

Sermon 18: Philippians 3:4-11: Being Righteous

OUTLINE

The righteousness that comes from self
The righteousness that comes from Christ

INTRODUCTION

Recently on Sabbatical I had the opportunity of preaching the gospel to family and friends. The conversation that I found myself having over and over is, what is sin; or who is a good person? I found it striking that as I spoke about the need for Christ, that we need Him as a Savior from sin, there was the common push back 'I am a good person'. This would be argued for in various ways. They would compare themselves to the worst criminals and say I am good because I am not that bad. Or they would point to some virtuous things they do like being a parent who loves their children; or being a hard worker and not sponging off welfare; or doing free charity work with their business; or being a vegan and avoiding meat that has been obtained through animals enduring cruel situations. I think that this is the most common deception that people believe and so they do not accept the gospel of Jesus Christ as their only hope for salvation. Our culture is reinforcing the narrative that we are good; that we are worthy; and as a result every human being is in a self-deceiving self-saving program where they are relying on themselves and not on Jesus Christ; they are looking to the goodness that comes from themselves and not the goodness that comes from God. Today we are seeing religious versions of this error in the many cults and religions all around us; but we are also witnessing non-religious attempts at self-improvement, so that whether they are religious or not they are not sinners who need Jesus they are good enough without Him.

As we continue with Philippians 3:4-11 we are in a chapter where Paul is dealing with the problem of false teachers who are teaching that Christ is not enough to be made righteous before God, but that these non-Jewish converts also had to adopt certain Jewish practices to be the true people of God. Paul the vigilant pastor warns these Gentile believers of these false teachers reaffirming them in the faith as the true people of God. In v4-11 Paul goes on to share some of his personal testimony as proof that these Jewish false teachers are wrong and that faith in Christ is enough. Paul does not enjoy talking about himself but when false teaching drives him hard enough he is willing to talk about himself in order to show error to be false. Paul was the ultimate poster boy for salvation by being a good Jew. In the portion before us we can see that Paul lists the various Jewish advantages he had, but then counts them as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. All of this to show that Christ alone is enough and that these non-Jewish believers don't need to be taken in by these Jewish false teachers. Our section divides into 2 sections in v4-6 we see the things that Paul used to trust in for righteousness before God; and in v7-11 we see him talk about how all of that is loss for the salvation that he has in Christ.

The righteousness that comes from self

V4, 'though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.' Here we see Paul the poster boy for Jewish righteousness putting forward his credentials. He of course is speaking ironically because he does not put his confidence in anything

in himself but in Christ. But here we see him indulging the false teacher's error, and still showing it to be false. Paul goes on to list 7 things that would ordinarily be seen as gain or beneficial, but which Paul calls loss and puts into the debt column.

'Circumcised on the eighth day.' Paul leads with that which would have been most important to these false teachers. You will remember that the central message of their error is that these Gentile believers had to go all the way and become Jewish proselytes in order to become the people of God and be righteous in God's sight. Circumcision was the great ceremony given by God to mark Israelites apart from the other nations. Any male not circumcised could not be a Jew in the OT. Paul boasts about the fact like any natural born Jew he was circumcised as a baby on the 8th day in accordance with the law. He likely emphasizes this because the false teachers are likely Jewish proselytes who were circumcised as adults not on the 8th day. In this his circumcision is better than theirs.

'Of the people of Israel.' Here once again Paul is emphasizing that he is a natural Jew born into the nation and not a Jew by conversion. He was born part of the chosen people of God, once again having one up on any false teacher who was a proselyte, and being equal to any Jewish heretic who was bragging about his nationality.

'Of the tribe of Benjamin.' Benjamin was one of the two tribes that supported the line of Solomon. Unlike the 10 Northern tribes who were exiled to Assyria and became mixed with the nations producing groups like the Samaritans.

'A Hebrew of Hebrews.' Paul was born to Jewish parents, spoke Aramaic, he was given a Hebrew education and was not one of those Hellenized Jews whose Jewish credentials were watered down by contact with other nations.

Now it has been pointed out that all of these 'benefits' were without any effort, Paul had these simply by being born a Jew. The next three items are related to Paul's efforts and endeavors.

'As to the law, a Pharisee.' If keeping the law is essential to salvation then Paul can brag that he was a Pharisee. Josephus tells us that there were only about 6000 Pharisees, they were an elite group who studied and practiced the law as well as many traditions and additions to the law. They were scrupulous to a fault. Paul was no antinomian but devout and strict going above and beyond what was required even keeping the traditions added to the law.

'As to zeal, a persecutor of the Church.' Paul had made it his personal mission to suppress Christianity. He saw himself like a contemporary Phineas who was zealous for the worship of God. He had been present for the death of the first martyr and wanted to take advantage of the situation pursuing Christians outside of Israel even into other countries. With the fervor of a Jihadist or suicide bomber he could put anyone's dedication to shame.

'As to righteousness under the law, blameless.' Paul is not pretending that he was sinless, we know from Romans 7 that he had a sense of the sinfulness of his own heart. No but by the standards of Jewish observance, he was blameless.

This token list by Paul alerts us to some of the typical ways we deceive ourselves into thinking we are good enough to get into heaven. Like Paul we can trust in ceremonies like baptism; or being born into a Christian family, or being part of a church. Like Paul we can think we are good because outwardly we are not committing any criminal acts, and appear better than other people, but all the while there is deep sin going on in our hearts. We are full of hatred, lust, greed,

revenge, bitterness, unforgiveness, racism, pride. Like Paul we can think that the sincerity of our religious devotion is good enough to make us acceptable before God; or the keeping of man made rules that are added to God's rules. This list is very Jewish and law oriented, but if we asked our generation today what makes them a good person we would have a number of responses. We have self-righteousness on the left and on the right. People today on the political left do not need Jesus because they see themselves as good because they believe in a Bi-partite government in NZ; because they believe in climate change and want to see change in how businesses pollute so that future generations will have a clean earth to live in; because they adopt needy animals; support minority rights; resist capitalist consumerism; practice recycling; grow their own foods; avoid meat; etc, etc. On the political right people happily live without Jesus Christ as their Savior because they see themselves as good because they advocate for the family, are against abortion, support freedom of speech, resist leftist ideologies as they seek to take captive the minds of our children, support and even practice a religion of some sort for the sake of having community, etc etc. Both of these groups are in error; both of these groups are self-deceiving because they see themselves as basically good, and they do not see themselves as incurable sinners who are hopeless apart from faith in Christ. This confidence in self for righteousness is the error that the false teachers in Philippi are promoting, the lie that Paul himself believed and is the lie that every single sinner needs to understand before they will come in humility to the only one who can save us from the guilt of our sins, Jesus Christ.

The righteousness that comes from Christ

V7-8, 'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.' Paul of course encountered a God of grace who saved him. On the Damascus road this self-righteous Pharisee who was trusting in his own righteousness was confronted by a visitation from the risen Christ. Everything Paul ever thought he knew was now shown to be false. Jesus who he thought an impostor is in fact the Messiah; the way of salvation that he thought was by his own efforts he now sees is the way to judgement and hell. Look at how he describes these things. Firstly he says that he counts all these things as loss; and secondly that he counts them as rubbish. Now in and of themselves things like being moral, and observing the law are not bad, Paul says that these things are in fact advantages in Rom. 9:1-5. But if we are trusting in them for salvation, if we are counting on our observance of them to make us right before God, then they are a loss, they literally become a liability not a gain. You see any attempt we make to try and save ourselves is another sin we add to the pile of our guilt; they are evidence of our refusing to accept the Savior God provides in Christ; they are testimonies to the pride of our hearts where we think that God is not as holy as He says He is and we are better than we really are. This is why Paul calls them rubbish, or dung, or dog food. In the OT Isaiah called good deeds offered to God which are not done in faith, filthy rags. Paul is echoing this sentiment here. Contrary to what we expect God is not pleased with these efforts. Any attempt at this way of salvation can only insult God by refusing to see Him as holy as He is, and thinking that we only need to try a little harder to be holy as He is holy. This is a self-deceiving position which cannot see how bad our sins really are and our desperate need for Christ.

Paul having had all of these privileges has given them all up, and it has been costly. He is now hated by his countrymen; there is a theory that says that Paul as a Pharisee would have been married but his wife left him when he became a Christian; he has lost his position, his family, his possessions, his reputation, but for him it is worth it because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ. Jesus calls this counting all things loss as becoming poor in spirit. Casting away all the so called riches that you are relying in to make you right with God and coming empty handed to a God who is willing to give you what you need in Christ. Holding to nothing but Christ for salvation.

Paul in v7-11 lists the tremendous benefits found in Christ which exceed by far the trappings of his past life of self-righteousness. The first benefit is knowing Christ, 'the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.' What does Paul mean here by knowing Christ? John 17:3 explains it in part, 'And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.' But this word 'know' here is also the word used to describe the most intimate of relations. Paul is not only talking about an intellectual knowledge of Christ, but a personal intimate relationship with Christ. To be reconciled with the living God in Christ, as a creature to know our Creator and relate to Him as One who loves us, who is worthy of worship and who receives us into His presence as children. We are in a vital, life giving, satisfying, joy inexpressible filled relationship with our Savior.

But that is not all, Paul then goes on to list other benefits, v8c-9, '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 that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.' In having Christ we not only have a fulfilling relationship with Him, we also have a righteousness that is not our own in Him that we receive by faith. This is one of the central concerns of our passage, how can I a sinner be righteous and accepted by a holy judge? Paul has already told us how we cannot do it, we cannot trust in things like ceremonies, or where we are born, or in things like law keeping. We need righteousness, but we cannot produce that righteousness from ourselves. For this reason we need an alien righteousness to be gifted to us, and this is exactly what we receive when we trust in Christ. We have here a verse which tells us why no other religion can save and why salvation is found in Christ alone. We cannot through any other religion or righteous act produce a righteousness that will clear us on judgement day. But God in His goodness we are told by Paul gives the righteousness of Christ to those who believe.

Because we cannot be saved by works, we can only be saved by faith. But what is faith? Some have tried to redefine faith into some type of work. But faith is the empty hands that we receive the gift of Christ's righteousness with. We do not give anything to God, but coming empty handed faith is accepting that gift of righteous that comes in Christ alone. In receiving this righteous by faith we are justified.

But that is not all we have in Christ. Paul is not merely comparing one form of righteousness with another but emptiness with fullness. So he goes on, v10, 'that I may know him and the power of his resurrection.' The knowing of Christ, the receiving the gift of Christ's righteousness by faith, and next the power of Christ's resurrection. Paul has just spoken of justification, here he is speaking of sanctification. Every person who believes in Christ is also united to Christ, and there is something incredibly powerful that happens to anyone who is united with

Christ. It is like sticking your finger into a wall socket. All those who by the Spirit are united with Christ are united with the power of His resurrection. This creates a new life with us; but this also creates a new power to overcome sin where once we were dead in sin. Paul says as much in Rom. 6:5-6, 'For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.' We are not only saved from the guilt of sin and justified; but we are also delivered from the power of sin and can break free from those controlling addictions which held when we were in unbelief. We enter into a life of liberty where we can now observe God's commands and put sin to death, there is a new freedom that we experience as we break free from those sins that once controlled us.

But that is not all, 'and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.' This sounds like a very strange benefit doesn't it. Paul is extatic that he is united to Christ because now He knows the living God; he has a righteousness he could not produce; he is living in a new freedom to obey and put sin to death; but he is also glad for the privilege of suffering and being conformed to the image of Christ in His servant suffering for the sake of the elect. We must not miss this. Paul is so enamoured with the Savior who has done so much for Him, that doing anything in His will as He submits to the will of God as the Son did is Paul's happy place. In fact he is even willing to be martyred to die, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Can you see how it works. Feeling the total hopelessness of saving ourselves, we see our guilt and our lostness. But then we see God's goodness to us and His provision for the righteousness we need in Christ. We receive it in desperation, but when we do our cups runneth over and suddenly we are drinking from the fire hydrant of God's grace as we are brought into a relationship with the living God; we are granted a legal standing which will make us stand as holy on judgement day; we are rescued by His power from the enslaving power of sin and free to pursue holiness, and in response we will do anything, suffer anything, because we have everything in Christ. We will gladly give our lives in martyrdom.

But there is more still, v11, 'that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.' At the end of it all Jesus will come again, He will overcome every enemy and make a new creation for us to dwell in. not only is the guilt of our sin dealt with in justification; not only is the power of our sin dealt with in sanctification; but the very presence of sin will be dealt with in the glorification of our bodies in the resurrection. And what a hope that is. To have a body that no longer tempts us to sin; to have hearts that are free to love God with all that we are; to have eyes that can look upon the glory of God and we not be destroyed; and to forever live in constant fellowship with God.

Can you see why Paul says he is willing to count all things as loss for the sake of knowing Christ, of having Christ as His Savior? What about you? Are you here today trusting in something of yourself to make you acceptable before God. Are you uselessly pursuing a righteousness that cannot save? Or have you trusted in Christ? Have you come before God in the poverty of your sinfulness, emptied your hands of every attempt to save yourself, and come to the God who will willingly to freely give to us what we cannot provide for ourselves. If you receive Christ today you will have everything; the whole world can be taken away from you but you will be rich. You will have justification and sanctification and glorification and reconciliation. It is all found in Christ.

