

“PUT NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH”

**I. Introduction**

- A. Misplaced confidence is a dangerous thing.
  - 1. It has resulted in military defeats, lost fortunes, sports upsets, and tragic accidents.
  - 2. One of the most well-known examples of misplaced confidence is the sinking of the *Titanic*, which had been hailed as “unsinkable.”
  - 3. Apparently, that claim kept some of the passengers calm even while the ship was going down.
  - 4. If misplaced confidence is a bad thing when it comes to the things of this world, it is infinitely worse when it comes to matters of eternity.
  
- B. In tonight’s passage, Paul deals with the danger of having misplaced confidence with regard to our standing before God.
  - 1. The phrase that Paul uses to describe this misplaced spiritual confidence is “confidence in the flesh.”
  - 2. Whenever a person thinks that his efforts and intentions are good enough to merit God’s approval, he is placing his confidence in the flesh.
  - 3. This is the mindset that Paul is confronting in these verses.
  - 4. He wants the Philippians to know that no level of outward righteousness is sufficient to give a person a right standing with God.

## II. Be on the Lookout

- A. Our passage begins with the word, "Finally."
  - 1. Because of the way we use this word today, we may be a bit confused by the fact that Paul uses it at this point in this letter.
  - 2. "Finally" might give us the impression that this is the beginning of Paul's conclusion, which would be odd given that two of the letter's four chapters are still to come.
  - 3. In light of this, it seems that Paul is simply using "Finally" to introduce a fresh point, similar to the way we would use a phrase like "And furthermore..."
  
- B. The first thing that Paul mentions in this section is that the Christians in Philippi should "rejoice in the Lord."
  - 1. We have noted several times in this sermon series that joy is one of the repeated emphases in this letter, even though Paul wrote it from prison.
  - 2. This makes it clear that the joy that Paul is talking about is something that transcends feelings and circumstances.
  - 3. We should strive to approach every moment of every day with joy in our hearts toward God.
  - 4. Don't let Satan succeed in using life's trials to exasperate you or embitter you.
  - 5. Don't let yourself lose sight of the gloriousness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
  - 6. As John Calvin points out, when we find satisfaction in God's grace, "all annoyances, sorrows, anxieties, and griefs are sweetened."

- C. In the second part of verse 1, Paul says that writing “the same things” to the Philippians “is no trouble to me and is safe for” them.
1. What is he referring to with the phrase “the same things”?
  2. If he means the exhortation he has just given for them to “rejoice in the Lord”, then he is referring to the fact that he had already given a similar exhortation back in 2:17-18.
  3. But if that is Paul’s meaning, it seems odd that he would speak of rejoicing in the Lord as something that is necessary for the sake of the Philippians safety.
  4. In light of this, it could be that the “same things” to which Paul is referring are the things that he will talk about in the following verses.
  5. If so, then the “same things” are his warnings against placing confidence in the flesh.
  6. While Paul has not said anything about this in the first two chapters of this letter, it is reasonable to assume that he would have warned the Philippians about it when he was with them.
  7. Even though they had heard this before, it was certainly important enough for him to mention it again.
- D. We can get tired of hearing the same things repeated again and again, but sometimes there is a good reason why they are repeated.
1. Think of the safety speech that flight attendants give before the plane takes off.
  2. Most of the people on board have heard that speech many times.
  3. But it is repeated on every flight to make sure it is fresh on people’s minds.

4. The same thing could be said of the warnings that are repeated throughout the Bible.
  5. Those warnings are there for your well-being.
  6. Make sure that you listen to them.
- E. In verse 2, Paul issues his warning, telling the Philippians to “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.”
1. The context that follows makes it clear that Paul is speaking of the false teachers known as the Judaizers, the same group of people he writes about in his letter to the Galatians.
  2. These false teachers were telling Gentile Christians that if they truly wanted to be accepted by God, they needed to receive the sign of circumcision and follow the ceremonial aspects of the Jewish law.
  3. The Judaizers were adding works of the law to faith in Christ as the basis for salvation.
  4. Because they were doing this, Paul says in Galatians that they were preaching a different gospel altogether.
- F. The words that Paul uses to describe the Judaizers in verse 2 are quite strong.
1. First, he calls them “dogs.”
  2. I’m not sure that there are any cultures where it is a compliment to be called a dog.
  3. In Paul’s world, dogs were generally scavengers and hence were regarded as unclean.
  4. Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as “dogs.”

5. Paul turns the tables on this, declaring that it is the Judaizers who are unclean.

G. Next, Paul calls the Judaizers “evildoers.”

1. This too is highly ironic.
2. These people were devoted to God’s law.
3. And they were trying to get others to follow the law.
4. But Paul says that they were actually promoting that which is opposed to God’s will, because they were making observance of the law into the basis of salvation.
5. They were doing evil rather than good.

H. Lastly, Paul calls the Judaizers “those who mutilate the flesh.”

1. This is a play on words, as well as another point of irony.
2. The Greek word for “mutilation” sounds similar to the Greek word for “circumcision.”
3. Paul is saying that, far from having any religious benefit, the Judaizers’ insistence upon circumcision amounts to a mutilation of the human body.

### III. Properly Assess Worldly Credentials

- A. After urging the Philippians to be on the lookout against the false teaching of the Judaizers, Paul shows them how to properly assess worldly credentials.
1. He begins by setting up a point of contrast with the Judaizers, describing the qualities of God’s true people

2. While the Judaizers placed so much emphasis upon the rite of circumcision, it is actually Christians, whether Jewish Christians like Paul or Gentile Christians like most of the Philippians, who are “the real circumcision.”
  3. That was quite a claim for Paul to make.
  4. Under the old covenant, circumcision was the sign of inclusion in God’s covenant people.
  5. It marked the Israelites out as God’s possession.
  6. But after the coming of Christ, the nationalistic aspect of circumcision and its bloody nature rendered it inappropriate as the covenant sign for the people whom God is gathering to himself from every tribe and nation.
  7. For this reason, circumcision was replaced by baptism as the sign of covenant inclusion.
  8. By referring to the church as the real circumcision, Paul is saying that the church is the true Israel, the true heir to all that God had promised to Abraham, the spiritual reality to which circumcision pointed.
- B. Next, Paul says that Christians “worship by the Spirit of God.”
1. This stands in contrast to the worship of the Judaizers, which was focused on external rites and ceremonies.
  2. Christian worship is not governed by the kinds of rituals and ceremonies that dominated Israel’s worship in the Old Testament era.
  3. This is why Reformed Christians do not embrace the ornate and highly sensory aspects of worship that are so much a part of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

4. The external things that were a part of Israel's worship were shadows that pointed to spiritual realities.
  5. Now that the substance has arrived in Christ, we let go of the elaborate signs that pointed to him and offer spiritual worship that has more outward simplicity.
- C. The next quality of God's true people mentioned in verse 3 is that we "glory in Christ Jesus."
1. That is, our only boast is in Christ.
  2. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is our source of confidence before God.
  3. If you place your spiritual confidence in anything other than Christ, it is like stepping out onto a bridge made of tissue paper.
  4. As John Calvin said, "we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God." [*Institutes*, 3.13.3]
  5. The only righteousness that is able to provide such support is the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
  6. This is why Paul will say in the next section of this letter that he counts his fleshly righteousness as rubbish in order that he might gain the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.
- D. The last quality of God's true people in verse 3 is that we "put no confidence in the flesh."
1. The term "flesh" has several different senses in the New Testament.
  2. It can be used to refer to meat, to the human body, or to man in his corrupted state.
  3. In this context, Paul is clearly using "flesh" in the last sense, referring to our fallen humanity.

4. "Flesh" refers to the state of mankind under the first Adam.
  5. This means it refers to any human practice or trait in which we might be inclined to glory.
  6. The point that Paul is making here is that a Christian doesn't put his confidence in his own accomplishments, but only in Jesus Christ.
  7. Nothing we have or so — including our upbringing, aptitudes, possessions, education, and achievements — can merit favor with God.
- E. Having provided this point of contrast for assessing worldly credentials, Paul then goes on to list his own fleshly credentials in verses 5 and 6.
1. It might seem odd that Paul would call attention to himself in this way.
  2. But the reason why he does this is to show that his reason for speaking against the Judaizers is not because he cannot measure up to their standards of external righteousness.
  3. On the contrary, he can play the game of putting confidence in the flesh better than anyone else can.
  4. His credentials are of the highest order.
  5. He was "circumcised on the eighth day," which was exactly what was stipulated in God's law.
  6. He was "of the people of Israel," a phrase that underscores the fact that he was a Jew by birth.
  7. He was "of the tribe of Benjamin," the tribe that produced Israel's first king and remained loyal to the house of David after the nation was divided.



8. He was “a Hebrew of Hebrews,” a phrase that emphasizes that everything about him was thoroughly Jewish and uncorrupted by pagan influences.
9. He belonged to the party of the Pharisees, the sect within Judaism that had a reputation for carefully keeping God’s law.
10. He was a persecutor of the church, showing such zeal for God’s law that he tried to stamp out the Christian movement when he thought it was a blasphemous sect.
11. And he was blameless under the law, a statement that reflects how his law observance would have been viewed by his fellow Jews.
12. Prior to his conversion, Paul placed his confidence in these things.
13. These were the things that he thought made him acceptable to God.
14. But now that he has been brought to faith in Christ, he sees that they are of no help at all.

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. Paul’s description of his fleshly credentials in this passage brings to mind the way Martin Luther spoke of his attempts to attain a righteous standing with God through the practices that he followed as a monk.
  1. Luther wrote: “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I... My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. [cited in Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 34, 49]
  2. Like Paul the Pharisee, Luther the monk can be set forth as a picture of man at his best.

3. Both men were scrupulous in carrying out their religious duties.
  4. But the Searcher of hearts showed both of them that their supposed righteousness was only the righteousness of man in the flesh.
  5. God opened their eyes to the folly of placing their confidence in the flesh.
- B. There are many people in the world today who are far less outwardly righteous than Paul the Pharisee and Martin Luther the monk were who nevertheless place their confidence in the flesh.
1. There are many whose badges of righteousness are in reality things that are deeply offensive to God.
  2. This shows how utterly unworthy of confidence the flesh is.
  3. Don't look for righteousness and acceptance with God in the precept, but in the promise.
  4. Don't place your confidence in your performance of the law, but in God's provision in the gospel.
  5. Don't glory in your works, but always and only in Jesus Christ.