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Living the Jesus Life: Be Safe Out There

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TEXT: Philippians 3:1-11 (ESV)

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Dear friends:

We are confronted with so much death in the news these days with this Covid-19 pandemic. We see death counts on the news, we hear tragic stories from the hospitals and interviews with people of lost loved ones. And all of this can cause an uneasiness

deep within. I was talking with a friend the other day, he said watching all of this made her realize that, "I can die sooner than I thought I would." People wonder, "what if I get this virus and I die, what will become of me?" And according to the experts that could happen to any one of us. With that in mind, I would ask you to consider this personal question: are you at a place where you know for certain that if you died today you would go to Heaven? Some people might respond, "Well I honestly don't know, I'm not sure anybody can know that for sure." Others might say that they hope so because they're trying to live a good, moral life, but they're not really sure what's good enough so they are hoping God "grades on a curve".

Well, our text today addresses this question for us. The opening statement of chapter 3 actually expresses a concern for our spiritual safety. Let's look at it again – Paul writes, "Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you." This statement frames the whole of chapter 3: rejoice in the Lord, in the Lord alone, in the Lord Jesus and what He's done for you. Now, why would Paul go out of his way to remind them of this? He tells us: because it's safe for you. There are alternatives to that, you know. I can rejoice and myself, my accomplishments, my abilities, my own spirituality, my goodness, my morality. Paul reminds us, though, that to keep your eyes on Jesus is the way to go. Rejoice in Him and Him alone, especially when it comes to eternal matters. Salvation safety is to be found only in Christ alone, because I want you to be safe in Christ.

Here's a fact: there are people, even today, who will tell you other things, wrong things. It's good to beware of them. They may come off as experts and be likable and impress you with their thinking, but they can be dangerous for your spiritual health. Remember when the cigarette companies were forced to put warning labels on cigarette packages, alerting people that smoking can be dangerous to your health? Well, there are some people who need a label attached to them; their thinking can be dangerous to your spiritual health, and if you buy into what they tell you, it can be deadly for you. You see, theology and doctrine really matter. So Paul proceeds to give us a heads up about dangerous people who could come in and wreck your life with dangerous teachings. That was the concern for the Philippians – he gives these people that he is concerned about coming in a label. He says look out for these people they're like dogs. They're evildoers, they're mutilators of the flesh with circumcision on the brain. What they teach may sound right in your ears, but beware of them. What comes from their mouths is dangerous to your spiritual health and salvation.

So, who are these people Paul's talking about? It seems that there were some Jewish Christians, who were referred to as Judaizers, who were coming into churches after Paul would leave the community and say that Jesus is nice and what He did on the cross is great, but there's still more for you to do than simply trust in Him. For instance, if you're non-Jew you needed to do some things like get circumcised and followed the other Jewish practices – dietary laws and so on. Then you'll be a bona fide, saved Christian, and in a right relationship with God. Obviously, these people were very convincing in their arguments and caused all sorts of spiritual dilemmas in the church. So Paul kicks out after them in his letter to the Galatians; you really get it there. Paul had seen the good news of Jesus and salvation by grace through faith in Christ getting lost in all of this false teaching, with people getting mixed up and start believing that it only makes sense that you needed to do something, in addition to trusting Jesus, to get right with God. These teachers hadn't gotten to Philippi yet, but Paul seemed to think it was only a matter of time, so he gets ahead of the problem – better safe than sorry. I guess some of these Jewish Christians pridefully referred to themselves as “the circumcision”: the ones who were really right with God. Paul blows that thinking, that kind of boasting, right out of the water, and he affirms those that are placed their trust in Christ alone for salvation by saying “we are the circumcision, the true thing.”

A little background, by the way: circumcision, in the Old Testament, was symbolic of being the covenant people of God. It goes back all the way to the time of Abraham. Well Paul says, “No, that's not what gets you right with God, getting circumcised. That's not what defines being God's covenant people in a right relationship is about. In fact, there's another statement from Paul in the book of Colossians. He writes:

In Christ also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh [trusting in your works], by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

So, with Christ we really are the circumcision, the covenant people of God. Paul says we worship by the spirit of God, we're filled with the Holy Spirit, Who's received through faith in Christ. That seals us as a guarantee of eternal life. He says we're the people who “glory”, meaning we boast in Christ alone. “Look what Jesus did for us at the cross,” we say, “He paid for our sins. I was hopelessly, eternally lost until Jesus got into my life.”

And we put no confidence, no hope or faith, in the flesh to make ourselves right with God. "Flesh" here means good works and personal accomplishments, or our heritage. These things can't bring us the righteousness we need to be in a relationship with our Holy God. And if you think they can, Paul is saying, that's just bad theology and deadly thinking.

Then Paul uses his own background as an example, He gives a personal testimony. He says if they think they have reason for confidence in the flesh, their heritage and spiritual practices, "hey, I have a lot more." And then he just goes off on this run, about listing his lineage, and his circumcision, and his credentials, and achievements, and his zeal for serving God, and his status among his Hebrew peers. And then he says, "But then something happened: I met Jesus Christ." Remember, Paul had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus which changed the trajectory of his life, it straightened him out. There was a 180° turnaround as he encountered the risen Jesus, and he came to understand the reality of his own sinfulness and hopelessness before God, and the promise of salvation through faith in Christ. And so Paul says:

All those things that I was counting on, putting my confidence in to make me right with God, I now count as loss. They're not profit, but loss, for the sake of Christ. I let them go, I quit counting on them as my "assets" before God. I let go of my spiritual résumé, instead I place my trust in Jesus Christ and what He did for me. I count everything now as loss to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus. He's describing a personal relationship with the risen Christ. He says "I don't want to just know about Him, I want to get to know Him." Every person who trusts in Jesus, by the way, can get to know Him more each day, as you follow Him and discover He really does know what makes your life work best.

And we can face death with confidence, knowing that we belong to Him forever and ever. Paul says:

I've written all these things as loss, I count them as nothing more than garbage, that old spiritual résumé of mine with all my good works, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him. I let go of those things and I latched on to Christ. Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from following the law and keeping rules, but that which comes through faith in believing in Jesus. The righteousness from God depends on faith. I've come to the conclusion, folks, that a right relationship comes through trusting in Jesus Christ. He alone is my hope, my righteousness; only He can give me righteousness, and on the judgment day I

want to be found in Him. As I stand before the judgment seat I'll be righteous in God's sight, justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who died on a cross for me and rose again.

I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection. I want to walk with Him. I want his promise of eternal life. I want to serve Him, and share in His sufferings, and pick up my cross and follow Him, and live for Him, and walk in His footsteps, and conform my life to His, even if it means personal suffering and death. That by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Whatever that suffering for Jesus looks like, whatever opportunity arises for me to "go all out" for Him, that will make it possible to do that for Him, I'm going to do it, to attain the resurrection from the dead.

Now he's not talking about earning his salvation, he's talking about the second coming of Jesus, when the resurrection of the dead happens. He's saying, "I want to stand with the exalted Jesus as He's promised me. I want to hear Him say, 'Well done Paul, good and faithful servant, you've run a good race.'" Paul says, "Boy what you believe in has a big impact on your eternal destiny."

Be safe out there. The world's thinking can get your twisted up, and turn you around, and get you lost, and get you building life on something that's not solid. It's all garbage – trust in Christ alone. Theology matters; it's a life and death issue for you and me, friend. Who or what you place your trust in determines your eternity, and our message for today is: put down that other stuff and rejoice in the Lord. Not in your rule keeping, not in your good works, not in your attempts at living a good, moral life, but in what Jesus has done for you at the cross and the empty tomb. The rest of it is only sinking sand, as the hymn says.

It reminds me of a story, by the way, of an Alaskan man who recently attempted to cross a channel near Juneau on a homemade watercraft; more specifically an inflatable duct-taped craft, complete with a paddle, his dog, and a conspicuous lack of a life jacket. Now, in many instances duct tape is highly reliable, but as a means of water transportation it may not be your prime choice. A local news outlet stated that, while the weather on sea was calm with nine mile-per-hour winds, a local Coast Guard crew still ended up coming to the man's aid, when the makeshift boat started to fill with

water and sink. Having deemed that craft “unsafe”, they transferred it, the man, and his dog to nearby Douglas Harbor.

Friend, if you’ve been building your hope of salvation upon doing good things for God and people, I encourage you today, I appeal to you, to let go of that thinking. It’s just like that man with his duct tape boat; it won’t get you where you want to go. You’ll find yourself sinking. Instead, turn and entrust your life to the only one who can make you righteous before a Holy God and give you eternal life: Jesus Christ. He loves you, and He wants to be in a personal relationship with you. And if you are listener who has already placed your trust in Christ, may Paul’s message be your solid truth and blessed reassurance to bring rejoicing again into your life, even during this troubled and uncertain time. I encourage each and every one of us to tuck these words of our Savior into our hearts, memorize them and say to them to yourself each day:

Let not your hearts be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go and prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare that place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that were I am, you may be also.

That’s our good news. Rejoice; rejoice in the Lord.

Amen.