

**SESSION OBJECTIVE: PHILIPPIANS 3:2-11**

To understand what we should and should not boast in.

Overqualified?

I have a confession, and one that you'll rarely hear from a conservative guy who writes Bible studies and preaches on Sundays: *I like hard rock*. Now, I know what you're thinking, but hear me out. While I rarely listen to it nowadays, it was a mainstay for me as a child. I grew up in a rough home with a lot of dysfunction, and



rock bands identified with my anger and confusion in a way that most people did not. One of my favorite groups growing up was the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band, *Metallica*. Metallica has mostly had the same members through its career, with the exception of the bassist. The first bassist was named Cliff Burton, who played with the group up until his untimely death in a bus crash in 1986. He was then replaced by Jason Newsted. However, during the audition process, they interviewed another bassist, Les Claypool, who went on to have a notable career of his own. Claypool is one of the top bassists in the world, and even in 1986 was extremely talented. He nailed the audition, and yet... *he didn't get the job*. The reason? He nailed the audition a little too well. He was, "too good for Metallica." He was, put another way, *overqualified*.

When it comes to living an impressive spiritual life, the 12 disciples that followed Jesus were anything but overqualified. A fisherman? A tax collector? No one would brag about their otherwise humble beginnings. They were the, "foolish" who would, "confound the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:27). Not so, with the Apostle Paul. Paul had all of the qualifications in the world to think of himself as an elite spiritual force to be reckoned with, and yet he counted it all as, "rubbish." For Paul, there was something even greater to boast in.

Beware!

The context of this passage is found in verse 2, with regard to false teachers. These particular false teachers were called Judaizers, and their cause centered around forcing Gentiles to be circumcised and follow the law *before* they could become Christians. Paul uses a phrase three times, “look out for,” to emphasize the need to be cautious for such wolves. He describes them in three ways, as outlined below.

DOGS

As much as we love dogs in our modern culture, they were hated by those in the ancient near east. Dogs were not house pets, typically, and mostly roamed the countryside eating whatever they could find. There is actually some irony here. As a practice, Jews often referred to Gentiles as, “dogs.” Here, Paul is applying the term to Jews who are coming against Gentiles that are coming to faith.

EVILDOERS

Next, they are called evildoers. The emphasis here is on action, being that they attempted to gain righteousness by the works of the law. Instead, they presented a false gospel that damns rather than saves.

THOSE WHO MUTILATE THE FLESH

The last word doesn’t make as much sense in English, but is a play on words in the Greek. The word for circumcision in the Greek is περιτομή (peritomē), and the word for mutilate is κατατομή (katatomē). They sound similar, but mean slightly different things. He is referring to their circumcision, a practice that should denote obedience and love for God and man, and essentially saying, “their circumcision is meaningless.” It’s the modern equivalent of someone being baptized who hasn’t really been born again. We would say, “You didn’t get baptized, you just got wet.”

Paul’s Background

Below is an overview of Paul’s spiritual qualifications, as outlined in the passage.

CIRCUMCISED ON THE EIGHTH DAY

The first qualification Paul gives is a strange one, because it isn’t one that he himself is responsible for. The command originates in the covenant that God makes with Abraham in Genesis 17:3-14. Circumcision becomes a sign of the covenant, an important practice and aspect of Jewish faith (for more, see [Session 13 in the Genesis study](#)). The point, I think, of this attribute is that Paul is not only himself a devout follower of God, but he comes from a devout family as well. His parents took very seriously the commands of God in the Torah, and that devotion can be demonstrated in part by the fact that he was circumcised on the eighth day, precisely as Scripture dictates. Some Jews would wait until later due to a lack of resources, but those who were committed would have made arrangements to insure the circumcision could take place in the appropriate time frame.

OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

This is the ultimate goal of the Judaizers who were looking to sway Gentiles into a false gospel by making them first adhere to the Jewish law.

OF THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN

Once again, this speaks to the Gentile dilemma. Gentiles who converted to Judaism could at best be considered a part of the people of Israel, but could not claim to a tribe of Israel since they were not born Jewish. Paul, on the other hand, could make that claim. Being able to trace your lineage to the tribe your family originated from was highly valuable. Beyond that, Benjamin was a well-known tribe; Saul, the first king

of Israel, originated from that tribe. God said of the tribe of Benjamin in Deuteronomy 33:12, “Of Benjamin he said, ‘The beloved of the LORD dwells in safety. The High God surrounds him all day long, and dwells between his shoulders.’”

A HEBREW OF HEBREWS

This sort of sums up the first three statements. Paul is, in every way, a pure, devoted, and established Jew.

A PHARISEE

To be a Pharisee required a high degree of knowledge and Jewish pedigree. Paul recorded in Galatians 1:14, “And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.” He was, in fact, the son of a Pharisee as well (Acts 23:6-9). He was a rising star in the Jewish world and for good reason, one of which was his passion to kill Christians.

A PERSECUTOR OF THE CHURCH

Paul was zealous, and he proved his zeal by coming harshly against the church of Jesus Christ. Of course, the well-known and documented account of Stephen’s martyrdom proves this (Acts 7:1-8:3). The false teachers that Paul is addressing were in some sense persecuting the church, but even Paul has outdone them in this regard as well.

BLAMELESS

He was so rigid in his adherence to the Jewish law that he considered himself to be blameless. No one could accuse him of not taking seriously the commands of the Torah. The Sabbath, the food laws, circumcision, etc., were all met with rigorous obedience in Paul’s life.

Rubbish!

After laying out his extensive resume, he regards it as, “rubbish.” The Greek word σκύβαλον (skybalon) is a word that means, “dung, garbage, or refuse.” It was a word that would draw out a distinctly negative feeling. All of the great qualifications that Paul possessed were like like dung in comparison to knowing Jesus. Losing those things, then, meant two things:

GAINING CHRIST

One cannot gain Christ and still maintain pride over personal achievement. Grace plus anything is no longer grace. Grace and confidence in one’s own righteousness are the antithesis of one another. If you want to gain Christ, you must lose everything you boast in.

BEING FOUND IN HIM

The second verb here is, “being found in Him.” This in some way echoes Jesus’ words in John 15:7: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment are given when you remain in Christ, and His commandments remain in you.

The end goal is to know Jesus, and share everything with Him, even His sufferings and death. Why? Because when we share Jesus’ sufferings and death, we also share His resurrection (Phil. 3:11).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Philippians 3:2. What does Paul say to do? Who are we to look out for? What three terms does he use to describe them?

2. Read Philippians 3:3-4. How does he describe himself and the church? What does he say sets him apart from everyone else?

Day Two

1. Read Philippians 3:5. Write each of the descriptors down and what each of them mean.

2. Read Philippians 3:6. Again, write each of the descriptors down and what each of them mean.

Day Three

1. Read Philippians 3:7. In your own words, what is Paul saying here?

2. Read Philippians 3:8-9. Why does Paul count everything he gained as loss? For what two purposes?

Day Four

1. Read Philippians 3:10. What does Paul hope to know? What does Paul hope to share with Jesus?

2. Read Philippians 3:11. What does Paul hope to attain?

Week 8 Discussion: Self Righteousness

In Philippians 3:2-11, Paul outlines many of the qualities he possesses that would naturally provoke him unto self-righteousness, and yet he denounces those things that he might, “know Christ.” Talk as a group about the allure of self-righteous behavior, and what kinds of things you typically boast in apart from knowing Jesus, and the damage it can inflict on you if you’re not careful.

1. Icebreaker: Do you ever boast in anything other than your relationship with Christ? What kinds of things do you boast in?
2. What things does the world hold as supreme? (Think: careers, academic accolades, wealth, etc.)
3. How has self-confidence in your own accomplishments sabotaged your spiritual walk with Jesus? Share with the group specific examples.
4. Is it wrong to have goals in your career, education, and affluence? Why or why not?
5. Is it possible to wrongfully boast in spiritual practices such as bible study, language learning, quiet times, etc.? Why or why not?

Takeaways:

1. Paul had every qualification to boast in, and yet he disregarded all of them for the sake of simply knowing Jesus.
2. You cannot boast in your own self-righteousness and also be found in Christ. Grace and self-righteousness are the antithesis of one another.

PRAYER REQUESTS: