

A TRIBE FOR ALL TRIBES

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



Catalog No. 20180520
Philippians 3:1–6
Seventh Message
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May 20, 2018

Philippians 3:1–6

Increasingly in our world today, men and women in the West feel threatened because of a rapidly changing world. As a result, many have retreated into tribalism, adopting an “us-versus-them” mentality. Amy Chua, the author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, writes of these things in her new book *Political Tribes*:

Whites and blacks, Latinos and Asians, men and women, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, straight people and gay people, liberals and conservatives—all feel their groups are being attacked, bullied, persecuted, discriminated against.

Of course, one group’s claims to feeling threatened and voiceless are often met by another group’s derision because it discounts their own feelings of persecution—but such is political tribalism.

This—combined with record levels of inequality—is why we now see identity politics on both sides of the political spectrum. And it leaves the United States in a perilous new situation: almost no one is standing up for an America without identity politics, for an American identity that transcends and unites all the country’s many subgroups.¹

How are we, as followers of Jesus, being affected by this tribalism? How are we responding? How should we respond? We turn, in our study of the book of Philippians, to Philippians 3:1-6, which qualifies, in today’s terminology, as an identity text for followers of Jesus. Who are we?

Rejoice in the Lord

Philippians 3:1:

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

The words translated “finally” here would carry the sense of “well, then,” or “as for the rest.” Paul tells them to “rejoice in the Lord” (the Lord is Jesus, as in Philippians 2:11), which would be an antidote for the

mindset of those depicted in verse 2. Rejoicing “in” the Lord overcomes the desire to put confidence “in” the flesh (verse 3). The “same things” that Paul writes again are his warnings and exhortations that follow. Evidently, the Philippians have heard this before.

Two lists

Philippians 3:2-6:

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 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— 4 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: 5 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; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

The structure of the passage features two lists of seven, each of which features a center point—the fourth description in each list. A more literal translation demonstrates the grammatical connections, and a schematic presentation demonstrates the structure:

List 1

See the dogs,
See the evil workers,
See the mutilation (*katatomē*).

For we are the circumcision (*peritomē*),
Who worship by the Spirit of God,
And who boast in Christ Jesus,
And who put no confidence in the flesh.

List 2

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, persecuting the church;
As to righteousness under the law, blameless.

False people of God

Paul warns his readers to literally “see” the people he describes in three ways: “dogs,” “evildoers,” and “those who mutilate the flesh.” These are people who take pride in their Jewish heritage. They may have been Jewish evangelists who urged followers of Jesus to abandon Christ in favor of Judaism. They are probably not the “Judaizers” Paul writes of in Galatians who believe themselves to be following Jesus and are trying to convince the Gentiles to be circumcised as part of following Jesus. If they were, Paul would probably not combat their teachings by saying that he was once like them, a persecutor of the church (verse 6), because the Judaizers were not, in fact, persecutors of the church. These Jews are not followers of Jesus. Each description features more than a little irony.

Dogs were scavengers that Jews considered unclean. Jews, of course, considered Gentiles unclean and even used the term for Gentiles (Matthew 15:21-28). Like dogs, Gentiles ate food that, from a Jewish perspective, was ceremonially unclean. A good Jew, on the other hand, observed prescribed food laws and kept himself pure. Paul turns the tables on these people and says that they are unclean. They are like the pagans.

These Jews, of course, would have thought of themselves as doers of righteousness, in accordance with the Mosaic Law. By relying on the law, they are actually evildoers, according to Paul. They are like the pagans.

The noun translated “those who mutilate the flesh” (*katatomē*) is a play on words with the noun translated “circumcision” (*peritomē*). It would be more literally translated as “mutilation,” although such a translation still would not indicate the grammatical relationship between the words. Circumcision was supposed to signify that one belonged to God’s covenant people. The Levitical priests were prohibited from cutting themselves (Leviticus 21:5). Now, however, those Jews who are trusting in their circumcision are more like the pagans, who cut themselves for their gods (1 Kings 18:28).

True people of God

Paul, on the other hand, rather emphatically states that it is “we who are the circumcision.” The pronoun “we” includes both Jew and Gentile followers of Jesus, who now constitute the covenant people of God. Paul puts it this way in Colossians 3:11: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

The Lord has always been after a circumcision of the heart: hearts that belong to him (Deuteronomy 30:6). Paul, in an allusion to Deuteronomy 30:6, says in Romans 2:28-29: “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” He also writes in Colossians 2:11-12: “In him [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Paul offers a description of the true people of God to counter his description of the false people of God. This description is in keeping with the true and now fully realized nature of circumcision he describes in Colossians and Romans. The new identity markers, if you will, are the Spirit of God and Christ Jesus. Paul says elsewhere that we have been marked in Christ with a “seal”—the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13).

First, the people of God “worship by the Spirit of God.” True worship and service are called forth by the Holy Spirit, who resides in each believer. God initiates. He takes responsibility. It is at his impulse that we worship him, serve him, and follow Jesus.

Second, the people of God literally “boast in Christ Jesus.” Whereas the Jews would find circumcision and other ethnic markers to boast in to prove their covenant membership, Paul says the only thing the true people of God have to boast about is Christ. They know they only belong to God because of Christ.

Paul probably has in mind Jeremiah 9:23-24, where the Lord says, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

The people of God know the Lord, Christ Jesus. As far as their qualifications for covenant membership are concerned, this is the only thing about which they can boast.

Third, the people of God “put no confidence in the flesh.” The Jews whom Paul is castigating trust in the flesh—they trust in their ethnic heritage and

observances, particularly the cutting away of their “flesh,” to mark them out as the people of God. As Paul says in Romans 10:3, the Israelites sought their “own” national righteousness. They relied on their ethnic status and the supposedly inalienable privilege that it provided. And they tended to be rather exclusive about it. The identity markers for the people of God have nothing to do with ethnic heritage and observances and everything to do with the Spirit of God and Christ Jesus—and with faith, as Paul will say in verses 7 through 11.

Paul’s history

In verse 4, Paul says that if he wanted to play the game these Jews are playing, he could lick any of them. In fact, Paul used to play that game. His identity markers were the same as those advocated by these Jews. But that is all behind him now. Such identity markers are also behind the people of God, as the true meaning of those markers has been brought forth in the new covenant. For Paul, there is no future in the past.

Paul describes his former life in seven ways. Structurally, this balances the seven total ways in which he described the Jews (three ways) and the people of God (four ways) in verses 2-3. The center point in the previous list was his affirmation that “we are the circumcision.” The center point in this list about his life is his description of himself as “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” Leading up to this center point, the list focuses on ethnic heritage or covenant membership. On the other side of the center point, it focuses on ethnic accomplishment or the expression of covenant membership.

Paul was “circumcised on the eighth day,” in accordance with the law (Genesis 17:12, Leviticus 12:3). Some Jews, for whatever reason, were not circumcised on the eighth day. Paul is saying, “They got it right with me.” He is “of the people of Israel” by birth, not conversion. He is “of the tribe of Benjamin,” which was a tribe of prominence, not least because it was one of only two tribes, along with Judah, to which one’s heritage could still be traced.

Based on his heritage and leading into his accomplishments, Paul says he was “a Hebrew of Hebrews.” By breeding and accomplishment, he would be considered an elite member of the nation of Israel.

The final three descriptions each begin with a word that is translated “as to.” The first three descriptions affirm that he was a purebred Israelite. The final three descriptions put forth his accomplishments as an Israelite.

He chose to join and was accepted into, the sect of Pharisees, who advocated scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law.

If a Jew was said to have “zeal,” it meant that he was passionate about God, the law, Jewish traditions, and the purity of Israel (Acts 21:20, Romans 10:2-3). Many who were zealous in this way were willing to engage in holy war to purify Israel and overthrow enemies. The revolutionaries who advocated the overthrow of Rome were called Zealots. As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had seen the church, composed almost solely of Jews early on, as a corrupting influence in Israel. Therefore, he persecuted it.

He writes about this in Galatians 1:13-14: “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.”

Finally, he says that he was “blameless” according to the “righteousness under the law.” He does not mean that he lived a perfect life; he means that he lived as an observant Jew. He followed the Sabbath, food laws, and feasts (Colossians 2:16). He kept short accounts with God, participating in the sacrificial system and the Day of Atonement. Paul could probably have said, as another Israelite said regarding the Ten Commandments, “All these I have kept from my youth” (Luke 18:21). No one could fault him in these respects.

Paul would not have said that any of these accomplishments enabled him to be a member of the people of God as if he could have earned such status. No, these were the ways in which he expressed his covenant membership. Nevertheless, such accomplishments for a Jew would tend to affirm his status and generate “confidence in the flesh”—confidence that he belonged to God because of ethnic privilege.

Paul’s story reminds me of the song “Somebody Else,” which Jeff Bridges’ character sings in the movie *Crazy Heart*: “I used to be somebody but now I am somebody else What was thought to be the right way turned out the wrong way after all / What I took to be the high road was only leading to a fall.” Perhaps the same is true for you. Or, perhaps, you need to stop trying to “be somebody” so that you can be “somebody else.”²

What it meant to the Philippians

Why did Paul write these verses? The word translated “look out for” would be more literally translated “see.” Here, it probably means to observe those people who claim covenant membership based on ethnic heritage and express it through accomplishments that would have been honored in their culture. Paul must mean, “Don’t be like them.” But why would mostly Gentile followers of Jesus in the city of Philippi need to be told this? How might they tend to adopt a similar outlook on life?

Perhaps they were faced with some temptation to convert to Judaism. The Philippian believers were being persecuted for their faith (Philippians 1:29-30), and Judaism was a safer, more established—but still monotheistic—option in the Roman empire.

Also, and probably more significantly, Philippi was a Roman colony, and many of its residents had Roman citizenship, which carried with it certain privileges. Both the Jews and the Philippians, then, would tend to consider themselves children of status and privilege. Those Jews who opposed Jesus and his people became like the pagans: dogs, evildoers, and mutilators. The Romans, of course, were pagans, to begin with. In this letter, Paul takes particular aim against the pagan claims of Caesar, who called himself savior and lord. For Paul, Christ alone is Savior and Lord. The Philippians were beholden to Caesar for their status and privileges as Roman citizens.

What would it mean, then, for the Philippians to put confidence in the flesh? It would mean either gravitating toward the particular Jewish “flesh” or clinging to and boasting in the status and privileges granted them by Caesar, even bowing down to him, instead of clinging to and boasting in Christ and bowing down to him. No doubt one would do certain things to express his or her Roman citizenship, just as Jews did certain things to express their covenant membership. Such actions would affirm one’s status and generate confidence in the flesh—pride in status and related achievements.

There’s nothing wrong with being a Roman, just as there’s nothing wrong with being a Jew. There’s nothing wrong with any tribe, any race, or any nation per se. Yet there is something wrong with every tribe. Every tribe is made up of sinners. In a collective sense, then, no tribe puts its trust in God. Not knowing what else to trust in but needing to trust in something, the tribe trusts in itself. A tribal, or national, consciousness develops. In order to prop up this cultural consciousness, each tribe wants to think of itself as superior. The members,

then, take pride in their membership. Each cultural consciousness develops differently, so each tribe has different identity markers and different ways for its members to express their membership.

For the Jews, the marks of identity were circumcision, adherence to the Mosaic Law, and, in some cases, revolutionary zeal. Nothing was wrong with circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic Law (although something was wrong with revolutionary zeal, in that it disobeyed God’s design for Israel to be a light to the nations). In fact, everything was right about them. They were ordained by God. They were given by God so that the people might know and follow him. However, the markers were hijacked by many people and used as justification for a national privilege, pride, and exclusivity. In other words, they were seen as reasons for confidence in the flesh.

The Jews had their tribe. The Romans had their tribe. Paul says, in so many words, that Jewish and Roman followers of Jesus belong to a new tribe that is different from every tribe in these respects: membership has nothing to do with ethnicity or accomplishment, leaving no room for pride or exclusivity.

What it means for us

Finally, and most importantly, we have to ask ourselves what this means for us. What is the nature of the cultural flesh that we may tend to put confidence in instead of the sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives? To answer this question, we have to ask ourselves what tribes we tend to identify with. Then we have to ask ourselves what the identity markers of these tribes are.

Again, there is nothing is wrong with belonging to any of these tribes. We need to be concerned with how we put confidence in the tribal identity markers only to the extent that they compete with allegiance to Christ. We know this tendency is in us because we want our schools, our teams, our cities, and our nations to triumph, and we root hard for them to do so.

We may have a visceral attachment to the identity markers of our ethnic or national tribe. If you’re an American, what marks you out as such? Perhaps achieving the “American Dream” of success, wealth, notoriety, and home ownership. Individualism, oftentimes “outside-the-box” individualism and entrepreneurial individualism. Projecting a certain can-do attitude that befits a country that takes pride in its economic and military superiority. If you’re of Asian descent, what marks you out as being part

of your culture? Many of you tell me that academic achievement and succeeding in the right kind of career are cultural markers.

Then there are all sorts of smaller “tribes”—first the families we come from and then people we hang with. These smaller tribes often develop their own identity markers, much as college fraternities and sororities. Toward the end of my college years and for a few years after, I hung out with two guys all the time. The three of us thought that no one was as cool as we were. If I told you what we thought made us cool, you’d laugh your heads off. We had our own tribal identity markers, complete with inside jokes that we thought were the funniest things ever. Looking back, I can now see what was going on: we were insecure, and we propped up our insecurity with tribalism and feelings of tribal superiority.

Finally, if we are participants in a church, there can be certain ecclesiastical markers. Lee Knapp in *Christianity Today* writes of how his church culture frustrated him:

*While nothing I had been taught was in any way contrary to scripture, the church culture, one in which I rarely felt like myself, applied layer upon layer of conformity. Being insulated in such a culture either took away an honest estimation of sin, as people became spiritually proud, or it made them preoccupied with their sin in trying to eliminate it. I won lots of morality points and spiritual status this way, but in the end, I lost my humanity.*³

Two categories

Paul has two categories for the flesh: the first pertains to heritage or that which is obtained by birth, and the second pertains to achievement, or what one does with what one obtains by birth. Taking pride in anything, be it heritage or achievement, is ludicrous, of course.

What did any of us have to do with what tribe we were born into or what innate abilities we have? Nothing, of course. Am I “proud to be an American”? If so, what did I have to do with creating the land the country occupies, let alone the philosophy and system of government? I just happened to be born here.

Then we may want to say, “Well, perhaps I had nothing to do with the hand that was dealt me, but I played it to the best of my ability.” But where did the ability, be it physical or mental, come from? Not from us.

The tribal identity markers we grasp for and cling to are meaningless, and they distract us from “sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). The apostle John writes, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes and boastful pride of life, is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 John 2:16).

In moving toward Christ, many of us have sought to move away from the call of certain identity markers and points of pride. But we still hear their echo, and they haunt us like a bad memory. For Paul, there is no future in the past. For us, there is no future in the past. There is no future in tribal heritage or achievement. The future belongs to God. Listen to his voice.

The call is to live by the Spirit and boast in Christ. We belong to God solely because of Christ. Because of Christ, we are part of the people of God, which is composed of members of every tribe (Revelation 5:9). The Holy Spirit resides within us to reveal to us the glory of Christ and to motivate and empower us to activity that brings honor to God. Don’t put your confidence in the flesh. Don’t find your identity or your worth or your security in your heritage or your achievements. Put your trust in the Lord.

Scholar Richard Lovelace writes of how, trusting the Lord, we can freely enter our culture—or any culture:

*Thus men who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.*⁴

A tribe for all tribes

We are, quite simply, the people of God. If membership has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Christ and the Spirit, we have no reason to feel superior, and there is no room for pride. If the people in our world retreat into tribalism out of fear, we have

no reason to fear anything, if God is who he says he is and if he promises us eternal life. If the people of our world adopt an us-versus-them worldview, we open our tribe, which is composed of all tribes, not on the basis of ethnicity, not on the basis of accomplishment, and not on the basis of politics.

When we worship God together week by week as his people, we connect with Christ and the Spirit and, in so doing, we remember who we are. We worship so that we might be thrust out by God again into the cultures and tribes of this world, being filled with the Spirit and Christ, repelling confidence in fleshly heritage and achievement and holding high the banner God.

Because of tribalism, Amy Chua feels that the United States is in a perilous new situation in which almost no one is standing up for “an American identity that transcends and unites all the country’s many subgroups.” Whatever it is that promises to unite a multiethnic country isn’t strong enough to do so. When threatened, people will revert to their tribes, however they define them.

We as the people of God must strive, in view of Christ’s sacrifice for all people and by the power of the Spirit, to be different. We are a tribe for all tribes. We must do everything we can, in view of the cross of Christ and by the power of the Spirit, to anticipate the future in the present. What is that future? The apostle John was given a vision of it:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10).

Endnotes

¹ Amy Chua, *Political Tribes* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018)

² T Bone Burnett, “Somebody Else.”

³ Lee Knapp, “The Making of an Original, *Christianity Today* (December 27, 2000).

⁴ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1979), 198-99.