

Lesson 14

The Subtlety of Error

Philippians 3:15-21

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Doctrinal accuracy is very important, for what we do in practice is directly related to what we believe. Error in doctrine does not usually come overnight but it creeps in on a person very subtly. This is why it is crucial for Christians to know their Bible, for the final criterion for checking all doctrine or experience is the Bible.
- B. Doctrinal error, concerning sin and grace, was making inroads into the Church of Philippi. The threat was in the area of legalism and libertinism. Both of these extremes would be detrimental to the Philippian Christians.
- C. In chapter three, the first error Paul warns against is that of the legalism of the Judaizers (*Phil. 3:2: Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.*). These Judaizers were legalists because they taught salvation and sanctification were not by grace through faith in Christ alone but belief in Christ PLUS circumcision, keeping of ceremonial law and adherence to Jewish man-made custom, tradition and ritual. Remember, these Judaizers claimed to be followers of Christ. Yet they were in error because they were adding some form of works to salvation or Christian living. NOTE. What motivated these legalists? They were motivated by the fear of change. For the first seven years of the New Testament church, there were only converted Jews to Christ. These Christian-Jews had hundreds of years of Jewish tradition behind them. A Jew was told never to mingle with Gentiles, never to eat their foods, never adopt their culture and never worship their gods. A revered Jew was one who stayed faithful to Judaism regardless of the influence of the Gentile pagan culture. Those who were able to isolate and insulate themselves from pagan forces were the truly dedicated and committed Jews. These early Christian-Jews maintained their Jewishness but loved Christ within the Jewish culture. Yet, there were false Jewish-Christians who claimed to be followers of Christ but insisted that all Gentiles become like Jews in order to be saved. They were Judaizers. True Christian-Jews and false Jewish-Christians were all alarmed when, after fifteen years or so, they saw all these Gentiles turning to Christ, bringing with them much of their pagan culture which the Jew was trained to hate. They feared that these converted Gentiles would destroy their Jewish culture. True Christian-Jews struggled with the change but ultimately made it but the false Jewish-Christians could not make the change so they devised a system of legalism to restrain what they thought was the lawlessness of the Gentiles entering into their culture. Their system was to make all Gentile converts to be Jews by law, by tradition and by custom. If Gentiles wanted to follow Christ, they had to become Jews in a cultural sense. These Judaizers were driven by the fear of change because they were threatened by the influx of Gentiles into the visible Christian church. They were frightened that pagans or pagan influences might take over the church. The only way they knew to stop Gentile influences was to counteract it with legalistic rules which were not biblical. The legalists were reacting to what they thought was the lawlessness of the Gentiles. They saw legalism as a safeguard to

preserving their own Jewish culture within the church. These Judaizers went too far and subtly slipped into the error of legalism, making them false teachers.

We may not be able to identify with the Jew-Gentile problem within the church but perhaps we can identify with something a little more contemporary. Suppose our church had an influx of Hippies into the church. Soon it became obvious that they were a large block in the church and growing. We were not adjusted to their style of dress, their taste for music, and their modes of worship. They also began to bring their unsaved friends to church and we could detect the smell of marijuana in the church sanctuary. It would appear that they would grow large enough to take over the church. This would be distressing for all of us. The establishment in the church would insist that some type of restraining force be put upon this distressing situation. They would say, "Don't you think we should pass some rules to keep these people in line, have a dress code and insist that the hair be cut above the ears? Out of fear of change, there would be a drift towards legalism, believing that legalism would be a safeguard when really it is just a reaction to change. The Christian thing to do is accept these people and accept the change that comes with it, providing the change is scriptural.

II. ERROR OF SINLESS PERFECTION or DECEIVED CITIZENS 3:15-17

- A. Last week we saw how Paul refuted the doctrine of sinless perfectionism using his own life as an example. He claimed that perfection could only be reached in eternity and that he in his own experience could only reach relative maturity. Yet, he pushed on in his life towards the goal of perfection, experiencing progressive victory over sin, fear and doubt in his daily life. As a Christian, Paul forgot things behind him and stretched forth to attain a deeper fellowship with Christ which would ultimately lead him to the goal of perfect fellowship and sinless perfection in eternity (Phil. 3:10-14)
- B. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. – The legalistic Judaizers thought they were mature or perfect because they had attained to their own standard of man-made righteousness. But Paul says a mature Christian is one who has the same attitude about progressive sanctification as Paul. The mature believer understands the necessity of pushing on in the Christian life, always stretching forward for Christ and not looking back at failures or successes. The mature Christian sees legalism of any kind as inadequate to save or sanctify. The mature Christian sees there is a constant need for a deeper walk with Christ. The mature Christian knows the Christian life is ultimately a coming to know intimately, personally and dynamically Jesus Christ and maintaining that relationship daily.

John Newton, the great Puritan preacher of days gone by also expressed in his life the desire of the Apostle Paul:

"I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I hope to be in another world, but still I am not what I once use to be, and by God's grace I am what I am."

- C. ***And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.*** Paul says those in the Philippian church, who had fallen into the error of legalism or sinless perfection, would be dealt with by God not by him. At this point, Paul could have become very legalistic himself saying, "Since you don't agree with me, I'm going to give you a list of do's and don'ts which will force you to think my way." This

approach would have made Paul a legalist himself. But his attitude is very loving. He says God will reveal this error to them. There were deceived brothers and sisters in Christ and they needed understanding from God on the matter of sanctification. God would make the matter known to them but would the knowledge be headed? They had to be ready to change if God showed them the error of their legalistic ways. In order to change, they would have to stop being critical, harsh, negative and judgmental of their brethren who did not think just exactly like them. Paul believed God was able to change these Philippians who had fallen into error. NOTE. All Christians have everything there is to know. All of us are confused about certain areas of our Christian life. All of us resist the Lord in some areas. God will show us the error of our way, and when he does we must be willing to change.

- D. ***Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*** – However far these Philippians had come in their spiritual maturity, they were not to rest on their laurels. They were to move on, for they were still a long way from perfection. The song “Higher Ground” expresses the desire of the Apostle Paul:

*“I’m pressing on the upward way,
New heights I’m gaining every day;
Still praying as I onward bound,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.
Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By Faith, on heaven’s table-land,
A higher plane than I have found;
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.”*

- E. ***Join with others in following my example, brothers*** – The Philippians were to imitate Paul’s life in the area of progressive sanctification. Paul was an illustration of a saved man who still struggled with sin in his life. Paul failed many times but he did not let that stop him. He knew about God’s grace in the sanctification process. Therefore, he confessed his sins and got up and kept moving for Christ. NOTE. We need Christians today like Paul who will say, “Follow me as I follow the Lord!” But in order to say it a person has to live it. How are we to follow the example of Paul? 1) By not trying to please God in the power of the flesh but in the power of the Holy Spirit; 2) By not turning to legalism to control our lives but to Christ and His moral law. 3) By being convinced that we have not yet arrived spiritually and we must push on; 4) By striving to live a diligent and disciplined life for Christ. NOTE: Paul says, “Join with others”. We need to choose to be influenced by Christians who are walking in faith. The people we “hang out with” will influence us. When we are discouraged, find ourselves losing hope, are stagnant in our Christian walk, then we ought to “hang out” with people who will influence us for Christ, for godliness, for holiness of life. Choose some Christian who is worth emulating. Let your life be influenced by one who is mature.

- F. And take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. – Paul tells these Philippians to “take note” or “mark out” those who followed the example of Paul. The Philippians were to follow these people. Paul says in essence, “Don’t follow everyone. Follow those who follow the Lord. Follow the Apostolic example.” Christians are to follow those men or women who follow the Lord.

Christians need examples to follow. Observe the average American teenager. Who are his examples? Who are his idols? Some macho-man on a motorcycle. Some athlete who is carnal. Some rock star who blatantly sings and lives immorally. Some movie star who portrays a sexual image. Why not follow some real heroes and pattern yourself after Moses’ leadership, Daniel’s wisdom, Joseph’s kindness, Abraham’s faith, Job’s patience, Paul’s zeal. Why not follow Martin Luther who when before the Diet of Worms said, “It is a dangerous thing to go against my conscience. I will not recant. Here I stand. God help me!” Why not follow a George Mueller who lived a life of prayer. Let these men be your idols so you can say, “Follow me as I follow the Lord.”

III. ERROR OF LIBERTINISM or FALSE CITIZENS 3:18-19

Not only was legalism and perfectionism an error in the Philippian church but so was libertinism. The libertines were antinomians (those against law) and they were in reaction to the legalists. These were professing Christians who believed that once they had trusted Christ, they could live as they please. They asked the question, “Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound and they answered, “Yes!” They threw out the moral law under the guise of grace and were living in rank sin. They were willfully sinning saying that God would give them more grace. This, of course, is not a matter of Christian liberty. This is a matter of blatant sin and rebellion to the moral law of God. Christian liberty deals with things not specifically commanded against in scripture, but libertinism violates the commands of God, twisting the teaching of the grace of God. These libertines were guilty of antinomianism which is rebellion against the moral law of God.

- A. ***For I have often told you before and now I saw again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.*** – These libertines were not outside the visible church but within it. How were they enemies of the cross? They were turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. They said Christ died for their sins but went right on sinning. Christ died that His people might not serve sin any longer, yet these libertines were using the cross as an excuse to sin. They reasoned, “If Christ died for all my sins (past, present and future) then I can keep on sinning because through his death I will be forgiven.” NOTE. Yet, the Bible teaches just the opposite. In Titus 2:11, 12 it says, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” In Titus 2:14 it says, “Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” NOTE. A false teaching which is so common in our American Christendom today is, “What really delivered me was when I found out Jesus loves me no matter how I live.” That simply is not true. John 14:21 says, “Whoever has my commandments and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” If a person professes Christ and yet has no desire to love Christ and hate sin, there is no basis to call that person a Christian.

NOTE. Those who pretend to be on the side of Christ but are not, do more harm to the cause of Christ than open scoffers. These hypocrites masquerade as believers but all the while despise the moral law of God and true holiness.

- A. ***Their destiny is destruction;*** -- The ultimate end for the charlatan Christians will be hell, not quick annihilation but everlasting destruction. Why their destruction? Because they never really appropriated Christ into their lives as Savior from sin. No matter what these phony Christians believe, they will one day hear the words, "Depart from me, you who are cursed into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."
- B. ***Their god is their stomach,*** -- These libertines had accepted the Epicurean philosophy of life with a Christian flavoring, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." They worshipped what could be felt and touched. They reasoned that Christ is love; therefore, He will overlook how they live now. Libertines live to satisfy the lusts of the body. They lived for the sensual experience of the moment. They live to eat, to drink, to have pleasure, to indulge in orgies and to do anything that pleases the flesh. Their motto is, "If it feels good, do it." Gluttony, drunkenness, sexual immorality, adultery, homosexuality and pleasure seeking is their lifestyle. They saturate themselves with all the physical experiences of life and call themselves Christian. They worship the sensual nature and their existence is one of self-gratification.
- C. Libertines are all about us in the modern day visible church. We call them liberals. These professing liberals support free sex and alternate homosexual lifestyles. Many professing Christians push hard for abortions because they feel that a mother has the right to live her own life as she pleases. If the unborn child is an inconvenience to her, then she has the right to abort it. One million three hundred thousand abortions are performed each year in the USA which is nothing but a gratification of self. Abortion is murder. Professing Christians who support wholesale abortion are headed for destruction no matter what they profess. Libertines attack the family, saying if marriage is too tough, get out and get a divorce. This is gratification of self.

Today courses are taught in so-called Christian based colleges on subjects such as group marriages, mate swapping, sex outside of marriage, homosexual marriages, communal families and many other perversions to destroy the family ordained by God. These things are taught so men can gratify the cravings of their flesh. Their god is their belly. Their stomach is their idol. They worship whatever is pleasing and self-indulgent.

- E. ***And their glory is their shame.*** – Libertines glory in things they should be ashamed of but they do not care. What should make them blush, they actually boast about. They brag about being the most drunk person at the party. They are proud of eating until stuffed. They boast of how many affairs they have had. They vaunt themselves as progressives because they have had a number of abortions. They pride themselves on being broadminded, they justify themselves by saying their behavior is proper and allowable. Yet, true Christians can never be tolerant with sin. True Christians are ashamed of sin and seek to deal with it in their lives.
- F. ***Their mind is on earth things*** – These false citizens of heaven, these charlatans, these hypocrites only ponder the things of the flesh and not spiritual things proving by their actions they are only

professing Christians not possessing Christians.

One time a convert of D. L. Moody, who was inebriated, said to him "Misher, Moody, don't shu rememer me? I'm your convert." Mr. Moody quickly replied, "You must be my convert, not the Lord's convert, for you do not give evidence of salvation."

IV. ERROR REPUDIATED or TRUE CITIZENS 3:20-21

A. ***But our citizenship is in heaven.*** – Paul contrasts true Christians and false Christians. Every person who lived in Philippi was a citizen of Rome, for it was a Roman colony. For them, their capitol was in Rome. They took orders from a distant city. Christians are earthly citizens but are also heavenly citizens. Christians serve their King, Jesus Christ. Their laws for living on earth come from the distant heavenly city. As citizens of heaven, Christians are ambassadors for Christ. The Christian's lifestyle and value system is built on the fact that we will not be here forever. We are one day going to be with Christ but right now we are citizens of His spiritual kingdom. Our whole style of living should be regulated by the fact we are heavenly citizens. Libertines live only for the present, the "now" experience. Christians live for the future when they will be with Christ. As the hymn writer said, "This world is not my own. I'm just a passing through. If heavens not my home, what on this earth will I do."

B. ***And we eagerly await a Savior from here, the Lord Jesus Christ.*** – While living on the earth, the true Christian looks for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Christians are characterized by a constant hope of Christ's coming. The anticipation of the Lord's return helps the Christian live a godly, separated life. ***(1 John 3:2-3: Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.)***

Lord Shaftsberry who was a great Christian English social reformer said at the near end of his life, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by our Lord's return."

C. ***Who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so they will be like his glorious body.*** – Christians eagerly await the second coming because that is when they will get sinless, perfect, resurrected and glorified bodies. At that time, the Christian will experience perfection – a perfect heart, a perfect will, a perfect body and a perfect mind. Oh, what glory that will be! That will be heaven for me!

V. APPLICATIONS: How can we detect libertinism in our lives? What is the test for libertinism?

A. What are your priorities? What things are important to us? Do we desire earthly things or heavenly things? Are our appetites carnal or spiritual? Do we live for the eternal or the temporal? Are we seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness or are we seeking our own self-gratification?

- B. Are we anxiously anticipating the return of Christ! Or do we say, "Don't come back Lord until I get married, or get that big promotion, or make it big in my business, or get my new house!" Do we think the return of Christ will interfere with our plans?
- C. Are we giving orders to your body or is it giving orders to us? Paul, who understood Christian liberty, was also a very disciplined person.
- D. Do we have godly heroes or carnal ones? Are we patterning our lives after Christ and other godly men and women who follow Christ?
- E. Do we abuse our Christian liberties causing others Christians to stumble? Are we more concerned about satisfying our flesh than loving our brother?

V. CONCLUSION

- A. When Paul saw the lost condition of men and women within the visible church, he wept. He wept for the lost outside the church but he wept even more for men and women who knew about Christ but did not know Christ.
 - B. Do you know Christ? Surely your end will be eternal destruction if you die without Christ as Savior and Lord. Do not trust your baptism. Do not trust church membership. Do not trust the fact that you have been raised in a Christian home. Trust only in Christ. He is the only way to heaven.
 - C. Christ will forgive any and all sins you have ever committed. HE died for sinners that they might not serve sin any longer. If you will come to Christ by faith, He will forgive you, grant you eternal life and give you a dynamic purpose for living. Trust Christ and really live!
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