

“Adding to the Gospel vs Confidence in Christ”
Philippians 3:1-3
April 12, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

It’s the first Sunday after Easter, and as we move into the spring, we will pause our series in the Gospel of Mark, which we’ll return to next January, and we’ll return now to our series in Philippians, picking up where we left off last summer, at the very beginning of chapter three.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, has given thanks for them. He’s spoken to them about his own situation. He’s offered them spiritual instruction. And now, as chapter three begins, he warns them about a threat to their faith.

As we turn to our passage, let me make one note on the translation. I’m using the ESV’s marginal translation for this passage this morning. That is the alternative translation that the ESV itself offers in a footnote. Specifically, I’m using that footnoted translation for the Greek word *adelphoi*. Where the main text translates this word as “brothers” the ESV footnote offers the translation of “brothers and sisters.”

Now ... this isn’t just a matter of being more modern or politically correct. This is about accuracy.

The Greek word *adelphoi* has more flexibility than our English word “brothers.” Because while *adelphoi* can be used to describe an all-male group of siblings, it can also be used to describe a mixed-gender group of siblings. That’s not a new or controversial claim. You can find it in standard lexicons.¹ And in his letters, Paul regularly uses the term *adelphoi* to address groups that contain both men and women.² But in English, the word “brothers” is not used that way.

If I had my extended family here, and I said to you “Come here and meet my brothers!” ... and then I introduced you to one male sibling and one female sibling, you would be confused. So would they. Because even though that’s how *adelphoi* worked in Greek in the first century, it’s not how “brothers” works in English today.

And so, if the goal of translation is to communicate the same meaning from one language to another, then the ESV marginal translation is really the one that does that better. Paul is addressing both men and women – both brothers and sisters in Christ. The best way to translate that is in

¹ See, for example, BAG or Liddell & Scott 7th Edition. For a more recent case, see Bill Mounce’s explanation: <https://www.billmounce.com/bible-study-greek/are-translators-adding-gods-word-when-they-say-brother-and-sister/>.

² We see this especially in Philippians 4, where Paul uses the word *adelphoi* to address the group, and then immediately addresses two women within the group.

English “brothers and sisters”³ which is the translation from the ESV editors that I’ll use this morning, and likely in the future.

Ok. That was a lot of introductory stuff. Feel free to come and talk to me if you have more questions about it.

With all that said, we come to our text this morning: Philippians 3:1-3.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the church in Philippi:

^{3:1} Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

² Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³ For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord,
We long for your salvation,
because your law is our delight.
Give our souls life, that we might praise you,
and help us now through your word.
We have each gone astray like lost sheep.
As we come to your word now, we ask you to seek us.
For we have not forgotten your word to us.
Grant this, we ask, in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:173-176]

³ To express what the word *adelphoi* means when Paul uses it in situations like this, there are really three main options. One is to translate it “brothers” as is the dominant tradition in English translation. I honestly think this is the most inaccurate option in modern English. It’s misleading, because it requires you to understand the English word in a different way than it’s used in any other setting. A second option is to translate it “siblings.” But that feels off. “Siblings” is maybe most accurate, but we don’t use the term “siblings” to express warmth and affection, or to address other people. We don’t ordinarily say “Hello sibling!” to a brother or a sister. The third option is to translate it as the ESV footnote does – “brothers and sisters.” It’s a bit more wordy, but it accurately translates the meaning, fits with natural English use, and has the option for warmth and affection and a natural-sounding second-person address.

Introduction

So our text this morning is short. But there's actually a lot in there.

And when we look at it closely, what we see here is that: We are often tempted to try to make a central proof of someone's status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually required; but when we do that, we end up alienating ourselves from Christ; instead, we are called to find our true confidence in Christ alone.

Let me say that again: We are often tempted to try to make a central proof of someone's status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually required; but when we do that, we end up alienating ourselves from Christ; instead, we are called to find our true confidence in Christ alone.

Let's consider that one piece at a time.

We Are Often Tempted to Try to Make a Central Proof of Someone's Status in Christ Out of Things that Christ Has Not Actually Required

The first thing we see here is that we are often tempted to try to make a central proof of someone's status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually required.

Now ... what do I even mean by that? Well, let's start by asking who Paul has in view here – who he's criticizing.

Paul here is talking about a group of Jewish Christians who insisted that in order to have a true relationship with Jesus, someone had to take on the markers of Judaism. In order to be a Christian you also had to become a Jew. And so, the markers of Judaism, things like circumcision and following the Old Testament's ceremonial laws, those markers of Judaism became proofs of someone's Christian faith – proofs of someone's status in Christ. The group that made these arguments is often referred to as the "Judaizers." [Fee, 286, 287]

Now the main problem with this group was not that it included Jewish Christians who continued to live as Jews. It was okay for Jewish Christians to live like Jewish Christians. But it was also okay for non-Jewish, Gentile Christians to live like non-Jewish Gentile Christians. The problem came when the Jewish Christians insisted that to be truly Christian, Gentile Christians also had to become Jewish. Which meant that Jewish social markers became proof of someone's status in Christ. This insistence was the fundamental error of the Judaizers.

And even though the Judaizers had probably not yet had an impact in the church in Philippi, Paul was still worried. He knew there was something appealing about this error. [Fee, 289-290; 294] Paul had confidence in the Philippian Christians in many ways. But still he worried about this. "Look out!" he says to them, three times in verse two. His strenuous warning here tells us that this temptation is one that any Christian can struggle with. And that includes us.

For them the issue was circumcision. But for us it may be something very different. Paul warns them here to put no confidence in the flesh. And in the verses that follow this passage, Paul demonstrates that what he means there is for them to put no confidence in social markers that Jesus has not required, as if they proved someone's status in Christ.

What Paul is warning against is taking any kind of social marker, which Jesus hasn't actually required of his people, and trying to make that a proof of a person's status in Christ.

And Paul's opponents weren't only trying to do that for themselves. They were also demanding that other people prove their status in Christ by those same kinds of social markers. And Paul says this is a great spiritual danger.

And so, we need to ask ourselves: What are the ways we are tempted towards this same error? What are the social markers or practices that Jesus hasn't really required ... but which we might be tempted to turn into central proofs of someone's status in Christ – either a marker of whether or not someone is really a Christian, or a marker of how serious – what level of a Christian we think they are.

What kind of things do we do that with?

Well, if we want to start with some low-hanging fruit ... as I've pointed out before, it's become increasingly common for political allegiance to play this kind of role among American evangelicals. It's not just about taking stands on issues the Bible speaks to clearly, it's about political loyalty: if you're "really" a Christian, if you're a "serious" Christian than you'll be loyal to this political party, you'll defend this political leader, you'll see these countries as good and those countries as bad, you'll adopt this party's platform. If you're a serious Christian, you will hold this political line, and if you don't, then we will doubt the maturity of your faith – we will doubt your status in Christ. And in this way, we try to make a central proof of someone's status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually called us to regard in that way.

But it's not just politics. We can also do this with education. In some circles in American Christianity, formal education is viewed with suspicion, and so less education is a sign of a more sincere and unclouded faith. For others, the view is the opposite. Real Christians are well educated – whether that means formal education or that you've read all the right books. In either case, education becomes a social marker for the depth, the maturity, the status of one's faith in Christ.

But the list goes on. Sometimes it's career success, or financial success, because contrary to the Book of Ecclesiastes, we assume that if someone is moral, and wise, and works hard, they will always succeed, and the foolish and immoral will always fail. And so, career success, and financial success become markers in the church of a mature faith and a righteous life ... even though the Bible tells us over and over again that they're not.

For others, a marker of our status in Christ may be the number of children we have. Four kids or more marks a faithful Christian, less than four is seen as a sign of worldliness.

For others, the marker of sincere Christian faith is being married. And if someone remains single after a certain age, then contrary to Paul's words about the calling of singleness some may have, we assume instead that there must be something spiritually wrong with the single Christian adult. Marriage becomes a marker of spiritual status in Christ.

Other times it's a specific theological or ethical issue that Christians have often disagreed upon, but we decide that that issue is the best marker of whether someone is really a serious Christian or not.

Still other times it's the details of our church's worship service: the shape of the liturgy, the style of the music, the way we dress on Sundays – and we turn these things into markers to determine whose faith in Christ is more real or sincere or serious.

And the lists can go on.

Now some of the things I just listed may be rooted in good things. And there may be fine and healthy ways for Christians to pursue them.

But even if they are in themselves good, none of those things I just listed are central to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. And so none of those things should be turned into a proof of someone's status in Christ – a proof of how sincere or genuine or serious their faith is.

And yet ... we are each tempted to take some of those items and do just that.

And that's what Paul is warning against here. Because that's what the Judaizers were doing – the Judaizers who Paul so strenuously denounces here.

So what does that error tend to look like for you?

Paul tells us here that we are often tempted to try to make a central proof of someone's status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually required.

That's the first thing we see here.

When We Do That, We End Up Alienating Ourselves from Christ

Second, when we do that, Paul tells us here that we end up alienating ourselves from Christ.

We see this in verse two. Paul says: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh."

Now, to us, this may sound at first like it's just a string of insults. But it's not. Paul is making a much deeper point here.

With each of these statements, Paul is saying that while the Judaizers, by adding to what Jesus required, were trying to make themselves more holy, and more righteous, and more whole ... in actuality, by adding to Jesus's commands, they were doing the opposite. They were alienating themselves from Christ.

So first, by calling on Gentiles to keep the Jewish ceremonial laws, the Judaizers were trying to make themselves and others more ceremonially clean, according to the Jewish ceremonial laws. But because they did this by adding to Jesus's requirements, Paul says that they have become "dogs" – an animal that was popularly viewed by Jews as being ceremonially unclean. [Fee, 295]

They have done the opposite of what they intended. Seeking to make themselves and others more clean, they have actually made themselves unclean. Rather than proving and securing their status in Christ, they have alienated themselves from Christ.

Next Paul calls them "evildoers." And again, Paul is making the point that by adding to what Jesus requires, the Judaizers have done the opposite of what they claimed. Rather than making themselves and others "righteous," they had made themselves into evildoers by adding to God's law. [Fee, 295-296]

Third, Paul calls them "those who mutilate the flesh." In the Greek it's just one word that means essentially "mutilation." "Beware the mutilation." Paul says. Far from making others whole, far from making things as God wants them, by circumcising Gentiles, Paul says that these Jews are mutilating them, and they are themselves becoming a mutilation.

And Paul uses a word there that's used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe what pagan priests did to themselves, and what God's people were forbidden from doing. [See Leviticus 21:5; Fee, 296] Which means that instead of being more holy, like the priests of God, Paul is saying that his opponents have become like the pagan priests, alienating themselves from God, by adding to and thus disobeying God's law.

Each description in verse two is actually a different way of saying that by seeking to prove their status in Christ by adding to what Jesus requires, Paul's opponents have actually alienated themselves from Christ.⁴

Now ... that can feel a little abstract. We can maybe understand conceptually why it was wrong for them to add to what Jesus wanted ... but it can still feel a little arbitrary to us. Ok. So they added a few extra requirements to what it meant to be a Christian. Why would Jesus respond so harshly to that? Why would it lead to them being alienated from him?

⁴ And verse three reinforces that because where the opponents are "the mutilation" Paul says that Christians who find their confidence in Christ alone are the true circumcision. Where Paul's opponents alienate themselves from Christ, becoming unclean like dogs, becoming unrighteous like pagans, Paul says that those who find their confidence in Christ alone, they are those who "worship by the spirit of God." And that term there translated "worship" is a specialized term referring to the work of the Old Testament priests. While Paul's opponents had become like the pagan priests, it was the believers who trusted in Christ and not these additional proofs who were like the true priests of God. [Fee, 298-300]

Now, the simple fact that when we do this we are adding to Christ's commandments – adding to his word – that is enough to justify Jesus's response. But there's also more to it than that. Because it's a mistake to think of this issue as only legal – like it's just the breaking of an arbitrary rule. The problem is deeper than that. Because the problem is fundamentally relational. And the relational dynamic at work is not primarily that Jesus is pushing away those who do this ... but that when we do this, we are alienating ourselves from Jesus.

Maybe think of it like this ...

As many of you know, I grew up in New York, and I'm a big fan of the New York Yankees.

Now, my wife, Rachel ... appreciates the Yankees. She knows the players, she cares about how they do ... but she's not as into it as I am. She'll join me and our daughters in watching games sometimes ... but she needs something else to do too, at the same time, while the game is on. She's pro-Yankees ... but it's not super important to her. Like ... if I dropped dead tomorrow ... she'd probably stop following the Yankees.

And that's fine. But ... what if I decided to make Yankee fandom a central part of my relationship to Rachel? What if I started making our time together centered on the Yankees. What if I started getting her a lot of Yankees-related gifts? What if for our anniversary, I splurged on tickets to a Yankees game? What if I tried to turn most of my conversations with her into conversations about baseball, and the Yankees?

Well ... that would start to negatively effect my relationship with Rachel. She would start to get frustrated. On one level, she'd be frustrated because I was inserting something else into our relationship and making it central when it really shouldn't be central. On another level, she would feel alienated from me because I wasn't actually prioritizing the things she most cares about in our relationship. And then, if I kept it up, she'd probably start to feel like I didn't really know her. If I really thought that more Yankees was the main thing she wanted from me, then I didn't really know her – I didn't know her heart, her desire, or what was important to her in our relationship. And as it went on even longer – as she tried to tell me this wasn't what she wanted, and I kept ignoring her – she would probably start to wonder whether I even wanted to really know her ... or if I just wanted to project some other kind of person onto her. She might wonder whether I loved her, or an imaginary version I'd invented of her – a made-up version who was obsessed with the New York Yankees.

If I did that, Rachel and I would become more and more alienated from each other. And it wouldn't be because she was being harsh or unreasonable or anything like that. It would be because I was alienating myself from her – because I was failing to love her and relate to her as the person she actually is.

Now, if I've made you nervous, let me be clear: this is a made-up illustration, not a confession. I have not actually done this to my wife. (At least I don't think I have!)

But Paul's point here is that when we take something that Jesus has not actually asked for or required ... and we try to make it a central proof, or a defining mark of our relationship to him ...

whether it's politics, or education, or career, or children, or marriage, or a theological stance, or how we approach worship, or something else ... when we do that ... then we are doing the same thing as that imagined story of alienating my wife with the New York Yankees. The dynamic is the same. We're failing to love Jesus ... and we're failing to approach Jesus for who he actually is, and what he actually wants, and when we do that, we will alienate ourselves from him.

But what Paul has in view here actually gets even worse than that. Because it's not just that these opponents are inserting these things into their own relationship with Jesus. They're trying to insert them into other people's relationship with Jesus too.

So go back my Yankee fandom analogy. What if, in addition to inserting the Yankees into the center of my relationship with Rachel, I also tried to insert the Yankees into our kids' relationship with Rachel too? What if I started telling my daughters that unless they loved baseball and passionately rooted for the New York Yankees – unless they did that, they weren't really Nicolettis. And if they weren't really Nicolettis then they weren't truly my or Rachel's children. What if I told my daughters that unless they enthusiastically embraced the New York Yankees, they couldn't really be confident that Rachel even loved them.

If I did that in a serious way... Rachel wouldn't be annoyed ... she'd be furious with me. I would be lying to her children about her feelings towards them. I would be lying about what she most cared about in her relationship with them. I would be lying to them about what kind of person she was. I would be causing them to doubt her love for them. If I did something like that, and if I continued to insist on it, it could actually destroy our family life. And certainly it would alienate me from Rachel.

Now ... that example is kind of absurd. Which is maybe the point. Because Paul is saying here that that is what we do when take something that Jesus hasn't actually asked for, and we make it into a central proof of our relationship to Jesus and other people's relationship to Jesus.

If you tell someone – whether directly or indirectly – that their political loyalty, their career success, their number of kids, their marriage status, their views on obscure issues of theology or ethics or worship – if you tell them that their status in Christ – that whether or not Jesus really loves them – is dependent on, and maybe even proved or disproved by those sorts of things ... then we are doing the same thing as if I told my children that whether or not their mother loved them depended on their response to the New York Yankees.

And if we do that to fellow Christians ... then you better believe that Jesus will respond with the same kind of anger as a mother who caught someone telling her kids that she wouldn't really love them unless they rooted for the right sports team. Jesus will not just be frustrated with us – he will be furious. Because we would be lying to his children about his love.

And so we need to take Paul's warning seriously here. We need to ask: Are there ways that we do this? And even if we don't do it nearly as overtly and egregiously as Paul's opponents did it, are there ways we need to be on guard against even starting to drift down that road with some topic or issue that we're personally invested in?

Or, to put it a different way: If you were the devil, and you were trying to tempt you to make the error Paul describes here ... what issue would be the most effective temptation – the most likely to trip you up and tempt you down this path? That’s the area you need to be on guard against. That’s the place that you need to “look out” for this temptation.

Paul tells us here that we are often tempted to try to make a central proof of someone’s status in Christ out of things that Christ has not actually required; but when we do that, we end up alienating ourselves from Christ, rather than solidifying our relationship to him.

Instead, We Are Called to Find Our True Confidence in Christ Alone

That’s the negative. But Paul doesn’t leave us with just the negative. He gives us a positive here as well.

Because, finally, instead of all that, Paul tells us that we are called to find our true confidence in Christ alone.

And Paul makes this point right at the beginning of the passage, and comes back to it at the end.

Verse 1 can seem disconnected from verse 2. But it’s not really. Paul’s instruction in verse 1 is actually meant to be linked to Paul’s warning in verse 2. [Fee, 289]⁵

And what’s his instruction in verse 1? It’s that the Christians in Philippi should rejoice, specifically, in the Lord. Rejoicing in the Lord is what will keep them safe from the temptation Paul describes in verse 2.

Of course, Paul wants them to resist and to avoid the errors he refers to in verse 2. But even before that, Paul’s “first antidote” to this temptation (as one commentator puts it) is to rejoice, and delight, and glory in the Lord. [Fee, 291]

Because really, the temptations Paul warns us against all result from a failure to rejoice, and glory, and put one’s full confidence in the Lord.

If you’re focused on the Lord – if you’re rejoicing in Jesus, as Paul calls for in verse 1, and glorying in him as Paul calls for in verse 3, and putting your full confidence in him as you love him and worship him – if you’re doing that ... then you’re not going to be looking for some other way to prove your status in him. You’re going to know it. Because he tells you in the gospel that as you trust in him, you are his, and he is yours. As long as you keep your eyes on Jesus, this temptation has very little power.

Think again of my Yankee illustration. The only way I could really convince my daughters that their mother won’t really love them unless they’re devoted to the New York Yankees – the only

⁵ The word “finally” there may be an unhelpful translation choice. The Greek word there, in that context, can also be taken to mean something like: “As for the rest of what needs to be spoken to ...” [Fee, 288, 290-291] In other words, Paul says that his instruction in verse 1 will relate to the instruction that is to follow. [Fee, 289]

way I could convince them of that, would be if I could also get them to take their eyes off their mother ... and listen less to what she says to them ... and rejoice less in their relationship they already have with her. First, I'd need them to be somewhat disconnected from her, not paying attention to the promises of love she speaks to them. Then as they started to feel insecure about their relationship to her – then I could introduce the Yankees as a way to solidify her love for them. But if they keep their eyes on their mother ... if they listen to what she's actually said to them ... if they rejoice in the relationship they already have with her ... then my claims about how they need the Yankees to secure their status and relationship with her – my claims are going to sound idiotic.

In the same way, Paul's exhortation here – his antidote to this temptation is for the Christians in Philippi to simply look to Jesus: to rejoice in him, to glory in him, to put their full confidence in him – in his grace, in his love, in his power, in his promises in the gospel.

That's the best way to fight this temptation.

So how do you need to focus more on Jesus? How do you need to listen more to his word? How do you need to rejoice in him in worship? How do you need to glory in him in the gospel?

Brothers and sisters, let us turn from putting our confidence in things that Christ has never asked us for – as if they can prove our relationship to him. And instead, let us look to Jesus, and rejoice in him, and put our confidence in him alone.

He is the only one who makes us right with God. He is the only one who can unite us with one another. He is the only one in whom we can find true hope and true glory.

And so, let us rejoice in the Lord. Let us glory in Christ Jesus. And let us put no confidence in the flesh.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.