

Session #4: Philippians 3.1b-16

Compiled and written by Theresa Lisiecki



Today we take a sudden turn as we will look at one of the major teachings of this letter. St. Paul has heard some news and he wants to challenge some teachings and put things right.

The Church, throughout two thousand years of history had “issues” that had to be studied and then either accepted or confronted and put down. In the first century one of the issues was the “dialogue” regarding how one becomes a Christian. I am not speaking in terms of belief but in the practical aspect of rituals and education. In that century there were those, Jewish Christian Missionaries that were very vocal, and they contended that if one was to truly embrace the way of Jesus Christ they must first become a Jew, embracing all the laws and rituals before they could fully embrace the message of Jesus and call themselves Christian. These individuals St. Paul calls Judaizers. They taught:

1. all male converts to Christianity must undergo circumcision
2. gentile converts obey the entirety of the Law of Moses. This included dietary requirements which would have seemed strange to gentile converts, such as prohibitions against pork and shellfish.
3. insisted on a separation between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. The reason is because the Jewish Christians continued to worship in the Temple and by their associating with non-Jews they were made unclean and therefore unable to enter the Temple.
4. insisted that gentile converts to Christianity observe all of the Jewish holy days in keeping with the Law of Moses.

You can see with these expectations at the very least the Christian community would always be divided had the Judaizers gotten their way, and at most Christianity would be a sect within the Jewish religion. In his writing St. Paul maintains and supported by the teachings of the First Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) that circumcision nor the traditions and beliefs of the Jewish faith were necessary to embrace and live the Christian message. This issue comes up time and time again as these Judaizers travel the land proclaiming the Gospel. St. Paul once again must challenge their teachings trying to keep the community at Philippi on the straight path.

Beware of the Dogs! 3.1b-7

3:1 To write the same things

While this is the only surviving letter to the Philippians it doesn't mean that it is the only letter that St. Paul wrote to this community. It is most probable that either during his initial stay or in another letter he took up this subject (what is to follow) before; but there is no concern on his part to repeat the teaching because it is that important. St. Paul is most likely offering the teaching in hopes of protecting them rather than to correct them since he is using no specific example. Scholars say this not only because of the tone of the document but also

because the letter gives no indication that there are those in the Philippian community having embraced the Judaizers ways.

As you read this next verse hear in your mind St. Paul screaming at the community in Philippi. He is angry. If St. Paul were texting, verse two would be in all capitals.

3:2 Beware of the Dogs These would be the Judaizers that we spoke of in the opening paragraphs. St. Paul is turning this “identification” of “dogs” back on them. Jews of that age sometimes referred to gentiles as dogs. St. Paul’s anger continues as he calls the Judaizers: **evil-doers.**

beware of the mutilation Simply put – circumcision. In the same way baptism is required of all who wish to live their life of faith in the Catholic Church, within the Jewish community all males must become circumcised, regardless of age. The Greek word used for mutilation is better translated “incision” and makes a nice word play on circumcision. As discussed at the beginning of this lesson, the Judaizers were teaching a false teaching (See Acts 15). Peter and the Council of Jerusalem had decided:

And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Acts 15:8-11

3:3 we are the circumcision What St. Paul is speaking to here is that our lives, not a part of our body, gives testimony as to our belonging to God. As Christians our lives should be a living witness of “cutting off” the unnecessary acts and actions, those things that lead us away from our salvation. From the time of John the Baptist it is Baptism that celebrates our covenant relationship with God.

3:4-6 I myself have reason for confidence Here in verse four and continuing into verse five and six, St. Paul offers an argument against the Judaizers. He himself has been circumcised. This is what he speaks of when he says he has **confidence in the flesh**. St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:22-23: *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.* Here in verse four through six of Philippians we learn, as a Jew why St. Paul’s confidence had he remained a Jew:

1. **circumcised on the eighth day** (Jewish law)
2. **race of Israel** – meaning that he was Jewish by his heritage or family lines (not a convert who would be seen as less than by the Jews)
3. **tribe of Benjamin** – which means he can trace his lineage back to Abraham. He is pure blood. It is also important to note that those born of this tribe take great pride because within its geographic borders are Jerusalem and the Temple.

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4. **Hebrew of Hebrew parentage** – both parents were Jewish, more importantly St. Paul was raised Jewish. Judaism was more than just a nationality to his family. It was their faith and life.
5. **A Pharisee** – in relationship to Jesus we can understand Pharisees as the enemy. But there were good Pharisees. Joseph of Arimathea is a good example. Pharisees were basically devout laymen who had devoted their lives to teaching the everyday people how to practice the laws of Moses in their daily lives. (In many ways, although a woman, I would be considered a Pharisee.)
6. **as to zeal** St. Paul goes on to describe the depth of his passion for the Jewish faith as a young man here in verse six. He describes himself as **a persecutor of the Church**. What he is speaking to here is the fact that Paul (then known as Saul) was one of the chief instigators trying to shut down this “new movement” of belief called “the Way”, those that followed Jesus. Read Acts 8:1-3. With these facts St. Paul is hoping to fortify the choices of the gentile Christians and to shut down any Judaizers who may be listening.
7. **based on the law...blameless** St. Paul is gathering all 613 laws of the Torah into this one statement. He is blameless because he observed all 613.

3:7 whatever gains I had, I come to consider loss

Now, having shown his resume that many would boast in, he recognizes it for what it is... nothing. For none of his Jewish beliefs and practices gave him what Christ has done for all – salvation. For some there is a dramatic sense of life before faith, before Christ and life after. St. Paul is one of these people. A son of a rich man who came to Jerusalem to become a great scholar in the Jewish faith. So great was his passion for his faith that he was a leader in a movement to stamp out these followers of “the Way”, of Jesus (Acts 7:54-60, 8:1-3, 9:1-2). St. Paul had money, authority and prestige. Yet, once he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus (Act 9:3-18) he recognized how truly worthless those things and values of the world, even those found in a religious world when not based in Christ.

Nothing in his writing suggests that Pharisee Paul ever thought of himself as leaving his Judaism behind. Rather, he has come to know Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism. The old covenant and its rituals, precious as they were, were powerless to bring salvation. His identity is now rooted in Christ, who alone bestows “the righteousness that comes from God” and , ultimately, resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:7-8)

Philippians, Colossians, Philemon by Dennis Hamm, SJ

ONE FINAL COMMENT: St. Paul’s criticism of the Judaizers is not to be understood as his critique of the entire faithful of Judaism. Many over the centuries have used St. Paul’s words as the basis for hatred and bigotry against the Jews. In looking at the whole of St. Paul’s writings we can see that he had great love for his heritage and grieved for those Israelites/Jews who did not see Jesus as the Messiah, as the fulfillment of the law. We read in Romans 9:3-5:

I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the

worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

As Catholics, as Christians we are called to reach out to our brothers and sisters in that we share the same beginning through the call of Abraham. The enduring value of God's covenant with the Jews is strongly affirmed in the writings of the Second Vatican Council. (SEE: NOSTRA AETATE Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, section #4.)

Righteousness Comes from God 3:8-11

In this section St. Paul goes on to explain his statement in 3:7, that everything that came before his knowing Jesus Christ pales in value compared to the love he now knows and experiences through Jesus Christ.

3:8 *consider everything as a loss*

The point that St. Paul is making in verse eight is that there is a difference between "knowing" Christ (head knowledge) and "knowing" Christ (heart knowledge). Before St. Paul's meeting on the road to Damascus St. Paul, as Jew knew (head knowledge) about the Messiah; but once he encountered Jesus St. Paul came to truly know (heart knowledge) Jesus as his personal Messiah. While his life before his conversion gave St. Paul a firm foundation, it did not give him life. It is like going from a world of black and white to all the sudden seeing color, or blindness to sight. With most translations we don't get the full extend of St. Paul's emotion on this matter until we understand that a better translation of the Greek word we read as "rubbish" is better translated as "dung".

3:9 *not having a righteousness of my own*

Once again St. Paul is making a distinction between "legal" righteousness which the Israelites sought through the law and that received as a gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In other words, the difference gaining salvation through their own works by adherence to the law (*righteousness of my own*) as opposed to ***through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God*** which is only dependent on our decision to believe and receive it. For St. Paul legal righteousness is not a saving righteousness because it is dependent on human effort. Salvation only comes from the grace and mercy of God. Our part is to receive it and then live as one who, in all gratitude appreciates it. There is still debate among scholars today as to the appropriate translation of the *through faith in Christ*, which makes us more active in the equation of faith. Some scholars offer that a better translation of that phrase and better continues the message of St. Paul in the power of God by translating the phrase to: *through the faithfulness of Christ*.

3:10 *the power of his resurrection and (the) sharing of his suffering*

So, if we can't earn our way into heaven then what is our calling in faith? St. Paul explains what we are "to do" here in verse ten. We have two calls in our vocation as Christians:

1. Believing in the power of the resurrection: There are many Christians who say they believe but they live as if salvation is something for them to earn. The first call in faith is to celebrate, honor and accept that salvation is a gift. We do this by living in the joy of faith, the love of faith, the mercy of faith. We live in relationship with others as Christ lived in relationship with

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us. He loved us. He forgave us. And in that we should communicate nothing but joy at believing.

2. Sharing in His suffering: Whatever difficulties life brings us we should understand it as a privilege for it gives us the opportunity to be sharers in the redemptive work of Christ. St. John Paul II says in *Salvifici Doloris*: “*In bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption. Thus each man, in his sufferings, can also become a sharer in the redemptive suffering of Christ*”

And how do we do this? By **being conformed** (to Christ and) **to his death**. We are not to understand this in complete terms of dying for Christ, although some (martyrs) are called to this privilege. Rather to understand our vocation as Christians as committing ourselves to the ongoing process of imitating Christ is all that we do and become, the ongoing commitment to self-emptying love in service to all we encounter.

3:11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead We are not to read this last phrase as St. Paul having doubt. Once again it is a statement of recognition of salvation as a gift, freely given but can always be taken back.

Forward in Christ 3:12-16

3:12 attained perfect maturity One of the most dangerous sins is to believe that while we live we have “arrived” in perfection of God’s grace. St. Paul, after discussing the gift of salvation and our vocation as Christians is now acknowledging that he still has work to do to perfect himself in Christ, but he will continue in his **pursuit in that that (he) may possess it**. Fr. Dennis Hamm in his commentary calls the work we must do here on earth as *the dance of discipleship*. This dance is an interplay between our need for God’s grace and mercy, our commitment to the process to deserve these gifts and God’s loving compassion and salvation. And why does St. Paul **press on to make (faith) his own?** Because Christ Jesus first **made (him) his own** when He called St. Paul to conversion on the road to Damascus.

3:14 I press on toward the goal Some scholars suggest that St. Paul must have been an athlete in his younger days or at the very least enjoyed watching the athletes because he uses that imagery in many of his letters to being an athlete (2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 9:24-27; Hebrews 12:11-13). St. Paul is comparing living in faith to running a race. The prize? Salvation. But this prize is yet to be won because as long as we are alive we are running this race. Just a thought. In the heat of competition what athlete thinks about all the mistakes they have made along the race? Athletes live in the moment with their eyes on the prize. As Christians, while it is important to continually assess our “performance” and seek reconciliation with God, we must not obsess on our failures but get up immediately and strive to do better.

call of God The concept of “call” is an important one in the bible, and especially in St. Paul’s writing. To be called by God can speak of either a conversion experience or a vocation in faith. Here scholars suggest that St. Paul is speaking of the latter. That our call of God is a call to live a life of faith until we draw our last breath.

3:15 who are “perfectly mature” Many translators choose to add quotations around the phrase “perfectly mature” because it better fits into the context of the message. St. Paul just go done saying that he had not achieve perfect maturity in verse 12. Is he changing his mind here? No. Scholars suggest that rather he is employing a bit of humor at his own expense so as to challenge those at the community in Philippi who do see themselves as being perfectly mature to join him in continuing to run the race of faith, to continue to seek ways to grow in faith. Every community has those individuals who believe they have arrived in perfection of knowing how to live as a faithful Catholic. Their attitude is one of “What to be a perfect Catholic? Just do

what I do.” St. Paul is challenging this and in an excellent way. How can one stand strong in this belief when their hero says they are not perfect?

3:16 Continue on the same course

As St. Paul draws this section to a close he acknowledges the hard work that everyone has done, the progress they have made. They are moving in the right direction. So, now just remain on the same course you have been going.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are your “Christian Credentials”, your resume of faith? If you needed to convince others of your “faithfulness”, what accomplishments, degrees, contacts, memberships, activities, service and so on would you list so as to convince them.
2. What are your thoughts about “perfect maturity” in faith? Do you believe it is attainable while walking this earth? If so, can you give examples.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

At the Heart of the Catechism: 426-429

Jesus and Israel: 574-576

Relationship with Jews: 439, 574-576

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