

Logan T. Smith

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Philippians 3:1-11

The Worthlessness of Works and the Worth of Christ

Intro

If you watch enough movies and TV shows, you'll see a similar message played over and over again: the idea that *our own personal identity, meaning, and value - our own moral justification and vindication - is found within ourselves*. You see this message come in many different ways. They might say it said like this: most people, deep down, are really good, or at least can be, if we just *try hard enough*. 'You just have to have enough faith in people.' Or even more commonly, put this way, 'Just *believe in yourself*'; '*just be true to yourself*'; '*just follow your heart*.' The message is clear: meaning and purpose in life is found *within ourselves, our identity, and our actions*; **salvation** comes from **us**. That's the pervasive message of the world; that's the allure of our own flesh. And it is a *lie straight from Satan, straight from our own sinful instincts*. We are all so prone to think that the answer to our problems comes *from us*; that our worth and value can only truly come from *within ourselves*. Look at different religions, and you'll see see similar messages: if you *do the right things, say the right things, join the right religious communities, or do the right rituals and practices*, then it will save you, and your good deeds will work towards you hopefully measuring up one day; and if you *don't do the right things*, then you won't measure up.

The common theme in all of this is the attempt at **self-justification**; the attempt to *prove that we are good enough, or justify our own actions, identity, and values*; or if we're not good enough and don't measure up, then *trying to do things that will make us good enough, that will give us meaning, worth, and value!* It's the never-ending never-satisfying, never-fulfilled, endless cycle of **self-justification**, trying to bring about **works-based righteousness**. And this shows up in so many ways: some people are convinced, or at least try to be convinced, they *are in fact good enough!* They believe they're good outweighs the bad, they won't stand for anyone to tell them otherwise, and they *justify their own thoughts, actions, and lifestyles to the very end*. Others *acutely feel the weight* of their own guilt, their own shame, their own failure, sin, and inadequacy; but their fatal mistake is that they keep thinking that they can turn their life around,

clean themselves up, and finally be **good enough**. But that will never work; we can never be good enough, not our own. This is the reality that all of us must come face-to-face with: God stands over all things; He is the perfect standard of goodness, justice, and righteousness, and He will punish all the evil and wicked, and reward true righteousness! But here's the hard part for us to swallow: none of us, no matter how hard we try, can measure up! There is nothing we can do to be good enough!

It's not enough to be "better" than the other people you compare yourself to. It doesn't matter how good or bad other people think you are. It doesn't matter how many good or seemingly "religious" things you've done in your life. Our education, backgrounds, families, social status, social and political activism, charitable giving and good deeds - whatever *credentials* we're trusting in as the basis for our identity, for our worth and value - for our *righteousness and justification* - **none of it matters or amounts to anything! It does not add to our spiritual bank account, it only incurs more debt!** There's only *one way* to gain a spiritual profit, and not a net loss; there's only *one thing* that matters: **knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, and the grace and salvation he offers us freely; the righteousness of God that comes by faith!**

That's exactly what we see in this passage, **Phil. 3:1-11**: *the beautiful, surpassing, glorious worth of knowing Christ Jesus!* The sobering contrast between *the absolute worthlessness and futility of earning our own righteousness*, and the *incomparable joy of being declared righteous in Christ through faith!* This passage declares the gospel, the good news of salvation for hopeless sinners, loudly, clearly, and beautifully! It starts off with Paul calling the church, his brothers and sisters in Christ, to "rejoice in the Lord!" And what follows is not something new to the Christians in Philippi, not something new to anyone who is truly a believer; it is the reminder that we **rejoice** - that we *root our joy, hope, and confidence* - **not in ourselves - not in who we are, what we have done, or anything in this world - but we root it only in Christ Jesus!** So first, Paul reminds us of **1. The absolute worthlessness of a works-based righteousness;** and secondly, he reminds us **2. Of the greatly surpassing, infinitely greater worth of knowing Jesus Christ, trusting in Him by faith, and receiving salvation, righteousness, new life, even eternal life, in Him!**

So first, let's look at *the worthlessness of our good works*:

I. The Worthlessness of Works-Based Righteousness (3:2-7)

Verse 2 takes a bit of a striking turn, taking on a much sharper tone than we're used to in this book so far. Paul issues a sharp warning: ***“Look out for the dogs...the evildoers...those who mutilate the flesh.”*** Now who exactly is the group of people that Paul is so *emphatically* warning us about? And why does he speak of them so *strongly* and *severely*? Based on the context, and particularly all that he says in verses 3-6, it seems fairly certain that Paul is referring to the *“Judaizers”* - the same group of people that Paul addresses in the book of Galatians, who had been causing such damage to the gospel and the churches in that region. The *“Judaizers”* were a group of Jews that professed faith in Jesus Christ, believing him to be the Messiah. However, as time went on, a big issue developed, revealing that they didn't quite understand the full gospel of Christ: you see, as *Gentiles* - that is, not Jewish pagan peoples, such as Greeks, Romans, or anyone else in the world outside of Israel - as these Gentiles became Christians and followed Christ, the Judaizers had a big problem with it: they firmly believed that in order to become a *“Christian”* you first had to become a *Jew*. So they travelled to all these cities and areas, places like where Paul and his missionary cohorts, shared the gospel, made disciples, and planted churches - places like Philippi - and when the Judaizers came, they would cast *shame* on the Jewish Christians who associated with non-Jewish, Gentile Christians; furthermore, they would tell everyone that the Gentile believers needed to *“become Jewish”* and observe the Mosaic Law in order to truly be believers. In other words, it went much deeper than just quibbling about ethnic or national identity; they firmly asserted that true believers needed to observe the Old Testament Law of Moses *in addition to believing in Jesus Christ!* They taught that in order to become a believer, the males needed to be *“circumcised,”* that they all needed to observe certain rituals, practices, and festivals; that they need to observe and obey the Law in order to truly be righteous, in order to truly be God's Holy people. In other words, they were preaching *a different gospel: Christ plus our own obedience to the Law!*

And Paul would have none of this! IN the book of Galatians, and again here in this passage, Paul makes clear that such teachings are completely foreign to the gospel of Christ! Any group that claims true salvation requires **Jesus plus something else** is no Christian gospel, but a completely different religion! So Paul uses strong language here to say that, ironically, these Judaizers are actually **not** part of God's people; they **are not** following God's law, but are actually doing evil; and when they push circumcision, they are **mutilators of the flesh, no**

better off than pagans. They are putting their trust not ultimately in the work and grace of Christ, but in their own works, their own righteousness, their status as part of Israel, and their own ability to observe the Law. What Paul is saying *very clearly* in this passage is that *there is no confidence to be found in the flesh - in our own credentials and merits.* To trust in anything else but the gospel is **to not trust in the gospel at all.** Paul is not only saying that their efforts are useless; far worse, they are actually *harmful and damning!*

So Paul warns us against such ways of thinking. And he does so by telling us that he knows, from personal experience, that *there is no righteousness to be found in our own works and merits!* He tells us in verses 4-6, that if there *were* any righteousness to be found in ourselves, then *he of all people would have it!*

So Paul **first tells us his own credentials as a member of Israel:** he himself was circumcised according to the Law of Moses; he is a true Israelite, being born of the tribe of Benjamin, a “Hebrew of Hebrew,” truly Jewish by birth, custom, and ethnic identity.

Then, he tells us of his **own merits and achievements, his own good works:** he eagerly studied, interpreted, and obeyed the Law, becoming a Pharisee, a very strict observer and teacher of the Law. He was so zealous that he even persecuted Christians because he believed them to be blasphemous! And strikingly, he tells us that he was outwardly “blameless,” according to the way that the Pharisees interpreted and observed the Law! He kept the Law and did not break the outward, external demands of the Law!

But what was the result? What was the **net gain** off *all of the merits and deposits that Paul so eagerly put into his spiritual bank account? Absolutely nothing of any worth or value! Worse than zero, it was negative, a loss!* As we see in verse 7: *“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”* When Paul was converted, met the Lord Jesus, and truly believed in Him, he finally realized that he had no leg to stand on before the Lord! Despite his blameless law keeping, he was still a condemned sinner, breaking the meaning of the Law in his heart. Being born a Jew didn’t save him or make him righteous. Being a zealous, Pharisaical Law-keeper and interpreter didn’t make him righteous.

So what did? What wiped away all of his spiritual debts? What did he find was truly a net gain? **Only Christ!** *Like Paul, we must all realize that we have no confidence in the flesh! We cannot hope or trust in our own efforts, our own merits, our own credentials, background, achievements - all of it is nothing in the end. We cannot clean ourselves up or be good enough.*

We cannot observe the Law perfectly, we cannot do enough good things or right ritual practices to earn God's favor and become righteous; it is never enough!

[Application]: Today, you might not find yourself tempted to become a Jew and revert back to Old Testament law-keeping in order to be righteous and holy before God. And yet, *we are tempted*, in many different ways, to revert to a **works-based righteousness**, thinking and believing that our standing before God depends on what we do or what we bring to the table.

As an example of this, just look at the Catholic Church. In the early church, they started off with the gospel. But as time went on, ***works-based righteousness and the allure of legalism crept in***. It became so bad that in the middle ages, there were priests claiming *you could even buy favor with God with money*. As we mentioned last week, the Protestant Reformation, beginning with guys like Martin Luther, represented a strong defence of the gospel, returning to the glorious news that salvation comes righteousness comes not by our works or actions, but purely by faith in Christ! But how did the Catholic Church respond? They announced an official decree, in the Council of Trent, saying this: **“If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified...let him be anathema!”**¹ That is, accursed, not a Christian but under the wrath of God. That is a direct denial of the gospel. And it is still the official teaching of the Catholic Church to this day. So this is still very much a real problem and temptation today. And yet being christened as part of a catholic family will not save you anymore than circumcision. Saying “hail Mary’s” and going to confession and mass, even done in zeal, do not add to our spiritual bank account before God. Only Christ can!

But there are other ways this shows up in our hearts. Perhaps, this morning, you think that you're not good enough to come to the Lord and become a Christian! Perhaps you're waiting until you “get your life” together first, thinking that someday you'll be decent enough to be a Christian and church member. If that's you, *then you're trusting in a false hope! You'll never be good enough, and you'll never clean up your act enough! But that misses the whole point! The good news is: there is still hope for you in Christ!* None of us can be good enough; we need a righteousness that doesn't come from ourselves, but from Jesus Christ! And he gives it freely; just trust and believe in him, not yourself!

¹ Canon 9, The Council of Trent, <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch6.htm>.

Or maybe, today, you're resting in a false hope. You think you don't need to live a life of faith, you don't need to follow Jesus, faithfully trusting and obeying him. Maybe you think you're good enough on your own. Maybe you're trusting in your "family credentials" like Paul did, thinking that because you were raised in a "Christian home," or because you claim to be Christian, or Catholic, or because you walked the aisle or set certain words long ago, that you're ok. Please hear these words in love: **if you're trusting in the status of your family, or the religious things that you've done, then you're trusting in a false hope!** If it wasn't good enough for Paul, it isn't good enough for us either! **There is no substitute for personally knowing and trusting in Jesus Christ!**

Or maybe, today, you are a believer, trusting in Christ alone! Yet sometimes we, too, struggle against putting our confidence in the flesh. We might not realize it until we're suddenly convicted of sin in our lives, and we feel too ashamed to come to the Lord in prayer, too ashamed to admit our sins, either to God or to our fellow believers. Why? **Because we're buying into the lie that our standing before God is based on the things we've done or haven't done! We're buying into the lie that our works can amount to *anything* before the Lord! As if we can earn his favor by doing certain things, reading our Bible enough, praying enough, or doing enough!** And then, when we don't do them, **guilt crashes on our heads and we can't bear to pray, or maybe even come to church, because we don't feel good enough before the Lord!** Isn't it so easy to subtly begin to put our confidence *back on our flesh? To trust in Christ plus our own works and efforts?*

We need this sobering reminder from Scripture that *all of the things we do are counted as loss! None of these things can be our grounds for righteousness before the Lord! Nothing we do can appease God's wrath against our sin or earn his favor!* Our standing before the Lord is not based on how many spiritual disciplines we've crossed off our to-do list; it's not based on how many good things we did this past week; it's not based on how few or how many wicked things we did this past week; it's not based on how much we give, how much we pray; its not based on our church membership, or how much we know or don't know. Are all of these things important? Yes, of course. There is absolutely a place for obedience in the Christian life! **But we must have it drilled down into the core of who we are: *these things can never be our confidence before the Lord! Our works and obedience can never be the grounds or basis for our salvation or righteousness!*** So what is? **Only Christ!**

So let us turn away from our worthless works and endeavors! And let us *turn to the infinitely more valuable worth of Jesus Christ our Lord!*

II. The Surpassing Worth of Jesus Christ (3:1, 8-11)

When we see that all of our own works and efforts are counted as worthless on their own, we get to turn to the beautiful, glorious promise of the gospel: even though all our best efforts are counted as loss, we get **infinite gain for free in Christ!** We, like Paul, can turn away from the **worthless** and turn to the **surpassing worth of Christ!** Hear verses 7-8: “***But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.***” When we turn away from **works-based righteousness**, we can turn to *our only hope: Jesus Christ!* And so, we continue to “**rejoice in the Lord**” by remembering the beauty of knowing Christ in the gospel; by remembering all that we receive by *gaining Christ, knowing Him through faith!*

First, Paul reminds us that **when we know Christ, we receive the righteousness of God by faith.**

A. In Christ, we receive the righteousness of God by faith (3:8-9)

To know Christ and trust in him is of *far more worth* than anything we could do or trust in! Why? *Because he alone is perfectly sinless and righteous!* Jesus Christ is the God-Man: He *perfectly God and perfectly man*; the Son of God who took on flesh. And he lived the *perfectly righteous, sinless life that you and I have not and never could live!* And he lived it *for us!* So that if we believe in Him, if we trust not in ourselves but put all of our hope, trust, and faith *in Him, believing in His promises*, then He promises that **His perfect righteousness, the very righteousness of God, becomes ours by faith!** We, who are not righteous, are *declared perfectly righteous* simply by trusting in Jesus! We receive his righteousness by faith! We believe that he took our sin upon himself and dealt with it completely in His death! We believe that just as was raised from the dead, vindicated by the very power of God, so we, too, are raised in Him *by faith*, being declared righteous before the Lord! This is exactly what we see in the rest of verse 8 and 9: “***For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 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 of God that depends on faith.***” Simply *repent and believe; turn away from*

yourself, from trusting in your good works, from trusting in false gods and false promises; consider it all loss and worthless rubbish, worthless *trash before the Lord*. And instead, **turn to Christ in faith! Believe in His promises! Believe that He is who he says he is! And trust in His gospel, that all who believe in Him are declared perfectly righteous!**

When we become believers and put our faith in Christ alone, then we are *united to Christ by faith, truly knowing and being known by Him, so that **our sin goes to Him, and His perfect righteousness becomes ours!*** This is *not based* on anything your or I do! This is purely of **grace**, which is why we receive it simply *through faith! **We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone! This is the glorious news of the gospel!***

And yet, it doesn't end there! The "surpassing worth" and "joy" we have in knowing Christ includes *righteousness by faith*; but Paul continues on, fleshing out even more of the fulness of salvation we have in Christ!

B. In Christ, we know God and are part of His holy people (3:2)

So secondly, when we are united to Christ through faith, we are also **brought into the true, holy people of God!** We see this in verse 3: "***For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.***" Paul is reminding these gentile Christians - which includes us, today! - that we don't have to obey the Law of Moses in order to become part of God's people; nor is it true that there are two separate groups of God's people: Israel and the church. No, Paul is saying that whoever *trusts in Jesus* is part of God's Holy people, whether Jew or Gentile! ***We*** are the circumcision, the children of Abraham - by faith! We, as believers, worship "by the Spirit of God," the Holy Spirit within us; we are set apart as holy priests to God, we are part of God's holy temple and God's holy people! Jews who reject Christ are cut off; but *Jews and Gentiles* - anyone in the world - who trusts in the gospel, who "glories in Christ Jesus," trusting not in the flesh but in Him alone, is truly part of God's family!

C. In Christ, we receive the power of His resurrection, in life and in death (3:10-11)

And the blessings of salvation keep going: Thirdly, in verse 10, we see that when we "**gain Christ**" and know Him we experience "***the power of His resurrection,***" which transforms

our lives, both now *and in our death!* **Because we are united to Christ by grace through faith, we too participate in His resurrection!** Even now we are raised to newness of life, to a transformed life! When verse 10 says that this is so that we **“may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,”** I think this is alluding back to everything we saw in chapter 2; in other words, he’s referring, once more, to our *sanctification*. The power of Christ’s resurrection transforms our lives, so that even our obedience flows out of Christ’s grace in our lives, through faith! Our lives now are transformed by being united to Christ, so that we grow in Him, so that *even our sufferings* are seen as *sharing in His sufferings, becoming more like Christ through faith!*

And this ultimately leads to our own **“resurrection from the dead.”** Not only does Christ’s resurrection transform our lives, but it defeats death, so that in Him, we are forgiven our sins, declared righteous, filled with His Spirit, and will be raised to eternal with Him forever! And this all flows from Him! This is the great joy we have of knowing Christ through faith! The fullness of our salvation! Not in any means our own work, but purely God’s grace to us!

The Surpassing Worth *of knowing Jesus Christ Himself* - He is the treasure; our salvation, joy, and contentment flow from knowing Christ and resting in His grace through faith.

[Application]: So, brothers and sisters in Christ, when you wake up in the morning, and sit down to pray and read your Bible, and all you can think of is the guilt of your heinous sin, and you are tempted to think that God wants nothing to do with you because of your sin; or you are tempted to think that you need to go “make things right” and clean up your act before you can come to the Lord or have a clear conscience, or be a part of God’s holy people, the church; or if you’re even to tempted to think that God will only accept you if you first *prove your sincerity and grief over your sin by beating yourself enough first* - if you’re tempted in those moments, in any way, to think that you’re standing before God is based on anything dealing with yourself, then **hear the message of this passage loud and clear: count all of those things loss and filthy rubbish, and remember in incomparable worth and gain you have in Christ alone! Cast all dependence on yourself aside, and remember that if you’re clinging to Christ in faith, then God has declared you perfectly righteous! He has declared that you are part of His holy, royal people! You are in Christ, and your standing is secure in Him!** So when you come to the Lord

aware of your sin, yes, repent and turn away from it; yes, confess your sin; but don't repent by saying, "Lord, I'm sorry for sinning, and I promise to do better, please forgive." No no no, we repent by turning away from sin *and to **Christ***, resting in His grace, being righteous *through **faith!*** And *then* we turn to obey **because of God's love**, *not* in order to obtain it.

If you're not a believer today, then this is the closing application for you: don't put your faith in yourself. Don't believe in yourself. Don't have faith in your works, your goodness, or anything in your life. Put your faith, your hope, and your trust, in Christ alone! Everything else will let you down. But if you turn to Christ and know him, through faith, then you will finally know true joy! So turn and rest in him! Be clothed in the righteousness of God in Christ! If you have any questions about that, or if you believe and would like to make that public through baptism, or through joining the church as a member, then please come and talk to me. YOU can come now during the last song, or come and find me or one of the deacons after service. We would love to speak with you.

Let us pray.