

“The Surpassing Greatness of Knowing Christ” (Philippians 3:1-11)

Joyful Unity in the Gospel

Zionsville Fellowship | Edgar Momoh | July 19, 2026

Introduction|

Welcome to our continuing series in the book of Philippians. We are in chapter 3 this morning. The background of this epistle has been well established by the speakers before me. So, I would spare no time repeating what has already been said.

In the first two chapters, Paul expressed gratitude for the partnership and support of the Philippian church (1:3-6). He also took time to review some of the basic truths he had taught them (1:7-9).

He confidently reminded them that his suffering had become a catalyst for the advancement of the Gospel (1:12-30). In chapter 2, he admonished the church to pursue unity for the sake of the Gospel. Following the example of Christ by serving one another with humility and doing all things without grumbling or complaining.

Let's read the text & pray: Philippians 3:1-11 (it is on page 981 in the Bible in the seat in front of you. If you don't have a Bible you call your own, please take that home with you as our gift to you)

There are three movements in this text: i) Paul's admonition to the church, ii) Paul's warning against the legalists, and iii) Paul's ultimate pursuit.

1. Paul's Admonition to the Church (v. 1)

Imagine you received a letter from a friend or loved one. As you read the letter and follow their account of events in their life, you come to a paragraph that begins with the word "finally". What comes to your mind? The end of the letter, right!? But when you flip the page, you realize that you have two more pages of the letter.

Verse 1 of our text similarly reads, ***"Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble for me and is safe for you."***

In his teaching last Sunday, Ryan reminded us that certain words and phrases in Greek do not always perfectly translate into English. I think this is one of those situations where the word "finally" could also mean "in addition" or "so then".

But whatever the case, it is obvious that Paul did not mean to draw attention to a concluding statement. Rather, the function of the word "finally" was transitional or introductory of a new section.

Perhaps Paul wanted to expand on the theme of rejoicing in the midst of suffering, which he referenced in 2:17-18, where he said, ***"Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me."***

The comfort and joy Timothy and Epaphroditus brought Paul in his suffering were good examples of the kind of joy he is admonishing the Philippian community to uphold.

But Paul wanted to remind them that the source of this joy was in the Lord. Hence, the phrase in this verse, "rejoice in the Lord."

Their unity in the gospel, serving one another without grumbling and complaining; esteeming one another better than themselves; having the same attitude of humility that was in Christ, would all stem from their joy in the Lord.

There is no doubt that Paul must have given them some admonitions outside of this letter. That's why he said, ***"It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you."***

In the verses that followed, Paul would go on to use strong, forceful language to warn against the infiltration of false teachers among them. But before that, he wanted to review some of the important things he had already taught them.

I think it is a good Christian practice to be reminded from time to time of certain foundational truths about our faith. Isn't it?

Therefore, Paul did not hesitate to remind the church to consciously choose to rejoice, as it is not only spiritually fortifying but also a healthy posture for maintaining God-glorifying community life, especially in light of what he will say in the following verses about false teachers.

2. Paul's Warning against the Legalists (v. 2-6)

- i. *Watch out for the dogs/mutilators of the flesh (v.2)*
- ii. *We are the circumcision (v.3)*
- iii. *Rejection of false confidence in the flesh (v. 4-6)*

i. Look/watch out for the dogs/mutilators of the flesh (v.2)

Paul pivots from his endearing exhortation in verse 1 to a stern warning against the false teachers who were probably Judaizers.

Verse 2 reads, ***"Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh."*** The language and rhetorical style of the warning are indicative of the seriousness of what Paul intended to communicate.

There are three parts to this warning that we need to pick apart in order to appreciate what Paul is saying. Consider all three as successive powerful punches landing on an opponent's face in a boxing match . Paul is taking no prisoners here.

First punch, "Look out for the dogs" - the reason Paul used the metaphor dogs to refer to these false teachers is not quite clear. However, looking back into the early Jewish culture, we can draw some inferences.

Referring to someone as a dog was not primarily used as a pejorative or insulting term. Although it might have in some cases. But more likely than not, to the Jews, the term connoted a more devastating meaning. A religious one.

It implied being outside of the covenant relationship with God or being viewed as ritually unclean.

A quick journey to Mark 7:27 would lend credence to the point I am making. Do you remember the encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman? She came to Jesus begging him to cast a demon out of her daughter? Jesus replied to her, **"First let the children eat all they want...for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"**. What was more intriguing about this narrative was the woman's response, for which she is remembered. She said, **"but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."** (Mark 7:28)

To which Jesus responded, **"For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter"** (Mark 7:29). The woman did not see Jesus' initial response to her as a vulgar denunciation. Rather, she understood it as a religious statement.

And of course, Jesus was testing her faith before his Jewish audience. In the end, she received the gift of healing for her daughter, even without Jesus touching her daughter.

How unsettling that must have been for the Jews. Those who thought they had a seat at the table have missed out on the food. While the so-called "dogs" or gentiles are now receiving the gift of God.

Similarly, in this context, Paul was alerting the gentiles in the church in Philippi to watch out for the "dogs".

Meaning the Judaizer or false teachers. Those who thought that the covenantal law was still a requirement for getting right with God.

Paul strongly refuted this notion. He kind of alluded to a great reversal brought about by Christ. Such that those who were once called "dogs" are now the "children of God" seated at the table with Christ, while those who were seated at the table based on the covenantal law are now considered "dogs".

Second punch: "look out for the evildoers." This was probably not referring to those who did some wrong things here and there. Otherwise, he would have referred to them as "wrongdoers". Rather, his choice of words was intended to call things as they were - these men were evildoers.

In Paul's view, there was no greater evil that could be done to these believers than to intentionally put a religious yoke on their necks again after they had believed in Jesus Christ.

Paul called the works of these Judaizers "evil" because they tried to convince those who were coming to faith in Christ that they needed to become Jews first before they could become true Christians.

He dealt with a similar situation in the church in Galatia. There, he rebuked the Christians themselves for being allowed to be dissuaded by the same evildoers.

He wrote to the church:

"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive

the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:1-3)

Third punch, "look out for those who mutilate the flesh." It is interesting here that Paul did not dignify the baseless religious acts of these false teachers. . He used a mocking language to represent their conviction. He called them "mutilators of the flesh".

In Paul's view, that was who they were - "mutilators of the flesh". They had made the Abrahamic covenant into a mere pagan ritual.

ii. We are the circumcision (v.3)

He says 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.***"

By this statement, he draws a sharp contrast between true believers in Christ and those who claimed to believe in Christ yet remained bound by the yoke of religious traditions.

Pay attention to the inclusive tone of the statement. By saying "we", Paul was not only referring to himself and other genuine Jewish believers who were circumcised but also to the Gentiles in the church.

He no longer gauged true circumcision based on a physical adherence to the religious practice of cutting off the flesh, but by those who have had their hearts transformed by Jesus in the new covenant of the gospel. Those are the ones who have experienced the circumcision of the heart.

Even the OT scriptures were clear in this matter that the physical rite of circumcision was only symbolic of a deeper commitment to God's covenantal relationship. But the physical operation of the flesh wasn't enough.

Hence, the prophets Jeremiah and Moses talked about the importance of the circumcision of the heart. Jeremiah 9:25 says, "***The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—"***

Moses said to the Israelites, "***Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.***" (Deut. 10:16)

So, what Paul is saying in verse 3 is that all these requirements have now been fulfilled in Christ once you believed in him. No more need for any physical operation of the flesh or self-internal purging of the heart. Christ makes all these possible by putting our trust in him.

The distinct qualities of those who are the true circumcision:

i. They worship by the Spirit of God - in other words, their worship is enabled by the Holy Spirit. John makes a similar claim in John 4:23-24

" Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

ii. They glory or boast in Christ Jesus - this points to the fact that these believers see their true worth only through the lens of Christ.

And every true believer should see all of their achievements only through the mercies of God

- Are you in good health? It's only by the mercies of Christ.

- Is your family or marriage doing well? It's only by the grace of Christ

- Are you abundantly successful in material possessions? It's only by the benevolent mercies of Christ

- Are you thriving in your job, relationships, family, and academically? It is only by the goodness of God.

You cannot boast in anything other than in Christ. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way:

This is what the Lord says:

"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom

or the strong boast of their strength

or the rich boast of their riches,

but let the one who boasts boast about this:

that they have the understanding to know me,

that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness,

justice and righteousness on earth,"

for in these I delight,"

declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

iii. They do not put confidence in the flesh - in other words, true believers do not rest their confidence in human standards. In the next verse, Paul categorically denounces such a disposition.

By the way, the word "boasting" should not be misunderstood entirely in a pejorative sense. In fact, Paul encourages us here to boast but only in the Lord. That is giving God whole-hearted credit for everything.

But there is also a negative kind of boasting that we must be mindful of. We often do not admit to it, but you know where your confidence lies. Sometimes, we don't declare it with our words, but our actions clearly suggest where our confidence lies.

Aren't you putting confidence in the flesh when you tend to regard everyone who is outside your little group, anyone who does not look like you, who does not socially or economically measure up to your yardstick, or anyone whom you consider a little less important or inferior to your personal accomplishments?

On the contrary, Paul wants us to:

"Look around for those whose constant confidence is Jesus Christ,

-whose constant boast is Jesus Christ,

-whose constant delight is Jesus Christ.

-Jesus is the center of their worship,

-the center of their gratitude,

-the center of their love,

-the center of their hope... emulate those whose constant confidence and boast is in Christ Jesus and nothing else." (Carson, D.A. An exposition on Philippians, p.86

iii. *Rejection of false confidence in the flesh (v. 4-6)*

To put into perspective why the grounds for legalistic boasting were baseless, Paul writes in verses 4-6.

"Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

Paul only mentioned these credentials not for the purpose of boasting like the Judaizers, but to prove a point that the reason for their boasting in the flesh goes pale in comparison to his own resume.

For instance, whose view on the futility of worldly riches would hold more sway in society - mine or that of Elon Musk?

If Elon Musk, who was recently declared the world's first trillionaire, were to say on X today that money does not satisfy, that being rich does not make you happy, and that influence does not equate to true peace, many people would at least pay attention to him.

His wealth exceeds the annual GDP of 176 countries on Earth. He is richer than 50% of the world's population combined.

Now picture Paul's pedigree in that same light. If these Judaizers had reason to boast in the flesh, he said, he had more. For the purposes of our illustration, if you think you are rich, Elon will say, "I have more."

Similarly, Paul told the false teachers that if there were any merit in legalistic righteousness, he would be blameless. Therefore, believe him when he says, do not put confidence in the flesh in being made right with God. Trust only in Christ.

3. *Paul's Ultimate Pursuit (v.7-11)*

i. *Priority (v.7-9)*

ii. Passion (v. 10-11)

i. **Priority (v. 7-9)**

In the next six verses, Paul clearly demonstrates how to live out the advice he gave to Timothy, as a young pastor in Ephesus. He encouraged him to watch his life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16)

Paul didn't preach one thing and live by another standard differently. After painstakingly challenging his audience in the previous section to beware of those who put confidence in the flesh, Paul demonstrates in these verses that he meant every word he said.

After indulging in some boasting for the sake of making a point against boasting in the flesh, Paul now demonstrates a complete disavowal of whatever was to his credit from a human standpoint.

Verse 7-8 reads, ***"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. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (ESV)"***

Verses 5 & 6 gave us insight into some of the credentials Paul could boast in according to the flesh. By the way, those accolades were no mean achievements by human standards.

However, Paul sets himself a new priority in these verses. He no longer wanted to be identified by those achievements. Because whatever was once worthy of consideration is now considered worthless.

There is a deliberate and conscious rejection of his past glory in the flesh.

He was not defrocked from his religious status or office. Nor would he have been canceled for some controversial stance by the social media brigade if it were in our day.

Rather, Paul voluntarily denounced those privileges or advantages for the sake of knowing Christ.

Notice that he used the perfect tense here. *"I counted as loss for the sake of Christ"*. In other words, the deed had been done. And he no longer owned the right to it. He let go of it once and for all; immediately, Christ laid hold of him.

As if to buttress the fact that his former glory from the worldly point of view was now behind him, he emphatically repeats himself in verse 8. *"Indeed, I count everything as loss..."* But he used the present tense of the verb "count" in this case.

Perhaps he meant to say, not only those things that were in my past, but even every trophy, praise, or credit I may receive now for what I am doing, they are all counted as loss, if Christ is not the object of my attainment.

In fact, he clearly states the reason for denouncing every human credit – he says, "for the surpassing worth/greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord". That was his ultimate priority.

What about you?

- What is the secret enticement of your heart?

- If you took an inventory of your life today, what are some things you would honestly say are diminishing your desires for God or blurring your view of Christ?
- What matters most to you in life? Is it the temporal things of this life, or is it the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus?

Each of us needs to answer these questions. Perhaps right now or when you leave here today. Do not let this week go by without grappling with these questions.

Paul clearly understood the words of Christ on this matter in the gospels, where he asked, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Or as Jim Eliot once famously said, "He is no fool who gives away what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."

ii. Passion (v. 10-11)

Paul lets his readers into another pursuit in his relationship with Christ. He makes it emphatically clear in verse 9 that his ultimate goal is to be found in Christ and no longer pursue a righteousness of his own that comes from the law.

The only state of righteousness that he wants to be familiar with is that which comes through faith in Christ alone.

I see why Paul didn't take his new view of the righteousness imputed by faith in Christ alone lightly.

It is quite common for those who come from a religious cult, sect, or Muslim background to treat certain theological or doctrinal issues more passionately than people who have always been around some form of sound teachings.

Once the eyes of those people have been enlightened and they have tasted the freedom that comes from knowing Christ, they no longer want to look back.

But Paul had even greater ambition. Verses 10-11, which are perhaps two of my best passages of scripture in the entire Bible, provide us a window into Paul's passion.

It says, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." Philippians 3:10–11(ESV)

There are three phrases we need to unpack in these two verses.

i. What does Paul mean by "I want to know Christ"? Probably by the time he was writing this letter, he had been in Christ for at least 30 years. But still, he expresses a passionate desire to know Christ.

Of course, what he means by that is getting to know him more and more. He set his affection on Christ, like a couple in love. The more time you spend with that person, the more you want to know them.

So, it is with Christ. The deeper you uncover the riches of Christ's love for you, the more longing he creates in your heart to know him. And this is way beyond head knowledge. It is an experiential way of knowing him more intimately.

ii. But that was not all that Paul wanted. Beyond experiential knowledge of Christ, he wanted to know "the power of his resurrection". He wasn't seeking the resurrection power that would make him a powerful preacher or missionary.

Rather, he wanted to be a partaker of the resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead. The incomparable great power (Ephesians 1:19). The power that has seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms (v. 20). That power that helps us to will and to act according to his good purpose (Ph. 2:13). The power that fills us with wisdom and revelation, so that we may know him better (Eph. 1:17b). It is that kind of resurrection power that he wanted.

iii. He also wants "the fellowship of sharing in his suffering" (v.10). More than any other apostle, Paul understood what the concept of suffering for Christ looked like.

And he was never shy of identifying with suffering with or for Christ. He mentioned earlier in Philippians 1:29

"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake..."(ESV)

iv. In Paul's world, suffering and believing in Christ are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, another passion of his is "becoming like him in his death". He was assured that "If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him;..."

Probably, you are undergoing a kind of suffering right now. Maybe directly for the Lord or just the normal sufferings of this life. Regardless of the source of the suffering, how we respond to it will make a huge difference.

After making all these beautiful declarations, Paul concludes this section with a rather puzzling statement, "that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (v. 11). Some interpret this verse as though Paul were hesitant about the assurance of being resurrected from the dead.

Of course, that is far from the truth. Because he is bullish about every believer's hope of being raised from the dead in Christ. The verses I just read in Ephesians 1, Rom 8, Colossians, 2 Timothy, 1 Thessalonians 4, and 1 Corinthians 15 all point to Paul's solid assurance of his salvation and of being raised to life with Christ upon Christ's return.

Applications

- Cultivate a true and deep joy in knowing Christ rather than in any temporary circumstances, achievements, or material possessions.
- Keep the resurrected power of Christ in focus even in your personal struggles. Because sooner or later, Christ will bring about total freedom
- Let the concept of sharing in the fellowship of Christ's suffering redefine your view of your personal struggles as opportunities to draw closer to Christ and identify with his endurance.

Non-Christian:

- Do not rely on your own resume, good deeds, or status to earn God's mercy or approval.
- Rather, put your trust in Christ alone for salvation
- In the end, all human effort and confidence in the flesh will fail, and only that which is done by faith in Christ will stand the test of time.