



Speaker:
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The True Jews

Series: Philippians • 8 of 8

6/26/2022 (SUN) | Bible: **Philippians 3:1-3**

What is a Jew? Is it someone we'd find praying in a synagogue? Is it someone who's a descendant of Abraham? Or is it perhaps someone who lives in the modern state called "Israel"? What is a Jew?

It's easier to say what a Jew *was*, originally. The word came to be used for all those descended from the twelve tribes of Israel. In our Sunday evening Bible study, we've been observing the behaviour of the Jews in the books of Samuel and Ezekiel.

These were the people who God had chosen to show favour to. He had a relationship with them. Both God and the people were part of a legal contract, if you like. A *covenant*. If they obeyed him, God would bless them.

Although God was always faithful in what he promised them, they were almost always disobedient. Even their kings would be more wicked than good.

And they suffered for it. God roused Israel's enemies to invade them. Eventually, the people of Israel would be carried off as slaves into foreign countries.

But God graciously restored some of them to their land. They started to rebuild. A new temple was made and worship reinstated.

By the time Jesus Christ visited our world, Jerusalem was a thriving city with a sophisticated religious structure centred around an even newer and bigger temple.

But we know what happened. Jesus was not only a Jew himself but the very Messiah, long awaited by generations of Jews. Despite the great privilege of seeing the appearance of their king, they rejected him. And those who should've known better, the religious leaders themselves, led the opposition to Jesus Christ and had him executed.

I'd like us today to see if we can agree on what Paul meant and identify who the true Jews are now. It's clear to me Paul is telling us the followers of Jesus Christ are now the real Jews. If you've been taught otherwise, I pray you'll be patient and only take notice of what I say if it's based on Scripture.

Did God make a new Israel? Or did he rearrange the original one? Well, I'd suggest it doesn't matter too much. In our government, the Prime Minister might have a cabinet reshuffle.

He'll get rid of some of his top people and bring in others to replace them. Is it a new cabinet or the old one reshuffled? Well, *both*.

Following Paul closely, we're firstly going to look at the description of the unbelieving Jews. Then we'll look at his description of the true Jews.

The People of the Flesh

When we consider the warm tone of Paul's letters so far, v2 in this third chapter marks a fairly drastic change. He launches into a warning, and the language is quite harsh. But given the threat he perceived, his harshness is quite justified.

It might appear Paul's speaking about three different groups. You can see he mentions dogs, evildoers, and self-mutilators. But he's almost certainly describing the same group of people in three different ways.

When we read the Old Testament and make our way through the Mosaic law, we might think it was a religion of mere rules. But that would be a mistake. It was always the case that their *hearts* were meant to be employed in the service of God. They were required to do all those things *and* have a sincere love for God and others.

Sometimes, the sin of Israel was not doing those things God had ordained. They practised the rituals of those around them rather than those given by God.

But there was another type of sin. Many people **would** do exactly what God had laid down for them to do, but their heart wasn't in it. They thought the external ritual was more important than the inward attitude. God told them it was more important to show mercy towards others than carry out all these rituals.

So the people Paul's warning against are those who called themselves Jews but whose hearts were far from God. Some of them even got baptised by John the Baptist and believed Jesus was the Messiah. But they thought all this stuff Jesus taught them was an add-on to their Judaism rather than the beginning of a brand-new era of the spirit-filled church of New Jerusalem.

You might recall references in Galatians and Romans where Paul warns about Jews who see Christianity as a means to gain converts to their existing Jewish religion. They were even telling the born-again believers they needed to be circumcised to be acceptable to God. Their teaching undermined the message of the gospel which is why Paul goes at them so fiercely.

As you know, Paul's letters were written in Greek. And there's very often more power in the original language than in the translations that we use. This is a good example. These three descriptions—dogs and so on—all begin with the letter "k" in Greek. And this is a common method to emphasise something.

Let's hear these Greek words. He says, *Beware the kynas...beware the kakous ergatas...beware the katatomēn*. I'm sure you've noticed how some preachers use this device. They might have three main points in their sermon and each heading will start with the same letter.

Paul starts by calling them "dogs." It doesn't sound as harsh to us as it would have to the original hearers. You may already be aware that in ancient cultures dogs were despised. The habits of dogs were vile, but they weren't really any more disgusting than those of other animals; but for whatever reason, they were chosen as a symbol to represent uncleanness.

Now traditionally, Jews would refer to *non-Jews* as dogs. If they weren't ritually cleansed by the workings of Jewish law, they were necessarily unclean. You may remember Jesus himself using the word one day. A gentile woman had asked him to save her daughter. He replied that to help her would be like taking food off your own children and throwing it to the dogs. He was calling her a dog! But her faith in Jesus and humility was so great she wasn't put off by this insult. She persisted with her request, and Jesus highly honoured her for her great faith, and he saved the life of her daughter.

The Gentiles were nothing but dogs. Yet now, Paul completely reverses this. He says **these flesh-and-blood Israelites** are the real dogs. It's hard to express just how offensive this would've been. Yet we see this language continued in the book of Revelation. The church is described as the New Jerusalem, and it tells us outside this great city we live in are dogs, witches, perverts, murderers, false religionists and liars.

Going back to v2, we see Paul's next description of these people: evildoers. People who sin habitually. And again, Paul uses a word which turns the tables on the Jews. You see, because the Jews did the works of the law, they considered themselves righteous and everyone else sinners—evildoers.

In Paul's attack on these unbelieving Jews, **they** become the evildoers. All these people over here who are following the way of Jesus Christ the Messiah are now the righteous, whereas all these so-called "proper" Jews over here are the real evildoers. Shocking stuff, this.

Finally in v2, Paul describes these Jews as those who are involved in self-mutilation. This all centres around the practice of circumcision, that subject blokes don't like to talk about!

This radical practice was meant to reflect a radical *attitude of the heart* towards God. It was one of the distinguishing marks of the Hebrew people. More than this, it was a sign of the covenant between God and the people of his choosing.

Like everything else the Jews did, circumcision came to be a merely outward act of obedience. What God really wanted were hearts inclined towards him. Yet once again, the Jews' religion evolved in such a way as to make the outward sign of circumcision more important than the inward work.

That “k” word Paul used, *katatomēn*, was again a deliberate choice. We’ve seen how in each of Paul’s descriptions he turns the Jewish identity on its head. He does it here, too. This sign of circumcision, which the Jews held as so important, was now being compared to the mutilation carried out by pagans, practices strictly forbidden in the Mosaic law.

I was reading a book recently by an ancient Syrian called Lucian. The book was called *The Syrian Goddess*, and it described some of the practices of those devoted to the goddess Cybele [“sibberly”]. The rituals were frenzied, noisy, bloody and perverse, with men castrating themselves with swords then dressing up as women.

The Jews rightly despised such pagan practices. But here we have Paul putting the Jews in the *same category* as the pagans. Circumcision, without an accompanying inward work, was no better than the gross mutilations carried out by the pagans.

The worst culprits among the Jews were those who were actively teaching doctrines opposed to faith in Christ. But these harsh words of Paul’s rightly apply to **all** Jews who reject Jesus Christ. This is interesting, in Jeremiah chapter 9 and verse 25: “Behold, the days are coming”, declares the LORD, “when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh...”

Any Jewish person who doesn’t have faith in Christ is condemned. Almost all Jews, whether in Jesus’s day, those down through the centuries, or those Jews living today, have rejected the way of salvation. The people we see today in the UK wearing skull caps and the people worshipping in synagogues over there in Israel today; they are unbelievers and right now are without hope.

Friends, **let no one tell you there’s salvation outside of Jesus Christ**. Let no one persuade you that Jews or anyone else will get “another opportunity” to turn to Jesus.

There is now no distinction. The same principle applies to everyone, regardless of their family tree. The one who believes on the Son has life, but the one who does not believe does not have life, and the wrath of God hangs over them.

So Paul has clearly identified what a false Jew is. Now we’ll see his description of what a *true* Jew is, what *true* circumcision is.

The People of the Spirit

V3 states it clearly: “WE are the circumcision”.

Who’s he referring to? It obviously includes himself and the people in the church at Philippi. But v3 goes further and tells us more specifically who he includes. And this shows us Paul is referring to **all those whose faith is in Jesus Christ**.

It’s you and me, brethren!

- We are the real circumcision
- We are the true Israel of God
- We are the ones in a covenant relationship with God
- We are the true Jews

Just as Paul described the fake Jews in three ways, so he gives us three ways we can identify **the real people of God—those who are the objects of inward circumcision of the heart.**

God's chosen people are those who worship by the Spirit of God. They have the Spirit of God *living in them*. Their worship of God is *enabled by* the Holy Spirit within them. The Spirit is like the umbilical cord which connects us to God and through which we receive spiritual life.

John 4:23—"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"

True adoration of the Lord is done through the Spirit. If we do anything in the service of God and our heart isn't in it, we commit the same sin as the evildoers Paul was battling against. Have you ever sung a hymn to God while thinking of something else? Has your mind ever wandered while the word of God was being preached? It's sinful.

I'm not asking these questions so that you can figure out *whether* you've done this or not. There's no question you have! Me too, sadly. But don't think because everyone's guilty of that particular sin that it doesn't matter. It's an offence to God if you don't worship him with your heart engaged.

Imagine giving your friend a present for Christmas. There's this box, and it's covered in wrapping paper, and it has a bow on the top and it has a tag with the friend's name on it. And they take it and thank you. But when they open it, they find it's just an empty box.

No one would do that unless it was a joke. But that's what we do in all seriousness when we pretend to worship God but our heart isn't in it. When we're not employing the Holy Spirit within us to worship God properly, it's like presenting him with a gift box of worship which is empty.

No: I'm not asking **if** you do these things so you can inwardly answer *yes* or *no*. I'm challenging you, and challenging myself, to be honest with ourselves and with God and acknowledge that we **don't** always worship God in a spiritual way. I'm asking these questions to encourage you, and encourage myself, to try harder in our worship of God. After all, we're only giving him what he deserves.

So the true Israel of God is characterised by worshipping God with their whole hearts, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

V3 again: we can also be identified by the tight grip we have on Jesus Christ. In our hearts, we hold onto him and, more importantly, he holds on to us!

And we boast in him. We don't boast about our own goodness or our own accomplishments. If we **are** righteous, it's because of him. If we do **any** good, it's because of him.

You find sometimes when you witness to people and you tell them about being righteous, about this holiness you have, about your absolute confidence of eternal life with God, they misunderstand. They think you're boasting about how good you've made yourself. They think you're so confident in how well behaved you are that you're positive it's easily good enough to earn a place in the presence of God forever.

We have to be careful how we phrase these things. As soon as we mention being perfect in righteousness, it has to be qualified. We have to say, "It's not my own righteousness, or goodness, but the Lord's." As soon as we talk about our confidence of inheriting the world to come, we must talk of it as a gift of grace. We glory in Christ Jesus.

We *glory* in Christ Jesus!

We GLORY in Christ Jesus.

Look at the end of v3. God's true Israelites place no trust in the flesh. So what is "the flesh"?

The immediate reference is to the physical act of circumcision. Most of the Jews placed their confidence of salvation in outward performances. Paul elsewhere calls these "bodily exercises" as opposed to spiritual exercises. And the most important one of these merely outward practices was circumcision.

But Paul means us to understand "flesh" in more than one way. He frequently uses the word to describe that which people have confidence in instead of confidence in God. He does this in Galatians chapter 3, where "flesh" describes circumcision but also describes a life not in the Spirit. Flesh...and spirit.

The reformer, John Calvin, said that to trust in anything other than Christ is to have confidence in the flesh; and this belief would undermine the gospel and endanger a man's soul. For this reason, it's to be opposed with the same determination Paul had.

The true child of God does not put their trust in the flesh. They put no confidence in the flesh.

These are the marks then of the **true** chosen people.

- They possess the Holy Spirit of God, enabling them to worship God properly
- They glory in Christ Jesus and not themselves, crediting him with all they have

- And they have no confidence in the flesh. Their desire is to go through this life in sync with the Holy Spirit and not be led by the wicked passions of their natural selves.

Like the Cabinet reshuffle I mentioned earlier, Jesus came to this world and *reconstituted* Israel. However you prefer to think of it, he changed the *membership requirements* for his true Israel. He introduced a better covenant.

And when you and I came to trust in Jesus for salvation, we in a way added our “signature” to the bottom of this holy contract. We signed on the dotted line to say that WE WERE ABANDONING ANY HOPE OF BEING RIGHT WITH GOD THROUGH OUR OWN MERITS. WE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT OUR SALVATION WAS ALL OF GOD. And we agreed to love and obey him all the days of our lives.

Romans 2:29—But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart...

Citizenship of the Kingdom of God was taken from the people of the twelve tribes, the Bible says, and granted instead to a multitude of people from all over the world, throughout all ages.

WE are the true Jews!

And if you happen to meet someone who calls themselves a Jew, please don’t think you’re to call them names! You treat them as you would treat anyone else who doesn’t have Christ:

- You make sure they understand the grave consequences of sinning against God
- You tell them they need a substitute, one who is able to bear the penalty God brings down on lawbreakers
- You show them how they can understand the promises made to their ancestors in a spiritual way

And in doing this, they’ll be converted from an unclean, cursed thing outside the city of God— converted to a *real* Jew, and worship God the way he always wanted to be worshipped.

Amen.