

Lesson 13

Legalism, Complacency and Maturity

Philippians 3:12-14

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. All of us know of individuals who were gloriously saved but after a few months or years they grew cold spiritually, falling into complacency in spiritual matters. A person may start his Christian life with enthusiasm, zeal and vigor and then after a few years fall into a life of indifference, apathy and inactivity. Complacency must be avoided like the plague by a Christian. Yet, probably the one word which best describes American Christianity today is “complacent.”

- B. Complacency is not, however, a 20th century phenomena. Complacency faced the Philippian Christians because they were being influenced by a group of false teachers called Judaizers. Paul begins chapter three warning these Philippians about Judaistic legalists and he concludes chapter three by telling them the destiny of these false teachers – destruction. We are forced to conclude that what is written between the beginning and ending of chapter three is somehow connected with the refutation of the Judaistic legalizers. What did the Judaizers teach? They taught that salvation was belief in Jesus Christ PLUS keeping the ceremonial law, namely circumcision. But they also felt that every Gentile Christian had to keep the man-made laws, traditions and customs of the Jews to be saved. Probably most Christians at Philippi would not be swayed by the legalists in salvation but this could affect their whole concept of sanctification or Christian living. Some of the Philippians were saying that to be a Christian one only had to believe in Christ but to be a spiritual Christian one had to keep the ceremonial law and the traditions of Judaism. Paul’s whole point in chapter three is to show the inadequacy of legalism in any form to save or to sanctify. Paul’s antidote to legalism is a life occupied, dominated and controlled by the person of Jesus Christ. A person who knows Christ, loves Christ, obeys Christ and serves Christ does not have time for legalistic nit-picking.

- C. It is important we understand what the legalistic Judaizers taught and how this worked itself out in a practical lifestyle. They taught a system of man-made rules, rituals, customs and traditions which were distinctly Jewish but not biblical. For them, if a person was circumcised, obeyed the ceremonial law and kept the traditions of Judaism, that person was spiritual. In fact, that person was truly mature. He had reached the zenith, the apex of their legalistic system. He had arrived; He had achieved everything which was dictated and mandated by his own system of righteousness. It was all done. He could not go any further. The result

was they became very proud and very complacent. They politely folded their hands and said, “now that I’m spiritual, now that I have reached maturity as a Judaizer, there is nothing left for me to do. For all practical purposes, they thought they had reached some state of sinless perfectionism because they did or did not do certain external things. NOTE. What was happening is that many of the true Philippian Christians were being influenced by this kind of false teaching. A type of sinless perfectionism was creeping into the first century assembly. Gentile Christians were beginning to think that they had to keep the ceremonial law and Jewish traditions and customs if they were to be truly spiritual. The result of all this would be complacency. Once a legalist arrives at his own man-made standard of righteousness, he sits back very smugly, very complacently, feeling there is no need to struggle on in the Christian life, no need to fight the good fight because he has arrived; he is spiritual; he is fully mature. He does not sin against his own man-made standard of righteousness.

- D. Paul uses his own life to refute these Judaizers. Paul shows he has not attained to full maturity. HE has not arrived at complete spirituality, but he is one who was constantly growing into maturity even after 30 years of being a Christian.

II. ADMISSION OF SIN AND NEED OF MATURITY 3:12a

- A. ***Not that I have already obtained all this***, -- Paul attacks perfectionism by denying it. For Paul, there is no such thing as perfectionism in the Christian life. AT no time are Christians sinlessly perfect or have their sin natures eradicated. The “all this” refers back to Philippians 3:10 where the one consuming goal of Paul was to be constantly knowing Christ (***Phil. 3:10: I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death....***). As he persevered in fellowship with Christ, he felt he would attain to the resurrection of the just at which time he would be perfect; he would be sinless; he would know Christ completely and totally (***3:11: And so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.***). Paul admits he has not lay hold of perfect fellowship with Christ in his experience, and he fell short of what he could be and should be in his experiential walk with Christ.
- B. ***Or have already been made perfect*** – Contrary to the Judaizers and their legalistic system of perfection, Paul says he is not yet perfect. The word “perfect” means “fully complete” or “mature.” Paul says he fell short of complete and mature fellowship with Christ because even as a saved man, he still had sin in his life. Paul pointedly denies that he had reached a spiritual impasse of non-development. The struggle with sin, fear and doubt was not yet over. He had made great gains in his spiritual life, in Christ-likeness, but the goal was still before him not behind him. NOTE. Paul was perfectly satisfied with Jesus Christ, but he was not satisfied with the moral quality of his life and his depth of fellowship with Christ. Paul felt inadequate in his Christian life which simply pointed out the reality of sin and his utter need for more dependence on Christ. Yet, Paul had no legalistic concepts of perfectionism at any level.

III. ACTING IN RESPONSE TO GRACE 3:12b

- A. ***But I press on*** – This literally says, “I constantly press on.” The “press on” is an athletic term, depicting a runner who gives his all to win a foot race. Paul was constantly seeking a deeper life of fellowship with Christ and greater moral and ethical changes in his life as a Christian. NOTE. A sense of inadequacy to reach ultimate perfection in his present experience did not discourage but encouraged him because he knew he could have progressive victory over sin. And he pursued this goal with every ounce of energy in him.
- B. ***To take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me*** – Paul now speaks of the time he first met the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road. Before his conversion, Paul was a proud, religious, contented, self-righteous Jew who cared nothing about Christ. Paul was not about to change until he met Christ or better yet, Christ met him. It was Christ who took the initiative to save Paul. Christ sovereignly intervened into this lost man’s life. The starting point in his salvation was when Christ laid hold of him for salvation and Paul laid hold of Christ by faith. Yet, Christ laid hold of him for a definite purpose – that he might be Christ-like (Rom. 8:29-30). Paul pressed on in his life for more conformity to Christ. He found Christ but now he wants to broaden, expand and deepen his relationship with Christ. He wants to experience Christ-likeness.

Undoubtedly there are some in this room who have never even begun the Christian life. You say, “I go to church” – fine. “I read my Bible” – good. “I say my prayers” – excellent. “I live a decent life” – of course. “I try to help other people” – splendid. Many people do all these things and are not Christians, for you cannot start the Christian life until you have met the Savior. Christ must lay hold of you for salvation, and you must respond by faith to Christ.

IV. ADVANCEMENT IN FELLOWSHIP AND MATURITY 3:13

- A. ***Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.*** -- Paul gave deep meditation to his life and concluded that he had not arrived to total spiritual maturity even after 30 years of knowing Christ. He admits again that he fell short of what he could be or should be as a Christian. At no time does a Christian, even a mature Christian, ever need to stop growing in grace. As long as we are breathing, we must be growing.
- B. ***But one thing I do;*** -- Again Paul reverts back to the athletic runner. He compares the track runner, who is well trained and disciplined, to the Christian who is to persevere in Christ. The key focus to a successful runner in track is concentration. Everything is put out of the runners mind except winning the race. NOTE. A Christian has but one passion in life, to the exclusion of all other interests, to win the

Christian race through fellowship with Christ. NOTE. In the Greek and Roman games, there would be a pole at the finish line and the runners would fix their eyes on this pole and run towards it (**Heb. 12:2a: Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...**).

- C. **Forgetting what is behind** – A runner does not look back. If he does, he will lose his speed and cut down his stride which in turn may cause him to lose the race. NOTE. Paul forgot completely about the sins of his unsaved life and they were many because he called himself “the chief of sinners.” He attempted to erase these negative things from his mind because he was completely forgiven by Christ. He refused to let the sins of his past haunt him. Why? Because Christ died for all his sins no matter how great or small. Surely Paul also put behind him his sins, failures and mistakes as a saved person. He refused to go over and over his shortcomings as a Christian. A Christian must never go back but must go forward if he is to win the race. NOTE. Paul forgot his failures but also his successes, his victories, and his triumphs. A Judaizer with his legalistic system felt he had arrived at perfection; therefore, he was always looking back, becoming indifferent about the future and complacent about the present. Not so Paul. He would not rest on his laurels; he would not live in the past. He was determined to move forward.
- D. **And straining toward what is ahead** – This is a picture of a runner straining every nerve and stretching every muscle to cross the finish line and win the race. NOTE. The Christian is to give every ounce of strength to gain fellowship with Christ and experience progressive victory over sin. He clearly understands that the race is not won until he crosses the finish line. He does not dwell upon the failures and successes of the past, but dwells upon the challenge of the future. The Christian must grasp every opportunity for fellowship with Christ until the race is finished. There must be unwavering progression in the things of Christ.

V. ARRIVING AT COMPLETE MATURITY 3:14

- A. **I press on toward the goal.** – Paul was constantly pursuing the goal of Christ-likeness as a disciplined athlete of Jesus Christ. He was always moving towards the goal of total and complete fellowship with Christ, even though he knew he could not attain it in this life. Total, complete and final fellowship comes at death or in the resurrection at the second coming of Christ. Until then, we walk, we fight, we struggle, and we strain to know Christ better and better. NOTE. The legalist stresses external conformity in the power of the flesh. The Christian stresses exertion, effort, hard work in dependence on Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.
- B. **To win the prize** – The prize for the Christian is perfect fellowship with Christ, total eradication of the sin nature and complete maturity. In the Greek games, the winner of a race was called up out of the arena to the judge’s seat where the King or Emperor often sat. After Christians have run the race well and finish it, then they will be rewarded by the Great Judge, Jesus Christ, and shall be perfect.
- C. **For which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.** – This could be translated, “Because God has given me an upward calling in Christ Jesus.” The prize is perfect fellowship with Christ and there is an upward calling to move towards this ultimate goal of Christ. NOTE. When it appears the goal of fellowship with Christ is being reached in our experience, the goal is set up a little higher, then higher, and we progress towards fellowship with Christ which will be complete in eternity. NOTE. Fellowship with Christ is progressive. Each step of deeper fellowship with

Christ is a step towards heaven and the complete reality of Christ. Each step of fellowship with Christ now is “a little bit of heaven.”

VI. APPLICATIONS

- A. Today we don't meet up much with the type of legalism these Judaizers were setting forth. There are a few Christians today who wrestle with ceremonial law, Jewish tradition and Hebrew custom. This is not a threat to most of us but Satan always designs new forms of legalism which leads to a type of perfectionism.
- B. Classical Legalism. This view says that a Christian comes to a place in his experience where he does not consciously sin any longer. This type of perfectionism was propagated by John Wesley. Although Wesley believed perfection was attainable in this life, he never claimed to have attained it himself but knew others who he thought had. As a matter of fact, he denied having attained it and yet he thought it attainable in this life. Those who claim to reach this level of perfectionism are usually filled with legalistic pride and unable to communicate with the real world around them.
- C. Victorious Life Legalism. Victorious life teaching says one can be perfect for his particular stage of growth. This view says Christians can have temporary moments of perfection where there is no conflict, struggle or warfare for there is complete, momentary victory over sin. This type of perfectionism produces inactivity and complacency because once this stage is reached there is nothing to do but trust God.
- D. Moral Legalism. Christians make up their own little lists of do's and don'ts which are based on opinion, culture and tastes and not scripture. Things such as hair style, dress length, movies, TV, music, wine, dancing, make-up or whatever. They reason that because they do not do these things they are spiritual; they have arrived. That is, they have achieved their own standard of human righteousness. Yet, this same crowd may be guilty of over eating, pride gossip, harsh attitudes and backbiting which are taught about in scripture. However, they reason these things are O.K. because they are not part of a legalistic standard they have imposed upon themselves and others. The person who arrives at this man-made standard often becomes very smug, full of pride and self-righteousness. Believing he has arrived spiritually, he becomes very complacent in self-righteousness.
- E. Religious Legalism. A person may have some experience and set that experience up as a criterion or test for spirituality and maturity. For instance, there are many today who think that if they have spoken in tongues, this is the apex of spirituality and maturity. They have arrived. Yet, some of these folks may live in deep immorality but it does not bother them because their standard of spirituality is tongues.
- F. Formula Legalism. There are those today who talk about “The Spirit-filled Life” and give a pat formula to get Spirit-filled. Yet, the Bible teaches that Spirit-filling is Spirit-control and this comes as one yields to the Lordship of Christ in his experience. It is possible to become legalistic about a formula when the Bible gives no formula.
- G. Doctrinal Legalism. These folks say that if one holds to a particular doctrinal creed or emphasis he is spiritual. They conclude that knowing and agreeing with certain doctrine is the test of spirituality and maturity. There are many Christians who

know a great deal of doctrine but lack love and application of the Word of God to their experience. They are not mature just because they know doctrine or assent to a creed. This type of thinking leads to dead orthodoxy which in turn leads to complacency. NOTE. I am not anti-doctrine or negative about theology. I believe in biblical theology. I believe the Westminster Confession but knowledge of these does not automatically make one spiritual or mature. There must be the application of the Word to ones experience over a period of time for maturity to come in the life. It is a living faith in Christ and His Word not dead orthodoxy which brings maturity.

VII. CONCLUSION

- A. Perhaps there are some within the sound of my voice who have never had their own Damascus Road experience. Christ has not as yet invaded your life. IT is quite conceivable that you have confused church membership, baptism, denominationalism, good works, legalism and man-made religion with real Christianity. Christianity is Christ, and if you do not know the resurrected and living Christ personally, you are not a Christian.
 - B. If you are without Christ, I plead with you to see your lost condition. Except Christ invade your life, you shall never seem heaven. I beg you to ask Christ to save you before it is too late.
 - C. Except Christ take the initiative to convict you and draw you to Himself, and you respond by trusting Him as your Savior and Lord, you will never be saved. You will perish in you sins. What a ghastly thought!
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