

# A Spiritual Dead End

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**Bible Verse:** Philippians 3:4-7  
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You know, the joy of Christmas carols presupposes something of an understanding of why we needed Christ to come in the first place. The joy presupposes an understanding of sin and unrighteousness, that we were in darkness and that we were under judgment, and that therefore for God to send Christ to be a Savior to deliver us from sin and judgment and Satan and death and hell, that is why it is so joyful. It's not simply that a babe was born 2,000 years ago, babies have been born throughout since the beginning of time, right? It's not simply a baby being born, it was what and who Christ is coming to be the Savior of the world, a world lost in darkness and a world lost in sin and Christ representing the fact that God had mercy on unworthy sinners and has provided a way of salvation for everyone who believes in Christ. That's why it's so joyful. We can leave our load of sin behind and come to Christ and be received, come to Christ and be forgiven.

You know, just a couple of verses to talk about the wonder of forgiveness that we have in Christ. Look at Psalm 32:1. And I was doing some reading earlier today in a matter unrelated to anything that I'm preaching on tonight, but it was just pointing out some of the magnificent verses that show us that our sins are forgiven, and while we understand that we are sinful, we understand that sin is dark and it is rebellion against God, we understand that there are still remnants of corruption in us even as believers, God would have us understand and view our position from the primary perspective not of sin but sin forgiven as a believer, and that is the cornerstone of joy in the Christian life; that is what gives us the capacity to walk in a manner full of joy and overflowing, is that God has sent Christ, Christ has paid for our sins, and by believing in him we have received a complete and total forgiveness so that we bear no guilt or condemnation before God whatsoever. That is massive. That changes everything about life. It changes the way that you view yourself in respect to God to know that he has loved us and has done this for us that we could never have done on our own.

So Psalm 32:1, for example, says, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit!" So as a Christian, we recognize that we are in this great position of blessing and it governs our entire outlook on the rest of life. In like manner, in Romans 5:1 it says this, if you want to turn to Romans 5:1 to see it with your own eyes. That's always a good thing. Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We have

been delivered from the wrath of God, delivered from the judgment of God. We are in a position of objective reconciliation with him, declared righteous before a holy God, all of our sins forgiven, God promising never to hold our sins against us ever again simply through the gift given to us in Christ and received by faith alone. And in Romans 8:1, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." We skipped over Romans 6:23, "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." I mean, you just realize that there is this wonderful sense of burden that has been removed from your shoulders and we are free and accepted in the Beloved. And just one more for tonight, Romans 8:31-32, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

And the important thing, many many important things to say about this, but one of the important things about all of this to recognize is that this is a gift that has been given to us, this is an expression of the free love and free grace of God. This is an indication that God is favorably disposed toward us despite our sin, and that means that we view God as Jesus taught us to pray, we can view him as a loving Father rather than our judge now that we have been reconciled in Christ. So these things are all magnificent and wonderfully important for us to contemplate and it's a big part of the theme that underlies our text tonight found in Philippians 3. Philippians 3, and broadly speaking, roughly speaking, this isn't entirely the way I'm going to do it but for much of the rest of this month and into January and early February, we're primarily going to double up on Philippians on Sunday and Tuesday because I really want this to become embedded in our hearts and to get through the text and to not dilute it by going to other things.

So in Philippians 3, our text for tonight is verses 4 through 7, and it's the counterpart, in some ways, to the introductory theme of forgiveness. This forgiveness, you might say, and here's a way to help the transition, this forgiveness that we have in Christ is not received through self-effort, it is not received through self-righteousness. Salvation, as Steve Lawson says and I'll paraphrase him, salvation is not a reward for the righteous, it is a gift to the guilty, and if you can understand that, then you can go far in understanding the nature of true Christianity. We do not earn this marvelous position in Christ through what we do and the Apostle Paul is going to make that clear in the passages that we're studying over the next three times that we'll be in Philippians.

So tonight we're looking at verses 4 through 7. This is a testimony of Paul concerning his life before Christ and the kind of man that he was. He said in chapter 3, verses 4 through 7, he says this, he says,

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.

Now on Sunday, we looked at those first three verses and saw that there was a contrast between false and true religion. In verse 2 Paul said beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision, and we saw that there is a warning there against ungodly immoral men, there is a warning against trying to earn salvation through self-righteousness, and there is a warning against pursuing a religion that is based on religious ritual. Those are all marks of a false gospel, and by contrast we saw in verse 3 the true Gospel is spiritual in nature. Paul says, "we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God." There is an indispensable inner dynamic to salvation. We worship from the heart, not simply in our outer flesh, and this is grounded in Christ alone. Paul says we glory in Christ Jesus and we put no confidence in the flesh. In other words, we have no confidence in self-righteousness whatsoever. We understand that we do not contribute one iota, one ounce of righteousness to our salvation, that even the faith by which we receive Christ is a gift from God. And so it's just so vital for us to understand these things.

Now what Paul is doing here in verses 4 through 7, he is building on, he is illustrating how important it is to put no confidence whatsoever in the flesh, in other words, in your own self-righteousness, no matter how good a person you might think that you are, and Paul takes this concept of confidence in the flesh and says, "If you want to take about somebody who could have earned it by self-righteousness, I was that guy," Paul says, and he goes on and he explains his background in Judaism that would have qualified him by the standards of the false teachers for salvation if what they were saying was true.

So there's a little bit of a counterfactual going on here and we're going to get into the text in just a moment. What I want to do, first of all, is to remind you of a fairly familiar, I think, Old Testament passage, the prophecy of Isaiah 64, and this famous text is going to kind of clear the pathway for us tonight for the things that we have to say and, you know, for some, you know, perhaps even a few of you in the audience, for some this is going to be very offensive to you. Men do not like to hear the assessment of God on their self-righteousness but we need to hear what the word of God says and let it speak for itself and submit to the word rather than trusting in our own heart and our own righteousness; we are beggars at the table of God, we are ignorant knaves at the schoolroom of God, and we need God's word to teach us so that we would know the truth, and what is the truth about the nature of ourselves and the nature of our so-called righteousness. Well, Isaiah makes a statement for all time for us to take to heart.

Isaiah 64:6 says this, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." Everything righteous about us is what we think is righteous, even the best of our righteousness, a filthy garment. I'm going to talk about that in just a moment. What is our sin like, our iniquities, and what are we like? Well, we're shriveled up, old, dry, brittle leaves that blow away with the wind and our sins are blowing us away. We are under the power and under the force of sin in a way that we have no control over and that we have no ability to change.

Now that phrase "filthy garment" there in the Hebrew could literally be translated "a garment of times," and this is somewhat, you know, this is somewhat graphic but it's the picture that the inspired writer of Scripture chose to use. The commentator Edward Young says this about that phrase, "filthy garment," and I apologize, well, no, I'm not going to apologize. This is just what Scripture teaches us and it's important for us to receive it on its own terms and not soften the edges of it. Young, who is a famous commentator and was a great scholar said this, he says, "Filthy garment refers to the menstrual periods of a woman. It stresses the character of sin as pollution and points to its disgusting nature. The righteous works that the people could present before God were even in their own eyes as disgusting and filthy as the menstrual cloths of women. When one loathes his own works, as did these Jews, there is hope that he will turn to the pure righteousness that God imputes to those who believe in Jesus." And so that graphic picture that repels us, that is repulsive to us to contemplate, we must come to grips with the fact that Scripture is saying that the best of our righteousness is that repulsive in the sight of God. The best that we are, the highest form that we can obtain to apart from Christ is that kind of filthy condition that simply needs to be thrown away. There is nothing redeemable about it.

So that's the picture that Scripture gives to us of our own righteousness. Our best righteousness, let me say this in the second person to you, your best, your best righteousness is unclean and unworthy of a holy and righteous God. We do not measure up to the holiness of God and we never can and we never will, and so it is in that context that we can understand the significance of what Paul is saying. We're going to look at it in more detail but Paul is listing out this impressive list of Jewish credentials that would have placed him at the head of the class in Judaism, and what he is saying is that, "The best that anyone could achieve in Judaism, I've done it and I'm here to tell you it's nothing more than a filthy garment in comparison to the holiness of Christ."

So with that background, remembering that Paul had just warned the church against the influence of these Judaizers who were coming in and insisting on circumcision as necessary for salvation, Paul takes them, meets them at their own point of assertion and refutes it and rejects it as having any possible contribution to the salvation of man. And so Paul is pointing us in this text to his own Jewish background as proof for his position.

Look at verse 4 with me. He says, "although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh, you want to talk about self-righteousness, I'll engage you on that ground because if anybody was going to have confidence in the flesh, it would be me." Now what he's doing here, understand the literary approach that he's using and the method of argumentation that he's using. He is assuming for a moment the truthfulness of the Jewish argument that Jewish rituals are necessary for salvation, he is assuming the point of their argument simply for the sake of refuting it. He says, "I'll meet you on your terms and I'll show you why you are wrong. I'll show you why that could never be the case." And so he's looking at his life prior to his conversion from a Jewish point of view just temporarily before he returns back to speaking about Christ. And so if excellence in Judaism was the standard, Paul met it. That is the point that he is making in our passage here this evening.

So he talks about two different matters. He talks about his privileges of birth and then, secondly, his accomplishments by choice. So his privileges of birth are found in verse 5 and he goes through them rather quickly and we can only summarize them rather briefly here. He lists out five privileges that he had by birth. First of all, Paul had been circumcised the right way. He says there in verse 5, "I was circumcised on the eighth day." Now circumcision was the mark of the Abrahamic covenant and in Genesis 17 and 21, and in the book of Leviticus 12, God had told the Jews to circumcise their sons on the eighth day and that's why it is significant that Paul mentions this. He says, "Even when I was an infant, it was done the right way. I was circumcised according to the standards that God had given to his people. Not everybody was like that, I was. My parents did that when I was just a baby."

Now secondly, not only had he been circumcised the right way, he was born in the right country, or you could say he was born in the right place. Look at it there in verse 5, he said, "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel." Of the nation of Israel. The true Jews were direct physical descendants of Jacob. Paul was not a convert to Judaism, he was not someone, he was not a proselyte, he was a physical Jew, he was genetically Jewish, in other words, and could trace his line back to the proper patriarchs. And so he had been circumcised the right way, he was born to the right people, in the right place.

Thirdly, you remember that Israel, the people of the Jews, there were 12 tribes, Paul was even born to one of the preeminent tribes of the 12. He says in verse 5, "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin." Now Jacob's 12 sons had become the heads of national tribes in the Old Testament and the tribe of Benjamin had distinguished itself in history. The first king of Israel, Saul, came from the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin was one of only two tribes that stayed loyal to the throne of David in the divided kingdom. And so there is this rich history in the tribe of Benjamin from the first king, to being loyal to the true king, David, Benjamin was a distinguished tribe and Saul was born there. He was a Jew among Jews. You can see the case that he is building here.

Fourthly, he says there in verse 5, he said, "I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews." In other words, Paul was born to genuinely Hebrew parents who spoke the Hebrew language and his parents kept Hebrew customs. Look over at the book of Acts 21 for just a moment. Acts 21, Paul said in Acts 21:39, he said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city," and when he spoke to the people in verse 40, "he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect." And so Paul had followed Hebrew customs. He spoke the Hebrew language. Everything that a Jew could aspire after, in other words, Paul had done it. Paul was that. You cannot be more perfectly Jewish than Paul was and the false teachers could not match Paul in that Jewish attainment.

So what's he saying here? What's the point that he's making? He says, "Even in my ancestry, even by my birth and what happened in matters that I had no control over, I belong to the inner circle of the best that Judaism has to offer. That was my life before Christ." And so his credentials were impeccable, and keep that in mind as we go into the

second point here, is his accomplishments by choice. His accomplishments by choice. Paul not only had the privileges of Jewish birth and Jewish upbringing in his column, in his column of assets, so to speak, he built on those privileges as he entered into his adult life. He was the strictest Jew by choice and by effort he was a strict Jew building on his ancestral heritage.

Look at the end of verse 5 here. He says, "as to the Law, a Pharisee." He says, "When I became a man, I chose to be a Pharisee." Now the Pharisees were the fundamentalists of Judaism. They were very strict in their approach to religion. They had a number of oral traditions that they kept that went beyond the law of Moses. And not every Jew was like that, the Pharisees were a smaller subgroup of the overall Jews. Paul says, "I belonged to that subset, that hard-working, dedicated subset of Judaism. That was me."

And then he goes on and he talks about his attitude toward his religion, what his heart was like toward his religion in verse 6. He says, "as to zeal," as to what motivated me, as to the energy that I brought to my religion, he says, "I was a persecutor of the church." In other words, when Christianity started to rise up and there was starting to be converts preaching Christ, Paul said, "Before I was a Christian and I was embedded in my Jewish religion, I was so zealous to protect the truth of my religion that I went out of my way to persecute those who were opposing it and preaching something contrary." Paul proved his love for his religion by hating those who threatened it. You may remember at the end of Acts 7 that he guarded the coats of those who stoned the martyr Stephen. You may recall that he had received authority to bind Christians and take them to Jerusalem for trial. That is how great his zeal was, he affirmed the stoning of Stephen and he took on himself the responsibility to get authority to take Christians and to bind them for trial for heresy in Jerusalem. This is a man of great zeal for his religion.

And finally, you see that he, in terms of what was required of Judaism, he says, "I was blameless in it." Look at verse 6 again, "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." Now Paul here is not speaking of moral perfection, he's not claiming utter sinlessness there, he's simply saying this, he's saying, "My life as an adult Jew, my life as a member of the strict sect of the Pharisees was exemplary. No one could have charged me with failing in any responsibility of Judaism. I had my act together as a Jew. I had everything that Judaism could give. I had everything that Judaism could require from me and I had it all." And so now for a moment, put yourself in the sandals of a Jew, an unconverted Jew who is reading this, and you can see how overwhelming the case that Paul has made for his accomplishments in self-righteousness. He was born in the right way. His adult life had carried that on and furthered it even more in the moral choices that he made. He had everything that Judaism could give and could require.

Now one writer summarizes Paul's argument here in this way and I quote, he says, "His superiority put Paul in a class of his own. Listen well, Judaizers, those of you who would import the laws and strictures of the old covenant back into Christ in his church, listen to what this spiritual superman has to say." So Paul has said, "You want Jewishness in the church? Let's talk about Jewishness. I am the model Jew. I was the model Jew and I can

meet everything that you require from people and now let me tell you about it and what it all means." So Paul has summarized briefly this and now he's going to make a global statement, he's going to make a comprehensive statement about what all of that means in comparison to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So point number 3 here this evening is you'll see Paul's assessment of it all. We have seen his privileges of birth, we have seen his accomplishments by choice, and now we're going to see Paul's assessment of it all. Paul, you could say, was the perfect Jew and how did he assess that in his spiritual past? Look at verse 7. It's stunning. He says, "But," he's going to give a contrast here, "for all of the perfections of my Jewish experience and my Jewish qualifications, let me tell you something by way of contrast, whatever things were gain to me, in other words, those things that contributed to the sense of self-righteousness that I had, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." He's using terms of accounting here. His prior righteousness he talks about as beforehand he considered them to be spiritual credits on his account. "I had built up this bank of righteousness based on who I was and what I had done." And what he says about, he says, "Everything that I thought was a credit to me was actually a debt, it was actually something that was working against me, it was something that was creating bankruptcy in me rather than advancing me in righteousness."

Now you say, "How could that be? Why would a man say that about his prior life?" Well, you have to go back and make this twofold understanding. First of all, remember the assessment that Scripture makes about our self-righteousness. It's not acceptable to God. We cannot be good enough. We cannot meet legal requirements and satisfy what God requires. We are sinners, sinners by nature, sinners by choice. We are born into a corrupt human race and David says, go back in Psalm 51, go back to Psalm 51 for a moment to just realize how deeply rooted all of these things are. As you're turning to Psalm 51, Paul is saying that this approach to spirituality that grounds our righteousness in who we are and what we do, it is utterly misguided and forsaken. Not only can it do us no good, it will keep us from the one thing that can save us. And David said in Psalm 51:5, for example, this is what Scripture says about all of us, he says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me." In other words, "From the moment of my conception, my nature was corrupt. As I developed in my mother's womb and she gave birth to me, I was corrupt from birth, I was corrupt from conception. There was never any time in my physical existence where there was anything good about me. It was always corrupted by sin and by the transmission of sin going back all the way to Adam." This is utterly hopeless.

So Paul, going back to Philippians 3 now, Paul recognizes that this outward assessment of righteousness is horribly misguided. First of all, it's not a real righteousness that qualifies us for the presence of God. It is not a real righteousness, it is not a genuine righteousness in the eyes of God that he accepts and can have communion with, and it could never be that way because we are corrupt from birth. Even if you're born into the right family, that does not excuse or separate you from the sinfulness which your parents transmitted to you. You can't do it.

And not only that, and I can certainly speak from this, speak about what I'm about to say from direct personal experience looking back in my own testimony and the way that the Lord worked in my life, when, here's the shocking truth of it all, beloved, the shocking disorienting, very deeply troubling truth is that when you think you are righteous, when you think that you are attaining spiritual good, that sense of external morality and that self-assessment that I'm basically a good person, that is keeping you separate from Christ and if you persist in that judgment, it will send you to hell. You will die in your sins if you think that you are righteous, if you think that there is something good about you. It doesn't work that way. That is not the assessment of God.

Now look, here's the problem and here's where men go astray on this very point. We get into that horrible, misguided, damnable mindset by comparing ourselves to others or by comparing ourselves to the wrong standard of morality. "My outward life is better than this man over here," as they used to say from where I came from, "I don't smoke or chew or go with girls who do." You know? And so there's just this sense that by what I do, I am more righteous than someone else. Or for some, for me it was the fact that I hadn't committed certain sins and, you know, and by the fact of what I had not done outwardly in the flesh, I, somehow that made me a better person than the next person, and I relied on, there is no doubt about it, I trusted in my own righteousness based on sins that I had avoided. Well, the Bible condemns all of that. The Bible condemns all of that and the problem is that and where men go astray and women go sadly astray on this, is comparing themselves to other human beings rather than comparing themselves vertically to the great holiness of God who lives in unapproachable light, who when men saw him they fell on their face shattered in their personality because they couldn't handle it like Isaiah chapter 6, you know? Or as we're going to study in the spring, you know, comparing ourselves to the perfect unalterable standard of God's moral law as it is summarized in the 10 Commandments. The first four commandments in a vertical sense of our obligation toward God, the last six commandments are obligations toward men, which are actually obligations to God because this is what he requires us to do before men, and understanding that the law in the tenth commandment goes so far as to prohibit us from coveting, prohibiting us from even inward jealousy, inward thoughts that are impure and unrighteous.

So the holiness of God, the holiness of his law, and we compare ourselves to these things and we realize how brutally far short we fall. It's not a question of whether you've satisfied the standards of religion. That's irrelevant. That has nothing to do with it at all. The question is does the law of God condemn you for your lies and your adultery or your adulterous thoughts, your stealing, your lying, your failure to worship God in the way that he deserves, and the answer is, yes, it does, it condemns every one of us. And the only way and the reason that I want to preach from the 10 Commandments soon is that we need to have that law brought to bear on our conscience so we would see ourselves for who we really are from the perspective of God rather than resting in a false sense of self-righteousness that can only condemn us.

You say, "Well, man, preacher, you're being pretty harsh on everybody here, and I'm not sure that that's really what Scripture says." Well, it is what Scripture says and let's look at



the words of Jesus even in Luke 5. I want you to turn there and see this. Christ makes this abundantly clear who it is that he came to save, and Scripture exposes us in these things. Jesus in chapter 5 of Luke, verses 31 and 32 said this, he said, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick." He's making an analogy from the physical realm to the spiritual realm and comparing himself to a physician. "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." In other words, if you think that you are righteous and satisfy the requirements of God, Christ has nothing to do for you or with you. Christ comes to call those who know that they are sinners, who openly confess it and who desire the cleansing and the forgiveness of sin that we were talking in our opening, "I'm a lost and miserable sinner. Christ, have mercy on me! I can't save myself. Christ, I don't deserve heaven, I don't deserve Your kindness. What I actually deserve is to go to hell for my guilt before God, and I offer nothing by way of self-justification, I offer nothing in self-righteousness, I simply call out to You for mercy to save me because if You don't have mercy on me, I will be eternally and miserably lost."

Now going back to Philippians 3 with all of that said, you can see why Paul would say the things that he says here. In verse 7, Philippians 3, he says, "whatever things were gain to me," in other words, whatever contributed to my perception of self-righteousness, "those things," those things pertaining to self-righteousness, "I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Those weren't assets. Those were liabilities. I write them off that I might gain Christ. His prior spiritual "credits," using air quotes around credits, were actually debts because if he offered them to God in terms of righteousness, God was going to reject them. God rejects that kind of self-righteousness and people think that this is how they get to heaven but I like to use this very homely example, you know, to talk about going to heaven because you're a good person, that's like going somewhere with Monopoly money and trying to buy things at the store with Monopoly money. It's not real currency. It is not recognized as that which has purchasing power, and your righteousness has no purchasing power with God to bring him to accept you. Your righteousness is like a filthy menstrual cloth that needs to be discarded and thrown away. That is what it is like in the sight of God, and if you're clinging to self-righteousness, then that is keeping you from Christ because you're trusting in yourself rather than him.

So when Paul speaks about his Jewish heritage, he says, "That heritage did not impart to me the righteousness that God requires. It was an unclean man-made counterfeit. It was not the righteousness that God gives. It was not the righteousness that God demands." And so Paul by pointing to his own testimony, has shown that these Judaizers were leading the church to a spiritual dead end. They were leading people into a system that could not produce any righteousness that had currency in the throne room of God. The only righteousness, my friends, the only righteousness that God accepts is the righteousness of his own Son, and you are not as righteous as Christ and you cannot be and you never will be in your own effort and what you do with your life. This is a righteousness that has to be given to you. It is a gift, as Paul said in Romans 6, it's something that has to be given to you and you receive it by faith, not earning it by what you do.

And my friends, this discussion that we are having right now is eternally significant. The ramifications of what we are talking about tonight reverberate throughout all of eternity, not simply here on earth, and has ramifications for each one of us. What was true of the Apostle Paul is also true of you and of me. Gather up all of your goodness, put it in a pile, count it out, if you want to, as if you're counting out pennies, and the reality is it doesn't add up. You and I are not righteous before a holy God, the holy God who will judge us one day, the holy God before whom every one of us will one day stand and give an account of our lives. We will be judged by this holy God and the question is what's going to happen, and he's going to render a verdict, either righteous or guilty, and to trust in your own righteousness is a spiritual dead end. You do not have in yourself the goodness that God requires.

It does not matter, it does not matter that Paul was born to the tribe of Benjamin. It does not matter if you were born to a good Christian family. That does not give you the righteousness that God requires. It does not matter if you associate with the right Christian church, that church cannot give you the righteousness that God requires. It does not matter what your private morality may be, you do not have the righteousness that God requires. Self-righteousness is literally a spiritual dead end.

So my dear friend, please hear me well and understand why we were singing earlier about the great joy of the coming of Christ. There is only kind of righteousness that God accepts and it's nothing that we do in ourselves. The only righteousness that God accepts is the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to you as a gift. It is not something that you earn. It is humbly received by faith alone. Self-righteousness could not and did not save even the Apostle Paul. And so do you see, my friend, that your righteousness cannot begin to save you either? If any of us are going to be saved, if any of us are going to go to heaven, it must come by this single, lonely, narrow path, not the broad way but the narrow way, we come before God and we forsake all claim to personal merit. "Lord, there is nothing righteous about me. I am before You as a bankrupt sinner and I have nothing to offer to You." And from that position of humility, receiving Christ by faith alone.

What is faith? Faith is, as the Westminster Catechism defines it, faith is receiving Christ and resting in Christ. In other words, you recognize that Jesus Christ is God, that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life in full, absolute, undiminished obedience to the law of God, and that on the cross he offered up that perfection to God and offered up his perfect life as a sacrifice for sinners like you, and that God judged Christ as a substitute who was bearing the penalty for everyone who would ever believe in him. You accept Christ, you receive Christ on those terms: he is God in human flesh, he is the God of all righteousness, his shed blood washes away all sin, and you say, "I receive Christ on those terms. I receive Him as Lord. I submit to Him and I trust in His righteousness alone as the currency which God would accept on my behalf." You receive him like that and, the other aspect of the Westminster definition, you rest in him. In other words, you don't try to add to what Christ has done, you don't rely on subsequent conversion works. Christ is all of your righteousness and you trust in him and in him alone and you rest in him.

And what's the promise, what's the promise that's given to those who put their faith in Christ like that? Well, look at 1 John 1 just as an example. 1 John 1. You see, the whole presupposition of the Gospel is that we're guilty before God and need forgiveness, not that we can earn our way, we need forgiveness, we need our sins washed away and we can't do that on our own. So in 1 John 1:7 there at the end, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins," if we confess and forsake our sins, if we freely acknowledge our guilt before a holy God both individually in our whole condition, if we freely acknowledge that in faith in Christ, what does God do? What is his response? What is his gift? Verse 9, "He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The sin which was previously a barrier to going to heaven and reconciliation with God, all of it taken away, all of it borne by Christ and God accepting his Son on your behalf.

So what is this gift of Christ of which we spoke and what was the spirit in which God gave it? 1 John 4:9-10, "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him." How great our joy, great our joy. Joy, joy, joy. Joy, joy, joy. My sin has been taken away by Christ, he paid for it at the cross and he freely shares his righteousness with me so that God accepts me as righteous and holy in his sight as righteous and holy as Christ himself is, but not based on what I have done, based on who Christ is and what he has done, and I trust in his merit, not my own. And this is the great love gift of God to humanity, that forgiveness of sin can be found in Christ. Look at verse 10 there in 1 John 4, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

My friends, are you trusting in your righteousness or the righteousness of someone else, the righteousness of Christ? Look at Paul and see the dead end that you are, that the dead end that your righteousness is, and turn around, turn around from that dead end and run to the open arms of Christ who is freely offered to everyone who would believe in him.

Let's pray together.

*Father, well might we be silent before the wonders that we confess here this evening, the wonders of redeeming love in Christ and our own unworthiness. Father, I ask for the help of Your Holy Spirit upon each heart today. For those that are in Christ, Father, may they be renewed in the joy and the encouragement of complete forgiveness of sin, of the promise that You have made to Your children that our sins and our lawless deeds You will remember no more. You don't hold them against us and You never will for the sake of Your Son.*

*Father, for those who may now be like I once was, wandering around in pride and self-deception and some kind of sense of self-righteousness even naming the name of Christ but clinging to good deeds of some sort, Father, I pray that You would bring the convicting work of Your Holy Spirit upon them and that in that position of spiritual deadness You would impart life, that You would draw them, as it were, to Jesus Christ to find salvation by faith in Him and in Him alone. Father, these things are of such great*

*eternal consequence and we realize how utterly inadequate our human lips are to express them, how inadequate our human ears are and our willingness to hear, we're all so utterly inadequate, God. What will happen to us unless You send Your Spirit and help us and sanctify us and change us into what You would have us to be?*

*O God, hear our prayers for the help of Your Spirit. Sanctify Your own in the truth and, Father, look with mercy on those who are outside of Christ, perhaps hardened more and more by each passing day, Father, impossible by human standards to be saved. Father, we only look to You and remind You of what You Yourself have said, the things that are impossible with men are possible with God. Salvation and conversion are possible in Your power and we ask You to exercise it, Lord, for the sake of Your glory and Your glory alone. Help us to take these things to heart, Father, and may it all bear much eternal fruit for Your great glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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