

### A Warning Against False Teachers

#### Philippians 3:1-3

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

#### Background Notes

*“Finally, my brethren”* (v1). The word “Finally” sounds like Paul was about to conclude his letter - and yet we have two chapters left to go! Was Paul like a long-winded preacher who says “finally” and then finishes his message forty minutes later? [laughter] Well, the word “finally” here does not necessarily mean that he was drawing the letter to a close. It meant that he was making a transition in the subject matter.

In chapter 2 Paul emphasized the attitude that believers should have toward each other: humble, self-giving, willing to take the lower place. He used Jesus Christ as the supreme example, and then he mentioned himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus as examples to follow in Christian service and lifestyle. This was particularly important in view of the disunity that was emerging in Philippian church.

In chapter 3 Paul began to deal with the “Judaizers.” Judaizers were the legalistic false teachers of the day. They were heavily influenced by Judaism. There were non-Christian Judaizers and Christian Judaizers, but both taught that it was essential to keep the Law of Moses and the traditions that had been added to the Law.

The non-Christian Judaizers claimed that salvation was attained by keeping the Law and the traditions. The Christian Judaizers did not believe that you were saved by keeping the Law, but they taught that believers were sanctified – that they became more holy and more spiritual - by keeping the Law and the traditions. The Judaizers were big on keeping the Sabbath and practicing circumcision as a ritual.

In verse 2, some translations say “false circumcision” rather than “concision” or “mutilation.” All these words describe the Judaizers, who said that the religious ritual of circumcision was necessary for the believer. “No!” said the apostle Paul (and the rest of the Bible)! That issue was settled back at the first Church council in Acts 15. Becoming a Christian was (and still is) by faith in Christ alone. Becoming sanctified was (and still is) not achieved by keeping the Law and the traditions. Sanctification, like salvation, was (and still is) 100% a work of God’s grace.

There are two 3-part doctrinal points. The first has to do with the Judaizers - the legalists of Paul’s day. The problem of legalism is still around today. Legalistic Christians think that you’re a better Christian, or a more spiritual Christian, if you

set up your own system of rules for Christian living, and judge yourself (and others) by **your** set of rules! That's **not** what the Bible teaches.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers.

#### a. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as “dogs” (v1).

The Judaizers referred to Gentiles as “dogs.” Paul turned the tables and used the term to describe the false teachers! The “dogs” of that day were not the pleasant family pets of today. “Dogs” were the scavenger dogs of the city that barked, yelped, snarled and fought among themselves, while prowling around and attacking passersby.

The legalistic teachers of the 1st century were like those scavenger dogs – just like the legalistic false teachers today. They snarl at and attack other believers. They downgrade Christians who don't keep the legalist's set of rules – rules such as “you can't be a spiritual Christian if you don't dress up on Sunday” or “you'll only be a spiritual Christian if you read the particular translation of the Bible that I read.” That's legalism.

It's important to understand that legalism is not a matter of “taste in music” or “preference in clothing.” Legalism is a matter of **judging another believer's spirituality based on your own set of religious standards**. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as barking, snarling dogs.

#### b. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as “evil workers” (v2).

The Judaizers of the 1st century worked hard to gain proselytes – to bring new followers into their false legalistic teachings. But their work was evil. They took people away from a Christ-centered faith, and they still do today.

Legalists always appear to be more spiritual because the legalist **outwardly** keeps a bunch of rules. Thus they can appear to be more “holy” or more spiritual. The legalistic Pharisees of Jesus' day looked pretty good outwardly, but they were hypocrites. The Lord denounced them as being like “whitewashed sepulchers” (Matthew 23:27). Whitewashed tombs look good on the outside - but they're full of dead bones within.

The legalistic Pharisees of the Lord's day were self-righteous hypocrites who led people away from the truth; therefore they were evil workers. This is still true today. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as evil workers.

#### c. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as “the mutilation” (v2).

This is the third “beware”. The word that's used here is not “circumcision,” which comes from a word meaning “cut around.” It's better translated “mutilation,” because it comes from a word meaning “cut off.” Paul likened the Judaizers to the pagans of heathen religions who cut themselves and mutilated themselves in religious rites and rituals.

Paul's point was that grace had come through Jesus Christ, so circumcision practiced as a **religious ritual** was nothing more than a cutting. Circumcision was an important practice with religious significance for the descendants of Abraham in the Old Testament, and it has a place in medical practice today, but it meant nothing as a religious ritual for believers.

This is still true today. Keeping rules cannot bring you salvation, and keeping self-made regulations cannot sanctify you. Sanctification is a work of grace just as much as salvation is a work of grace. Trying to sanctify yourself apart from the work of Christ is like the 1st century Judaizers trying to sanctify themselves through circumcision. The Bible describes legalistic false teachers as the "mutilation."

## **2. The Bible describes the difference between true and false teachers.**

Our second doctrinal point contrasts the true believer and the legalistic false teacher. God intends the true believer to be a liberated Christian, not a legalistic Christian. The term "liberated Christians" doesn't mean Christians who do whatever they please! No! Liberated Christians means believers who know how to properly use their Christian liberty. They are not bound by a bunch of legalistic, man-made restrictions.

In verse 3, the true believers are referred to as "the circumcision," or the "true circumcision." God intended the physical circumcision of the Old Testament to be a picture of spiritual circumcision. True believers have been "spiritually circumcised" in Christ. Our "flesh" - our sinful natures - have been judged, and cut off. Jesus Christ died not only for our sins to be removed, but for our sinful natures to be cut off as well.

Colossians 2 says, *"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" (v11)*. There it is; the sinful nature has been cut off. And verse 13: *"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the un-circumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."* Now we are to **be** what we **are!** We have been spiritually circumcised. That's our position. Now we are to practice spiritual circumcision. In a practical way, we are to cut off the flesh.

Another New Testament way to say this is "walk after the Spirit." Practicing spiritual circumcision is not done by legalistic rule-keeping. If you try it, you'll fail. A better measure of spiritual circumcision would be to check on whether the fruit of the Spirit is becoming increasingly evident in our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). Philippians 3:3 gives three characteristics of a liberated (spiritually circumcised) Christian.

### **a. The Bible describes liberated Christians as those who worship God in the Spirit.**

*"For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit" (v3)*. The liberated Christian (then and today) is not characterized by ritualism in worship, and does not depend on outward forms and ceremonies in worship. The liberated Christian does not need images and relics for the worship of the true God.

Remember what our Lord said to the Samaritan woman: *“God is Spirit and those that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24)*. The Bible describes liberated Christians as those who worship God in spirit - and in the Spirit.

## **b. The Bible describes liberated Christians as those who rejoice in Jesus Christ.**

*“For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus” (v3)*. Are you rejoicing in Christ right now? Notice that we are commanded to rejoice in the Lord (v1). Legalistic Christians do not have the joy of the Lord because they are completely hung up on keeping their set of rules - and measuring others by them, too.

Liberated Christians are joyful! They have the joy of the Lord, regardless of their circumstances. The Bible describes liberated Christians as those who rejoice in Jesus Christ.

## **c. The Bible describes liberated Christians as having no confidence in the flesh.**

*“For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (v3)*. Although our sinful natures have been judged at the cross, we will have the flesh or sinful nature until we're with the Lord. And the flesh of a believer is not holier than the flesh of an unbeliever; it is still sinful flesh. The flesh of a believer does not change into spirit. *“That which is flesh is flesh, and that which is spirit is spirit” (John 3:6)*.

Legalistic Christians put confidence in the flesh, but liberated Christians put no confidence in the flesh. Apart from Christ, liberated Christians know we will fail. We can't make progress in our own strength. The Bible describes liberated Christians as those who have no confidence in the flesh.

## **Practical Application**

### **Don't get turned off by repetition.**

*“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe” (v1)*. Paul was probably thinking of all the teachings and warnings that he had given to the Philippian believers over the years, but he told them that he didn't mind writing these things again, and warning them again. He said this repetition was a safeguard for them.

So don't get turned off by repetition. Repetition is one way to remember things well. Sometimes we get turned off by repetitious teaching and preaching, but it's important. It's protection for us - so it's good to hear biblical teaching again and again. It's protection for us to learn and know sound doctrine! So don't get turned off by repetition.