

What is a Christian?

- Philippians 3:1-3
- Some have wondered why Paul starts chapter three with “Finally,” and then rambles on for 43 more verses. It’s because he was a preacher. It reminds me of the little boy who whispered to his dad, “What does the pastor mean when he says, ‘in conclusion?’” And his father muttered, “Absolutely nothing, son.” Hey, sometimes we think of things we didn’t think of earlier, OK? But actually, there’s some evidence that the word Paul used here was sometimes used in the Greek to point to a new topic, to transition to a new subject. So it could be translated, “And so, my brothers, rejoice.” Some scholars point out that this idea fits the case here, as Paul has used the word rejoice as a transition before in the letter. Chapter 1:18, he rejoices that Christ is being proclaimed, even if by preachers with impure motives, and then he starts a new subject, that to live is Christ. Again in chapter 2:17-18 Paul uses the command to rejoice with him as the end of one idea, the possible sacrifice of his life for the gospel, and the beginning of another: the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus. So, let’s look at this change of direction by the apostle and examine these verses under three headings: Command, Warning, and Characteristics.
- **Command**
- This is the first time Paul tells the church to rejoice *in the Lord*. This is a reminder that the Lord is both the reason for, and the direction of, our rejoicing. We rejoice because of His great work on our behalf, and we rejoice in Him and to Him. Paul acknowledges also what we need to remember: it is a good thing to continue to be reminded about the simple truths of the Gospel. He says, I don’t mind repeating the same things to you: it is no trouble for me, and it is safe for you. There are many believers who go looking for a ‘new teaching,’ like the Greeks in Athens were famous for, always wanting to hear a ‘new thing.’ But when we do that, we are stepping into dangerous territory. Deadly territory. No, we need to be a ‘safe church.’ Safe is not politically correct. No, the only safe place is the Gospel. The only safe place is knowing and living out the simple truths we find in the Bible, which help us reject the deceptive lures of those who would undermine our faith.
- So, what are we to do? Rejoice in the Lord. As Nehemiah said, “the joy of the Lord is our strength.” As David and Asaph wrote about often in the Psalms, “Sing aloud to God for our strength; shout for joy to the God of Jacob.” There is strength and inherent protection for those who will rejoice in the Lord. Matthew Henry wrote, “The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks.” So, rejoice in the Lord! That’s the command. Let’s look next at the warning.
- **Warning**
- What we find in verse 2 may seem shocking, but we need to understand that Paul has been doing battle with these Judaizers for years. And to be clear, these are not people who are teaching things on the level of what we might find today in a disagreement about which translation of the Bible is the best. Or whether we should have drums in worship or not (we should). No, the Judaizers were Jewish Christians, or those who claimed to be Christians, who said that a Gentile who followed Jesus would have to first submit himself to Mosaic law, including circumcision. The Judaizers were the reason for the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Remember, Paul and Barnabas, along with Peter and James and John and all the elders of the Jerusalem church agreed that a Gentile should not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. That’s great news for us, and for millions of Gentiles who have come into the Kingdom before us. Paul had nothing good to say about the Judaizers. To Titus he wrote this about what he called the “circumcision party,” “They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.” (Titus 1:11) Though Paul doesn’t deal with it here, in Philippians, his word to Titus reminds us that “religion” is big business. Getting people to believe that there are things they can do and sacrifices they can make to get themselves into right standing with God is a billion-dollar

industry! It produces books, seminars, dvds, churches, mosques, and temples. But it is deadly deception. We see that here in his three descriptions of the Judaizers.

- **Dogs:** don't think pets, here. He wasn't comparing the Judaizers to poodles or schnauzers or even drooling bulldogs. No, first century Jews did not have any pets. The only animals they fed were work animals. The dogs he refers to were nasty scavengers, wild dogs that lived on road kill, garbage, anything they could find. They were disease-ridden beasts that people avoided at all costs; to try and bring them into your house would be foolish, if not deadly. The irony is that Jews referred to Gentiles as dogs. If they saw a group of Gentiles at the market, they wouldn't say, "Look, there are some Gentiles." They would say, "Ugh, pack of dogs near produce; let's go the other way." They were referred to this way, unkindly of course, because they did not observe the Jewish dietary laws, and were not part of the covenant. With stunning and brutal irony, Paul says it is actually the Judaizers who are the dogs, who are unclean and outside God's covenant!
- **Evildoers:** Another slap of irony and wordplay. The Judaizers liked to claim that it was they who were doing the good and righteous works of the law. Paul says no, actually, you are doing evil works. Remember Jesus will say to the people who thought they were saved and really weren't, "Depart from me you workers of iniquity, you evildoers, I never knew you." Alistair Begg has a great illustration about the folly of works-based righteousness: imagine that you went to the bank every week after you got paid and made a deposit. And you did this for months. And one day you need to get some of that hard-earned money out so you go to the bank and find that instead of crediting your account with each deposit you had made for 6 months, your account had been debited for each of those amounts. Instead of being several thousand to the good, your bank account is several thousand in debt, and has been closed! That's what happens to those who depend on good works to save them. Instead of making a deposit into some heavenly account, they are going deeper and deeper into debt. **With every act of self-righteousness, they put to shame the cross of Jesus Christ and His suffering for sins once and for all, and they store up more wrath for themselves on judgment day!**
- **Mutilators:** again Paul uses wordplay to undermine the Judaizers. He uses the word *katatome* (mutilate) instead of the word *peritome* (circumcision). Peter O'Brien writes, "Circumcision, their greatest source of pride, is interpreted by the apostle as mutilation—a sure sign that they have no part in God's people at all."
- Paul sums up the argument for the Gospel in **Romans 2:28-29; 3:21-23; 27-31.**
- So, let's look at the third point Paul makes in Philippians 3:3. He describes a Christian for us.
- **Characteristics**
- We have here three distinguishing characteristics of a Christian, in direct opposition to the three characteristics of a Judaizer.
- **"Worship by the Spirit of God."** True followers of Jesus Christ, those who have been circumcised in the heart, will worship by the Spirit of God. Don't think standing at your pew, singing worship songs. No, this means that our direction and our affections are changed, not just for a few minutes on Sunday and not just in a certain location, but all the time and in every place. Remember the woman at the well, a Samaritan, asked Jesus whether we should worship in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerazim, which is where the Samaritans worshiped God. He said, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." (John 4) In other words, worship will not be a service, or a thing you go and do somewhere, or a religious ceremony. It will have nothing to do with a place or a liturgy or smells or bells or instruments or no-instruments. It will be something you cannot help but do all the time, because the Spirit of God has taken up residence in you! I saw a picture of this on Wednesday as I visited with Hilda at Twin Lakes. She is 94, a widow, and a wonderful woman of God who blesses me every time I see her. She was a nurse in the 1940's, working with Dr. Nelson Bell, Ruth Graham's father, after the Bell family came back from China. Hilda is in poor health and can't go to church,

but let me tell you, that lady loves Jesus. She told me this week, as she has told me before, that she talks to him all the time. She reads her Bible in the morning and prays, but all through the day she is talking to him, praying for people, and worshipping him in spirit and in truth. She said with a wink, "I tell the Lord, 'Now, if I am asking too much, you tell me!'" I assured her that she could never ask too much at the same time I was thinking, I ask way too little.

- **"Glory (or boast) in Christ Jesus."** That's what Hilda was doing. This is just a natural outflow for those who worship by the Spirit of God. The work of the Spirit is to glorify the Son. Paul said, quoting from Jeremiah, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." We cannot make much of Christ at the same time we are making much of ourselves.
- **"Put no confidence in the flesh."** Again, this is the natural outflow for those who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus. How could he then put any confidence in the flesh? How can we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, and then pat ourselves on the back? *Good job on that devotional time this morning! Great prayer at church, you really knocked that one out of the park. And the way you witnessed to that guy at work?! Woo! That was really something to be admired.* That kinda' turns your stomach a little doesn't it? Beware of becoming the older brother in the story Jesus told in Luke 15 about the prodigal son. The point of the story was not really the penitent prodigal younger brother, but the proud, pharisaical older brother, whose confidence was in his works. BOTH of the sons were prodigals. The older brother, the proud prodigal said, "Look, these many years I have served you," in anger, while refusing to come in and celebrate that his brother had come home. Then he says with disgust, "I never disobeyed your command." Because his confidence was in his own self-righteousness, he felt justified in being angry with his father, even accusing his father of not loving him enough. He was a legalist, just like the Judaizers, just like many today who measure their worth to God, and therefore what He 'owes' them, by their own good deeds.
- But, listen! The flip side is true as well! There are many Christians who rarely have a good day in the Lord because they are constantly weighing whether they did enough, whether they loved him enough, whether they served people just right, whether they said everything in just the right tone. Saints, we are the prodigal sons, every single day. We fall short every day. We spend time in the far country, every day. What brought the prodigal home was not a sense that he really could do better if he tried harder. That is a lie from the pit of hell. What brought him home was a confidence that his father would take him back in, even if only as a hired servant. What a surprise when he was welcomed with a kiss, and a ring, and shoes, and a robe, and son-ship. **We also can come home every single day with that same expectation and hope, that our Father will take us in, and that He already has. Anything else, we are putting confidence in the flesh, not in the Father.**
- **Prayer**