

STUDY GUIDE

PLEASANT RIDGE BAPTIST CHURCH
PHILIPPIANS: CITIZENS OF HEAVEN LIVING ON EARTH
A MESSAGE DELIVERED IN JOY
PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11
10/22/2017



MAIN POINT

The message of making Christ known matters too much not to share it with others in joy.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What ideas come into your mind when you think of the word “priority”?

Do you often associate the idea of joy with the word “priority”? Why or why not?

How would you respond to the statement, “Joy is the priority of the Christian life”?

The priority of joy highlights the God-centered nature of the gospel and the Christian faith. We honor most whatever delights us the most. If God is of highest worth and value, then it follows that we enjoy Him above all other things. Joy is thus a worship issue. If we aren't finding joy in God, then we aren't truly worshipping God. Our joy in God—a joy that can exist even in the midst of sorrow—should transcend all other delights in this life.

What should drive us to proclaim the gospel to every sinner we can is not only that they might be spared from the wrath that will come (1 Thess. 1:10) but also so that their joy might be full (1 John 1:4; cf. Rom. 15:13). Proclaiming the gospel to our friends, family, acquaintances, and apparent enemies is but the application of the two greatest commandments—to love God and to love neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40). We love God by finding our joy in Him through how He has revealed Himself in the gospel of His Son. We love our neighbors by extending to them the possibility of finding true and lasting joy in the God who made them through the gospel. Joy is our top priority because worship, the Greatest Commandment, and the Great Commission are top priorities. The message matters too much not to share it with our friends, family, strangers, and enemies!

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11.

Philippians 3 begins with an exhortation to joy (v. 1) following the apostle Paul's call to humble, Christ-like service in chapter 2. Philippians 3:1-11 shows a shift in thought and tone with Paul's warning about false teachers (i.e. Judaizers). The passage can be arranged in three smaller sections: 1) the command to rejoice in the Lord (v. 1); 2) the call to refrain from trusting in the flesh (vv. 2-6); and 3) the confession of Christ's supremacy in all things (vv. 7-11).

Look at verse 1. What stands out to you about the apostle Paul's command to “rejoice”?

Does it seem fair to you to receive an obligation that involves your emotions? Why or why not?

How does the command to rejoice relate to the “protection” of the Philippian believers?

Look at verses 2-6. Why does Paul follow his command for the Philippians to rejoice with a warning about false teaching? How does false teaching deprive us from finding joy in God?

How do the autobiographical details that Paul includes speak against the apparent false teaching and trusting in the flesh?

Look to verses 7-11. What do verses 7-9 tell us about how the gospel radically changes how we view our good works and religious identity?

Why do we need not to have a “righteousness of our own from the law” and instead one that is “through faith in Christ”?

How does verse 8 enhance how all things—not only our religious achievements or good works—are to be considered subservient to knowing Christ and making Him known?

How does the Christian life and experience reflect the pattern of Christ’s suffering followed by His resurrection (vv. 10-11)? How does the gospel speak to our sufferings and to our triumphs?

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Why should we be concerned, like Paul in verse 1, about our fellow believers’ joy in the Lord? What can we draw for ourselves and for others from his intentionality of including this exhortation and concern?

How can we follow Paul’s model in verses 4-11 of using personal accomplishment and experience as a way to speak about the gospel and to magnify Christ? Why is it also important to distinguish the gospel’s objective truthfulness apart from our personal experience?

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias stated, “Jesus does not offer to make bad people good but to make dead people alive.” How can Paul’s denouncement of his own religious heritage in verses 4-9 help us communicate this clearly when we explain the gospel and Christianity to others?

What are some tangible ways that we can pursue the same goal as Paul in seeking to know Christ and the power of His resurrection? If we are truly in Christ, why is it a certainty that we will obtain this goal (see v. 11)? How does this inform the manner in which we deal with disappointment and failure in the meantime?

PRAY

Father, may all of our pursuits in life be subordinate to knowing Your Son, Jesus Christ, and the power of His resurrection. Fill us with a joyful zeal to proclaim the gospel so that others might experience the joy that comes exclusively from knowing Christ. In His name, amen.

COMMENTARY

PHILIPPIANS 3:1-11

3:1. Paul marked a transition point in his letter with a term that can mean “finally” but often indicates something like “well, then, or furthermore” (v. 1). He is only halfway through his letter at this point. In spite of Paul’s difficult circumstances, his relationship with Christ provided him with joy. He encourages us to “rejoice in the Lord.” This spirit or attitude of joy permeates this entire letter. Joy comes, however, only as one lives in the Lord. He is joy’s only source.

3:2-3. As a father protects his children, Paul wanted to keep his spiritual children from harm (v. 2). He warned them in strong language of opponents who would tempt them to false doctrine. These men were unclean “dogs,” not qualified to enter into spiritual worship. A group of Jews in Paul’s day attempted to distort the gospel by adding the requirement of circumcision plus faith in Christ as necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1). Their false way of salvation was evil, as it could cause great confusion to the true message of Christ. They misunderstood the teachings of the Old Testament on circumcision and the Christian gospel of salvation by grace through faith. They wanted to preserve the Jewish heritage at any cost.

In disagreement with the teachings of his opponents, Paul took over their claims as belonging to the church and not to the Jews (v. 3). The opponents claimed to be the true Israel, circumcised in the flesh, being the truly spiritual ones, and glorying in their worship and goodness as measured by obedience to the law. Paul turned the tables. Believers in Christ are the true circumcision (Rom. 9:24-26; Gal. 6:16), having their hearts circumcised. Christians put no confidence in the flesh, neither in the ritual of circumcision, nor in the practice of obeying a law. This stands radically opposed to the false teachers who said Gentiles had to be circumcised to be acceptable to God. The Philippians and modern readers must make the choice—glory in Christ or in human religious achievement. Genuine believers have their complete hope or confidence in Christ’s finished work on our behalf on the cross rather than anything done by them for God or in God’s name. Trusting in anyone or anything besides the true Messiah is foolishness.

3:4-6. If anyone had bragging rights about their status and achievement, Paul did (vv. 4-6), but Jesus showed him that just being Jewish did not make him righteous before God.

3:7-8. While these credentials and accomplishments are impressive, Paul placed no “stock” or confidence in them (vv. 7-8). His relationship with Christ was far superior to his Jewish background. The things of the world—all human accomplishments—are viewed as rubbish or garbage in comparison to gaining Christ. Paul’s focus changed completely. No longer did personal religious ritual and obedient religious acts occupy center stage. All eyes were on Christ and on him alone.

3:9-12. Paul’s description of his desires pointed forward to a goal (v. 12). Not yet mature, he was still very much in the race of the Christian life. The perfection he would have at the future resurrection was not yet attained. He still had to deal with what in Romans 7 he calls “the flesh,” an innate pull to sin. He had to deal with his sinful body and was only too aware of the need for further spiritual growth. He purposes to press on as he had not attained the intense personal knowledge of Christ that he desired and had not become all that Christ wanted him to be. Paul always held God up as the source of every part of the salvation experience.

Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, *The New American Commentary*

3:3-4a Genuine believers in Christ were the truly circumcised. Paul referred here to a spiritual circumcision rather than physical. In God’s economy, spiritual circumcision was always more important. The Old Testament said as much (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26ff.), and Paul confirmed it elsewhere (Rom 2:25-29). Physical circumcision served to identify someone with the Jewish nation and had value for purposes of ministry, but it had no value in commending someone to God. Spiritual circumcision was a matter of the heart (Col 2:11).

The spiritually circumcised were described three ways. Each part of the description is linked together by the fact that in the Greek text the three are preceded by one article that goes with them all. The three together, therefore, characterize genuine Christians. Paul identified himself with that group, even though he also had physical circumcision. By so doing, he anticipated the discussion of the choices which became apparent when he chose Christ (3:7ff.). By stating that “we” were the true circumcision, Paul associated himself with Gentiles and Jews who relied on Christ rather than religious ritual.

The three characteristics involve worship, glory, and confidence. First, true believers worshiped by the Spirit of God. Using a term that often referred to temple service (*latreu*), Paul identified inward, spiritual worship in contrast to the legalism of outward conformity to the law. The Spirit energizes and focuses Christian worship. Second, true believers glory in Christ Jesus. The term “glory” means to boast (*kauchaomai*), and Paul consciously contrasted the boasting of good works with

boasting that is in the work of Christ. Third, true believers have no confidence in the flesh. Again he referred to a righteousness that trusts in human initiative and energy to gain spiritual blessing. Paul came to the place where he realized his own efforts were useless, and that attitude paved the way for his trust in Christ.

Following this general description of Christians, Paul appealed to his background as proof of his point. The immediate concern was “confidence in the flesh.” Since that attitude is basic to all human life—all naturally trust in their own abilities—Paul picked up that point. Further, it seemed to be the pride of the Jewish opponents and, therefore, their downfall. They trusted in their flesh to gain salvation.

Paul’s background naturally divides into two logical categories: heredity and achievement. Paul listed seven components which spoke of his background. The last three are introduced by the preposition “according to” (kata). They belong together since kata provides a standard of measurement and refers to achievements. The other four form the first group, and each identifies some part of Paul’s heredity. Clearly, though he had the best of advantages by birth and made the most of his religious opportunities, they fostered a spirit of pride which kept him away from his goal of gaining salvation.

3:4b–5a The natural attributes are identified in a list that includes four components, but their exact relationship to each other is difficult to understand. The pattern of these relationships is one of inclusion. Two statements occur. Paul was “an eighth-day person” (“circumcised on the eighth day,” NIV), and he was a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Each of these has a modifier, and the effect is to divide them into two distinct points. First, Paul was a true Israelite. Starting at the point of their interest, he disclosed that, with reference to circumcision, he was an “eighth-day one.”¹⁵ If his opponents were circumcised, he was too, and his was completely in accord with the law. Further, he was of the people of Israel. This set him apart from Gentiles. Second, Paul was a Hebrew. The chiasmic arrangement (an inverted relationship between the elements of parallel phrases) places the tribe of Benjamin first. He had an enviable ancestry and remained true to that heritage. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. On one hand, this may have meant he was not a Hellenist or Hellenist sympathizer. Since he was born in Tarsus, his opponents could have assumed that he was. On the other hand, it may have referred to Paul’s ability to read the Scriptures in Hebrew. In any case, the stress on the correct pedigree removed a potential question about Paul’s credentials when he confronted the Jewish teachers.

3:5b–6a Paul moved from heredity to achievement. He had made the correct choices as a Jewish boy and adult. Three items provide the standard to measure these achievements: the law, zeal for the nation, and righteousness. First, Paul had chosen to be a Pharisee. Each devout Jewish male would sympathize with some organized approach to the law since it was the heart of Jewish life. The Pharisees were noted for their love for the law, strict interpretation of it, and ethical consistency. Paul obviously had excelled in all three (see Acts 22:3ff.; 26:5). Second, Paul had persecuted the church. This had been a matter of zeal. In the first century, Jewish men often measured their commitment to God and the nation by how they opposed foreign religion and rule. Since Paul had persecuted the church, he had put into action his love for the nation and the law. He had taken his beliefs to an extreme that even his opponents did not, using physical force to eradicate Christianity (see Acts 9:1–2).

3:6b Third, Paul had attained the righteousness of the law. Obviously Paul did not mean that he had lived perfectly in accordance with the law. In this context, he boasted of externally verifiable qualities that demonstrated the religious standing he had before he became a Christian. If the other two points regarding achievement could be verified, which was the case, this one must have the same capability. Paul’s point was that he had an outwardly perfect record! He had never been accused of breaking any law and, therefore, “showed himself blameless.”²⁰ This does not cancel out the testimony of Rom 7:7–12. At one time, he had perceived himself as “alive, apart from the law” (Rom 7:9) but that time had passed quickly. He knew his inner spiritual condition, but publicly he was above reproach. These seven characteristics of heredity and achievement reveal that Paul’s accepting Christ did not occur because he was marginally Jewish. He had not failed in his own religion. He had seen a better way and had chosen to follow it.