

“Grace Plus Nothing”

Philippians 3:1-11

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A WORD TO THE GRADUATES

I'm so glad that we're looking at this passage on Graduation Sunday. As I read through the list of the names, schools, and degrees of our high school, college, and grad school graduates, I was very impressed by all of their accomplishments. As a church, we have 29 high school graduates, 13 college graduates, 10 grad school graduates who have completed master's degrees, and 3 who have completed doctoral degrees this year.

Each one of our graduates has put years of his or her life into reaching this milestone, and I'm sure those years were filled with many sleepless nights and stressful days, triumphs and setbacks, opportunities for growth and exploration, and hopefully a sense of accomplishment and relief now that they're done. Each year, this celebration gives me the chance to remember my own graduations – high school, college, and seminary. I remember how proud I was, how proud my parents were, and how much I had learned. I remember being excited for the new adventures and opportunities before me, and a little nostalgic about the chapter of my life that was coming to a close. I remember great times with wonderful friends, and the impact of some incredible teachers. But reading this list also is a good reminder for me of just how much I don't know.

To those of you who have been trained to be medical doctors, pharmacists, physical therapists, counselors, business people, biologists, economists, engineers, chemists, teachers... you all have training and expertise in fields that I know very little about. And to our graduate who has a degree in “nanomedicine engineering,” not only can I not do what you're trained to do, I don't have any idea what it is that you're going to do! Graduates, you have a lot to be proud of. But you're also exactly the kind of people who need to pay attention to Philippians 3:1-11.

REJOICE, BUT BEWARE (1-3)

Many of you have been here for some of our previous sermons on Philippians this spring. But in case you've missed some or all of it, here's what you need to know for today's message to make sense: the Apostle Paul is writing this letter to the church at Philippi. He's writing from a prison somewhere, most likely in Rome. Paul and the Philippians have a strong friendship with each other. Paul's main themes throughout this letter are going to be joy in all circumstances, even in suffering, and the importance of living a Christ-like life. Last week, we looked at Timothy and Epaphroditus, two examples of Christ-like living and service. In this week's passage, Paul shifts his focus to a threat facing the Philippian church.

Paul begins this section with a familiar refrain – “rejoice in the Lord.” This time, though, it comes with a warning label attached. This isn't just “rejoice,” this is a directive to “rejoice, but...” Starting in verse 2, Paul warns the Philippians about some troublemakers. Rather than there being specific people in Philippi who are causing problems, it seems Paul is scanning the horizon and sees a potential threat to the church. From prison, he wants to warn these people whom he loves that there is danger lurking just around the corner. So rejoice, but beware.

The threat that Paul believes is headed towards the Philippians is the Judaizers. We'll get to who these people are and why they're a threat in just a moment. There are probably two reasons Paul thinks this Judaizing threat is coming – first, he's seen it before. Paul has fought

this fight with these people repeatedly, and we see part of those fights in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Second, Philippi is located on the Via Engatia (Ignatian Way), a major thoroughfare of trade and traffic in the ancient world. It was an easy place for people to get to, and ease of access typically means an influx of people and viewpoints. The same is true today. We'd expect to see much more diversity in a place like Greensboro, where several major highways intersect, than in a place like Maiden, that's not really on the way to anywhere.

The Judaizers may not be in Philippi yet, but Paul expects them to be there soon. There's some nuance and complexity to the debate between Paul and the Judaizers, but it basically boils down to the matter of circumcision. In Paul's day, the followers of Jesus were still considered a sect of Judaism, not a separate religion. The Judaizers believe that you need to become a Jew before you can become a Christian (a type of Jew). For those who are born Jewish or for converts to Judaism, this means circumcision of the males, as instituted with Abraham in Genesis 17. Paul disagrees. His argument is that Abraham was declared righteous because of his faith in God, not through the act of circumcision. Therefore, Gentiles (non-Jews) who want to be Christians are also justified by faith apart from circumcision or any other ritual observance of the law.¹ What is at stake in this disagreement is whether we are made right with God by grace through faith, or if it requires some kind of correct action on our part. Paul disagrees with traditional Jewish theology on this point, and he's more than willing to fight for his view.

Although some of Paul's writings are more aggressive, Philippians is generally a tame and mild letter. That makes this section all the more surprising, as Paul is not polite or politically correct when he talks about his opponents. For us, it's not totally clear how intense Paul's language is. Take a moment and think about some of the insults you have heard or said. If you were going to describe an enemy, someone who hurt you, or someone who you thought was going to harm your friends and family, I'm guessing everyone could come up with worse insults than "dog," "evil doer," or "mutilator of the flesh." By our standards and through the lens of our culture, those are terribly boring insults. That wasn't true in the first century.

In our culture, dogs to be cherished household pets. Some people spend thousands of dollars buying designer dogs from breeders. It is not uncommon for Americans to treat dogs as part of the family. Dogs live in the house, sleep on the bed, go on vacation, and are often treated as and referred to as children. Last year, CNBC shared a report that found that the average lifetime cost of dog ownership is now \$27,000-42,000.² It's safe to say that, as a culture, we're invested in dogs! Nobody in the ancient world would have done that. In Paul's day, dogs were looked at with disgust and contempt; they certainly weren't part of the family.

For the ancient Jews, the word "dog" had a uniquely religious overtone. They used the term to refer to the Gentiles, who were outside the community of the people of God and considered unclean.³ In the New Testament, Jesus himself uses this common slur. In Matthew 7, Jesus says "do not give to the dogs what is sacred, do not throw your pearls to pigs" (7:6). Matthew and Mark both tell the story of a Gentile woman who comes to Jesus for help. Jesus dismisses her, saying "it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26-27; Mark 7:27-28). In the ancient world, it's very bad to be a "dog." Paul sets up a

¹ For more on Paul's argument about Abraham and justification by faith, see the text and commentary of Romans 4, which is Paul's most comprehensive, systematic treatment of this topic.

² Zack Guzman, "Owning a Pet Can Cost You \$42,000, or 7 times as Much as You Expect," CNBC, April 28, 2017, accessed June 02, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/04/27/how-much-does-it-cost-to-own-a-dog-7-times-more-than-you-expect.html>.

³ Moisés Silva, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 147.

startling reversal. He removes the term “dog” from the Gentiles and applies it instead to the Jews. This is beyond mean; it’s a scathing, offensive insult. Paul is saying to his opponents, “you who think you have the corner on the market of God’s favor, who think you’re so perfect and pure... *you* are the most unclean of all the filthy dogs!”

We get far less detail about what Paul means by evil-doers, but that one is pretty self-explanatory. His final invective, “mutilators of the flesh” is much more interesting. In Greek, Paul is using a clever play on words that doesn’t come across as clearly in English without explanation. The Greek word for circumcision is *peritome*; the word Paul uses to describe his opponents is *katatome*. Even without knowing a single word of Greek, you should be able to notice the similarities between *peritome* and *katatome*, which is exactly what Paul wanted his audience to hear. The Jews would have considered themselves the *peritome*, the circumcision, which was shorthand for the people of God. It’s a term that conveys pride and status. In both *peritome* and *katatome*, the second half, *-tome*, means “cut.” The first half is what changes, and that’s also how the meaning changes. Without getting too detailed or indelicate, *peritome* means “to cut around.” Rather than using that word, Paul calls his opponents *katatome*, which means more like “cut to pieces.” With some clever word play, Paul says to the Philippians, “we are the circumcision (the people of God), those Judaizers are just a bunch of butchers.”

Paul does not have an issue with the practice of circumcision. He’s going to tell us in the very next sentence that he himself was circumcised. Last week, we talked about Timothy, who is Paul’s beloved child in the faith. In Acts 16, there’s one sentence that’s very easy to miss. It’s right when Timothy and Paul’s journeys overlap for, it seems, the first time. “Paul wanted to take [Timothy] along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that [Timothy’s] father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3). Paul himself is a Jew of tremendously impressive pedigree. He is okay with practicing Jewish conventions and rituals. He’s even okay with practicing rituals for the sake of not causing unnecessary offense to others. What he objects to is putting your confidence or hope in these rituals. The problem is when the rituals become an end in themselves. For Paul, it’s not so much what you do, but what motivates what you do. The real problem arises when we boast in or trust in the wrong thing.

PAUL’S CREDENTIALS (4-6)

I think in this case, Paul and I are bothered by similar things. I don’t respond well to bragging, name dropping, or the so-called “humble brag.” They don’t impress me; they annoy me. One of my really big pet peeves is when people who have absolutely no reason to brag are clueless to the fact that they have nothing to brag about, and brag anyway. One of my guilty pleasures is watching the TV show *Worst Cooks in America*. The premise is pretty straight forward. Professional chefs pick teams of awful cooks and put them through cooking boot camp. Each week, someone is eliminated from each team, until finally the top two contestants face off against each other before a panel of professional restaurateurs.

A couple seasons ago, there was a woman named Ginny who I could not stand. In the first episode, she cooked something she called “Spanish Rice” – which had rice, olives, French onion dip (which, for reasons I still can’t figure out, was neon green in color), and sliced avocados. When the professional chefs asked her what made it “Spanish Rice,” she said that the avocados were from Mexico. In utter disbelief, one chef looked at her and said, “so you have Mexican avocados and French onion dip, and somehow that makes this Spanish?” Without batting an eye, Ginny nodded. “I’m very multicultural,” she said proudly.

I'm not a great chef by any standard, but even I could tell this woman should not be bragging in the kitchen. A few weeks later, we see Ginny in a team competition. The goal was to taste a completed meal and then recreate it from scratch. Ginny has learned a few things, but she's still a pretty bad cook. Unfortunately, she's also become much more obnoxious. After we see her mess up her team's dish— she doesn't choose the right meat to cook, she overcooks her vegetables, she omits most of the spices – she starts taunting her competition. “Hey meatheads! Hey testosterone!” she yells in a mocking voice. “We're finished. What's your problem? It looks a little sloppy over there. Oh my gosh! Hurry! Hurry!” She's acting like a bratty child. I can handle a little bit of sassiness in the context of competition, but this was ridiculous and immature. The professional chefs are watching over closed circuit TV from another room. They're disgusted with her too. “I wish she would just keep her mouth shut,” one judge says. “If Ginny's dish was brilliant and perfect, that would be one thing... She's about to be so embarrassed.” And by that, he means that, if she only knew just how little she had to brag about, she'd know better than to act that way.

This is an obvious lesson, right? When you're clueless and screwing things up, maybe don't brag about what you're doing. But Paul is going to take things a step further. Paul is going to say, even if you're amazing and have done super impressive things... still, maybe you don't need brag about it.

Paul gives us a list of seven items that he could brag about. Four were given to him; three he earned. First, his circumcision. This clearly links to what he has just said about the Judaizers, but it also indicates that Paul has from his birth been following the Jewish customs. Second, he says he's “of the people of Israel.” The Judaizers are trying to tell the Gentiles that in order to be part of God's people, they need to be circumcised and become Jews. That's the only way “in.” Paul is saying, “nope, I'm an insider – as insider as it gets – and you don't need to do that.” Next, Paul mentions that he's from the tribe of Benjamin. This would have really struck a chord with his fellow Jews. Paul's ancestry connected him to Israel's first king, Saul. Benjamin was described in Deuteronomy as “the beloved [tribe] of the Lord” (33:12), and it is the tribal territory of Benjamin in which the holy city of Jerusalem is located.⁴ Paul isn't just Jewish by birth (which is better than being a Jew by conversion), but he's part of one of the most powerful and prestigious tribes of the Jewish people. He reiterates this point by saying he's a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Taken together, the full weight of this first section is that Paul is an Israelite through and through; he's as much a part of God's chosen people by lineage as anybody could ever hope to be. When it comes to being a Jew, he's got all the boxes checked. But there's more!

Paul hasn't just coasted through life on his inherited Jewish status. He has actively worked to be a more devout Jew. Although the Pharisees show up as a group throughout the gospels, we don't get a whole lot of information about who they are or what they believe. The Pharisees were “a popular conservative movement focused on a keen interest in the study of the Torah and in guarding the national traditions against pagan and secular trends.”⁵ The first-century Jewish historian Josephus reports that there were about 6,000 of them. This is what Paul chose to do with his life. He wasn't merely a Jew by birth, he chose to devote himself to studying the Torah and preserving the integrity of Judaism. From that position, he became a persecutor of the early church.

In its early years, the church was considered to be a segment of Judaism. It was a movement that revolved around a Jewish man who was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. His

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 307.

⁵ Todd D. Still, *Philippians & Philemon* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 104.

followers included many Jews and some Gentiles. Paul, as a conservative defender of Judaism, saw the early church as a corruption of his Jewish religion. He sought to excise it, just as any number of other religious zealots in all times and places have worked to keep their religions pure and undefiled. In Paul's case, he decides later that he was wrong. But at the time, his actions were motivated by fierce religious devotion to Judaism.

Finally, he describes himself as "blameless with regard to the law" (6). Although some people have read this and taken issue with what may sound like Paul claiming to be sinless, I don't think that's what's going on. The idea of being sinless before the law doesn't exist in Jewish theology.⁶ Sinlessness wasn't the ideal, blameless was. And the two concepts are different. What Paul is saying is that, with regard to how the law could be observed, he had done absolutely everything within his power to adhere to it. In no way did he consciously or knowingly avoid or break any part of the law. This doesn't make Paul perfect, but it does make him a strictly observant Jew. Paul sets up this whole argument to say that, if there is anybody who could have confidence in their religious practices and pedigree, he would be the one. In more contemporary terms, we may look at someone like Mother Teresa and think, "if there's anyone in our era who was a model of a saint walking this earth, it's Mother Teresa." Mother Teresa and Paul were both so single-minded in their pursuits and so religiously devoted to their calling that they seem to be blameless. But Paul is going to say that none of that really matters. Even though it looks like he has a lot of good reasons to brag, that's not the case.

LOSS AND GAIN (7-11)

In verses 7-11, Paul is going to introduce a major reversal, and he's going to do it in economic terms. We need to think about this section a little bit like a balance sheet. The accountants can explain this better than I can, but a balance sheet essentially has two major categories – assets and liabilities. Paul is going to use the terms gains and losses, but the idea is the same. When he looks back over his life, his "asset" column should be overflowing with all those things he has just talked about – his status as an Israelite, a Benjaminite, a Pharisee. Some scholars have written incredibly detailed (and honestly, sometimes painful to read) analyses of the structure of this economic image. There's value to that, but what I think matters more is the point of what Paul is saying. I would argue that verses 7-11 is one of Paul's most beautifully-written summaries of his theology, and we don't want that amazing theology to be lost amid a discussion of syntax and logical structure.

Paul says that whatever used to be a gain or asset, he now *considers* loss for the sake of Christ (7). He repeats himself with greater emphasis, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" (8). I don't think Paul is saying it's garbage to be a Jew, or to be a Benjaminite, or to be a Pharisee. What he is saying is that, in comparison to Christ, there's nothing to be gained in any of those things. What he used to count as gain – those things which built his confidence and gave him hope – are different in light of knowing Christ. In his old life, his status was directly tied to what he did and how well he did it; in his new life, all that matters is grace that comes through faith.

Not only does this change how he sees himself, it changes his life's direction. Aside from the most obvious example, that Paul went from persecuting the church to spreading the church, there's a deeper, more personal application. Verses 10-11 tell us that Paul wants to know Christ. Here Paul returns to a major theme of this letter. The technical term is a "cruciform" life – one

⁶ Silva, 151.

that is modeled after Christ. Paul isn't primarily concerned with head knowledge about Jesus. When he says he wants to know Christ, he means that he wants to live a life that looks like Jesus' life. He wants to live as Christ lived, suffer as Christ suffered, and experience the joy of the resurrection that Christ knows. Paul is no fool; he knows that a cruciform life isn't joyful in the sense of being fun and happy. Don't forget, he's sitting in a Roman prison while he writes this letter! But the prospect of knowing Christ and making him known and the joy that comes with serving him outweighs his current suffering. And more than that, it gives meaning and purpose to his suffering. Through his suffering, Paul is being conformed ever more closely to Christ.

This doesn't just invert the balance sheet, it totally changes how the math works. Paul is trying to say in the most emphatic language he can find and with the most startling imagery he can conjure up, that the grace of God cancels out everything else. The assets and the liabilities, the gains and losses – they don't balance the way they used to. And that's a really good thing!

Paul knows that his status before God is defined by grace through faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. Paul is not extra-righteous or extra-justified because of the things that were on his "asset" column. He's not being punished because of his "liabilities." That's not how any of this works. Paul has learned, and he wants the church to learn, that it's not about him and what he's done. As one commentator put it, Paul knows that "grace and self-confidence are in radical antithesis; grace plus anything cancels out grace."⁷ Although he had a lot of reasons to be confident in himself, Paul throws out the old balance sheet and embraces this new gospel math. He wants the Philippians to do the same. It's grace on both sides. Grace and nothing else.

GRACE PLUS NOTHING

That's precisely why I started this message by saying I'm glad we're looking at this text on Graduation Sunday. Graduates, you've just been given another credential to add to your balance sheet. Your diplomas and degrees have tremendous value. You've learned skills. You've gained experience. You've come to a major milestone in your life. And you know what? There's absolutely nothing wrong with working hard and celebrating your achievement. This is a great time for you and your friends and family to rejoice.

However, like Paul said to the Philippians, I say to you, "rejoice, but..." Don't value yourself by the diploma or degree. Don't expect too much from a piece of paper. Don't let this accomplishment – as significant as it is – become the basis of your confidence or the source of your hope. And to those of us who aren't celebrating a graduation today, let's not be too impressed by our own education, our jobs, our families, our bank accounts, our homes, our good deeds, or anything else from which we might be tempted to derive our confidence or hope. We need to be cautious of falling into the same trap that endangered the Philippians. It's not about who we are or what we've done. It's not about what we can put on the "asset" side of our balance sheet.

Those are all good things, but not one of them makes the grace of God more powerful. Not one of them is as secure and unfailing as the love of Christ. And not one of them can do a thing to help us become more loved by God. These good things we have, they're opportunities and tools that we can use to serve God and make him known. But they cannot be the source of our confidence or our hope. That job belongs to God alone, who gives us grace upon grace. Grace plus nothing else. Amen.

⁷ Fee, 320.