

A LETTER FROM PRISON

THE PARADOX OF JOY IN SUFFERING
paul's letter to the philippian church



Week 5: "BEWARE OF DOG"

INTRODUCTION – Reading Rebuke In The Bible

Paul, like Jesus and the prophets before him, critiques the Jewish religion because it is religious, not because it is Jewish. This means that all criticism of 1st century Judaism in the Bible is a transferable challenge to 21st century Christianity as well. Paul's first readers in Philippi would have had to do the same exegetical/hermeneutical work, applying Paul's challenges to his ethnic and nationalistic pride to their own status as Romans.

LOOK TO THE BOOK – Race Vs. Grace

Philippians 3:1-11

- "Finally"/"Further more" Paul reminds his readers to rejoice "in the Lord" (also see 4:4).
- Paul is happy to repeat teaching he gave them previously because it is so important.
- Paul encourages his readers to "watch out for" or "beware of" or "be aware of" or "be mindful of" or "consider carefully" or "look long and hard at" a particular group of people who represent the way of religion. He describes them through three ironic labels:
 - "DOGS" is what Jews called Gentiles, highlighting their scavenging nature and poor eating habits. (Dogs ate *skubala*, the table scraps left after a meal.)
 - "EVILDOERS" is what religious Jews took great care and pride in *not* being;
 - "MUTILATORS OF THE FLESH" is how Paul sees anyone who considers circumcision as part of a salvation system. Paul is attacking not only their religiosity, but their "us vs. them" mentality that makes unity impossible. He uses the word *katatomē* (Lit., cutting through), whereas "circumcision" is *peritomē* (Lit., cutting around). This is particularly shocking to Jewish sensitivities, since they saw pagans as those who cut their flesh to appease their gods (e.g., see **Leviticus 19:28; 1 Kings 18:28**).
- Paul has now put religious Jews (and religious Christians, remember!) in the camp they would usually consider only pagans to be in. As "dogs" they are spiritual scavengers who settle for scraps (and even their own vomit!) rather than God's rich food (see **Exodus 22:31; Proverbs 26:11; Matthew 7:6; 2 Peter 2:22**). As "evildoers" all their zeal for holiness is leading them away from it. And as "mutilators" they have become so focussed on the externals that they have missed the spiritual emphasis of Torah (**Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26; Ezekiel 44:7-9; Romans 2:28-29**).
- The temptation for Roman Christians to Judaize would be ongoing since Jews were the only identified group who were exempt from Roman religious practice.
- Paul then makes the bold claim that all people, Jews and Gentiles together, who put their trust in Jesus are the true circumcision, the real people of God, the trans-national, multi-ethnic family of faith that God promised Abraham in the first place (**Genesis 17:5; Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:9**).
- Paul lists his religious credentials – reasons he would have to feel superior to others rather than unified with them. He uses his life again as an example of Christ-like love.
- All of his religious, ethnic, and educational advantages are "garbage/trash/dung/crap" to Paul when compared to Christ. (*Skubala* can mean either table scrapings fed to the dogs or street scrapings from horses – dung.) Religion is horse hooley.

- Paul's goal is experiential intimacy with Jesus – knowing Christ, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Notice that the pattern of Paul's life – privilege sacrificed for something better – follows the pattern of Christ in **2:5-11**.

SO WHAT? – What Should Holiness Look Like Today?

TAKE OUT #1: We should not reckon celebration and partying on one side of the ledger and our faith in Christ in the other column. Our rejoicing, celebrating, partying should be "in the Lord". If you can't picture the two ideas together, then ask yourself whether your idea of Jesus or your idea of partying is warped.

TAKE OUT #2: Just because God gives us symbols to help us remember and understand deeper truths (e.g., circumcision, baptism, communion) doesn't mean we should treat the symbols as sacrosanct. For God, it is never about the external symbol, but the internal reality.

TAKE OUT #3: Think of the psychological security we can experience when our only boast, our only pride, is in Christ. Ego fades, along with fear, insecurity, worry, and nervousness.

TAKE OUT #4: Religious zeal will inevitably lead to violence unless we submit our zeal to the pattern of Christ – dying rather than killing for his cause.

TAKE OUT #5: Holiness means being set apart for a special purpose. We are holy because of Christ and now we work out what is already in us, rather than achieve it through our own piety. When any group or religion places their emphasis on external holiness markers, the first thing to die is honesty. An emphasis on external holiness partnered with a strong group identity leads to secret keeping in order to maintain a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION – The End Of The Meeting House

Luke 9:23-24

HOME CHURCH QUESTIONS...

WARMING UP...

1. Take time to review this week's message. What things in the message most challenged, puzzled, or encouraged you?

LOOK TO THE BOOK...

2. Read our key passage (**Philippians 3:1-11**), in various translations if possible. a) What verse or idea stands out to you the most? Why? b) Paul seems to think that resisting the temptation to turn faith into a religious system is an ongoing issue for Christians that must be held in view and resisted at all times. What are some ways you see Christians today turning relationship into religion? (Perhaps a good way to answer this question would be to rewrite this passage as though Paul were raised as a Christian here today.) c) Paul's story is a reflection of the story of Christ. Compare this passage with **2:5-11**. His life is cruciform. Could you tell your own story in a cruciform way? Why or why not? d) Paul's great passion was to "know" Christ. How do you experience this relationship? What are some practical ways you engage in a relationship with someone who is, on one level, invisible and silent?

SO WHAT?...

3. Paul wanted to know Christ so intimately he even desired to know him in the fellowship of his sufferings. Is your desire to know, understand, and empathize with Jesus so intense that you would pray to suffer like Christ to some extent? What would that look like in your life? What sacrifices would you have to make? Take time to meditate on and pray about this.

Bruxy Cavey @ THE MEETING HOUSE – Sunday, July 22 / 29, 2007