

## Philippians 3

The Apostle Paul had just concluded a wonderful mission tour of Galatia. He had preached that a person was justified by God through faith in Jesus Christ. Miracles accompanied his preaching and churches were founded. However a counter mission was mounted immediately by Jews from Jerusalem arguing that Paul's gospel was deficient. They preached that people must also be circumcised, keep the Jewish feasts and do good works to win God's approval. Paul reacted with a vigorous letter to the Galatians declaring, we Jews, "have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law, because by works of the Law shall no one be justified" (Gal 2:16).

Ten years later Paul wrote to the church at Rome setting out his gospel in a thorough and systematic manner. At the heart of his letter he wrote that "no human being will be justified in God's sight by works of the law" and "we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom 3:20,28). Another 4 or 5 years later he was still addressing the same issue as he wrote to the church at Philippi from his house arrest in Rome. (Phil 3:2-4:1).

Obviously whether a person is justified by works of the law or by faith in Christ was a big problem in the early church and many would say it is a big problem today. In fact a minister from Florida prepared a training programme for his congregation to be able to explain justification by faith because of the misconception so many people had that a person could be justified by works of the law.

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The program began with two questions the congregation members would ask their friends. The first question was, "Suppose you were to die tonight, would you go to heaven?" Most people were found to answer, "I hope so". The second question they were to ask was, "Suppose you were to die tonight and God were to say to you why should I let you into my heaven what would you say?" Most people were found to say, "I have lived a reasonably good life" which is another way of saying salvation is by works of the law.

Lets turn to Philippians 3 and see what Paul has to say on this subject in this chapter. We observe four things.

**Firstly Paul indicates how regularly the subject arises** by saying "to write the same things to you is not irksome to me and is safe for you" (v1). It was very common for people to think they would go to heaven because they were good enough and the apostle would patiently try to correct this common error.

**Secondly he indicates how strongly he feels toward those who teach this error** by the language he uses. He calls them "dogs", "evil workers" and their rite of circumcision he calls, "mutilating the flesh" (v2). Later he speaks harshly again of circumcision as glorying "in their shame" and of their food rules by saying, "their god is their belly". He was not happy with their teaching.

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**Thirdly he delivers a personal testimony.** His letter is no dry academic exercise of the mind. This doctrine arose out of the deepest personal experience. In the days before his conversion he was intense in his desire to win God's approval by his religious and moral good deeds. As he looked back on those times he could boast that his circumcision was according to the rules, his lineage was impeccable, his theology was right, his zeal for the faith unsurpassed and his keeping the law was extremely conscientious. If anyone could get to heaven by being religious and doing good, he certainly could. He could out do the best of them (v4-6). And his attitude to the works now was they were "loss" and "refuse" (v7-8).

It is important to say at this point Paul was not being critical of the religious deeds or good works or enthusiasm or theology in themselves. What he was saying, was that thinking these things would serve to win God's approval was loss and garbage. There can be no boasting of man before the Holy God of all the earth. Our best deeds are stained, ruined and of no value in winning salvation.

**Fourthly he delivers the second part of his personal testimony.** His conversion experience on the road to Damascus was life changing. Before that experience he had a murderous hatred of Christ and of those who believed in him. Now because of Christ's mercy and of his powerful resurrection from death he could see that life had to do with knowing this Jesus Christ. He could see that this was where life lay and he wanted to know him and be found in him and gain him. He wanted to know the power of his resurrection and if necessary to suffer with him so that by any means he might enjoy the resurrection of the dead with him. The righteousness that pleases God is not doing good works to win his favour

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but to join ourselves by faith to the One who has already won his favour, namely Jesus Christ (v8-10).

With this personal testimony to the uselessness of our good works and the wonderful glory of knowing Christ Paul further explains his present situation and calls upon us to follow his example.

**There is confidence before God.** Paul already is a citizen of heaven because of his union with Christ. As he lives now on earth Paul awaits his Saviour from heaven. This Saviour is the Lord Jesus Christ. The One in whom Paul has God's righteousness. The One who will change Paul's mortal body, deteriorating through age and battered by persecution, to be like Christ's glorious body.

**Within that confidence there is striving before God.** Paul has a righteous status before God because he has Christ's righteousness but he is not perfect. Within that acceptance by God, Paul can now confidently strive to be like Christ. He can forget the past poor performances of life and give himself to the better future ones because of God's sure acceptance.

**There is the plea for Christians to act like him.** The way Paul conducts himself is not just for apostles. His confidence in having God's righteousness in Christ and within that confidence striving to be righteous like Christ is the mature Christian. Paul urges us to note people who do this and imitate them. This is the way to stand firm in the Lord and the answer to give if we are asked why should God let us into his heaven.