

Philippians XX – Name-Calling (*Phil 3:1-3*)

Introduction – Timothy and Epaphroditus were commended. But others are now to be mocked and condemned. When it comes to his sheep, this undershepherd is not afraid to use his rhetorical rod.

Text – “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. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh...”

Rejoice in the Lord (v1) – Doctrinally, here is the first antidote to any false teachings, especially to any teachings of self-justification. The word ‘rejoice’ here is the word to salute, to greet, to externally verbalize with praise and singing. It is not a command easily obeyed ‘down in my heart’. The object of our rejoicing, the defense of our faith, is the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repeating Oneself – He is not just talking about how he is repeating the command in verse 1 (as he seems to do in 4:4). He is referring to all the things he is now repeating in Chapter 3. These warnings had been given to the Philippians before (v18). Paul is happy to do so (and we should be in all important teaching). Repetition is a safeguard for us and we see God do this time and time again (consider all the psalms of deliverance).

Turning the Tables (v2) – With biting irony, Paul uses sarcastic epithets rich in meaning (to the false-teachers). It is clear his intention is to call them names, to humiliate them, and to mock them. But who were they? From looking at all of Paul’s writings it is clear that he is here again attacking the Judaizers, those who taught that one must become a Jew, be circumcised and keep the ceremonial laws in order to be saved. It is important to remember that boasting in the flesh was an inappropriate means of justification before Christ came and after Christ came (Rom 2:28-29). Paul calls them –

Dogs – Don’t think of your favorite Golden Retriever. That is not what Paul has in mind. Dogs were unclean scavengers, eating all sorts of refuse and unclean dead things (remember Jezebel? – 2 Kings 9). “Dogs” had become a name for the unclean Gentiles. By trying to make Gentiles ceremonially ‘clean’ through circumcision (in this idolatrous way), the Judaizers have themselves become unclean dogs.

Evil Workers – This reversal is a little less obvious. Throughout the psalms, “workers of iniquity” are the “ones who boast” (i.e. Psalm 5:5). By boasting in their own self-justification, these Judaizers themselves are evil workers, low-lives in the kingdom, hated by God. From this we should also see that sincerity and zeal are not virtues to be praised when one is sincerely or zealously pursuing such wickedness (Matt 23:15).

Mutilators – In the Greek the word-play is obvious. While they proclaim themselves to be the ‘peritome’, in fact they are the ‘katatome.’ While they think their circumcision has made them clean before the Lord, Paul says they might as well have cut it all off, which would make them like the pagans (practiced by some), and would make them ceremonially unclean in the Temple (the very thing they were trying to do). Paul is not being nice.

Godly Name-calling – Paul has not forgotten what he commands in Eph 4:31-32. In this context, he is not disobeying with “*evil speaking*,” nor forgotten to “*be kind to one another*.” This is not a freedom for young boys to giggle over ‘bathroom language.’ This is wise, biblical satire. His behavior defines what Paul means when he writes “*let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt*.” (Col 4:2)

The True Circumcision – Worse yet, Paul takes the high-ground in the argument, naming his people, his followers (uncircumcised gentiles), with the name “*the circumcision*”. It is as if we turned to the ‘liberals’ and said, “you are people desperately enslaved; we are the liberals, the ones who walk in the liberty of gospel-freedom.” Which, by the way, we *should* say.

Who Are We? – Paul makes clear that he hasn’t departed from the gospel of the Old Testament – they have. We are the circumcision, the true circumcision, who, by the Spirit of God, having hearts circumcised, worship the living God (Deut 30:6). Our boasting is in Jesus Christ and in Him alone (Gal 6:14-15). We have, as opposed to the Judaizers, no confidence in the flesh; there is no room for any self-justification.

The Subtle Sin of Self-Justification Destroys Gospel Freedom – Paul hated the circumcision-idolaters, and so should we. Where are these forms of self-justification today?

Our Forms of Self-Justification – Christ plus what? Your baptism? Your hand-raising? Your sinners-prayer? Your psalm-singing? Your catechism-memorizing? Your rejection of all legalistic catechism-memorizing? Your holding to a confession of faith? Your lack of holding a confession of faith? Swearing off drinking? Swearing off swearing off drinking? They are all idols when in them one *earns* salvation.

Rejoice in the Lord – Jesus Christ is the ground of your salvation, and Jesus Christ alone. The whole point of the gospel is that you no longer look to yourself for anything. Christ grants you faith. Christ grants you repentance. Christ grants you obedience. Christ calls and Christ forgives. Christ redeems, renews, restores, and reconciles. Christ is everything, and in Him you have everything. Look nowhere else, and particularly do not look to yourself.

Rejoice in the Lord – Repeating this is our protection. We are not protected in our stuffed-shirt, tight-shoed, got all our doctrinal confession-ducks in a row, if they just stay there in a row. When these things are apprehended by faith, men and women will sing, feast, rest, and share their good things with one another. They will do so by the Spirit and in the Lord. There is the antidote to self-justification. “*But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life*.” (John 4:14).