true standard?

In Matthew 19:16-22, another individual was confronted with this crossroads of religion versus a relationship. This rich young ruler's spiritual "gain" column was filled with self-effort and works-righteousness, and he chose to keep that standard and forfeit Christ. As a result, he went away "sorrowful," devoid of joy and life. Don't make the same eternity-affecting decision!

Maybe you've already "clung to Christ" as your Savior and Lord, but life has taken its toll and you find yourself guilty, distracted, discouraged, or despairing. Hear the gracious words of your Jesus in the pen of Paul, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you" (v. 1). Meditate upon the riches of Christ vividly described in this passage, and allow the resulting "gospel joy" to be your strength.

ENDNOTES

¹ Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 292-93.

² "It seems from this repeated emphasis that the Philippian Christians needed this word. Most of God's people need this challenge often. It is easy for believers to let circumstances discourage them. The cure for discouragement is to rivet one's attention on the Lord and rejoice in Him. It is significant too that a Roman prisoner would beseech people who were free to be joyful in their Savior. It seems that it should be the other way around. Paul learned what every child of God needs to learn—there can be rejoicing in the Lord even when outward circumstances are contrary to a spirit of rejoicing" (Robert P. Lightner, "Philippians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985], 659).

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 216.

⁴ Hughes, 122.

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 147.

⁶ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: A & C Black Limited, 1998), p. 181, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, *Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 122.

⁷ Kent Hughes and Matthew Henry demonstrate what this kind of spiritual protection, provided by "rejoicing in the Lord," looks like (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 2 (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 1096, in Hughes, 122):

There is safety for all believers in the joy of the Lord. Matthew Henry, the Puritan expositor, wrote, "The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks." The joy of the Lord is a divine armament. Those living in his joy are resistant to attacks that take others down. Resiliency marks their steps. The taste of joy renders the tempter's offerings bland by comparison.

⁸ Hughes, 122.

⁹ Alistair Begg, "Righteousness From God," a sermon preached on June 14, 1998 over Philippians 3:1-3, <http://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/righteousness-from-god/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Motyer, 147.

¹² Hughes, 123.

¹³ MacArthur, 217.

¹⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 85.

¹⁵ MacArthur, 218-219.

¹⁶ Ibid., 220.

¹⁷ Ibid., 221.

¹⁸ MacArthur fleshes out this heart-provoked, Spirit-produced worship (Ibid., 221-222):

Several characteristics mark true worshipers. First, they love God. That is in stark contrast to unbelievers, who hate Him. Jesus declared in John 7:7, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it, that its deeds are evil." In Romans 1:30 Paul describes unbelievers as "haters of God" (cf. Num. 10:35; Deut. 7:10; 2 Chron. 19:2; Ps. 81:15; John 15:23-24), while in

Romans 8:7 the apostle points out that “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.” Christians’ love for God will never be perfect in this world, but it will always be there.

Because true worshipers love God, they find in Him their source of joy and delight. They acknowledge that “the joy of the Lord is [their] strength” (Neh. 8:10). They “sing for joy in the Lord” (Ps. 33:1; cf. Pss. 84:2; 92:4; 95:1; 98:4), because they are filled “with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6; cf. Rom. 14:17). Like the psalmist, they find in “God [their] exceeding joy” (Ps. 43:4). True worshipers “delight to revere [His] name” (Neh. 1:11), and heed David’s exhortation, “Delight yourself in the Lord” (Ps. 37:4). The contemplation of God’s glory and majesty, and what He has done in their lives, is their supreme joy and delight.

True worshipers also have a confident trust in God that produces peace. That peace is based not on their circumstances, but on their relationship with God. They can exclaim with the psalmists, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God” (Ps. 42:1); and “Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth” (Ps. 73:25). This “peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension” (Phil. 4:7) comes only to those who “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33)....

True worshipers are devoted to God; He has no rival for their affection. They “worship the Lord [their] God, and serve Him only” (Matt. 4:10), knowing that He “will not give [His] glory to another” (Isa. 42:8; 48:11). They affirm Jesus’ declaration that “he who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37). Holding nothing back, they “present [their] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [their] spiritual service of worship” (Rom. 12:1).

¹⁹ Ibid., 222.

²⁰ Consider these hymns for meditation: “His Robes for Mine” (churchworksmedia.com/his-ropes-for-mine) and “I Run to Christ” (churchworksmedia.com/i-run-to-christ).

²¹ “By Paul’s day, many Jews no longer knew what tribe they belonged to. Inter-marriage during the years of exile had blurred the tribal lines. But Paul’s family had remained pure Benjamites. That again elevated him above some of the Judaizers, who probably did not know their tribal descent. But Paul’s privileged status as a Benjamite did not impress God. Family status has nothing to do with salvation” (MacArthur, 230).

²² Ibid., 232.

²³ This word was used of waste, dung, manure, or excrement. “Paul expresses in the strongest possible language his utter disdain for all the religious credits with which he had sought [and which which we seek] to impress man and God” (Ibid., 236).

²⁴ “The forceful phrase *more than that* [“indeed” in the ESV] is an untranslatable string of five Greek particles (lit. ‘but indeed therefore at least even’). It strongly emphasizes the contrast between the religious credits that do not impress God and the incalculable benefits of knowing Christ” (Ibid., 234).

²⁵ Ibid., 235.

²⁶ Ibid., 236–237.

²⁷ Ibid., 239.