

BEWARE OF THE DOGS!

SERIES: PHILIPPIANS

by Steve Zeisler

During last week's heavy rainstorm I came upon the scene of an automobile accident. A few people had arrived there just before me and they were engaged in emergency actions. A car had come off the freeway ramp and had fallen about 30 feet down an embankment. The driver, who had been helped out of the car, was standing there, shaky and white-faced. One man was sprinting down the road toward a nearby store to call the emergency services; other passers-by were lighting flares to warn the oncoming traffic. The road was treacherous due to the heavy rain, so it clearly was a situation that called for urgent emergency activity. No words were wasted; no discussions were held; quick action was taken.

The passage of Scripture from the letter to the Philippians which we have before us this morning has that kind of "red-flare" urgency about it. The Philippians are being warned to be aware of the danger they are facing. Philippians 3:1-3:

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

The word rejoice is sewn throughout the fabric of this letter. The apostle refers to joy in his prayer life, to his joy as he surveys the advance of the gospel, to his joy as he recognizes that his life, even if it is forfeit, may be poured out for the sake of the work of Christ.

But joy is used in a striking way in Philippians 3:1 because it is linked to the idea of safeguarding the Philippians. "Rejoice in the Lord," Paul says. "To write the same things again is no trouble to me, but it is a safeguard for you." There is danger, an emergency, ahead; there are warning flares out, but the Philippians' deep love for and joyous response to the things of Christ will begin the process of protecting them from the emergency.

What is the emergency then? What are the things that are causing such concern? The language Paul uses here is some of the crudest, most arresting and striking that he uses in any of his writings. The commands in Philippians 3:2 come in a staccato-like fashion: "Beware of the dogs; beware of the evil workers; of the circumcision."

In the first century, dogs were not the same kind of house pets we are familiar with today. In his commentary on this section, William Barclay writes,

With us the dog is a well loved animal, but it was not so in the east in the time of Jesus. The dog was the pariah roaming the streets, sometimes in packs, hunting amidst the garbage dumps and the rubbish heaps and snapping and snarling at all whom they met.

To call someone a dog was about as low a description as you could give. In a way, Paul is turning the tables on the Judaizers (whom I believe are the ones being warned against) because the rabbis referred to Gentiles as being

beneath contempt, calling them the dogs of the world. Beware of the Judaizers, the dogs, the evil workers, Paul says. The word evil here is a very strong term, meaning wicked, vile, or base. What these people accomplish is wickedness itself; they work evil.

Then, Paul says, “Beware of the false circumcision” (Phil. 3:2). This is actually a euphemistic translation. Paul is contrasting the true circumcision (Phil. 3:3) with this false circumcision, True circumcision is a purposeful cutting, but the false circumcision of verse 2 means to chop in pieces, to mutilate, to castrate. The language has a strident crudeness about it. “Beware of the mutilators. Beware of those who accomplish destruction in the spirit,” he says.

In contrast to these three warnings of Philippians 3:2, Paul in verse 3, gives us a threefold description of true Christianity, true worship:

We are the true circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

To worship, to glory, to place our confidence rightly—all of these go beyond surface concerns. To whom do you owe ultimate obedience and allegiance? The one whom you worship identifies you at your very heart, your deepest level. Bob Dylan caught the essence of this thought in his song, “You Gotta Serve Somebody”: “Everybody’s gotta serve somebody; it might be the devil or it might be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.”

The second of these phrases says we “glory in Christ Jesus.” Our exultation, our boasting, our glory is in Christ Jesus. This is not the same kind of exultation the San Francisco 49ers are getting these days. A lot of fans are doing a lot of strange things—painting themselves red, standing in the rain for days to get playoff tickets, glorying in the 49ers, boasting in their football team. But that is a very shallow experience, a poor substitute for the deep exultation, the deep boasting we Christians have. When all is said and done, one name comes to our lips, one cause matters to us. We glory in Christ Jesus. Thirdly, “we put no confidence in the flesh.” We have no final confidence, no ultimate concern for the things of the flesh.

Throughout this book there are described a number of situations which, if I were writing about them, I would use very emotional language. Early in the book, Paul talks about his imprisonment at the hands of the Romans and says he faces the possibility of a criminal’s execution. He writes about the enmity that grew between himself and some brothers in Christ in Rome who were doing their very best to undermine and hurt him. He writes of the near fatal illness of his close friend, Epaphroditus. (Later in the book Paul will write about what it is like to be financially destitute.) Any one of those experiences would cause me to be very serious, emotional and excited if I were writing a letter. But it is interesting that none of those experiences receives from Paul the same kind of serious, aggressive concern than this problem of the false circumcision, of putting confidence in the flesh, which he is about to highlight.

There is a reason for that. We see this same attitude evident elsewhere in Scripture. The point Paul is making is that in any conflict your enemies can do the most damage if they are successful at sabotage and betrayal. Paul says in Romans, I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation.” Whenever the gospel encounters sin, the gospel is the greater force. No human failure, guilt, weakness or rebellion can stand against the greatness of the gospel, (the power and authority of Christ to set people free. But if the gospel itself is undermined, if Jesus Christ becomes a taskmaster who appeals to human pride, who heaps guilt on us and attacks us for our failures, if the Lord himself becomes the servant of the flesh, not the One who can answer the human dilemma but adds to it, then we are lost. If the gospel is no different than the human problem, we have no hope. The worst thing people can be made to believe is that Christianity is advanced by human effort.

This is what was being accomplished by the dogs, the evil workers in Philippi. They were making the gospel something it is not. Sin is no match for the gospel, therefore betrayal of the gospel is the most devastating thing that can happen to a church.

What is the nature, then, of this sabotage? What does to have “confidence in the flesh” mean? Everyone in this room was born with a subtle—or perhaps not so subtle—love for human accomplishment. We love to hear the stories of the great heroes who did magnificent things, who overcame great odds, etc. And we love to fantasize about we ourselves doing great, out-of-the-ordinary things. We even naturally love a religion that will appeal to us to work hard so that we can reach our spiritual potential.

Here is an almost humorous description, taken from a recent edition of the Stanford Observer, of the human accomplishments of a woman who is teaching at Stanford University:

In a career studded with excitement and unusual experiences, she has (to mention a few), followed in the footsteps of Marco Polo, St. Paul, and Alexander The Great on their famous journeys; hacked her way through the Burmese jungle; trapped rare animals in the Iranian desert; penetrated the upper Amazon to study the language of the remote Cashibo tribe; won a gold medal for the U.S. at the East-West games in the Soviet Union, etc. The ‘etc.’ includes adventures which may one day make a book, but in the meantime she is writing a work on T.S. Eliot’s early philosophical interests. Today she is on what she regards as her finest adventure. In addition to taking care of her four children, all under 13, she teaches fulltime in the new Western culture program. and also throws herself enthusiastically into the task of being Resident Fellow at the Madera dormitory.

There is something impressive about that, isn’t there? Human beings love to be challenged to do great things and to receive all the honor that goes along with that.

Unfortunately, we are therefore subject to being deceived into believing that Christianity consists of Christ plus something. The great advantages of Jesus’ death on the cross are one thing, but how much better it would be to have Christ, plus performance, as Jews? How much better it would be to have all the advantages of our inheritance in Jesus plus all the advantages of accomplishment? How much better it would be to be an “in crowd” Christian, to be a Christian with special titles, influence and merit?

That is precisely the devilish, subtle issue that was at stake in Philippi. The Judaizers, those servants of the enemy who followed Paul throughout the Roman Empire, taught that Christianity was great, but how much better was Christianity plus Judaism (plus circumcision, plus the law, plus temple worship)? What a great advantage is religion with an extra! But here is what Paul says about his own putting confidence in the flesh. Philippians 3:4:

...although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation 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 the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of

faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

“Brothers and sisters in Philippi,” Paul says, “if anybody could have Jesus plus as his religion, if anybody could combine faith in Christ with successful religious performance it would be me,” says the apostle. He was circumcised the eighth day.” From the first week of his life he was part of the “in crowd.” He was no Johnny-come-lately to the cause. His nation and tribe were held in high honor. He was not descended from Abraham through Ishmael or one of the other sons, but through Israel, The tribe to which he belonged, Benjamin, was one of the two heroic tribes which did not defect from the Davidic throne.

What Paul is saying, in effect is, “My heritage was gallant, valuable and worthy, not just after the first week of my birth, but stretching back into antiquity. I come from righteous stock.” Some Christians talk this way about their denomination: “Not only was I born and raised in a Christian home, but my denomination has been truer and purer than others.”

Further, Paul says he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, and, as to the law, a Pharisee. Here he is talking about his education. His family were not Jews who had been infused with Greek and Roman culture, they were Hebrew Hebrews who retained their love for the Old Testament language, their love for the Scriptures and the writings of the ancients. He was adopted into the sect of the Pharisees, the highest and best, the most accomplished, most rigorous, most theologically astute of Jewish communities. His education was of the highest order.

Those accomplishments are loved every bit as much by some Christians today. Some Christians like to quote Greek and Latin phrases; they like to have a string of degrees behind their name; they like to be known as part of a group that has accomplished more and stood for more.

Further, Paul says he was “zealous,” and “as far as righteousness that may be found in the law, blameless.” Zealousness refers to his religious guts. He was no ivory tower academic. He put his life on the line. He encountered dangers. He was white-hot with concern and involvement in the cause of religious purity. He obeyed everything that he was called on to obey; he kept the commandments rigorously; he offered sacrifices; he did not miss worship services under any circumstances. If anybody could glory in human accomplishments, if anybody could add Judaism to Christianity it would be the apostle Paul. Yet, in his analysis, all his accomplishments counted for nothing.

What about us? What kind of accomplishments do we glory in? When you are afraid, in the dark night of the soul when your sense of well being is at stake, when you fear for your future, what do you call upon for reassurance? Where do you find your self worth, your freedom from fear? Many of us go to the Lord, to the gospel, but, unfortunately, we add something to that. It’s great to have Christian assurance, but it helps too to be a graduate of Bible college. It’s great to be a Christian, but it’s even better to be an “in crowd” Christian. It’s nice to hob-nob with Christian bigwigs. It is great to know Christ, but it is wonderful to have a degree or two or three in Christian disciplines, to speak in tongues, to have visited the Holy Land, to be a Bible teacher of high reputation, to have spent a summer in the inner city or with a mission overseas, to be familiar with the current trends in Christian music, to have an unbroken attendance record at church and Christian conferences. It’s great to know Christ, but it’s especially comforting to have a list of accomplishments to which I can turn to for reassurance.

When I came to Christ I joined a youth group which fancied Phillips translation of the New Testament. I wanted to have that badge of entrance, a Phillips New Testament, just like everybody else. Then I discovered that this New Testament had to be underlined, not with an ordinary ballpoint pen, but with colored marking pens. So I read the

whole New Testament in a period of weeks, and underlined with a colored pen what I didn't understand, until every page had a few lines on it. Somehow it had been communicated to me that it was great to know Christ, but there was a way to be on the inside, there was a way to belong more thoroughly, and I wanted to belong. I was reassured of my place in the Christian community because I had the badge of entrance.

It is this subtle temptation not merely to love Christ but something else besides that receives the strongest, the most angry, the most aggressive reaction from the apostle:

“Beware of the dogs, of the evil workers, of the mutilators.” Don't ever let anything diminish the accomplishments of Christ on your behalf.

Having gone through his own list of accomplishments, and having told us that he puts no confidence in the flesh, Paul tells what he went on to do. “Whatever things were gain to me,” he says, “those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” This is a mental exercise. “I counted these things and evaluated them,” he says, “and I decided they were a loss; they were negative; they were not even neutral.” Then, he says, “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Further, in Philippians 3:8 he says, “I count them rubbish (or dung) in order that I may gain Christ.”

We too have to make some decisions. We have to take a survey of our lives and all the things in them that we find, perhaps even without realizing it, we have loved and held on to and been supported by. These we have to judge as worth nothing, as a loss, compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.

Further, Paul says in Philippians 3:8, “For whom I have suffered the loss of all things.” At some point in our lives we have got to live out the decision; that is the point. We must not only evaluate our seeming advantages as though they did not matter, but we must be willing to let go of our prejudices, to take the lower place, to be concerned for people we might otherwise look down on. We must evaluate our lives and then be willing to suffer the consequences of that evaluation.

There was nothing inherently wrong about Paul's being a Benjamite, or his being circumcised the eighth day, etc. He could not have changed many of the things on that list anyway. The problem was that he took pride in them, he valued them highly, he lived on the basis of them, he treated people in a certain way because of them. Now he says, having evaluated these things, “I've learned that they were garbage, and I live out in my life with the suffering that comes as a consequence.

Paul strikes two further notes in Philippians 3:9-10. “We place no confidence in the flesh,” he says. So what does he do? Two things: “I long to be found in him” (verse 9), and, “I long to know him” (verse 10). I want Christ to be my final resting place; I want to be in Christ, he says. “I don't want to stand in the last day and in the last evaluation and carry my little bag of accomplishments. I want to have the righteousness that comes from faith in Christ, the beauty of Jesus himself.” Paul desires to have an intimate knowledge of the Lord, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection (that the power that raised Jesus from the dead would fill him and change him); “that I may know him and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death” (that the flesh and all it stood for, that the old man in him would increasingly be put to death, would increasingly be cut away); “and in all this I walk in intimacy with Christ,” Paul says,

Place no confidence in the flesh, we are told. In our evaluation we reject the things that we have accomplished; we suffer the consequences of that evaluation, and then we turn our face to stand with the righteousness of Christ, to

walk in a growing intimacy with him, to know him better and better --"the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death."

The last verse in this section, Philippians 3:11, in some ways is the most remarkable verse of all: "In order that I may attain to the resurrection front the dead." A prominent Christian writer once told me that he thought this was the most difficult verse to interpret in the New Testament. It is very hard to avoid feeling that Paul is saying he is not sure whether he is going to make it or not. But that flatly contradicts everything he says in other places. I don't think he is writing theology at this point; I don't think he is talking about Christian certainty. He is not expressing doubt, rather, he is expressing dependence. What he is saying is, "I don't have a Plan B; I don't have a fallback position; I have long ago jettisoned everything else. In some sense I am so utterly stretched out on Christ that if he does not come through, I am lost. I haven't retained anything that might save me or build me up; I have nowhere else to go." In Philippians 3:2 Paul is expressing that kind of naked dependence on the Lord.

At the beginning of this study we compared these verses to an emergency situation. They were written as if Paul's pen was on fire with an anxious concern for his readers. "Beware of the dogs," he says. "Don't let anyone convince you that adding something to what Christ has done for you will do you any good." Don't let anybody take Jesus away from you, is what he is saying. Paul is lighting flares to warn us that we need to be very concerned about something that is no small issue; it is more important than whether we live or die. We can sense his concern throughout this whole passage.

As I was thinking along these lines, the question entered my mind, is there any pattern of accomplishment about the pastors at PBC which would qualify us to be leaders in this church? Is there any element of human skill or heritage that marks this group out as worthy of spiritual responsibility? Well, I couldn't think of any.

There is an incredible variety of personalities, cultural tastes—even wardrobe choices!—among the pastoral staff here. Some pastors have an impeccable heritage in evangelicalism, stretching back for generations. Some are Johnny-come-latelies, the first generation of their families to know Christ. Some have been to the right schools and have earned impressive degrees. At least one man on the staff has no earned degree. Some come from the wealthy upper classes; some come from middle and working class families, Some were born and raised in poverty. Some have prominent fathers who supported them as they grew up. At least four men on this staff were raised without fathers for a significant portion of their lives. Two were abandoned by their fathers. Among us there are men who have had marital struggles, defiant children, bad health, emotional insecurity, They are Republicans, Democrats, men from all over the United States and overseas, outspoken men, quiet men, men who are famous in many places in the world, others are not known by many in this congregation. It is a motley crew. There is no pattern of human accomplishment that qualifies this band for Christian leadership. God has brought people from all kinds of backgrounds through all manners and means to a place of some usefulness.

If the pastors of this church are any example we should conclude that the flesh will not get us anywhere. There is absolutely no reason to place any confidence, to feel any pride, or to turn to the flesh ever for reassurance. Paul says, "I consider everything worthless for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord." That should be our evaluation too. Let us heed the warning of Scripture about what will happen if we ever allow the temptation to love Jesus plus anything else to take control of us.

Lord, we want to grow in our love for you. We appreciate very much the warning of the apostle to beware of anyone who would take Jesus away from us. In his name we pray, Amen.

Catalog No. 3731
Philippians 3:1-11
6th Message
Steve Zeisler
January 10, 1982
Updated June 6, 2001

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