



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Beware Misplaced Confidence—Philippians 3.1-6

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PHILIPPIANS: CULTIVATING A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE AT THE CAPITOL

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INTRODUCTION

Beware! There is a certain dramatic flair to this word. It is not one we use often or lightly. To ignore a sign warning, “Beware of Dog,” might carry painful or, even, deadly consequences. The word screams for alertness and caution in the face of real and present danger. The sign mentioned above cautions you regarding the presence of a dog that is really dangerous.

In Philippians 3.1-6, we are given such a warning. For the church at Philippi the danger was a present one. False teachers were present among them who proposed ideas that were really dangerous. The very heart of the gospel message was at stake. These believers were being lured towards a misplaced confidence in outward religious expression rather than placing their confidence in Christ alone.

Philippians 3.1-6—Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, concerning the law, a Pharisee, concerning zeal, persecuting the church, concerning the righteousness found in the law, blameless.

I. WARNING AGAINST MISPLACED CONFIDENCE (1-2)

Paul introduces this warning against misplaced confidence by pressing the need for vigilance. This vigilance is necessitated by the human tendency to complacency. He also identifies the source of danger.

THE NEED FOR VIGILANCE (1)

Repetition is often necessary for emphasis or to reinforce learning. But especially when warnings are involved, repetition serves to counter the human tendency to become complacent, inattentive, or careless. It isn't irksome to Paul to repeat this warning to those he addresses as beloved and longed-for brethren, his joy and crown. Their safety in the face of danger warrants the repetition.

THE SOURCE OF DANGER (2)

The words used to alert these believers to the source of this real and present danger are harsh—dogs, evil workers, the mutilation. Whether these false teachers were Judaizers or not, we are not entirely certain. They were likely to have been Jewish believers who lacked the maturity and understanding to fully grasp the grace of God extended through Christ and the nature of the new covenant established with believers.

Such harsh terms leave no room for thinking that legalistic observance of Jewish ritual is compatible with living under the new covenant by faith in Christ. Those who promote these ideas are dogs, a term used by the religious Jew to denote the uncleanness of an uncircumcised Gentile. Evil work is how Paul describes their attempts to bind believers with such ritual observance. The resulting circumcision is likened to the mutilation practiced by many pagan religions—actions that are abhorrent to God. These false teachers represent a real and present danger!

II. PROPER GROUNDS FOR CONFIDENCE (3)

Paul put these believers on high alert regarding the danger of those who would advocate confidence in outward religious observance, particularly the rite of circumcision. In referring to these false teachers as the mutilation, he makes a play on the word circumcision. Now he presents the proper grounds for confidence to all believers who, through faith in Christ, have become the true circumcision. Circumcision is emblematic for

BIBLE STUDIES (MEALS PROVIDED)

LEGISLATORS ONLY: WEDNESDAY @ LUNCH AT THE AUSTIN CLUB (11:30A.M. OR UPON ADJOURNMENT, WHICHEVER IS LATER)
OR THURSDAYS @ 7:30 A.M. IN THE MEMBERS' LOUNGE (E2.1002)

CAPITOL COMMUNITY (ALL ARE WELCOME): FRIDAYS @ 8:00A.M. IN THE MEMBERS' LOUNGE (E2.1002)

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a covenant relationship with God. Paul taught that through Christ the believer is circumcised in heart.

Rather than putting confidence in outward observance of religious rituals to approach God, the believer worships God in Spirit. Beyond that, the believer does not rejoice in his own works, but in the finished work of Christ as that which grants him standing before God. Believers rest in the confidence that the work of Christ on the cross is all-sufficient for forgiveness and right standing before God. Therefore, he places no confidence whatsoever in the flesh, that is, in his own life or conduct.

III. FALSE GROUNDS FOR CONFIDENCE (4-6)

It would seem that those who were urging the rite of circumcision upon these Philippian believers sought to establish their own standing among them by boasting of their scrupulous adherence to Jewish law. Perhaps some of them had strong credentials among the Jewish community as members of important families or even the priesthood. Paul does not attack their credentials, but rather makes it clear that whatever cause for confidence in the flesh they have, he has even greater cause for confidence.

Paul begins his list of personal credentials with things related to his birth. He was not only of Jewish birth, he was circumcised on the eighth day, in strict accordance with Jewish law. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, from which Israel's first king had come. "Hebrew of Hebrews," emphasized his pride in his Jewish heritage and resistance to any compromise with Greco-roman culture. These were the strongest qualifications imaginable to establish someone among God's chosen and favored people. If these things were going to be one's basis for confidence, Paul had greater cause for confidence than anyone.

From issues of birth, Paul turns now to issues related to life and practice. As far as the law was concerned, Paul was of the strictest order, the Pharisees. His zeal was abundantly evident through his vigorous activity in persecuting the church before

his conversion. As a Pharisee, Paul claims to have been so scrupulous as to be blameless of transgression against the laws of Judaism. If anyone had grounds for confidence in such things, Paul had even greater grounds.

CONCLUSION

Beware! False teachers were seeking to lure believers into placing themselves under Jewish law. They boasted great confidence in such adherence. In relation to issues of birth or adherence to covenant law, Paul had greater reason for confidence than these false teachers. It would be from this position of personal credibility that Paul would argue against confidence in religious observance as a means to gain or maintain standing before God. Christ has done all that is needed to grant standing before God to all who trust in Him.

This tendency to seek to live out our faith by doing good and religious things has always been, and will always be a real and present danger for believers.

- Is your confidence before God solely rooted in Christ and His work or do you think that you are a pretty good person and God accepts you based upon your efforts to do good?
- Are you more acceptable to God than others because of your service in the church or community?
- Having begun in helpless dependence upon the finished work of Christ for your standing before God, do you now think you can maintain standing before Him through religious ritual?