

Phil. 3:2-11

I. Beware of those opposed to the way of Christ (2)

This is probably a reference to Jewish teachers who tried to convince Gentile Christians to follow the Jewish Law and traditions, claiming that they are necessary for the Christian life. This same kind of opponents plagued Paul in many other of the churches he started. The entire Book of Galatians was written to deal with exactly this issue.

Paul warns the Philippians to be on the lookout for these types of people, obviously to resist/reject their teaching

A. Look out for the dogs (2a)

“dogs” is an insult in the Jewish culture, because dogs were considered unclean

B. Look out for the evildoers (2b)

C. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh (2c)

“mutilate the flesh” is an ironic wordplay on circumcision, which Paul argues could result in spiritual destruction as well as physical damage

II. Reason: We are those who are the true followers of Christ (3-11)

A. For we are the circumcision (3a)

i.e. the true circumcision, of the heart, not just flesh, cf. Dt. 30:6, Rom 2:29, Col. 2:11

B. [We are] those serving by the Spirit of God (3b)

“serving” refers to the carrying out of religious duties. This refers to good religious actions in contrast to the useless/harmful religious activities recommended by the opponents. There are ways to worship God that are God given and pleasing to God. There are also ways to worship that are human inventions, which are not pleasing to God.

And the difference Paul highlights is that the good actions are motivated and empowered by God’s Spirit.

C. We are those who boast/put our confidence in Christ (3c-11)

1. General statement: We put our confidence in Christ, not in the flesh (3c-d)

a. Positive: and [we are] boasting in Christ Jesus (3c)

“boasting” is to take pride and to have confidence in something. We all have something (or things) that we think about which makes us feel good about ourselves – something that we have accomplished or that we identify with in some way (even if it is just a sports team). And we put our hope in the possibility that it will continue to cause good things in our life. Most things will eventually disappoint us.

But Paul emphasizes that His basis for hope, identity, and confidence is Christ Himself, who will never disappoint.

b. Negative: and [we are] not putting confidence in flesh (3d)

Notice that Paul does not say “in the flesh” which might be taken to mean “in ourselves,” but he says “in flesh” which means that he has no confidence in any part of humanity, including himself

2. Specific example and application from Paul’s life (4-11)

a. Negatively: Paul doesn’t put any value on his fleshly accomplishments (4-6)

1) Disclaimer: Although I [could be] having confidence in flesh (4a)

Paul could put confidence in the flesh from a worldly point of view, based on his experiences, background, and accomplishments. Paul only brings this up to show how foolish it is to put confidence in even the highest of human attainments, compared with the alternative of putting confidence in Christ

2) The explanation of what Paul could put confidence in: (4b-6)

a) Rhetorical comparison: If someone else thinks [they have reason] to put confidence in flesh (4b)

Notice how Paul has repeated the phrase “confidence in flesh” three times in the last three propositions.

Paul compares himself to his opponents. His life could meet any standard they teach, but he knows that no human standard is high enough to meet God’s standard. And so, Paul insists on a completely different standard, the standard of Christ’s righteousness, given through faith.

- b) Rhetorical response: I have more reason for confidence in the flesh (4c-6)
- (1) General statement: I have more (4c)

Paul is claiming to beat his opponents, even on their standards. He does not do this to give credence to his opponent's standards, but as a setup for the following contrast – that even the best of human achievements pales in comparison to Christ's righteousness
 - (2) Specific examples of his reasons (5-6)
 - (a) List of reasons considered absolutely (5a-d)

This first list describes Paul's personal heritage as a model Jew

 - (i) being circumcised on the eighth day (5a)

From birth, Paul followed the Law by initiation in to Israel's covenant sign, cf. Gen. ch. 17
 - (ii) being from the people of Israel (5b)
 - (iii) being from the tribe of Benjamin (5c)
 - (iv) being a Hebrew of Hebrews (5d)

Probably meaning a native Hebrew speaking Jew, i.e. the epitome of Jewish heritage
 - (b) List of reasons according to a standard (5e-6)

This second list emphasizes Paul's track record of Law keeping and personal righteousness according to Jewish standards

 - (i) According to the Law – a Pharisee (5e)

Pharisees were the strictest sect in observing the Law
 - (ii) According to zeal – persecuting the church (6a)

Paul's zeal for the Law led him to persecute those who he thought transgressed the Law
 - (iii) According to righteousness by Law – being blameless (6b)

Paul goes so far as to claim that he was perfect as far as the requirements of the Law

b. Positively: Paul puts no value on those things, but absolutely all value on knowing Christ (7-11)

- 1) I have considered these things to be disadvantage, loss compared to Christ (7)
 - a) Which things [once] were [considered] advantage/gain to me (7a)

"gain" refers to any kind of profit, benefit, or advantage, cf. 1:21
Paul once thought these things listed above were important because they gave him an advantage in his relationship with God
 - b) I have concluded these things are disadvantage/loss for the sake of Christ (7b)

"concluded" refers to a mental process of consideration. But the tense of the verb highlights that the process is finished, and the result of the process is settled – "I now hold this opinion as the result of the process of thinking it through"
"disadvantage/loss" is obviously the opposite idea of "advantage/gain" in 7a. This could mean that Paul considers himself to have lost all of these things as a result of being in Christ, in which case, he would say he does not miss it at all. But it more likely means that Paul now considers these things to be of no advantage to the point that they may even be a detriment if they at all take away from the new thing (Christ) that is of all advantage by comparison. This may be slight exaggeration to say these things are disadvantage instead of saying that they are of no advantage. But in light of the infinite advantage of Christ, to say these things are of no advantage would be to understate the reality.
"for the sake of" could be translated "because of," in which case it would mean that the past reality of Christ results in Paul's conclusion and attitude. This is doubtlessly true, but it is probably not the meaning and emphasis here. It could be translated "for the sake of" and mean "for the benefit of Christ and/or His cause." This is certainly possible, and Paul says something similar in other places (e.g. Col. 1:24-25). But in the context of the following verses, it most likely means "for the sake of" in the sense of "the reason why I do this is the possibility of experiencing Christ." In this case, the ideas of reason and purpose are blurred in this preposition, which also occurs with the same sense in 8a and 8b.

- 2) I consider ***all*** things to be disadvantage, loss compared to Christ (8a-b)
- a) But, more than that, I also consider all things to be disadvantage/loss for the sake of the surpassing greatness of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord (8a)
- This proposition is partially a repeat of the previous, but Paul emphasizes that he is taking the argument a step further by saying “more than that,” and also with two major differences: First, Paul emphasizes that, not only the things listed above, but absolutely every thing else is considered loss compared to Christ.
- Second, Paul gives the reason why he considers all things to be loss – because of the surpassing greatness of the knowledge of Christ. “surpassing greatness” has an inherent connotation of being better compared with something else – “to surpass in value, to be better.” And the thing which is of surpassing value is the knowledge of Christ Jesus. Paul will elaborate more precisely what he means by this phrase down in v. 8d through the end of this passage.
- b) [That is-] I have suffered the loss of all things for the sake of Him (8b)
- This proposition is similar to the previous two. The major difference, which is the point of this proposition, is that Paul not only considers all these things to be loss, but he also has ***actually*** lost all things. Paul has given up on any claim and confidence in anything from his past life, and has experienced living with no continuing connection with them.
- 3) I consider [all things] to be rubbish, in order to gain Christ (8c-11)
- a) And I consider [all things] to be rubbish (8c)
- “rubbish” is a polite translation of a word which literally means “crap.” Paul is not exaggerating, but showing how drastic the difference is between any human merit and the merit of Christ being compared as being reasonable grounds for confidence
- b) Purpose- so that I may gain Christ and be found in Him and know Him (8d-11)
- All that follows describes Paul’s purpose in rejecting all the things that he has just described as loss and rubbish. He does so for the purpose of gaining the One Who is better by far.
- (1) So that I may gain Christ and His righteousness by faith (8d-9)
- (a) So that I may gain Christ (8d)
- “gain” is a verb related to the noun used above (v. 7a), and it has the sense of somehow acquiring Christ, and all the benefits that are in Him. Paul has traded up – exchanging all that he once had and hoped in for the One Who is worth more than everything else combined. See Matt. 13:44
- (b) And benefit from receiving His righteousness by faith (9)
- (i) And be found in Him (9a)
- “found” is a generic term. In this context, it means to be the subject of the judgment and evaluation of another (presumably God & Christ) and to receive a particular evaluation – similar to someone being “found” to be innocent. When the final evaluation is given, Paul wants to be found “in Him.”
- “in Him” (or “in Christ”) is a formula often found in Paul, cf. 3:14, 4:19, Rom. 6:11, 23, 8:1, 39, 12:5, 1 Cor. 1:4, 5, 30, 4:17, 15:18, 19, 22, 2 Cor. 1:19, 2:14, 7, 5:17, 19, 21, 12:19, 13:4, Gal. 2:17, 3:28, 5:6, Eph. 1:3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 2:6, 7, 10, 13, 21, 22, 3:6, 11, 12, 4:21, 32, Col. 1:2, 17, 28, 2:6, 7, 10, 11, 17, 3:3, 1 Thes. 1:1, 2:14, 4:14, 16, 5:18, 2 Thes. 1:12, 1 Tim. 1:14, 2 Tim. 1:1, 9, 13, 2:1, 10, 3:12, Philem. 6, 8, 20, 23. It refers to things, benefits, and people that are in the sphere identified with, and controlled by Christ. This concept is sometimes referred to as “corporate solidarity.” It is similar to every citizen of a country having the same rights and responsibilities as a consequence of being a citizen in that country. If the country goes to war, technically, every citizen is at war (whether they participate or not). In the same way, Jesus is the King. And there are many benefits, responsibilities, and blessings in the sphere of Christ’s rule, because of Christ’s accomplishments. Therefore, every person who has been converted into the sphere of Christ, by being converted to Christ, is now “in Christ.” To be in Christ is somehow to participate in all that Christ is and has done. And this is Paul’s purpose. And he will elaborate on some of the benefits of being in Christ throughout the rest of this passage.

(ii) Not by my own righteousness, but by Christ's, through faith (9b-d)

This next section elaborates and explains what Paul means by being "found in Christ." To be found in Christ means to have Christ's righteousness and not to rely on one's own righteousness through good works or heritage.

It is obviously a contrast between two approaches to righteousness – one which Paul rejects (connected with those things that he now accounts as loss/dung), and one which he pursues (connected with gaining Christ and being found in Him)

((a)) Neg: Not having my own righteousness from the Law (9b)

"righteousness" is always a legal term meaning to be on the right side, or having the right standing in terms of right and wrong.

Paul has already rejected reliance on his own heritage or history of keeping the law, not because these things are bad in themselves, but (as he teaches elsewhere, see e.g. Gal. ch. 3 and Rom. ch. 10) they have never been, and never will be enough to merit any standing with God. Therefore, Paul will put no confidence in flesh. And the primary reason Paul rejects reliance on his own righteousness is that it is nothing compared with the righteousness of Christ that is available to him by grace through faith (see 9c-d).

((b)) Pos: Rather, having the righteousness from God through faith in Christ (9c-d)

((1)) But [having] the [righteousness] through faith in Christ (9c)

Rather than relying on his own righteousness, Paul relies on the righteousness that he has through faith in Christ. The following proposition clarifies that this righteousness is not from Paul, but it is a result of him being in Christ by grace through faith.

((2)) The righteousness from God upon faith (9d)

This proposition may seem like repeated information (which is partially is), but it is elaborating and clarifying the nature of this righteousness by adding two phrases: it is from God, and it is given on the basis of faith "from God" shows that God is the ultimate source of the righteousness that Paul has received. He is the source in more than one sense. First, the righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, who is God. Second, God is the One Who pronounces (reckons/imputes) this righteousness to Paul, on the basis of Christ's righteousness. And finally, God is the One Who bestows this righteousness by faith as a gift, not because of any merit in Paul (or in us).

"upon faith" highlights faith as the means or basis by which Paul receives this righteousness. cf. Acts 3:16 for a similar wording. See Romans chs. 3-4 and Gal. chs. 3-4 for a further explanation of how righteousness comes through faith (but not primarily because of faith).

(2) So that I may fully experience His death and resurrection (10-11)

These two verses continue to elaborate the purpose of 8c, telling why Paul counts all things as dung. As such, these verses are parallel to 8d-9. "to gain Christ and be found in Him" is the same overall concept described by "to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering," even though, obviously, Paul emphasizes two different aspects of his purpose in the two different sections.

(a) [in order] to know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His suffering (10a)

This proposition has three parts corresponding to three things which Paul says he wants to know.

“to know Him” has the connotation of a personal knowing. It is more than (but not less than) knowing about Christ. It means to have a continuity of relationship and a growing relationship. Obviously, by this point of his life, Paul knew Christ. But he is still pressing to know Christ further, and in a deeper way. He will address his desire to press forward in this in vv. 12-14. And part of what it means to know Christ personally is elaborated in the next two parts of this proposition.

“[to know] the power of His resurrection” also has the connotation of a more personal, experiential knowledge. Paul wants to (more and more) experience resurrection power. From the rest of Paul’s writings, we can surmise that he does not here mean just a naked demonstration of miraculous power. For Paul, the resurrection is not just about extraordinary power, which most of Paul’s readers already assumed that God had. But resurrection power is primarily about changed lives and experiencing the new resurrection life, which Christ has procured and of which He is the firstfruits. Paul will often describe this kind of life in ethical terms, such as joy, peace, and love, similar to the fruit of the Spirit described in Gal. ch. 5. When someone’s mindset and lifestyle is radically changed to conform to God’s Kingdom priorities and ethics, Paul would see this as a demonstration of Christ’s resurrection power.

“[to know] the fellowship of His sufferings” also has the connotation of a more personal, experiential knowledge. Paul often emphasizes that Christians should not expect to experience the blessings of the resurrection without also experiencing the suffering and death of Christ (see 2:1-11 as well as Rom. 8:18). “fellowship” means a close sharing in something involving close mutual relationship and association. Paul has elsewhere (Col. 1:24-25) spoken of his somehow experiencing Christ’s suffering. By this Paul does NOT mean that he somehow contributes to the atonement which Christ attained at the cross. Rather, he means that, like Christ suffered on our behalf, Paul will imitate the willingness to suffer for the sake of delivering the message of Christ and serving others. Notice how this repeats the sentiment of ch. 2:1-11

Paul elaborates on all of these in the following section.

(b) Sharing in His death and resurrection (10b-11)

As typical for Paul, Christ’s death and resurrection go together very closely.

(i) Being conformed to His death (10b)

“being conformed” means being brought into a similarity of form or style. Paul wants his life and experience to be caused to be like Christ’s death. This is most likely referring to the attitude of self-sacrifice on behalf of others, which characterized the death of Christ. It could also mean that he wants to be brought into more and more experience of the benefits of Christ’s death. It definitely does not refer to any of Paul’s activity having any atoning significance.

In any case, its meaning must take into account the reality of Paul being “in Christ” and thereby sharing in all the benefits and responsibilities of what Christ accomplished by His death.

(ii) If perhaps I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (11)

“attain” means to arrive at the experience of the intended goal
“resurrection” is a different word than usual, and probably has the connotation of coming to fullness of life

Paul’s ultimate goal is to fully experience all the new life that Christ has provided through His own death and resurrection