

Putting Confidence in Jesus

Philippians 3:2-3 says, “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (ESV).

This passage is shocking, because it is not like the people Paul is calling dogs and evildoers were all that bad. They were good Jews. They didn’t commit adultery, murder, theft. They kept the Sabbath day and tried to follow the Old Law. What was their problem? They put their confidence in the flesh.

What really shocks me is Paul’s following description of what putting confidence in the flesh looks like in **Philippians 3:5-6**.

- 1) *Putting confidence in circumcision*: I expected this. After all, he rebuked the evildoers for mutilating the flesh. They put their confidence in a fleshly ritual that actually didn’t mean anything about their spirit or real obedience.
- 2) *Putting confidence in ancestry*: Paul was a Hebrew. He came from the right nation. He was of Benjamin, the one tribe that stayed with Judah, the first tribe that produced a king. The Jews placed their confidence in being born into the right fleshly family. They were the seed of Abraham. It really didn’t matter what they did; they were okay because they had been born of the flesh to the right family.
- 3) *Putting confidence in personal knowledge of and protecting the Law*: This is where I start to get shocked. Paul claimed to have reason to put confidence in the flesh because he had been a Pharisee in relation to the Law. That is, he had been extremely knowledgeable. He had been of the group that studied the Law in depth. We have a tendency to scorn the Pharisees because of Jesus’ rebukes. But among the Jews, the Pharisees were highly respected as righteous teachers of God’s Law. They studied it. They knew it. Not only that, they protected it. They were so afraid of breaking a law they developed their own set of protective measures to make sure the Law was kept. They didn’t want to be on any slippery slopes. The most well-known is the protective rule to only give 39 lashes when punishing someone. The law had said 40 (**Deuteronomy 25:3**; cf. **II Corinthians 11:24**). They feared someone might miscount and accidentally break the law, so they established their rule. This shocks me because this starts to hit me where I am. I’m not worried about circumcision. I’m not worried about who my parents were. But I tend to put confidence in how well I know God’s Law and how well I protect it from potential violations.
- 4) *Putting confidence in personal intensity and energy*: Paul didn’t just know the Law. He didn’t just protect the Law. He was zealously fervent about God’s will. He was so personally intense and energetic he pushed for persecution of the church. He was a ringleader. He was out front. He could say, “Look at my accomplishments.” Again, this hits me where I am. I have a tendency to put confidence in how energetic I am, how zealous I am to preach a good sermon, write good articles, teach people. I can tend to want to let everyone know about all the people I’ve talked to or even baptized over the 16 years I’ve been a preacher. Look at my zeal. Look at my intensity, my fervor, my energy.
- 5) *Putting confidence in obedience*: Paul was blameless according to righteousness as to the Law. He was obedient. I struggle with this because I know Paul can’t be saying he was perfect. If so, then he wouldn’t need Jesus as he goes on to say. Not to mention, I’ve read what he said in **Romans 7**. Therefore, I can’t believe he is saying God couldn’t find fault with him. He must be saying the people around him couldn’t find fault with him. He was squeaky clean. There was no scandal, no public accusations, no knowledge of Paul’s sins. When others looked at him, he looked good. This shocked me again because that is what I try to maintain. I know my sins, but I don’t want anyone else to know them. I put on the mask so that I can be blameless in a legalistic sort of way. I want to make sure everyone knows I go to the right church, I do the right things, I worship the right ways, I say the right words, I answer the questions right, I treat my family right, I’m raising my kids right. It is like I carry my own personal image consultant with me everywhere I go to make sure I come out looking good when others are looking.

Go back again to where we started. No matter how good they looked or how righteous they appeared, Paul called people who put confidence in the flesh dogs and evildoers. I’ve had a tendency to focus on the

circumcision and the fleshly birth in this passage because I've never had a problem with those. But what about those last three points. I'm a bit worried. Even as a Christian, I tend to put my confidence in those things as well. I'm sure I'm saved because I know God's law so well, I'm personally zealous about it, and I obey a whole bunch of it.

I have often glossed over this whole passage by saying I don't trust in my efforts to keep the Old Law. I'm all about the New Law. Is that really what Paul is saying? Is he saying that it is putting our confidence in the flesh if we are confiding in our knowledge of, protection of, zeal for, and obedience to the Old Law, but if we are putting our confidence in our knowledge of, protection of, zeal for, and obedience to the New Law we are okay? That makes no sense. After all, if a Law could have saved, it would have been the Old Law and there would have been no need for Jesus (**Galatians 2:21; 3:18, 21**).

Thus, just because I'm focused on the New Law instead of the Old, doesn't change the fact that I'm putting my confidence in the flesh. I'm putting my confidence in me. Paul went on to say he gave up all of this in order to know Jesus. He gave up the personal attempt at righteousness in order to have the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus. I need to put my confidence in Christ.

Does this mean I simply say I believe in Jesus to save me no matter how I live? No. It means instead of believing I'll save me through my effort, I believe Jesus will save me by His work in my life. How do I let Him work in my life? Like Paul, I have to know Him, put my faith in Him, and trust Him. Consider **Galatians 2:20**. The life I live is supposed to be by faith in Jesus, not by faith in my ability to obey Jesus.

Paul said he gave up all his efforts to save himself in order to know Jesus better. The better he knew Jesus, the more faith he had in Jesus. The more faith he had, the more his life conformed to Jesus. The more his life conformed to Jesus, the more hope he had of attaining the resurrection. But who was getting Paul to that state? Not Paul. He had tried to do it on his own and failed. It was God who was working in him. Remember **Philippians 2:12-13**. Paul could keep on serving God because he knew it was God working in him to will and to work for His good pleasure.

The long and short of this is I need to quit putting my confidence in me. I need to quit thinking that if I just try harder and obey better, I can somehow be saved. That won't work. My best efforts got me lost. I need to simply give my life over to Jesus, use every possible means to know Him, put my faith in Him, trust Him. When I do, my life will change and I'll have the righteousness that comes by faith. I'll have the surpassing righteousness of the saved. I'll be like Christ in His suffering, His death, and His resurrection.

--Edwin L. Crozier