

The Ministry of Remembrance

Philippians 3:1-11

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Let us begin by reading our text:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

² Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers! Beware of the mutilation! ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, ⁴ 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: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

⁷ But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own which is from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *is* from God upon faith, ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

What we have here is the apostle exercising the ministry of remembrance. By this I mean he reminding his readers of certain essential principles of the gospel, and he is doing so because of the presence of false teachers. This text is likewise very applicable to you and me for the simple reason that most of what calls itself Christianity in the West is, in fact, a mere caricature of biblical Christianity. It looks Christian enough, it sounds Christian, and it uses Christians terms and symbols, but it's "gospel" and its practices represent a frightening departure from the truth of the apostolic gospel of grace. What is preached today is a gospel that produces only a powerless form of godliness that is devoid of the image of Christ. And consequently, the image of Christ is almost lost within the Christian community, and thus,

American society as well. Therefore, let us hear the words of the apostle today as he exercises the apostolic tradition of continually reminding the church of the character and nature of the gospel of grace.

Rejoice in the Lord (not in Yourself).

The apostle Paul never wearied of reminding the churches of the gospel of God's gift of righteousness in Christ. He told the Philippians, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you" (Philippians 3:1). His call for them to rejoice in the Lord is a reminder to them not rejoice in their own accomplishments. And then he warns his readers to watch out for those who would redirect their attention away from Christ and back to themselves.

² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

Who in the world is he speaking of here? Do we have dogs, evildoers, and mutilators leading our churches, today? At the risk of sounding too coarse, I'd say most of our churches carry the canine odor of a kennel. As to evil doers? There is no greater evil than preaching a man-centered, people-pleasing gospel. And while no one will likely demand literal circumcision as a religious ritual, they will insist that baptism represents the carrying forward of Old Covenant circumcision into the New Covenant. So yes, we face many of the same dangers as did the Philippians.

Many today would be offended by Paul's language. It seems harsh, unkind, even non-Christian. But once you understand Paul is speaking of certain Jewish Christian leaders who would turn his readers away from Christ in favor of a system of self-justification, even while yet continuing to profess Christ, we can then better understand Paul's intensity. In other words, Paul is jealous for Christ and his gospel. He does not want his readers to think of the false teachers as legitimate or their perverted gospel as equal to the gospel of Christ. So Paul uses language that clearly delineates these men as evil workers. Elsewhere, Paul exposes them as ministers of the one who appears as an angel of light, that is to say, Satan, and he does his best

work through those who disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness — the dogs, evil doers and mutilators, in our text.

So then, the *first* thing we need to be reminded of is to rejoice in the Lord and not in ourselves. Our righteousness is found in Christ, and not our own works, not even in our faith, for that too is the gift of God. Second, we are being reminded to be intensely intolerant of false teachers, that is, those who would turn you away from Christ in favor of a system of self-justification. We must never seek common ground or fellowship with those who teach another gospel other than the gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, in the finished work of Christ alone. Are you jealous for Christ and his gospel? And Paul goes on. . .

³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, [*not by tradition or Law*] who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh [*there is the choice, boasting in Christ Jesus alone, or placing your confidence in the fleshly religious system*]⁴— though I myself have reasons for such confidence [*Paul is an expert in fleshly religious tradition*].

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

Now, New Testament circumcision is found not in the waters of baptism, but in the regeneration of the Spirit, the circumcision of the heart, not in the cutting away of the flesh. The result of our true circumcision is that we now serve God by his Spirit, we boast in Christ Jesus, and place no confidence in the flesh.

So now, let me ask you, where is your confidence? Many professing Christians, like Paul, have faultless religious credentials. They have been baptized and confirmed, raised as a Christian of this or that tradition; in regard to keeping the rules and practices of that tradition and the righteousness based on those practices, faultless. Is this you? Where is the ground of your confidence? Is it your religious credentials, or is it God's saving work in Christ, on your behalf? I am not suggesting that all church activities and traditions are evil. Many of your church activities have their place, and I would not deny that, but they must never become the ground of your confidence before God.

Let me illustrate: I once sat the bedside of a dying man, and after he passed away, I listened as a clergyman assured his family he had “Died in the faith.” What does that mean? Did he die in Christ? That is the question. But for this clergyman, this meant the man had died in good standing within his tradition. The family took comfort not in the Lord, but in the dead man’s religious tradition.

So we are to rejoice in the Lord, and not in ourselves; we are to be reminded constantly of certain essential principles of the gospel; and we are to be intensely intolerant of anyone who would draw us away from Christ and back to self-salvation. And this includes those who merely insist that we are in Christ by our own choice, and remain in Christ on that same basis. The biblical teaching is this: “But by his doing you are in Christ Jesus” (I Corinthians 1:30-31).

So, it is not just the overt, blatant false teachers and cults we must beware of; rather, a little leaven will leaven the whole lump of dough, and it only takes one fly to spoil the ointment. What I mean is there are those who would agree that grace is *necessary*, that faith in Christ’s cross is necessary, but not *sufficient* apart from man’s contribution. In the end, we must be jealous for the truth that grace, faith, and the cross are not only necessary, they are also sufficient for salvation, all-sufficient, and that the ability to believe itself is the result of a work of grace, and not man’s vital contribution. And why is the gospel truth so essential? Because it is the means whereby the elect come into union with Christ, and grow in conformity to Christ. A gospel of self-salvation only turns us away from Christ.

Let’s look again at Paul’s testimony . . .

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Do you sense the passion of Paul? What is his passion, better, who is his passion? It is Christ. Paul here names several things: his personal “gains” and his “everything” indeed, “all things”

and “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,” all of which he considers garbage compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. In short, Paul wanted Christ, and above all things, to be like Christ. Period. And he knew that only the pure gospel of Christ, as revealed by the Spirit, would bring him into that glorious position of Christ-likeness. Everything else is garbage. In our day when it seems so important to be tolerant and nice, Paul is modeling for us what it means to be a lover of Christ. He is reminding us of what it means to be a Christian!

- 1) We rejoice in the Lord and not ourselves.
- 2) We are willing to be reminded of the essentials of the gospel.
- 3) We are intensely intolerant of those who would draw us away from Christ.
- 4) That even our own religious credentials and accomplishments are garbage in comparison to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.
- 5) The great passion of the Christian life is Christ himself, for whom we gladly lose all.
- 6) It is the righteousness of Christ, and not our own that saves.
- 7) We want to be like Christ, even in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, in order to attain to the resurrection of the dead.

In other words, the Christian faith, at its essence, is relational,¹ and Christ is the object of our relational desire. Furthermore, the fact that the Christian faith is relational means it is not a one and done event; rather, it is a moment -by-moment reality of being encountered by the risen Christ, through the work of the Spirit, as revealed in the Scripture. Anything less, is a sham religion. No wonder Paul told young Timothy:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel, for which I am in chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of the elect, so that they also may obtain the salvation, which is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. It is a trust worthy saying, ‘For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we will deny Him, He will also deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.’ *Remind* them of these things, solemnly charging them in the presence of God not to dispute about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of hearers. Be

¹ Adapted from David Powlison, “Dynamics of Biblical Change,” Lecture. Available through the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, 2023.

diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:8-15, emphasis mine).

The Ministry of Remembrance in Peter and Jude

Regarding the ministry of remembrance, Peter echoes Paul, writing, “Therefore, I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder” (II Peter 1:12-13). What was it Peter wanted his readers to remember? He tells them in verses 20-21: “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of the human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

Peter then goes on to warn his readers of the false teachers that would most certainly arise among them. It wasn’t a question of whether or not false teachers would arise, but when and how many, and how to discern their character. He then concludes, “This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words of spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles” (3:1-2).

Jude also writes to remind his readers, saying, “Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently, destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude v. 5). Why would Jude want to remind his readers of this horrific period in redemptive history? People who identified themselves as the people of God, proved to be devoid of faith in God, and thus were destroyed. What did these people trust in? Many wanted to return to Egypt, to bondage. Even slavery to Pharaoh was better to them than trusting Yahweh to save them. They knew where they stood with Pharaoh, they knew what to expect. But they did not know the God who brought them out of Egypt. Many people today would rather be comfortable with the familiar than to trust God. The gospel of self-justification offers the illusion of control under guise of faith.

So then, the ministry of remembrance is a safeguard against man-centered salvation; it is a ministry to remind you to listen to the prophets, and the commandments of the Lord and Savior as declared by the apostolic writings; and it is a reminder that *not* everyone who

identifies themselves with the people of God are indeed of God, but are instead unbelieving vessels fit only for destruction. Therefore, it is my duty here today to remind you of the essence of the gospel of Christ. Indeed, it is my central duty to daily preach to myself, my family, and to you, my brothers and sisters, the eternal gospel of God's saving grace toward sinners. It is my duty to remind you that the truth of the gospel is precious for one main reason: *It reveals Christ to us*. And there is no other means of becoming like him, except through the gospel of grace.

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