

# The True Church

Philippians 3:3

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## Introduction

Well it was just two days ago that we celebrated Reformation Day. This past Friday marked the 497<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day that Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany. And though Luther stood on the shoulders of men like the 14<sup>th</sup>-century English theologian John Wycliffe, and the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemian reformer John Huss, many regard October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1517, as the day that sparked the Protestant Reformation.

And perhaps the chief contention between (a) Luther and the Reformers (b) and the Roman Catholic Church was the *nature* of the church itself. In 1441, the Council of Florence issued the decree: “All those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless they are joined to the Catholic Church before the end of their lives” (cited in Sproul, *Are We Together?*, 57). This was only following in the footsteps of established canon law. In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal decree which stated, “. . .there is only one holy Catholic Church, and *that* one is apostolic. This we firmly believe and profess without qualification. Outside this Church there is no salvation and no remission of sins. . . . We declare, say, define, and pronounce that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human creature to be subject to the [Pope].”

You see, according to Catholicism, salvation is mediated through the sacraments—things like baptism and participation in the Lord’s Supper. And if those sacraments are administered by priests, overseen by the authority of the Pope, then those who are outside this church cannot have their sins forgiven. And so men like Martin Luther and the other reformers were regarded by the Catholic Church as the worst kind of heretics, because they were leading people to depart from the true Church, the only source of salvation.

Luther, of course, rejected the claim that the Roman Catholic Church was the one true church. Its authority did not derive from the succession of the Apostles, because Christ alone—and not the Pope!—is the Head of the true Church. And the true Church—the body of Christ—is made up of all those throughout all ages and all nations who are united to Christ their Head through faith in Him alone.

And so in that sense, it’s true that there is no salvation apart from being part of the true Church. But that doesn’t mean participating in a sacerdotal system under the authority of a pope. Being a

part of the true Church is to be united by faith to Christ who is the *Head* of the Church. It is to be numbered among those chosen by the Father before the foundation of the world, among those sheep for whom Jesus shed His precious blood, and among those in whom the Spirit has worked repentance and faith as a result of the miracle of regeneration.

And the question I want to ask tonight is: How do I know if I'm part of the Church? If it's true that there is no salvation apart from the true Church, united to Christ as its Head—then that's a question that we all need to answer. What are the **distinguishing characteristics**—the **identifying marks**—of the true people of God?

Well Paul answers that very question for us in our text for this evening. But to ensure that we understand this passage properly, we need to pay attention to the context in which it comes. Paul states his overarching concern in his letter to the Philippians in chapter 1 verse 27. In Philippians 1:27 he says, “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” He has a constraining desire to see his dear friends in the church of Philippi bring the implications of the Gospel to bear on every aspect of their lives.

And throughout the first two chapters of the book, he focuses most intently on the *relational* implications of the Gospel. Chapter 2 verses 1 and 2: they are to make his joy complete by being unified. And they are to achieve that unity by pursuing humility, by regarding one another as more important than themselves, verses 3 and 4. They are to diligently pursue practical holiness—to work out their salvation with fear and trembling as God works in them. And they are to serve one another sacrificially and from the heart, after the pattern that they've received preeminently in the Lord Jesus Himself (2:5–11), and then also from the examples they have in Paul (in verses 17 and 18), in Timothy (in verses 19 to 24), and in Epaphroditus (in verses 25 to 30).

But after addressing what you might call *internal* threats to their conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel—the need to be unified, to be humble, to serve one another, and so on—Paul then shifts his focus in chapter 3 to an *external* threat: the threat of false teaching. The Philippians had become targets for the false teaching of the Judaizers. The Judaizers were professing Christians who taught that circumcision and the observance of the Mosaic Law was necessary for salvation. Acts chapter 15 verse 1 says that they were teaching, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” “The righteousness of Christ achieved in His life and in His death, received by faith alone, is not enough to secure your salvation. You must ‘complete’ your faith by performing certain good deeds.” Sure, you had to believe in Christ. But because you were grafted into the blessings of God promised in the Abrahamic Covenant, you also had to bear the *sign* of that Covenant. And unless you received what we might call the sacrament of circumcision, along with performing the other ceremonial rituals of the Mosaic Law, the Judaizers would tell you that you weren't part of the true Church.

And so in the face of that false teaching, Paul devotes an entire section of his letter to defining what it means and what it does not mean to be a true Christian. Since the nature of the Judaizers' false doctrine is to *distort* what it means to be the true people of God—namely, by adding to the Gospel the necessity of lawkeeping—Paul makes a positive statement about the nature of true Christianity. And he begins, in Philippians 3:3, by outlining **three identifying marks of the true people of God**. Look with me at our text for this evening. Paul writes: “For we are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

And it's my prayer that as we look into these **three characteristics of those who belong to the true Church of God**, that every one of you will see yourself, and your own Christian experience, in the reflection of these verses—that as we examine these marks of a true Christian that you will be able to exclaim from the depths of your heart, “Yes! By the grace of God's, that's me!” And if you can't say that, then my prayer for you this evening is that you'd understand more what a true Christian is, and would cry out to God to make you one of His own even tonight.

### **The True Circumcision**

But before we jump right into examining these **three marks of the true Christian**, we need to grasp the significance of the opening phrase, “For *we* are the circumcision.”

Paul has just warned the Philippians in verse 2 to “Beware of the false circumcision.” So he is very clearly contrasting the Judaizers—who called themselves the circumcision—with the true people of God: those who trust in Christ alone for their righteousness. He's saying, “They may call themselves the circumcision, but *we* are the circumcision.”

Now as we briefly mentioned, circumcision was the divinely ordained sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. It was the divine seal of Yahweh's covenant love and fidelity to His ancient people Israel, the descendants of Abraham. You remember that God promised Abraham that a great nation would come from his descendants, that they would dwell in peace in the land of Canaan, and that that nation of descendants would be the instrument through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–21). And the *sign* of marking out that nation as peculiarly and specially belonging to God was the sign of circumcision. Every male belonging to Israel—whether he was born a Jew or even if he was a convert to Judaism—was required to bear this mark of identity in his flesh. And if he didn't bear that mark—if he didn't receive circumcision—Genesis 17:14 says, in a bit of a wordplay, “that person shall be *cut off* from his people; [for] he has broken My covenant.” And so circumcision was the baseline mark of

identity for the Jews. To belong to God's people was to be circumcised, and to be circumcised was to belong to God's people.

And that sense of identity carried right on through to the time of the Apostle Paul, so much so that in Ephesians 2:11 Paul himself refers to the Jews simply as "the circumcision," and to the Gentiles as "the uncircumcision."

But now, with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ—with the coming of the One who is the fulfillment of the covenants—the One who is the substance which all of the symbols of the Old Covenant pointed to—now that He has come and accomplished salvation through His death and resurrection, the sign of circumcision has found its fulfillment in Him! Physical circumcision always pointed to the true, inward reality of a vital relationship with the One and Only God. That's why as early as Deuteronomy chapter 10 we read about the circumcision *of the heart* (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4)—the cutting away, as it were, of the fleshiness of the heart, awakening the heart from its deadness, and making it pulse with the lifeblood of spiritual truth and spiritual reality.

And Paul is saying: the reality that physical circumcision prefigured and pointed to has come in the Lord Jesus Christ! And so he says in Colossians chapter 2 verse 11, "...and in Him"—that is, in vital union with Christ—"in *Him* you were also circumcised with a circumcision made *without hands*, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of *Christ*." Not by the circumcision of *Moses*. You see, physical circumcision has found its fulfillment—not in the ordinance of baptism, as our paedobaptist friends misunderstand—but in the circumcision of the *heart* that is the miracle of regeneration by the Holy Spirit of God.

Now understanding that, can you see the genius of what Paul is saying here? He's saying, "Those Judaizers—those *dogs* (verse 2), those *evil workers*—they call themselves 'the circumcision party' because they *trust* in their circumcision to identify themselves as the people of God. You know what they are? They're nothing but mutilators." That word referred to the pagan religious ritual of making cuts to the body to try to appease a deity. Paul says, "They call themselves 'the circumcision' and pride themselves in their right relationship to Yahweh. They're no better than pagans who mutilate themselves to try to curry favor with their false god. No, my dear Philippians, don't be deceived! *We*—those of us, Jew *and* Gentile!—who are united to Christ by grace through faith alone—*we* are the circumcision! We, and we alone, are the people of God! And we are marked out and identified as His people—*not by the knife of Moses*—but by the sword of the Spirit—by the Spirit who circumcises our *hearts*, and who quickens in us the divine life by the miracle of the new birth!"

And so when Paul makes this assertion that "*we* are the circumcision," what he's saying is, "*We* are the true people of God. *We* are the ones who are in a right covenant-relationship with the God

of heaven. *We* are the true Church.” And then he gives these **three distinguishing characteristics**—these **three identifying marks**—that characterize the true people of God. What does it mean to be a true Christian? What characteristics mark out the true follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? What must be true of us if we are to legitimately call ourselves *the True Church*?

## I. Worship by the Spirit

**Number one:** The true people of God worship in—or *by*—the Spirit of God. They worship by the Spirit of God. Now this word, *worship*, is the Greek word *latreúo*, which Paul chooses very carefully in this context. There are many words for worship in the Greek language, and if you were a Greek speaker in Paul’s day, the word you might have expected here was *proskunéō*—the idea of bowing in worship. But in this context Paul chooses the word that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament referred to the service connected with formal religious worship. This was the word that referred to the priestly services Israel performed in the tabernacle and the temple—having to do with the sacrifices and the altar, the laver and the incense, all the instruments of formal temple service. In fact, the noun form of this word is translated that way in Romans chapter 9 verse 4. Paul speaks of Israel, his kinsmen according to the flesh, “to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple service*....” And actually the word “temple,” isn’t even in the original there. It’s just the word, “service,” and the NAS adds “temple” to bring out that nuance of *latrēsis*: temple service.

You see, Israel was unique in their worship practices among all the nations, because they were the only nation in the world to whom God revealed a way of ritual access to Him. Only one nation could claim that the priestly service and the sacrifices that were offered in *their* temple truly reached the attention of the God of heaven. And in the context of contrasting the Judaizers, who gloried in such access to God through the ritualistic worship of the Mosaic Covenant—in contrasting them with the true people of God, Paul says that because of the great cataclysm that was the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the *true* circumcision no longer worships by such external means! They no longer worship by a temple, by a laver, by sacrifices, and by a priest! No, the *true* circumcision worships by the Spirit of God Himself!

“Don’t be deceived, my Philippians! All of those external, ceremonial aspects of worship that the Judaizers would have you submit to—they were all symbols that pointed forward to a greater reality! And that reality has come in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has inaugurated the New Covenant, and sent us the Comforter, the Holy Spirit of promise Himself. And now, that Spirit permanently indwells you, so that all true worship is no longer by the letter, but by the inward power of the Spirit of God who rules and governs your heart!” This is precisely what Jesus was speaking about to the woman at the well in John 4. She was asking about the proper location for worship—whether it was there on Mount Gerizim like the Samaritans said, or on Mount Moriah

in Jerusalem like the Jews said. And Jesus says, John 4:21, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But an hour is coming, and now is, when the *true* worshipers will worship the Father in *spirit* and truth.” You see, true, New Covenant worship, has nothing to do with external rituals, or human traditions, or liturgy, or even physical locations. True, New Covenant worship is fundamentally internal. It is fundamentally a matter of the heart.

And not only is true worship an inward, internal reality. It also encompasses *all* of life. A Jew under the Old Covenant thought of worship as offering sacrifice at the tabernacle or the temple. He would *go* to worship. But the Apostle Paul urges us in Romans 12:1, by the mercies of God,” he says, “to present your *bodies* as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God. This, he says, is our spiritual *service* of worship. And there’s that same word again. You see? *All* of life is worship, friends! Our entire lives are lived beyond the veil, in the Holy of Holies, in the very presence of God Himself. And the sacrifices we offer are not the slain carcasses of bulls and goats offered through a priest. We present our *entire lives*—all of our being, everything that we are—as a *living* sacrifice, offered by the very Spirit of God Himself.

And friend, I ask you: do you know anything of this New-Covenant, Spirit-empowered, heart-felt worship? Have you experienced what it is to have a heart so full of the truth of God and the glories of Person and work of Jesus Christ that you are delightfully compelled to spend time with Him, to read His Word, to commune with Him in prayer, to sing praise to His name? Do you know something of that inward relish of the soul that is entirely delighted and satisfied by all that God is for us in the Person of Christ? Is there a warmth and a freedom, animated by the Spirit of God, by which your soul is lost in wonder, love, and praise and adoration of the God of your salvation? Has the glory and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ so permeated the depths of your being that you can exclaim with the Apostle Paul, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain!”? Does your heart beat with the psalmist who says, “Praise the LORD! For it is *good* to sing praises to our God; For it is *pleasant* and praise is becoming” (Ps 147:1)? And with David who says, “I will go to the altar of God, to God *my exceeding joy!*” (Ps 43:4)? Oh, friends! do you **worship by the Spirit of God?**

Or is worship for you, merely a cold formality? Is it only a matter of externals? Is worship merely going through the motions of another so-called “worship service,” standing when you’re supposed to stand, praying when you’re supposed to pray, parroting out a few songs and hymns while your mind wanders and thinks about lunch, or the grocery list, or the football game? Has worship, for you, simply been a matter of being at the right place at the right time with the right people saying the right words that you’ve learned how to say and when to say them, but without any true and vital engagement of the heart? You see, you may go to church and fellowship group and Bible study, you may read your Bible, you may pray—you may perform all the external duties of religion. But if your heart is not set aflame to **worship by the Holy Spirit of God**, you

are not a true child of God! “This people honors Me with their lips, but their *hearts* are far away from Me. In *vain* do they worship Me” (Matt 15:9). In emptiness. In worthlessness.

Paul was telling the Philippians that the worship the Judaizers were calling them to was no true worship at all. And I can imagine them objecting, “But Paul, how can we love and worship and treasure an unseen, invisible Jesus more than a *visible* sacrifice, offered by a *visible* priest, on an altar I can touch and feel with my own hands? Isn’t something tangible better than something entirely invisible and intangible?” We say things like that. “Oh, if Christ was only here in front of me! If only I could see Him, it would make it so much easier!” You hear that kind of thing today. “How do I love a Christ that I can’t see in a statue, or in a stained glass window, or up on a crucifix?” There’s only one way: It’s when the Holy Spirit of God, through the Word of God, makes the glory of Christ more real, and more visible to the eyes of your heart than all those things that you can see and touch and hold in your hands! Oh how glorious is that! What a privilege it is to be living in the age of the Spirit—to be indwelt by the living Spirit of God!

And in the presence of that Spirit, how utterly foolish it would be—how blasphemous it would be—to suggest that mere external, ritualistic ceremonies could accomplish more than the Holy Spirit can! That is why the true circumcision—the true people of God—**worship by the Spirit of God!**

## II. Glory in Christ Jesus

The **second identifying mark** of the true people of God is that the true people of God **glory in Christ Jesus**. They glory in Christ Jesus.

Now this word, “to glory” is the Greek word *kauchaómai*, and it speaks of *boasting in*, or being *proud of*. This is one of Paul’s favorite words. It appears 37 times in the New Testament, and 35 of those are in the Apostle Paul’s writings. And it’s appeared a couple of times in Philippians already. The noun form of this word appears in chapter 1 verse 26, where Paul tells the Philippians that he’s convinced he’ll be released and will come to them again, “so that,” verse 26, “your *proud confidence* may abound in Christ Jesus *in* me through my coming to you again.” And we saw it again in chapter 2 verse 16, where he exhorts the Philippians to faithfulness, “so that in the day of Christ I will have reason *to glory* because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.” And so the word speaks of glorying in, boasting in, placing proud confidence in someone or something.

Now, the Judaizers boasted in the Law of Moses. One commentator writes, “The apostle’s references to boasting need to be understood against the contemporary backgrounds of the professional practices ... of the Jew, whose basic attitude was one of self-confidence before God, convinced that his keeping of the law would bring honor to himself” (O’Brien, 362). And we see

this confirmed by Paul's own statement in Romans chapter 2 verse 23. Paul is in that section of Romans where he's demonstrating that the Jews cannot be justified by works of the law, and in verse 23 he says, "You who *boast in the Law*, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?" You see, he characterizes the Jews as those who *boasted* in the Law. They trusted in their ability to keep the commandments of the Mosaic Law to provide them their acceptance with God. This is what they relied on—what they hoped in, what they depended on—for righteousness. Their proud confidence was in the Law.

But Paul says, in Philippians 3:3, that the true church—the true people of God—glory, not in the Law, but glory in *Christ Jesus*! All of their trust, all of their hope, all of their confidence for their righteousness before God rests squarely upon the One who has accomplished righteousness on their behalf: in Christ Jesus alone. They rely entirely on Him for their acceptance before God. They exclaim with the Apostle Paul in Galatians 6:14: "But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" In all the shame and scandal and foolishness of the cross of Christ—while the world sees it and hides their face in disgust, the true child of God *boasts* in that shameful cross. He sings with Edward Mote, "On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand!" And with Augustus Toplady: "Not the labor of my hands / Could fulfill Thy law's demands. / Could my zeal no respite know, / Could my tears forever flow. / All for sin could not atone, / Thou must save and Thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring / Simply to Thy cross I cling. / Naked, come to Thee for dress. / Helpless, look to Thee for grace. / Foul, I to the fountain fly. / Wash me, Savior, or I die!"

And so to glory in Christ Jesus means, first, to place all of our trust and all our confidence in Christ for our righteousness. But it does mean more than believing in Him. You can believe in something, but not be proud of it. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Many people believe in one cause or another, and are prepared to give their general support, but others are *on fire* on behalf of their cause, they are zealous and keen and active, and are prepared to shed the last drop of blood in their veins for it. They are proud of it; they glory in it. That is the word" (*Life of Peace*, 35). Pastor John says it is "boasting with exultant joy about what a person is most proud of" (MacArthur, 222).

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this concept of boasting is to turn to an Old Testament text that Paul himself quoted multiple times in the New Testament, and that is Jeremiah chapter 9. Turn to Jeremiah chapter 9, verses 23 and 24. There the Lord says, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things."

Now what would it mean for a wise man to boast in his wisdom? It would mean that such a man is smart and he knows it. His mind is constantly occupied with having the right answer, and



demonstrating to others that he's smarter than they are. It means that he derives his *identity* from his intellect. He considers a great deal of *who he is* to be defined by his intelligence. If someone is shown to be smarter than he is, he'll feel small; but when he can demonstrate his superior intellect in front of people, he's on top of the world. In other words, he derives his *satisfaction* from his wisdom. And of course, he takes every opportunity to broadcast his wisdom; he uses big words when a little word will do; he quotes obscure pieces of literature; he brags about how he's solved this or that problem. He's always talking about his wisdom in one way or another.

And how about a man who boasts in his riches? This is a man whose money is constantly on his mind. He's always ruminating on it, always reminding himself of how much money he has in this or that bank account, or this or that stock. He daydreams fondly about his big houses (plural), and his expensive cars, and the luxurious vacations he's been able to enjoy and looks forward to in the future. He sneaks glances in the mirror or a glass window so he can admire himself in his expensive clothes and his jewelry and his perfectly coiffed hair. In his mind, this is who he is: a rich man. If he were to somehow lose his wealth, he would feel like he's lost himself—like he wouldn't know how to act. But because he has money, he rests in the security that money brings. He trusts in it for his peace and satisfaction. And of course, he never misses an opportunity to brag to others about his wealth. He loves talking about the money he made on a good investment, about how good his sports car handles the tight turns, about how relaxing his last vacation was in the South Pacific. You just can't shut him up! He's *boasting* in his riches.

And Paul says, the true child of God *boasts* in *Christ Jesus*. His mind is continually filled with thoughts of Christ and His glory. He is constantly meditating and ruminating on the wondrous mysteries of the Person of Christ—how all the fullness of deity could dwell in bodily form in this God-man; how the One who spoke the galaxies into existence with a word could have been born as a helpless child; how the One who sustained the entire universe by the word of His power, could have at the same time been being sustained by the nourishment and protection of a teenage girl.

The one who boasts in Christ Jesus marvels at the love and wisdom of God put on display in the Gospel, whereby this innocent Savior voluntarily undergoes the full exercise of the wrath of His Father that He never deserved to know, bearing the punishment against the sins of His people, and then rising from the dead three days later in triumphant victory over sin and death! The one who boasts in Christ trusts in Christ with every fiber of His being. He relies on *His* work in the Gospel to merit his acceptance before God. And he derives his *identity* entirely from his union with Christ. There's an inward exultation and joy when he thinks about His Savior; he's proud of Him, the way a young child would be proud of his older brother or his father. And so of course he can't stop speaking about this Jesus. Christ is constantly on his lips. He wants everyone to hear about this glorious Savior and the work of His Gospel, and so he goes around boasting in all

that Christ is, proud of and celebrating the reality that he belongs to Christ, and Christ belongs to Him.

Oh friends, can you see anything of yourself in this description? Does your heart pulse with affection and adoration and exultation in your Savior as I speak of these things? Be stirred up to boasting in Christ—celebrate Him with me as I read this excellent passage from Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “Is there anything that you can conceive of or imagine that you need or want for your soul? It is all in him: ‘in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily’ (Col 2:9). There is nothing that the soul of man can need in time or eternity but that it is in Christ. You need pardon? There it is. You need reconciliation to God? The man Christ Jesus is the one and only mediator between God and man. You need new life and a new nature? You receive it from him. You need strength and power? He sent the Holy Spirit that you might have it. You need an Advocate with the Father? There he is, seated at the right hand of God. You tremble at the thought of death and of going to face God in the judgment? You are assured that you will be clothed with his righteousness and he will present you spotless. What else do you need? He is everything: Prophet, Priest and King, the All in all. ... The man who believes that, must make his boast in Christ” (*Life of Peace*, 40–41).

Oh Grace Church, is that Christ to you? And if it is, do you boast in Him? Do you glory in Him? Is He the occupation of your thoughts and affections? Is He the One around whom you shape your life and seek to derive your benefit? Do you seek satisfaction in Him? Is He the bottom of your joy? Do you delight to spread the fame of His name to your friends and your co-workers and your relatives? Can you be ashamed of a Savior like this? Can you be embarrassed to speak of the person and work of One who is so glorious? so lovely? so compelling? Oh if you have ever tasted for just one moment the sweetness of the sufficiency of such a Savior, you would shout with the Apostle Paul: “Whatever things were gain to me—whatever else I used to boast in: riches, strength, wisdom, reputation, education, achievements, occupation—those things I have counted as *loss*—and I count them as rubbish—garbage!—for the sake of gaining and knowing and fellowshiping with Christ!”

### **III. No Confidence in the Flesh**

And that leads very naturally to the **third characteristic** of the true child of God that Paul outlines in this text. The true child of God, **number one**: worships by the Spirit of God; **number two**: glories, or boasts, in Christ Jesus; and finally, **number three**: He **puts no confidence in the flesh**. And this is really just the negative aspect of the second characteristic. They’re two sides of the same coin. The one who glories in Christ Jesus puts no confidence in the flesh.

*Flesh*, here, is a comprehensive term that denotes “anything apart from Christ on which one bases his hope for salvation” (Hendriksen, 153). And you’ll see, by looking at the verses which

immediately follow, that in this context “flesh” refers to all those human achievements and advantages that one might put his hope and confidence in for his acceptance before God. Paul says, “If anyone was going to boast in the flesh, it’d be me. I was circumcised, and so I could boast on ceremonial grounds. I’m of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin—a Hebrew of Hebrews—and so I could boast on hereditary grounds. I was a Pharisee, so zealous that I even persecuted the Church, and so I could boast on the grounds of my upbringing and social standing. And as far as anyone looking at me from the outside could tell, I was found blameless concerning the righteousness which in the Law, and so I could boast on moral grounds.”

But then in the ledger of his life he adds up all of those attainments—all of those grounds for boasting—and in the light of the glory of Christ, he moves every last one of them from the “assets” column, to the “liabilities” column! He counts everything that he might have considered to his advantage as loss—as refuse—in comparison to the *surpassing value* of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord! And in that narration of his own testimony teaches us the great evangelical doctrine of total depravity—that sinful man, in his natural state of sinfulness, is absolutely powerless to achieve one iota of righteousness before God!—that if man will have any hope of salvation he will have to abandon everything in himself and despair of earning any part of it!

And that’s why Paul adds this final phrase! You read this and say, at first glance, “He’s just repeating himself! He’s making the same point twice! He’s already said that the true Christian glories in Christ Jesus—puts all his hope and trust and confidence in *Christ* for his salvation. What need is there to repeat that by saying, “and puts no confidence in the flesh”? But you see, dear friends: native to sinful humanity—the natural disposition of all of our sinful hearts—is that very Judaizing spirit that Paul condemned in the first century. By our *very nature*, our sinful hearts constantly seek to put confidence in the flesh, even if it’s just a little bit. And that’s what the Judaizers would say they were trying to say! “Of course we glory in Christ Jesus! Amen! We believe in the cross! We believe in penal substitutionary atonement! We believe in the resurrection! We believe that *faith* in Christ’s work is necessary for salvation! We just need to keep the Mosaic Law too!”

And that is *exactly* how all false religion speaks! That is what the Roman Catholic Church taught in Luther’s day, and it is exactly what they teach today! “Oh, we believe in salvation by *grace*! We don’t teach justification by works! We believe that we’re saved by faith in Christ’s work on the cross! We just need to *preserve* and *increase* our justification through our good works!” (Council of Trent, Canon XXIV). No, no, my friends! Christ will do *everything*, or He will do *nothing*! And so the true child of God puts *no* confidence in the flesh, because he knows, like Paul in Romans 7:18, that nothing good dwells in my flesh!—that all my righteous deeds are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6) when compared to the standard of God’s holiness by which I will be judged!

Friends, does this describe you? Does that ring and echo from your heart? Does the testimony of John the Baptist spring delightfully from your soul that in the matter of righteousness before God, “[Christ] must increase, and I must decrease” (John 3:30)? Or do you trust in *yourself*, even in part? What will be your confidence on that great day? “I attended Grace Community Church for 40 years. I was baptized by John MacArthur! I’ve listened to every sermon they’ve ever posted on the Grace to You website. I’ve read every study note in the MacArthur Study Bible!”

Or perhaps a bit more seriously: “I understand that I was a sinner, but surely I wasn’t as bad as those people! I did right by family. I did my best to take care of people. I didn’t go out of my way to hurt anybody. Lord, did I not serve in the homeless shelter and at the pregnancy center?! Lord, did I not take an interest in politics and world issues; did I not fight for justice and the betterment of society in Your name?! Lord, did I not raise children who all know you?! Lord, didn’t I study my Bible?! Didn’t I go to seminary?! Didn’t I serve you in ministry?!” And He will look at the filthy rags of your righteousness by which you seek to gain access to heaven, and He will declare to you, “I never knew you. Depart from me.”

Oh dear friends, let it not be you. Let it not be you, who sat under this word, who heard this Gospel. Abandon all confidence in the flesh—abandon all hope to enter God’s kingdom on the basis of your own good works and human achievements—and set all your confidence, all your hope, all your trust, all your dependence upon the Rock of the righteousness of Christ. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Sin has been atoned for. God’s wrath has been satisfied. Death has been conquered. Salvation has been accomplished in the God-man Jesus Christ, and He is yours if you will have Him this evening!

### **Conclusion**

How do you know that you’re part of the true Church?

You worship by the Spirit of God. Whether with the gathered assembly of God’s people or in the privacy of your own home, you delight to worship God with an engaged heart, warmed and animated by the Holy Spirit Himself. You taste the sufficiency of an unseen and invisible Christ more sweetly through His Spirit than through all external religious rites and ceremonies.

And you glory in Christ Jesus. You place all your confidence, all your boasting, all your glorying in the Person and work of Jesus alone. He is the bottom of your joy. He compels your attention and adoration; He fills your thoughts and meditations throughout the day; you delight to speak of Him to others. And in an appropriate way you are proud to be His, and to own Him as yours.

And you put no confidence in the flesh. You happily renounce all claims to righteousness on the basis of yourself and your own achievements. You eagerly release all claim to your own righteousness, and rest joyfully in the alien righteousness of Christ.

Put simply, you know you're part of the true Church when you hold fast to the *Head* of the Church by faith alone.

Grace Church: Build your hope on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Stand on Christ—the Solid Rock. All other ground is sinking sand.