

Lesson 11

God's Antidote for Legalism in Salvation

Philippians 3:1-7

I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever ignored a warning? What about those red lights on the dashboard of your car? When the light comes on, you say to yourself, "I'll take my car in tomorrow." Tomorrow comes and another tomorrow and one day your engine stops. Why? You neglected a warning. Warnings are to alert us to danger and Philippians 3:1-7 is to alert us to the danger of false teachings, namely that of legalism.

- A. The Book of Philippians has as its theme joy. It is mentioned sixteen times. God wants His children to experience joy and to rejoice in Christ in all circumstances. What will rob the Christian of this joy? Unbelief, discouragement, depression are all thieves of spiritual joy, but probably the number one threat to Christian joy is legalism. Legalism robs the Christian of genuine joy.
- B. Legalism can be seen in salvation. A legalist says, "Believe on Jesus Christ for salvation PLUS do something else." He holds to the fundamentals of Christianity but adds something on top of Christ for salvation to be complete. Legalism can also be seen in sanctification. A legalistic Christian wants to add some manmade rule or belief to the Christian life in order for a person to be spiritual. A Christian legalist says, "To live is Christ PLUS keeping rules, regulations, customs and traditions which I personally feel are right." Whatever form legalism takes, it always destroys the Christian's joy.
- C. In this section of scripture in Philippians, we deal with a first century heresy which said that belief in Jesus Christ was not enough for salvation but one also had to keep the Mosaic Law. These false teachers were called Judaizers made a profession of faith in Christ as Savior for Israel but added a works system to the salvation proves. Their message is summarized in Acts 15:1 (***Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."***). They, therefore, denied that salvation was by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. These Judaizers were legalists because they tried to add something to salvation.

II. FOCUS ON THE ANTIDOTE TO LEGALISM 3:1

- A. ***Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!*** -- The Apostle Paul wants these Christians to rejoice in the Lord. Joy is essential if the Christian is going to be a balanced person. Are we a joyful people? Do we express this joy outwardly so others can see the joy of Christ in us?
- B. ***It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.*** -- In chapters one and two, Paul has repeatedly told these Philippians to rejoice in Christ. It is as though Paul is saying, "You may think I'm tired of repeating it and you are tired of hearing it, but I'm not -- so rejoice." Rejoicing is a safeguard to legalism. The rejoicing Christian will never be a legalistic Christian. Why? A rejoicing Christian is wrapped up and occupied with Christ. He is dominated by the thought that all that he is and has is because of Christ. Because Christ is the source of his joy, he does not look to add anything to salvation or sanctification.

III. FIERCE WARNING AGAINST LEGALISTS 3:2,3

- A. ***Watch out for those dogs,*** -- Paul is really brutal with these false teachers and calls them "dogs." It was common for Jews to call Gentiles dogs but now Paul unmercifully gives these Jewish legalizers the same title. What a blow to Jew's pride! These dogs are not the warm and cuddly Benji and Lassie types. The dogs mentioned here are the mangy, flea-bitten, vicious mongrels who were scavengers living off the garbage of the street. What strong language! These false teachers were impure, unclean and immoral dogs. Judaizers were trying to get all Gentile Christians to practice the ceremonial laws, traditions and customs of the Jews. For his, Paul calls them "dogs."
- B. ***Those men who do evil,*** -- These false teachers probably did not deliberately go about doing evil. In their own eyes, their intention was to do good. They had sincere religious convictions but they were sincerely wrong. The outcome of their wrong doctrine was not good but evil. NOTE. False teachers are very sincere. They are often educated and quite handsome. They are usually dynamic individuals who are appealing to listen to. Yet, they are heretics of the first degree. Also the dedication of a false teacher is amazing. IT is hard to find a true teacher who has the dedication of a false teacher. For instance, the time commitment of Jehovah Witnesses is astounding. In Mormonism, every young man takes two years after college or high school to do missionary work. Yet, the product of all their labor is evil.
- C. ***Those mutilators of the flesh.*** -- Here we see the caustic attitude of Paul towards those who teach false doctrine. The Judaizers taught that even if a person professed

Christ, he still had to be circumcised according to Jewish ceremonial law if salvation was to be effective. So disgusted was Paul with legalists that he calls them "mutilators;" that is, those who cut their bodies to please God. ** Paul uses a play on words to shock his readers. The Greek word for circumcision is peritome which means "to cut around." But Paul uses the word keritome which means "to chop into pieces." Paul sees these Judaizers as mutilators who destroy Christians. This is a term of disrespect. It would be like a skilled surgeon calling a quack doctor a "butcher!" NOTE. Circumcision was a Jewish ritual to show a male child was under the covenant of God given to the nation of Israel. It was an outward symbol but had nothing to do with salvation. The Jew without faith in the Messiah to come could not be saved. Abraham is the perfect example of a Jew who had to be saved by faith (***Gen. 15:6: Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.***). Abraham believed God long before he and his family were circumcised in Genesis 17. NOTE. What did these Judaizers believe and teach to receive such a harsh reprimand from Paul? They believed Jesus was the God-Man, and that Christ was the Son of God sent into the world to die for sinners, and He died a sacrificial, atoning death. They believed that apart from Jesus Christ, a person cannot be saved. They taught Jesus is the way; He rose from the dead; He ascended to the right hand of the Father; and He will return in His second advent. They believed that one must believe in Christ and repent of his sins to be saved. These Judaizers seemed so sound doctrinally. But they taught that one must believe in Christ PLUS one more little ritual which they added. They said circumcision was essential to salvation. Most of us would say, "This is just a little ritual. Just a little error. Why get so upset? We know that circumcision is not necessary to salvation but if it is so important to these Jews why not let them perform circumcision on Gentile Christians? They believe in the fundamentals. After all we must show love and we want to keep the unity of the church at all costs." "No," says Paul! "This is false teaching and in the end it will destroy Christians. Anything added to by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is heresy! If Christians allow themselves to be circumcised with the idea that this will contribute to their salvation, then they are cut off from Christ and Christ will profit them nothing." NOTE. How does this apply to us today? Any person who tries to add anything to salvation is a spiritual Judaizer or legalist. Any time a person says, "Believe in Christ AND....." it is a false doctrine. Whether it is "believe and be baptized" or "believe and surrender" or "believe and do good works" or "believe and confess openly," or "believe and join the church, or "believe and speak in tongues" it is false doctrine. No conditions must be added to salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Salvation is found in Christ and in Him alone apart from any human effort (***John 14:6: Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. Acts 16:31a...Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved... Eph. 2:8-9: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.***). Beware of the subtlety of legalism and remember that it is destructive to salvation by grace through faith in Christ. According to the Bible, 99% grace and 1% works equals works. ILLUSTRATION: Roosevelt The principle of mixing grace and works can be compared to adding an extra and uncalled for ingredient to medicine. Sometimes such additions will result in curative medicine being changed into a poisonous mixture. For instance, when F.D. Roosevelt, Jr. was sick with strep throat, he was given a new drug, sulfanilamide. His recovery was amazing. Due to the publicity, there was an immediate demand for the drug. A pharmaceutical company in Tennessee decided they could more easily meet the demand by making a solution of sulfanilamide powder. They added just one element. As a result, sixty-one people died before they could stop the product from being sold. The addition of just one

little element changed what had been a tremendous curative power into a deadly poison. So it is with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By taking from or adding to it just one little thing, it becomes deadly poison and loses its curative qualities.

- D. ***For it is we who are the circumcision***, -- Paul now contrasts all true Christians with the false Judaistic legalists who claimed to be Christians. The “we” refers to all true Christians whether Jews or Gentiles. Christians have been spiritually circumcised in the heart and not necessarily in the body. Outward circumcision is nothing if one does not have a spiritual heart for Christ and every physical Jew knew this from the Old Testament scriptures (***Deut. 10:16: Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. Deut. 30:6: The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.***). Every Christian is a spiritual Jew related to Abraham through faith in Christ (***Gal. 3:29: If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.***). Gentiles are spiritual Israel, sons of Abraham and children of the covenant by faith. Also the Christian’s circumcision is one of the heart not the body (***Rom. 2:28-29: A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.***). Only the death of Christ for sin circumcises the foreskins of the believing person’s heart. Now Paul will give three characteristics of one who is truly spiritually circumcised. If we do not see these, our warning light should go on.
- E. ***We who worship by the Spirit of God***, -- True Christians, true spiritual Jews circumcised in the heart through faith in Christ, worship God not in the letter of the Law as did the Jews but in the spirit of the Law. Christians worship God by means of the Holy Spirit. Christians are Spirit-empowered people. A true Christian is not so concerned about external conformity to man-made laws and customs but is concerned about having an inward heart dominated by Christ, worshipping in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- F. ***Who glory in Christ Jesus***, -- True Christians glory or boast only in Jesus Christ and His finished work for sin. They see Him alone as the way, the truth and the life and salvation being by grace through faith alone. Saved men cannot boast or glory in their good works, their free wills or their faith because salvation from beginning to end is a free gift of God accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We enthusiastically appreciate who Christ is and what He has done, and we acknowledge that He alone is worthy of praise.
- G. ***And who put no confidence in the flesh*** — though I myself have reason for such confidence. -- True Christians know that natural man by the power of the flesh cannot achieve salvation. Flesh in this context refers to what a person is apart from sin or – unregenerate humanity. Nothing a man can do in himself can bring salvation but God brings salvation through His sovereign grace and man believes in Christ. The true Christian does not trust in his good deeds, law-keeping or his

religious achievements. The true Christian also understands that by the power of the flesh, he cannot accomplish sanctification. The power of the flesh is woefully inadequate for salvation or the Christian life. NOTE. By way of contrast Paul is saying that the legalist does rely on the power of the flesh and does put undue emphasis on the externals, and they do take credit and glory for their own deeds, works and accomplishments.

IV. FUTILITY OF LEGALISM 3:4-6

- A. ***If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:*** -
- What Paul is saying is this: "If you want to think foolishly, let me play the Judaizer's game for a moment. I will take my life and show that I was the supreme example of a man who operated in the flesh, but I had to cast it all aside to come to faith in Christ." If salvation was by works, Paul had all the credentials, for he was the ideal Jew and legalist.
- B. ***Circumcised on the eighth day,*** -- Paul had pride of covenant status for he was circumcised according to the Law. But that ritual did not save him. NOTE. This is comparable for us today in being baptized as an infant. There are many today who have been baptized as an infant and identified with the visible, external church who believe that this covenant status makes them a Christian. They are trusting a rite rather than the person of Jesus Christ.

A few years ago I had lunch with a lay staff worker for Campus Crusade for Christ. He was a turned on Christian, but he told me that up until ten years ago he thought he was a Christian because he had been baptized as an infant in a Presbyterian church. Christians, Christianity and the church left him cold until he trusted Christ. Then it all took on new meaning. However, he threw out infant baptism from his theology because of a bad experience and because some Presbyterian pastor taught him wrong theology.

- C. ***Of the people of Israel,*** -- Paul had pride of race, for he came from the chosen physical seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, being a "blueblood" Israelite. But this did not save him. NOTE. How many there are who have pride in family stock or race to save them. There are many who are trusting their family lineage to get them to heaven. They believe because their father, grandfather, aunt or uncle were preachers or missionaries, this will get them to heaven.

In Roanoke, I attended the YMCA to play basketball at least twice a week. I was witnessing indirectly to a fellow about my age. He was telling me how he was a Baptist but did not go along with all they taught. He was so very proud of the fact that his brother was a missionary and the Christian heritage he had surrounding. Yet the man was confused as to what it means to be a true Christian. This is so typical of many in the visible church.

- D. ***Of the tribe of Benjamin***, -- Paul had pride of family. There was great merit in Judaism for one to be related to this small tribe, for it was Benjamin and Judah who were the only two tribes who remained faithful to Jehovah-God. But this did not save Paul. NOTE. There are those who think because they are Presbyterians, or Baptists, or Methodists, or Lutherans or Catholics or whatever denomination that this will get them to heaven. They are sincere but sincerely wrong.
- E. ***A Hebrew of Hebrews***, -- Paul had pride of Patriotism. He was not a Hellenistic Jew who spoke Greek and adopted Greek ways, but he was a true Jew who was born of Jewish parents, who spoke the Hebrew language and who kept the Jewish customs and who was militantly patriotic. But this did not save him. NOTE. There are people who believe because they were born in America and are true to American ideals that this will save them, but they are sadly mistaken.
- F. ***In regard to the law, a Pharisee***; -- Paul had pride of religion or orthodoxy. The Pharisees were the most religious men who ever lived. They prayed seven times a day and went to the synagogue or temple three times a day. They were conservative politically and they hated liberals. In fact, they were the right-wingers of Judaism. But religion and orthodoxy did not save Paul. NOTE. Church membership, creedal assent, denominational affiliation, being raised in a Christian home, being conservative politically cannot save anyone.
- G. ***As for zeal, persecuting the church***; -- Paul had pride of conviction. He was a zealot for what he believed. Paul practiced what he believed and preached. No one could say that Saul of Tarsus did not back up what he believed with his life. In fact, he believed so strongly that Christianity was a Jewish cult which was undermining true Judaism that he persecuted the church of Jesus Christ in the name of God. But conviction could not save Paul. NOTE. There are many today in the cults and liberal wing of Christendom, who are carrying out what they have been taught with zeal and conviction, but they are following a lie and it will not save them.
- H. ***As for legalistic righteousness, faultless***. -- Paul had the pride of self-righteousness. As far as men could see, Paul kept the legal, ceremonial and moral aspects of the Mosaic Law as well as any man. It was his goodness and morality that kept him from becoming a saved man. In coming to know Christ, it is harder to get away from one's goodness than one's badness. Self-righteousness and super-piousness keeps one from seeing he is a sinner and in desperate need of the Savior. Paul describes the flesh not as man at his worst but as man at his best. Flesh in man can reach the pinnacle of moral and religious development. Paul spent much of his life depending on things to give him value and worth. But then he met Christ and all flesh was worthless. NOTE. There are ever so many people, in and out of church, who are trusting in self, human merit and good works to save them. Human merit did not save Paul and it will not save anyone else. What do you trust to give you value and worth? Your background, looks or salary? Is your confidence in the college you attended or the degrees or titles you have received? Is it in your dress, the house you own, the car you drive, the activities you do or your service to the

community? Is your confidence in your morality since you can always find someone who has a lesser moral character than you? When one comes to Christ, he sees all these things as flesh.

- V. FREEDOM FROM LEGALISM (3:7): ***And whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*** -- "Profit" and "loss" are accounting terms, and it is as though Paul was taking a paper, dividing it in half and putting profit and loss above the two columns. All the things Paul had placed confidence in; all the things he thought were bringing him merit before God, he put over into the loss column. God changed Paul's thinking and values through Christ. Things he thought were so important were now nothing. The works of the flesh were very important to Paul until he was saved, and then he realized how insignificant they were in light of knowing Jesus Christ. Paul realized instead of the things of the flesh being an advantage, they were a burden. They did not draw him closer to God but drew him farther away. He had to cast these works of the flesh off and trust wholly in Jesus Christ for salvation. NOTE. Something happened to Paul to make him change his whole viewpoint about life. He came to know the resurrected and living Christ. He came into a personal relationship with the Savior through faith. It was Christ who invaded Paul's life, and for Christ, Paul was willing to count all human effort, all works of the flesh, as loss. NOTE. It was not a religion, an organization, a church, a preacher, a challenge which changed Paul. Paul was changed by Jesus Christ who is the Author and Finisher of the Christian Faith. Without a personal knowledge of Christ and a heart relationship with Christ, no one can be a true Christian. When Paul came to Jesus Christ in simple faith, trusting only in Him for salvation, he was set free from the bondage of any kind of legalism. He became a free man in Christ. He breathed the pure air of God's grace and was liberated from the bondage of self-righteousness, good works, social status, education, family pride or whatever man might try to add to faith in Christ. NOTE. As Paul looked back at his salvation, he said, "I'm not one bit sorry I lost all these things to become a Christian. So I had to turn away from some things. I in turn gained Christ, salvation, heaven, purpose for living and above all joy. In Christ, Paul found the key to the meaning of life. Have you?"

VI. CONCLUSION

- A. Do you know Christ? Have you trusted Christ as your Savior and Lord? Have you been spiritually circumcised in your heart? Are you resting in Christ alone to deliver you from the consequences of sin and the certain judgment to come? Are you a Christian or a Presbyterian? A Christian or a Lutheran? A Christian or a Baptist?
- B. A true Christian can only boast in Christ, not self, for Christ alone is the Savior. A true Christian has no confidence in the flesh but all confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you have a circumcised heart? If not, receive Christ through faith, resting in Him alone to forgive you of all sins and to take you to heaven. Then you will be able to sing the great hymn "Rock of Ages" with real understanding and feeling:

*“Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law’s demands
Could my zeal no respite know; could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

*Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly, Wash me Savior or I die!”*