

Essays in Philippians 8- Watch

Philippians 3:2-3

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To this point in his letter to the Philippians, Paul has mainly informed the church of his condition. They could rejoice that he was well. In chapter three, the letter transitions. Paul was always forward-thinking. He was concerned about how the saints at Philippi were going to face the future. There were real and present dangers to their faith. Paul now focuses on these and instructs the Philippians about how they could successfully address certain challenges.

One cannot read Paul's letters without noticing a certain Jewish faction that constantly caused problems. By the time Paul wrote this letter, he had been wrangling with this group for over twenty years. They insisted on keeping the Law of Moses, with an emphasis on circumcision. They were relentless in the promotion of this false teaching and their discrediting of Paul. In this text, Paul issues a strong warning to the Philippians about this subversive group: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:2-3).

Paul addresses this Jewish contingent as dogs. This is a degrading insult to levy against any group of people. In most non-western societies, dogs are not house pets. They roam the streets, eat garbage, and are vicious. This is the image Paul brings to mind to warn the Philippians of the danger of these false teachers.

Admittedly, Paul's characterization of this group is harsh. However, this was not the first time Paul had dealt with them. He uses this description after years of being dogged by them. Those who were enforcing the old law of circumcision had proven that they were not genuinely interested in the Gospel of Christ. They were motivated by pride and malevolent desires of self-preservation. Paul did not want the church at Philippi to be deceived by these Judaizing teachers.

About the Doctrine at Stake

Paul does not extensively answer the false doctrine of the Judaizing teachers. Their doctrine was disruptive and had harmed churches in other places (i.e. the churches of Galatia). However, in a single verse, Paul answers the overall argument of the Judaizing teachers. They thought physical circumcision was the true symbol of God's covenant people. While physical circumcision was a symbol of God's covenant people in the past, it was merely a representation of the true mark. The true mark of God's covenant people was and is faith.

In his letter to the saints at Rome, Paul explained, "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29). God was teaching the world through Israel and the Law of Moses that He wanted

people transformed in heart and mind. This transformation is not made through circumcision or keeping any other aspect of the Law of Moses. This transformation only occurs by faith in what God accomplished through Jesus, the Messiah.

The Judaizing teachers refused to accept this. They rejected the Gospel. They rejected faith as the true mark of God's family. And, they were not interested in changing their stance. As far as they were concerned, Christians were a threat to their power. Therefore, they would do whatever necessary to acquire and maintain power. Like a roaming dog living on garbage, they viciously preyed on the vulnerable. They needed to be exposed and avoided.

Lessons Learned

While Paul identified a specific problem of his time, there are valuable lessons we can learn from this part of his letter. First, false teachers are dangerous. The New Testament creates a profile of a false teacher. Jesus, Paul, Peter, Jude, and John offer descriptions of such people. False teachers are not simply misinformed about the Gospel or misunderstood in their presentations of it. Fundamentally, they corrupt the grace of God. They are not interested in the truth. They are interested in themselves. They are motivated by lust and pride. They are destructive to the souls of men. Therefore, they must be marked and avoided.

Second, we can learn about what God is trying to accomplish in us. God is trying to recreate humans who worship Him. God wants creation generally and humans specifically to bring Him glory. We cannot fulfill this purpose until our idolatry, as expressed by sin, is addressed. Of course, the Messiah came to address sin and its consequences. Therefore, our sin can only be dealt with by faith in Jesus, the Messiah.

Faith ignites the change of heart and mind necessary to recreate us into the image of God. Sadly, like the false teachers of Paul's day, we often place faith in ourselves alone. We believe we can fix our problems without God. We believe we can earn our salvation by simply trying to be a good person. As long as our good deeds outweigh our sin, we foolishly think we will be saved. This mindset is evidence of how we put confidence in the flesh instead of putting faith in Christ.

Conclusion

Among the churches documented in the New Testament, some have described the church at Philippi as being the best. If we lived in the first century, we would have wanted to be part of this congregation. Overall, the church seemed to be thriving. However, we must not view history through rose-colored lenses. As will be identified at the end of this chapter, they had opponents. The balance of this chapter is designed to inform the church how to engage with "enemies of the cross" (Phil. 3:18-19).

If we are not watchful, we can lose touch with reality. The devil is actively trying to influence and destroy. At the time of Paul's letter, the devil wanted nothing more than to destroy the saints at Philippi. They needed to be cautious and alert to their surroundings.

Likewise, the devil wants nothing more than to destroy the saints of this congregation. We must be watchful. We must strengthen our faith and fuel our conviction. If we are complacent or self-reliant, we will fall prey to our adversary. Like an old preacher once said, “We better watch them dogs!”