

What is true worship? How do we know that what we are doing reaches God? Is the Scripture clear about how we should revere the Lord? Perhaps we have wondered what it would be like to follow another tradition, to find something which felt more “authentic.” This morning we’re going to continue our exploration of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi to discover what he has to say about the true worship of God and what this has to do with our walk with him and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-6

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. ² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; ³ 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, 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: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the nation 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 the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Paul wrote, **“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” (v.1).** You can almost feel the intimacy of his relationship with the church. He called them **“brethren.”** Of course, today he would call them “brethren and sistern”.... Well you get the point. Anyway, he was speaking to them in such a way that he wanted them to understand that everything he was sharing with them came from his heart, that he was not holding back, that he was a servant of Christ and his church, and he was with them until the end.

When he wrote, **“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord,”** he was saying, this is the bottom line for what it means to be a Christian: **“rejoice in the Lord”!** Everything in his mind and heart revolved around his service to God; that was his

focal point, his mission, his life. **“Rejoice”** means to praise and sing to God’s glory! When you awake, praise him; when you lie down at night, praise him; and throughout the day, praise him. **“Rejoice in the Lord.”**

And then he told them that what he was about to explain was something they had discussed before. But no matter, it’s for your own good, and it will keep you safe from the devil.

Today, so many Christians treat their relationship with God like they would if he were a Golden Retriever, who wanted nothing more than to be cuddled and to play fetch. But there are also those who correctly understand God as awesome and majestic, but mistakenly create hoops through which one must jump and walls one must climb in order to reach him. It’s this group whom Paul addressed here.

He wrote, **“Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision” (v.2)**. These were not Jews who were trying to convert Christians to Judaism. But these were Christian Jews were trying to make Gentile Christians do Jewish things!

Paul also called these Jewish Christians, “Judaizers,” men on a mission to make sure new Christians fulfilled the Old Testament laws God gave to Moses. They were not in Philippi yet. But they had been wreaking havoc in the church elsewhere. He had been dealing with them for about 10 years, and he was sick of them.

He called them **“the dogs.”** For Jews, dogs fell into the category of “unclean” animals. Indeed, they called Gentiles, “dogs.” So Paul dished it right back at those who were perverting the true worship of God.

He also called them **“the evil doers,”** or literally, **“the base workers,”** meaning they were morally corrupt, at the very bottom of the pile, without a single redeeming quality. And they were **“workers,”** that is, they were energetically spreading their lies.

In business, we talk about how the only thing worse than an employee who is stupid and lazy is one who is stupid and energetic. The Judaizers had been rapidly

spreading discord throughout the church with their dumb and perverse ideas and practices.

He also called them **“the false circumcision”** or **“the mutilators of the flesh.”** Literally, he called them **“the mutilation.”** “Circumcision” means “to cut around.” But “mutilation” means to cut into pieces. Paul was saying, “They are the ones who cut themselves and others into little pieces”! Very graphic. Elsewhere, he wrote, **“I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves” (Galatians 5:12).**

But perhaps Paul was too hard on the Judaizers. After all, they were Christians. A few weeks ago, we read in this same letter about how he was dealing with preachers who were prideful and wanted to hurt him. He wrote, **“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice” (Philippians 1:18).** The difference between that group and the Judaizers, was that in the one case the Gospel was proclaimed and in the other, it was not. That was everything.

Paul made clear that circumcision should under no circumstances be practiced as a spiritual discipline, as a matter of fulfilling the Law of Moses, as it would make one’s redemption “grace plus.”

Our rallying cry is “sola gratia,” which means, “grace alone,” which means, God does not need any help from us in our redemption. Luther himself said that persons who are mature in their faith may worship God by simply joining with fellow Christians for prayer, Bible study, and the Lord’s Supper. For God’s grace is sufficient. We love our hymns and songs, we love our liturgy and order of service, we love to hear the absolution and to recite the litanies. But they are helpful to us only in so much as they lead us to the Cross of Christ where God redeemed you and me from the sin, death, and the devil once and for all. Amen.

Paul could have stopped there, having made his point. But the Judaizers were coming, and he wanted the people to be fully prepared. He wrote, **“we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (v.3).**

Earlier, to the church in Rome, he also wrote, **“he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit” (Romans 2:28-29).**

Circumcision had been used as an outward sign for the chosen people of God for 2,000 years. But things changed. God sent down his Spirit on his people, and now his sign is on their hearts. That’s the new circumcision. But it’s not just a sign. It’s a spiritual transformation. We can only imagine the confusion and frustration of the Judaizers. The English have been driving on the wrong side of the road for only about 100 years, and they can’t get over it. But 2,000 years of circumcision? Old habits are hard to break.

Again, Paul wrote, **“we worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus,”** or, more accurately, **“we worship the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus.”** When we began, you might’ve thought this was going to be difficult, understanding the true worship of God. But really, it’s this simple: **“worship the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus.”** Man makes worship hard. After all, it must be hard! For God is awesome! God is mighty! God is holy! And he must be worshipped accordingly! But listen: You can worship however you like, just be sure you don’t go the way of the Judaizers and make your redemption “grace plus,” which would be to strip the Cross of Christ of its power.

But Paul was not done. He wrote, **“I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (vv.4-6).**

The Judaizers were infiltrating churches, telling new male believers that if they wanted to be true children of God, if they wanted to guarantee their inheritance, if they wanted the assurance of salvation, they had to be circumcised. They were also telling them a whole bunch of other lies about true spirituality and worship, which included the women concerning things like Sabbath observances, feasts and holy days, and clean and unclean foods.

Which is ironic. The secret the Judaizers never shared with their new converts was that they would always be second class citizens anyway. For they didn't have the genealogy, the bloodline, and they could never be true Jews. Incidentally, Paul addressed this elsewhere when he explained that before God there is no longer the Jew and the Gentile, but there is only one people, **"a new creation," "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16)**.

Paul intimately knew what was going on with the Pharisees, for he had once been one of them! Indeed, he'd excelled past them all. He was not a convert—like some of them were—but he was born of Jewish parents and properly circumcised on the eighth day, and he was from the tribe of Benjamin, which could boast that it was the origin of Israel's first king, Saul, Paul's namesake. But he was just getting started.

As a devout Jew, he had pledged himself to the most serious and strict sect of Judaism, the Pharisees, and he had prided himself for his unwavering obedience. But most importantly he was zealous, so zealous that he even persecuted the Christian church!

And that is the point. He was so obedient to the Pharisee's perverse interpretation of God's law that he even picked up the sword against God's children! His pride and self-righteousness, his ego and hardness of heart made him an enemy of God, whom he thought he had been serving! His self-imposed false spirituality and worship were nearly his undoing but for the grace of God.

A little while later, he wrote about his previous zeal and piety, saying **"I consider them dung" (Philippians 3:8)**, that is, poop.

And that's the moral of the story: Anything, whether it be a spiritual rite or an act of obedience to God's law, if it gets in the way of knowing the love, the joy, the pure peace of living in God's grace in Christ Jesus, is poop.

Imagine that I gave you a frosty glass of milk to drink, and I told you this is the freshest, purest, tastiest glass of milk imaginable to man. However, it has a teeny, tiny piece of poop in it. Would you drink it? Of course not! That's what Paul's telling us: Resist the temptation of making God's grace, "grace plus," for "grace plus" is not gracious at all.

“Brethren and sistern! This week let us take a deep breath and let go of those things in our life which are weighing us down, our regrets and resentments, our fears and doubts. For God has already given you his Spirit and you are his child marked for eternity.

This week let us rejoice in the free gift of life which poured down upon us once and for all from the Cross of Jesus, finding joy in our work and school, our home and church, in every manner of activity. For the life we are living is filled with the life of Christ who lives in us. **“Rejoice in the Lord!”**

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.