

Gospel Friendship | Paul's Letter to the Philippians

My Deadly Success

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Philippians 3.1-11

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. ² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; ³ for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory 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 in view 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 may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of 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.

We've been looking at this letter written to a young Christian congregation, the first church in Europe as Christianity spread westward, the Church at Philippi in Greece... and written by Paul from prison.

Last week, we saw Paul continuing his use of examples (getting his teaching OFF the blackboard and ON to the blacktop – spirituality for the road). Paul used two homespun examples (Timothy and Epaphroditus).

Today, Paul appears to go back to the blackboard and addresses a concept that looks theoretical and abstract – the idea of “righteousness”. But Paul is NOT going to leave it in the abstract – he will tie it immediately to another example, his own. And he will even use it in at the expense of his own reputation – in other words, he USES an example from his own life that we'd imagine would be very embarrassing, even shameful, the kind of thing most of us would want to hide, but he uses it as a teaching device: the story of his deadly success.

Now, we don't use the term “righteousness” very much... In the 70's: “Dude, those are some righteous rims on that Chevy Van...where'd you get 'em?”

But this idea of “righteousness” is a huge concept in Christianity... in Greek Class/NT Theology Class you learn a kind of shorthand – the word comes up SO much that you write it as an “R” with a circle around it...a long word BUT while the word IS LONG, the idea is pretty simple – how is a person made right with God? And even, on what basis or for what reasons are we right with other people and right with ourselves (having substantial mental, emotional and spiritual health even in this world)?

The surprising thing is that Paul’s ideas about being right are more nuanced or shaded or subtle than you might expect. He’s really clear to say, “The idea that there are just two kinds of people Right vs. Wrong, Good vs. Bad, spiritual/religious people vs. secular/skeptical people or people who pay taxes and use their turn-signals vs people who get tattoos and nose-rings and play their music too loud – Paul is saying that THIS view is way too simplistic. There is a way of being “righteous” that is just as bad (and actually WORSE) than being openly bad... and almost everyone who appears to be righteous is actually NOT... There are good people and bad people and of the good people most of them are really bad... Confused?

Let’s look at it and see if we can clear it up: from Paul’s own experience, TWO KINDS OF righteousness: 1) Watching Paul dying with the first kind of RIGHTEOUSNESS 2) Watching Paul living with the second kind of RIGHTEOUSNESS 3) Joining Paul in his testimony

The first kind of righteousness is what Paul had before he was a Christian. He was a very religious person. He was a man of his word, a hardworking man, an apparently successful man. People liked him – well, maybe not liked so much as respected (and what’s better?). He had a very impressive record.

He says, “If ever there was a person who had reason to be self-confident and self-assertive and certain that there IS a God and that God is evidently very impressed with me – I was THAT person!”

Now, notice a few qualities of this first kind of righteousness. It came by comparison. Paul KNEW that he had it because the test scores said so. It was possible to quantify this kind of righteousness. He had the awards – most likely to succeed, most successful, most earnest, most serious, most committed, most team spirit, best heritage and upbringing – you could see the trophies!

All the things that were important in his particular cultural context, all the markers by which people were evaluated and deemed good or bad – Paul had ALL the GOOD markers... “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in his success, I far more”: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

See, this résumé was so impressive to Paul's (or Saul as he was then known) so impressive to his peers...that Saul couldn't help but be impressed himself. At another place he wrote, "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions..." (Gal 1.13)

Now, what can we say about this kind of righteousness? Let's look at its origin and its results. It comes from comparing yourself with other people. The numbers tell the story (higher test scores, bigger paychecks, there's tangible, measurable evidence). As such, it can be managed and controlled – put in the time and effort and it will USUALLY show. Some of it Paul couldn't control – it was his parents that circumcised him on the 8th day (exactly as the Law prescribed) – and he was born into a family that actually knew it's roots, not just Jewish but "of the tribe of Benjamin" and that wasn't Paul's doing but he was from "that kind of family" a good family, a great family, a better family.

And all that family's heritage and hard work really paid off. Paul was "a VERY spiritually serious young man". And when a germ, an infection, a contagion entered into the world of ancient Judaism; when a sect arose claiming the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, when this group emerged calling themselves The Way and were later known as "The Christians" – then Serious Saul, the Pharisee, the purist, the zealous defender of the faith... joined the religious police and he is found holding the coats of the goon squad who put Stephen, the first Christian martyr to death (Acts 7). They stoned him and crushed his skull with huge rocks for telling people that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah.

And Paul's including this fact in his résumé is a way of saying, "See – this kind of righteousness – which starts with apparent obedience and then is fueled by comparison with those who are not so obedient, and then it craves that kind of recognition and accolades and human appreciation and applause and eventually sees only the accolades and fails to see God at all – that kind of righteousness is dangerous...is deadly.

And Paul is saying ... "it also killed me. I convinced myself that I was blameless and even though I prayed and looked spiritually crisp and disciplined – I was my own God."

But Paul was changed. He came to see another kind of right-ness. It was not something that came by sweat and comparison.

This right-ness can not be measured and managed by numbers and the result of our effort – it's not a "righteousness of my own that is derived from the Law but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God and is received by faith".

A right-ness that is RECEIVED not achieved.

When Saul was winning and succeeding, he must have been always looking for Snow White – the fairest of them all. He had to have wondered if he would stay the best and he had to have been tormented somewhere deep suppressed in his heart, “Have I done enough? Am I doing enough?” (Do you ever feel that way?)

And finally he heard those words, “Saul, Saul – why are you resisting Me – YOUR righteousness will NEVER be enough! But listen to the words coming from the chapped lips of My Son, your substitute – ‘IT IS ENOUGH ...it is FINISHED!’”

God is saying, “Here is rightness, you can’t control or manage. It stems not from your effort and LEADS not to comparison and pride and anger and paranoia and death...THIS is MY own rightness given because My Beloved, the Eternal Son of God, became a Human Being, became your substitute, obeyed in your place, then took the justice YOUR sins deserved (even your murder and fanaticism) and rose from the dead. YOUR rightness could not produce life – HIS DID!

And the only comparison HERE is that between your rancid, poisonous self-righteousness and the beauty of My Son’s perfect life, perfect love. Which do you want Paul – YOUR righteousness that leads to death or MINE that raises the dead?”

And by the liberating, inward work of God in His life, Paul saw that contrast quite clearly, like many of YOU have. And was able to say, “There’s no comparison! I now think of that OLD source of rightness as dung – it’s revolting!”

It’s amazing how Martin Luther bursts from the darkness of the Middle Ages and he sees this very BASIC truth of Christianity – that the righteousness that God accepts is NOT a righteousness we make. Luther sees it so clearly and his words seem so contemporary and fresh and applicable when you read them.

In the Gospel, in the doing and dying and rising of Jesus, the benefits of which we get by FAITH and in that glorious interruption by God we receive the one source of righteousness that God accepts. When we trade in our comparative rightness, our self-righteousness and come to rest on the rightness of Jesus Christ, we begin to know God; we begin to live.

Luther called it “a passive righteousness” – we receive it by faith. We don’t work for it - we rest IN it. It saves us and then begins to change us – “the righteousness of God received by rest, by repentance, by faith”. It's grace not karma. It has power to save us and change us and actually change to way we obey... a new motivational platform.

Now let me close by sharing a few practical considerations from Paul’s own example: how this second kind of righteousness (received by faith) led to a new kind of dying and rising for Paul.

We can look at Paul's categories and come up with what I think is a really helpful new vocabulary for our church and families and lives. For instance, he says he was a circumcised on the eighth day: i.e. he had ritual righteousness.

He knew the tribe in Israel from which his family came: he had heritage righteousness.

He was serious enough about his religion that he was in the strictest sect: he had purity righteousness.

He had zeal for the things of God: i.e. he had "team spirit" or enthusiasm righteousness

Are you getting the picture? And the reason this is important is we can use this on our selves (and even, if you can do it VERY sensitively where it's welcomed – you can use it to help others).

For instance, whenever you are trusting your efforts or credentials, whenever you use comparisons to feel good about yourself – INSTEAD of resting in Jesus Christ, you can identify things like:

- Lawn righteousness
- Grammar righteousness
- Grooming righteousness
- Fashion righteousness
- Directional righteousness (example)
- Parental righteousness
- Musical righteousness
- Theological righteousness
- Use-Your-Turn-Signal righteousness
- Pop-Culture righteousness
- High-Culture righteousness
- Pop-Culture ignorance righteousness
- Health righteousness
- Neatness righteousness
- Come-as-you-are righteousness
- Punctuality righteousness

And this reminds us that while we may have put our "Big C" confidence OFF ourselves and ON to Christ, we may still have our "Small c" confidence on our efforts. As we insist on these things and use them to feel good about ourselves and to feel superior to others (or INFERIOR!) we are breathing in the poison fumes of that fleshly righteousness that leads to little deaths – death in our communications with others, death in our relationships, families and selves.

The verbs Paul uses make clear that he decisively counted his old reputation to be loss AND also, on an ongoing basis, he had to continuously stop himself from trusting in his skills and successes and reputation and INSTEAD trust in the wondrous Cross.

And the more successful you are, the more of a challenge this may be...to keep pulling the beautiful weeds from your garden and count all things loss.

We constantly face the discomfort of Living by faith. We would rather boast of where we've been or of how clever we are or of what or who we know – all these things we can measure and manage. But the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ – we can't see it or control it. We have to simply trust and that's really hard for us to do.

Another thing to notice about this passage is the two imperatives – one negative and one positive. The positive is “rejoice”. You get the idea that Paul's old religious life was joyless. But the righteousness that comes by faith enables us to obey with joy – what we have to do becomes what we want to do, becomes our delight. So, that's one way to know you're on the right track: is your life and walk with God producing joy?

The negative imperative is “beware the dogs!” The whole fallen world is geared to making you compare yourselves with others...and fool you into thinking that your worth and your peace depends on whether you are superior to others and whether you've done enough to keep God happy.

But the Christian has a responsibility to steer clear of this dog-eat-dog system and say, “While I can be concerned about my lawn or my grammar or grooming or how much I pray or anything else – NONE of these things will be my source of peace and confidence. THAT can only come from the Wondrous Cross and the Voice that says, “It IS finished!”

And when that is our source, we will, like Paul, even be able to talk about our failings and negative examples and embarrassing stuff if we believe these confessions can be used for the instruction and encouragement of others.