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many.

Sermon Brief
Text: Phil. 3:1-16
Title: Living Cautiously
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today we continue the sermon series on “Living...” as a believer in Christ. Out of our spiritual union with Christ we have the opportunity to live victoriously and joyfully in a world filled with sadness and pessimism. As the people of God we have been given the blessing of God’s presence in our lives through the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit provides leadership and empowerment for a blessed life.

But the understanding of that life is twisted and confused in much of Christianity today. This failure to grasp the spiritual truths of the Bible ranges from the extremes of Christianity being a periodic ‘pep rally’ worship service on one side to a quiet deeply reflective contemplative life on the other side. Both Pentecostalism and Roman Catholicism in these extremes fail to grasp the teaching of the New Testament on how to live the Christian life abundantly and biblically.

In Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi, he shares both a personal testimony and a warning to the believers in this ancient city about false understandings of the Christian life. Hear his words today:

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — 4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. 15 Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. 16 Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.¹

¹Phil. 3:1-16 (GNT): 3.1 Τὸ λοιπόν, ἀδελφοί μου, χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ. τὰ αὐτὰ γράφειν ὑμῖν ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐκ ὀκνηρόν, ὑμῖν δὲ ἀσφαλές.

3.2 Βλέπετε τοὺς κύνας, βλέπετε τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας, βλέπετε τὴν κατατομήν. 3.3 ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν ἡ περιτομή, οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες, 3.4 καίπερ ἐγὼ ἔχων πεποιθήσιν καὶ ἐν σαρκί. εἴ τις δοκεῖ ἄλλος πεποιθέναι ἐν σαρκί, ἐγὼ μᾶλλον· 3.5 περιτομῆ ὀκταήμερος, ἐκ γένους Ἰσραὴλ, φυλῆς Βενιαμίν, Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων, κατὰ νόμον Φαρισαῖος, 3.6 κατὰ ζήλος διώκων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἄμεμπτος. 3.7 ἀλλὰ ἅτινα ἦν μοι κέρδη, ταῦτα ἠγῆμαι διὰ τὸν Χριστὸν ζημίαν. 3.8 ἀλλὰ μενούργε καὶ ἠγοῦμαι πάντα ζημίαν εἶναι διὰ τὸ ὑπερέχον τῆς γνώσεως Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου, δι’ ὃν τὰ πάντα ἐζημιώθην, καὶ ἠγοῦμαι σκύβαλα, ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω 3.9 καὶ εὐρεθῶ ἐν αὐτῷ, μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει, 3.10 τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν τῶν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, 3.11 εἴ πως καταντήσω εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν.

3.12 Οὐχ ὅτι ἤδη ἔλαβον ἢ ἤδη τετελείωμαι, διώκω δὲ εἰ καὶ καταλάβω, ἐφ’ ᾧ καὶ κατελήμφθην ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ. 3.13 ἀδελφοί, ἐγὼ ἑμαυτὸν οὐ λογίζομαι κατεληφέναι· ἐν δέ, τὰ μὲν ὀπίσω ἐπιλανθανόμενος τοῖς δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος, 3.14 κατὰ σκοπὸν διώκω εἰς τὸ βραβεῖον τῆς ἄνω κλήσεως τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. 3.15 Ὅσοι οὖν τέλειοι, τοῦτο φρονῶμεν· καὶ εἴ τι ἐτέρως φρονεῖτε, καὶ τοῦτο ὁ θεὸς ὑμῖν ἀποκαλύψει· 3.16 πληρὴν εἰς ὃ ἐφθάσαμεν, τῷ αὐτῷ στοιχεῖν.

As we've mentioned before in other sermons taken from Philippians, this letter was written in the early 60s while Paul was in imprisonment in Rome awaiting trial before the Roman emperor Nero. It is Paul's 'thank you' letter to a church for their faithful support both in prayers and finances of the apostle's missionary ministry. Now Epaphroditus had brought a love offering from Philippi to Rome for Paul's support during his imprisonment.² And so the aged apostle responds with a letter of appreciation to the church.

In the process of writing the letter Paul addresses several issues that were particularly relevant to the Philippian Christians in their spiritual journey. In chapter three, he mainly cautions them to live cautiously in light of the twisted understanding of the Christian life being advocated by different teachers in that region. The identity of these people is not clear and they are not named by name. But their teachings are sketched out in enough detail to know that their approach to Christian living was seriously off base from the truth of the Gospel and from apostolic teaching. Perhaps they had Jewish background and religious orientation, but it is not entirely clear. Their approach to Christianity was outward, ceremonial and legalistic, and neglected the inner condition of one's heart before God. By a personal word of testimony, Paul places the real issue of Christian living in stark contrast to that these people advocated.

We need to hear these words of the apostle today for they are vitally relevant to us.

BODY

I. Live rejoicing, v. 1

1 Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

3.1 Τὸ λοιπόν, ἀδελφοί μου, χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ. τὰ αὐτὰ γράφειν ὑμῖν ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐκ ὀκνηρόν, ὑμῖν δὲ ἀσφαλές.

The beginning words, Τὸ λοιπόν, ('Finally'), can be taken to signal the conclusion (the Conclusio) of a letter (cf. [2 Cor. 13:11](#)).³ They also can serve to indicate a transition to a new topic (cf. [1 Thess. 4:14](#); [2 Thess. 3:15](#)). Thus, the NRSV translation above, "Finally," is correct but must be taken in the latter sense of the term. Paul is moving to a new topic that is toward the end of the body of the letter. This particular spelling of the Greek word surfaces again in [4:8](#)⁶ with a similar meaning. The context seems to indicate a summing up of the preceding discussion that marks a transition into the next topic.

Paul thus concludes the discussion up to this point in the letter with an admonition to rejoice. This admonition occurs three times in Philippians: 2:18; 3:1; and 4:4. In [2:18](#) it stands as the climax of Paul's discussion of living as faithful Christians (NRSV): "[17 But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you — 18 and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.](#)" In [4:4](#) it stands as the header admonition for a series of encouragements Paul gave to the Philippians (NRSV): "[Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice](#)". As such, this word stands as a major emphasis of the entire letter. The present tense imperative mood form of the Greek verb underscores joy as an ongoing experience, rather than just as a momentary occurrence.

The second sentence in verse one asserts Paul's delight in writing to the Philippians. *Exactly what "the same things" alludes to is not real clear.* Gerald Hawthorne in the Philippians volume of the *Word Biblical Commentary* (p. 124) takes the stance that 'these things' refer to *his repeated admonition to joy* (2:18 and 3:1). Thus, the point is that adoption of a posture of joy and rejoicing in the Lord is an important safeguard against the ills that could derail the Philippian Christians. Other NT scholars will, however, take "the same things" to refer to *either the subsequent warnings (vv. 2ff) or perhaps to some warning found in a now lost letter of Paul to the Philippians.* The point of this interpretation is that Paul found it important to warn the Philippians about spiritual and doctrinal dangers facing the Philippian Christians.

Paul felt it important to write about these false understandings of Christian living both as "not troublesome" (οὐκ ὀκνηρόν) to him and as a "safeguard" (ἀσφαλές) for the Philippians. His concern was for the Philippian

²Phil. 4:18 (NRSV): "I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

³2 Cor. 13:11 (NRSV): "Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."

⁴1 Thess. 4:1 (NRSV): "Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more."

⁵2 Thess. 3:1 (NRSV): "Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you."

⁶Phil. 4:8 (NRSV): "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy -- think about such things."

believers that they understand the right approach to Christian living and not get sucked into false teaching.⁷ Any pastor 'worth his salt' will passionately seek to guide his congregation away from theological garbage and into correct biblical truths. Christians, you need to be careful what you watch on TV and listen to on the radio, as well as what you read. These days the airways are fill with theological trash that will pollute and suck the life out of genuine Christian living.

What can we learn from these two sentences? Most importantly is the principle of joy in our Christian life. God desires his people to be a happy people. Joy and rejoicing are important traits for believers, as [the 56 uses](#) of the word "joy" in the NRSV of just the NT indicate as well as [the 40 uses](#) of the word 'rejoice.' To be sure, this emotion and its expression especially during worship needs to be genuine and not artificial. W.T. Conner, who taught theology at SWBTS during the 1920s through the 1940s, had a saying about joyous worship: "I don't mind someone's cup overflowing; I just don't want them shaking the cup to make it overflow." Artificially created joy turns worship into a shallow spiritual pep rally. The destructive impact of this is substantial. Careful thinking is diminished if not forgotten. Little or no genuine spiritual growth takes place. Christianity then comes to the place of having to have frequent 'revitalizations' through these spiritual pep rally experiences. From my observation of over fifty years in ministry, ethical behavior frequently takes a back seat to these superficially induced moments of joy. Paul, however, saw genuine joy as an important aspect and spiritually nourishing part of Christian living. We could learn much from him here.

II. Live cautiously, vv. 2-16

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! 3 For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh — 4 even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. 8 More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

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These verses, 2-16, are arranged around the foundational warning given in verse two. Notice the threefold

⁷For a contemporary example, a quick glance at the so-called "God TV" network reveals much of the same false teaching. To be sure, the TV network is a Pentecostal network for the purpose of promoting Pentecostal theology and practice.

repetition of the warning 'beware' (Βλέπετε). Each verb object characterizes the dangerous people in a distinctive way: as 'dogs,' as 'evil workers,' and as 'those who mutilate the flesh.' There is an intentional phonetical play on sounds in the Greek text with the letter kappa: κύνας (dogs); κακούς ἐργάτας (evil workers); κατατομήν (flesh choppers). This adds intensity to the admonition, but is impossible to reproduce in English translation.

The sarcastic use of the [image of dogs](#) was a frequent Jewish term of contempt for Gentiles, since dogs -- particularly wild dogs -- were viewed as unclean animals with whom a faithful Jew avoided contact. Paul uses this image to characterize these dangerous people in Philippi, who ironically had most likely a Jewish heritage. Next, these people are characterized as 'evil workers' (τοὺς κακούς ἐργάτας). Given the Jewish preoccupation with Torah obedience, perceived as workers of good before God, the characterization takes on additional sting. These people are doing the opposite of obeying God. The third characterization is that of mutilators of the flesh (τὴν κατατομήν). This is a sarcastic reference to the Jewish practice of circumcision of the male. [Circumcision](#) in certain strains of ancient Judaism had become necessary for one's salvation, because it identified one as belonging to the covenant community of Israel. For Paul the external physical act had no spiritual value for the Christian. What mattered was the inner identification with Christ that in [Rom. 2:28-29](#) he labeled as circumcision of the heart (NRSV): "28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God." But these dangerous people at Philippi were insisting on the Jewish tradition as an essential part of salvation. These three characterizations are so general in nature that it is impossible for us to know with precision who they were.

The basis for these admonitions is set forth by the causal conjunction 'For' (γάρ) in verse three. That defense runs through verse sixteen. It takes an interesting twist, in that through these verses Paul asserts the superiority of his Christian experience over the viewpoint of these dangerous people. These verses stand as a testimony of Paul's religious experience, first as a Pharisee (vv. 4b-6) and then as a Christian (vv. 7-16). His Christian emphasis is centered on two things: (1) the superiority of the knowledge of Christ over against fleshly achievements as a Pharisee (vv. 7-11), and (2) the continued need for Christian growth (vv. 12-16).

In this approach, Paul did not choose to attack the inadequacies of his opponents' teaching, as he did in Galatians. Nor does he attack their character, as will be done in the pastoral letters of 1-2 Timothy and Titus. Rather, he decided to contrast the superiority of his experience over against the implicit inadequacy of their religious experience. One important principle to be learned here is to match your strategy with the individual situation being addressed. On some occasions, one approach is the best, but at other times different approaches are more appropriate.

The superiority of Paul's religious experience is directly stated in verse three and includes the Philippian readers -- the significance of the "we" verb frame (NLT): "[we who worship God in the Spirit are the only ones who are truly circumcised. We put no confidence in human effort. Instead, we boast about what Christ Jesus has done for us.](#)" The circumcision that ultimately matters is the inward mark of being God's child. Believers in Christ are those who genuinely worship God through the Spirit's leadership. Instead of boasting about fleshly achievements for God -- a part of the false religious orientation -- believers take their pride in the achievements of Christ for them. No confidence in fleshly accomplishments is the order of the day. Thus Paul asserted the superiority of authentic Christian experience over that being advocated by his opponents. The Philippian readers had participated in such, and thus they had no need of anything else from an alternative approach to religious commitment.

Tacked to the end of Paul's devaluing of fleshly achievements is a proviso indicating that he did have some basis for bragging about fleshly accomplishments during his Pharisee days. In verses five and six he lists seven (number not an accident) fleshly accomplishments that could comprise bragging rights: (1) properly circumcised on the eighth day after birth; (2) born in the covenant people of Israel; (3) born of the tribe of Benjamin (one of the two tribes of the southern kingdom); (4) an outstanding Jew who achieved above average things; (5) in regard to Torah obedience a member of the Pharisees who were considered the most devoted to observing God's law; (6) an extraordinarily devoted Pharisee who persecuted heretics; (7) one who lived so righteously that he could claim to be blameless by divine law. These represent unusual levels of religious commitment to God, and are similar to Paul's earlier declaration to the Galatians ([1:13-14](#); NRSV): "13 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. 14 I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors."

In verses seven through eleven, however, he debunks all of these fleshly achievements in favor of the knowledge of Christ. First, these pre-Christian achievements, "whatever gains I had," he now counts as liabilities, "loss," (ζημίαν) rather than credits, "gain," (κέρδη). In fact, he further castigates these accomplishments as worthy nothing more than "rubbish" (σκύβαλα). The Greek word means 'manure.' The backdrop here is final

judgment before God. When the Pharisee contemplated that day, his concern was to make certain that the credit side of the divine ledger, his good works, far outweighed the debit side of the ledger, his disobedience. (I'm using credit/debit in the popular sense of the terms, rather than with the technical accounting meanings.) But now as a Christian, Paul came to the conclusion that all those 'good deeds' in reality fell on the debit side of God's accounting scale. The credit side contained only one thing: the accomplishments of Christ for believers as their Redeemer. Thus, everything hinged on coming to know, through religious experience, this Christ.

For Paul and for true Christians, the passionate objective is to develop a deep spiritual relationship with the resurrected Christ. This Paul declares as his objective in verses nine through eleven (NRSV): "in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." The cultivation of that relationship through spiritual growth and maturity became the sole objective for the apostle. In that deepening relationship came God's power that enables one to live victoriously over sin and with substance to life. Key to deepening that relationship is the dying to self, that often comes through suffering. The conclusion is the ultimate experience of resurrection from death.

Verses twelve through sixteen turn a somewhat different direction but one that builds on verses seven through eleven. Paul spoke of the deepening of his spiritual relationship with Christ as the sole objective of his life. When writing these words, he had been pursuing this objective for almost three decades and was rapidly moving toward the end of his life. This final segment, vv. 12-16, makes an adamant point that the aged apostle was continuing to pursue this objective just as vigorously after decades of faithful service as he had at the beginning of his Christian experience. With the metaphor of the ancient Olympic games as the backdrop for his words, he characterizes himself as a sixty plus old runner who hadn't yet crossed the finish line, but instead was running as hard as he could with his eyes focused upon the upward calling of God as the prize at the finish line. This is much more than merely looking forward to Heaven. That's one a small part of the picture. The central focus of these verses is on Paul's continued spiritual growth and deepening of his relationship with Christ. A full experience of it Paul had not had; there was yet room for growth (vv. 12-13). He refused to look back on fleshly achievements (v. 13), and instead focused on the future, the new experiences with Christ that lay ahead (v. 13). The prize, the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus (v. 14). Every new day offered a new experience with Christ, one that could make Paul more like Jesus and bring the resurrection power of God into Paul's life. This was the apostle's objective; to not waste a single opportunity to get to know Christ better. Death? All that meant for Paul was a deepening of this relationship with Christ, as he had already declared in 1:21: "for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

In verses fifteen and sixteen, Paul applies the spiritual principles expressed in his testimony to his readers. For mature believers, Paul admonishes, "Let us set our focus on this." For less mature believers who may not have yet seen the importance of this, his word is that God will show them the truthfulness of this kind of focus on Christ, and thus they will get in this same race with the mature believers. He concludes with the admonition to continue marching forward in lock step unified commitment to this objective making progress toward realizing more and more of Christ day by day.

What lessons are found in verses two through sixteen? Many! At the heart is for each of us to focus on our relationship with Christ. That relationship is the only thing that matters on the credit side of God's ledger book on the day of judgment. Fleshly achievements that lead us to bragging about what we have done for God stand on the debit side of that divine ledger book and will come back to haunt us in that judgment day.

The deepening of that relationship is to be our number one priority in this life. A key means of deepening that is suffering. Even in that moment, the basic attitude is joy and rejoicing. Every experience that brings us closer to our Lord is an occasion for rejoicing.

Any approach to Christianity that adds to this focus on Christ represents a distortion of the gospel and poses a danger to spiritual healthiness. To saddle down Christianity with fleshly achievements orientation is dangerous and risks corruption of the gospel with eternal consequences. This lack of central focus on a deepening relationship with Christ lays as the major source, in my opinion, of most of the problems congregations experience today. Too often our priorities center elsewhere, and we find ourselves in trouble spiritually without knowing why. If every member of the IBC church Cologne adopted the goal that Paul lays out here and made as deep a commitment to it as Paul reflects, a spiritual awakening would take place in our church that would astound the surrounding world.

CONCLUSION

We must 'live cautiously' if we are to maintain authentic spiritual health. The world today is full of spiritual junk food that tastes good at first bite but eventually destroys your spiritual life. God has laid the best on the spiritual platter for us to consume. Why settle then for a old 'greasy spiritual hamburger'?