

Christ Plus Nothing Equals Joy

¹Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe. ²Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! ³For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, (Philippians 3:1–3)

Charles H. Spurgeon, was once teaching a class of preachers the importance of making your facial expression harmonize with what you are teaching about.

“When you speak of Heaven,” he said, “let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of Hell—well, then your ordinary face will do.”

Spurgeon was being witty, but it's worth asking what our ordinary face communicates to the world about our faith. When you watch advertisements, the actors and models are almost always smiling, to show you the great enjoyment they have in that product or service. It would be a strange thing to see actors or models with a product and looking gloomy, dour, or unhappy. No, the joy communicates the value of what is supposedly being offered.

This is one of the reasons that God even warned Israel about their joylessness. He said in Deuteronomy 28

⁴⁷“Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and gladness of heart, for the abundance of everything, ⁴⁸therefore you shall serve your enemies,” (“Deuteronomy 28:47)

Joy is not simply an add-on to the Christian life. Joy is the very mood of true Christianity. That's what Paul has been saying in various way in Philippians, but now comes to the heart of it in chapter 3. Here he is going to show us that joy is the mood of true Christianity. But fortunately, he will also tell us why, and show us how that can either be ruined, or maintained. And as the title has already given it away, the way is simple: Christ plus nothing equals joy.

I. The Mood of True Christianity

¹Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.

A lot of preacher-jokes have been made about Paul's use of the word *finally* at the beginning of chapter 3, which is only halfway through the epistle, and many a preacher who likes to use the word *finally* to win back people's attention when he is only halfway through his sermon might feel he has justification for doing so. But actually, the word can also mean, “as far as the rest is concerned”, beyond that, in addition”. Paul is not closing his epistle, he is moving to make his most personal and practical points.

And a great summary of all he is going to say is in this command: Rejoice in the Lord. Over seven times in this epistle, Paul says he is rejoicing, or calls for rejoicing.

¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.(Php 1:17–18)

¹⁷Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.(Php 2:17–18)

²⁸Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful (Php 2:28)

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! (Php 4:4)

Some Christians have made a great deal about the difference between joy and happiness, as if the one is solid, and the other is superficial. But the Bible doesn't differentiate between joy, happiness, gladness. The Bible focuses on the object of our joy. What we rejoice in determines the quality of the joy or happiness. If you rejoice in temporal, passing things, then your joy will be temporal and passing. If you rejoice in eternal things, then your joy will be permanent and profound.

Why does Paul bring this up so much? Possibly because he wants the Philippians to understand that when they embrace the cross-shaped life, the J-Curve of death and resurrection, the result is not misery and unhappiness, but joy! The overall mood of the Christ-centred Christian life is one of joy, freedom, gladness, gratitude and hopefulness. When a Christian single-mindedly seeks after Christ, and makes Christ his life, that Christian enters into a sweet, simple life of satisfaction.

In fact, in the next section, Paul is going to prove that with an accounting illustration of gain and loss. Loss usually means unhappiness and gain means joy. Paul is going to show us that in his life, the things that people usually think of as gain, he realised were loss, because they kept him from having a Christ-centred life. So he was willing to jettison them all, die to them, lose them, because he would have a greater gain: knowing Christ.

Paul is not seeking less joy, or pain or hardship for its own sake. Paul is not a stoic, or a member of a grim religion that counts its unhappiness as a sign of its righteousness. Paul says, the mood of Christ-centred Christianity is joy. Because a Christian has gained the greatest thing: the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.

Did you ever think, that if Christianity really is about love: loving God, loving our neighbour, loving one another, then the mood of love is joy? No one hates to have to love something. When you love something, you both objectively treat it as worthy and bless and help, but subjectively, you delight and enjoy and desire what you love. Therefore we can fairly conclude that joyless Christianity has become loveless Christianity. But if you know Christ, then you will love Christ, and if you love Christ, you will rejoice.

But the simplicity of knowing Christ and enjoying Him is always ready to be spoilt by people who don't understand the gospel. For that reason, Paul says, I don't mind repeating myself about this issue. It's not tedious or troublesome. In fact, it will be safe for you to hear it, because there are those who would seek to ruin or rob you of your Christ-centred joy.

II. The Marring of True Christianity

²Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!

Three dangers that will threaten the safety and security of the Philippians' joy. Actually, these three are not three different threats, they are three terms for the same groups of people. Dogs, evil workers, the mutilation all refer to the same people. In fact, in Greek, each of these three words begins with the letter kappa, or k, so the very sound was poetic and alliterative.

Who were they? Well, remember in the book of Acts we learn that the main question the apostles asked Jesus before He ascended was "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus told them that it wasn't for them to know times and seasons, but to simply be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world.

But in the next chapters, we find out that the Jewish believers are struggling to understand how

God's plan is unfolding. They seem to think that Christianity is going to colonise the synagogue, and then Gentiles are going to join Israel and then become part of Israel's Messiah. It's really going to be Israel taking over the world.

But it begins to dawn on them that God is going to include Gentiles without making them convert to Jews. And so they come to understand that the church is something new: a new body of all people made into one new humanity. But not everyone gets that.

There are still some who believe that the plan is for Gentiles to come into Israel by converting to Judaism, coming under the Mosaic Covenant, getting circumcised, and then they can receive the Jewish Messiah as Jews.

Now Paul saved some of his strongest reactions for these people. These people were doing nothing less than perverting the gospel of Jesus plus nothing. They were warping the truth that Jesus died and rose so that you come to him empty-handed, bankrupt of merit, looking to His righteousness alone. The preciousness and power of the gospel is found in those words alone: by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Anything added to Jesus shares the credit out, shares the glory, and changes the whole thing from a free gift to a transaction, from being something received with empty hands to something received with the right currency.

These people added the idea of becoming a convert to Judaism and coming under the Law, so as to be saved. The term for these people was Judaisers.

So Paul uses three terms to expose what they are really like, and each of them is rich in irony. The first is *dogs*. In many places in the Bible, we see the Jews compared Gentiles to dogs. We remember the Syro-Phoenician woman who wanted Jesus to heal her daughter, and Jesus told her that it was not fitting to take food given to children and to throw it to dogs outside, meaning the redemption of Israel being thrown to Gentiles.

Dogs in ancient times were not typically pets. They were scavengers, feeding on garbage in cities, dangerous when in packs. For Jews, they were images of uncleanness, and therefore pictured Gentiles.

Likely these Judaisers would have called Paul's Gentile converts, "dogs". They would have said, until these people are circumcised, they are unclean and unacceptable to God. Paul turns their racism back on them. It turns out that they are the unclean ones, they are standing outside the blessing of the new covenant.

The second term here is *evildoers*, literally workers of evil. Of course, this is more irony. These people were all about the works of the law, keeping Torah, doing the good work of coming under the Law and then keeping Sabbath and keeping the dietary laws. But Paul says, they're actually doing evil, because there is no greater evil than perverting the gospel.

The third term is maybe the most ironic. He calls them the mutilation, the cutters of flesh. In many of the pagan Gentile religions there were terrible rituals of piercing the flesh, cutting it, tattooing it, and otherwise destroying it. Pagan religions distorted and destroyed parts of the body. This is why Leviticus 19:28 said,

²⁸You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD.

Of course, the one exception to this cutting was circumcision for male Israelites. But Paul once again turns this around and says that these people who insist on circumcision are the pagan mutilators, the unbelieving ritualists chopping up skin.

Now Paul says to his Gentile Christian audience, the real unclean dogs, the real lawless people, the

real pagan religionists are these Judaisers who want to take away the word *alone* from the gospel. They want to add something. But whatever you add to Jesus will take away from knowing Him, and therefore from your joy.

There will always be people coming to you with a subtle or not so-subtle form of Jesus plus. Sometimes it might be outrightly doctrinal. Some real-life Judaisers still exist in the church today, people in the Messianic movement who say we must leave the church, join existing synagogues or begin synagogues where we approach God through Judaism. Some say that keeping Sabbath is necessary to be saved or only using the Hebrew names of Jesus in the Bible, or embracing Hebrew roots.

But then there are other forms of it. Jesus plus getting baptised. Jesus plus belonging to the only saved denomination. Jesus plus door-to-door evangelism. Jesus plus using only the King James version of the Bible. Jesus plus speaking in tongues.

Whatever adds to Jesus actually takes away from Jesus. He is either all-sufficient, and when He said on the cross, “It is finished”, it truly was finished, or He is not.

Paul's warning is “beware” of them. Look out for people trying to tamper with the word “alone”. They are tampering with knowing Christ, and so tampering with your joy. Ignore them, refuse them, avoid them.

Verse 3 tells you why.

III. The Marks of True Christianity

³For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,

Why should you avoid those people? His answer is that true Christians are the true people of God.

We are the circumcision. Here Paul changes the word from mutilation to the proper technical word for circumcision, a word that was sometimes used as another word for Jew or Israelite. A Jew was included in the covenant by circumcision on the eighth day. As opposed to the Judaisers who want to circumcise and think of Gentiles as lawless, unclean, dogs, true Christians are actually the spiritually circumcised, the clean, those within the covenant.

The Old Testament actually laid the foundation for this when God told Israel

¹⁶Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. (Deut 10:16)

⁶And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.(Deuteronomy 30:6)

God seems to be saying that this physical mark in you only outwardly marks you as being in the covenant. But you have to inwardly commit to God, the heart must be given to God. In Colossians, Paul tells us how that happens:

¹¹ In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with *Him* through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Col 2:11–13).

This inner circumcision makes you an honorary member of the commonwealth of Israel.

²⁸For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh;
²⁹but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God. (Romans 2:28–29)

Paul is careful never to say that Gentile Christians have replaced the Jews. He is clear that his countrymen are still Israelites and Jews according to the flesh, ethnically. And in Romans 9 through 11 he makes it very clear that they still have a place and a future.

But here and in Ephesians 2, and in Galatians 3, Paul says that in the church, ethnic background is no advantage or disadvantage. All those in Christ are now grafted into true Israel, are the people of God, and are within the new covenant.

What does that look like? Paul describes New Testament believers here in three ways: who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh,

These are the marks of Christ-centred Christianity.

First, we practice spiritual worship. The Greek is literally, who worship by the Spirit of God. We have been changed on the inside by the Spirit, and have been indwelt by Him. This worship cannot be performed from the outside in. That means, our worship, our whole relationship with God is not a thing we do on the outside, a set of boxes we check, a duty we keep, like a hobby, or a job, or a sport. No, for the Christian, our worship of God is the deepest, realest, most ultimate thing about us. We have been changed from within, and now God is at the core of our being. It comes from the inside out.

Do you remember what happened when the Samaritan woman tried to draw Jesus into an argument about which place, which geographical location was the correct place to worship God? Jesus responded by saying,

“Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father...²³But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ²⁴God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21–24)

Jesus wasn't saying that it makes no difference how you worship. He was saying true worship is based upon revealed truth, and an internal work of the Spirit that regenerates us and then empowers us.

Second, our boast is Jesus Christ. The word for rejoice is the word that means to take pride, or glory, or boast in something. Boasting is not intrinsically evil; it is what you boast in. Christians have one boast: Jesus Christ. We are proud of one thing: Christ.

We find our joy and our confidence not in something we've brought to the religious table. We don't feel smug about baptism, or fasting, or a Bible version, or being a Baptist, or a Protestant, or an evangelical. I tell people that I am many things. I am a conservative, a Baptist, a cessationist, a kind of dispensationalist, a creationist, a modified Calvinist. I am not ashamed of those titles, and for a serious-minded person, they will help describe my position. But I cannot make a boast in those things, as if they are my pedigree, my lineage, my Christian blue blood. As Paul would say, may it never be!

While Christians can rightly adopt titles to describe their positions, we should have only one boast: Jesus the Messiah. He is our standing, our righteousness, our reason for life and salvation.

The next thing Paul mentions isn't really a third thing, it is the negative form of boasting only in Jesus.

and have no confidence in the flesh,

Our trust, our confidence is not in the flesh. Paul is playing on words here. The actual flesh of circumcision, and then the other meaning of flesh: human life outside of Christ, independent human effort.

¹⁴But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

Take those marks of the Christ-centred life and consider why they create the mood of the Christian life.

If the worship is spiritual and internal, then it is like an internal fountain watering your soul.

If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. ³⁸ He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." ³⁹ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.(Jn 7:37–39).

You have a self-replenishing source of joy and satisfaction in your soul with the Spirit of God living in you. Internal, Spirit-given worship is not a heavy, duty-filled religion of guilt and oppression.

If the boasting is in Christ alone, then nothing can disturb the joy. I don't have to worry that I missed some ritual, or failed to keep some obscure law, or been part of the wrong group, or failed in some duty. I can neither boast in what I have done, nor fear what I have not done, or boast in what I have avoided, or fear what I have committed. My entire boast is the death and resurrection of Jesus. I am as accepted in heaven as Jesus is. I have as much right to be in Heaven as Jesus does. I am as secure in Heaven as Jesus is. I will be in heaven as long as Jesus will be. My only boast is the Son of God.

“The Christian owes it to the world to be supernaturally joyful. In this day of universal apprehension when men's hearts are failing them for fear of those things that are coming upon the earth, we Christians are strategically placed to display a happiness that is not of this world and to exhibit a tranquility that will be a little bit of heaven here below.” - A. W Tozer