

JOY VS. LEGALISM
PHILIPPIANS 3:1-7

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Pilgrim's Progress (PROJECTOR ON--- PILGRIM'S PROGRESS) has supposedly sold more copies than any other book in the world in the English language, except for the Bible. The author of the book was John Bunyan. (JOHN BUNYAN) He was an Englishman who was educated at home, served in the army, and learned the trade of a tinsmith from his father. After he got married, he became interested in Christianity.

Bunyan got connected with a church that was not part of the Church of England, which was a risky connection to make in the 1600s--- in fact, it happened to be a Baptist Church. John Bunyan began to do evangelistic preaching at various places outside of church buildings. When significant numbers of people responded to his message about salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, the governing authorities got upset. He was tossed into jail for preaching without a license.

John Bunyan spent most of the time between 1660 and 1672 and also the year 1678 in jail. English jails were not especially pleasant places back then. But Bunyan was able to write behind bars, and the major part of his writing of the Christian allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* happened when he was confined in this jail. Bunyan later commented on his motivation for writing, saying, **"I was at home in prison, and I sat me down and wrote and wrote, for the joy didst make me write."** In the midst of very difficult circumstances, separated from his family, John Bunyan experienced joy. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the last few weeks we have been looking at the work of another writer who was imprisoned for his faith. In the midst of his imprisonment the Apostle Paul also experienced joy. That is reflected in the many references to joy and rejoicing that we have encountered in our study of the Book of Philippians, which was written while he was a prisoner in Rome.

The source of joy for Paul and for John Bunyan was the same which some of the people of God experienced in the Old Testament. In about 442 BC Nehemiah led a group of Jews who were returning from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. Together they rebuilt the wall around the city in 52 days. A special day was set aside after that during which Ezra the priest began to read to the people from the Law of Moses. He spent the entire morning reading to them from God's Word. Apparently knowledge of it by most Jews had been lost.

(PROJECTOR ON--- NEHEMIAH 8:9) In vv. 9 & 10 of Nehemiah #8 we are told, **"And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your**

God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. (NEHEMIAH 9:10) Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’”

The joy of the Lord was John Bunyan’s strength. It was Paul’s strength. It can also be our strength. (PROJECTOR OFF) We have seen in Philippians #1 that Paul was joyful because, first, he looked at the positive side of life. Though he was a prisoner, he saw that through his imprisonment many people were becoming Christians. Second, Paul derived joy from the fellowship which he had with other Christians. He knew that together they were part of a cause that was worth dying for. Third, Paul experienced joy from focusing upon God’s faithfulness to him in the past.

So Paul had learned to live above his circumstances, and we can do the same if we focus upon our relationship with Christ. Circumstances don’t have to rob us of joy. In our passage today the apostle describes a potential obstacle that can rob us of joy. It can also block our spiritual growth.

I.

So let’s consider THE COMMAND TO REJOICE, which we find in v. 1 of #3. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE COMMAND TO REJOICE) Paul says, **“Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.”** The impression which the adverb “finally” gives us is that Paul is drawing this letter to a close. But the original Greek word used here can also have the idea of “furthermore,” and I suspect that this is closer to the thinking that Paul had in mind here.

The verb “rejoice” and the noun “joy” come from the same word in Greek. The verb appears 14 times in this brief letter. The noun “joy” appears at least four times. Back in #2 v. 18 (PHILIPPIANS 2:18) Paul wrote, **“Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”** In #4 v. 4 he will say (PHILIPPIANS 4:4), **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”** Now here in v. 1 of our chapter he writes, **“Finally (or furthermore), rejoice in the Lord.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

Joy is supposed to characterize the lives of Christians. The source of this joy must be God. Rejoice in the Lord. Nehemiah and Ezra told their people that the joy of the Lord is our strength. It is only a relationship centered upon God and not dependent upon circumstances which can produce an enduring joy.

Our world so often tells us that joy comes from things. It comes from winning the lotto or going on a cruise or looking young or having the right car or eating out. The Bible tells us that we are indeed expected to enjoy and appreciate the good things which God provides for us. We do not have to be monks who deny ourselves any pleasure in life. But real joy--- joy that is not dependent upon circumstances or things or people--- comes only from knowing and serving and trusting God.

C. S. Lewis had great insight into this joy in his book *Mere Christianity* (pp. 134-138). He said, **“Most people, if they really learn how to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy. I am not speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages or trips and so on; I am speaking of the best possible ones. There is always something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, that just fades away in the reality. The spouse may be a good spouse, the scenery has been excellent, it has turned out to be a good job, but ‘It’ has evaded us.”**

II.

There are many things which can rob us of this divine joy, besides our own misplaced desires. Earlier in the book Paul was concerned that circumstances of persecution might rob the Philippian Christians of their joy. Now in vv. 1-3 Paul speaks about THE DANGER FROM LEGALISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE DANGER FROM LEGALISM)

In the second sentence of v. 1 he writes, **“To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.”** I think that the reference to “same things” is the subject which he is about to address, which includes righteousness and law and faith. Paul had no doubt taught about these things when he was present in Philippi.

In v. 2 he says, **“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.”** Paul appears to be describing a group of people who are elsewhere called Judaizers. All of the first Christians were Jews. They continued to keep many of their Jewish cultural and religious traditions. Eventually Gentiles began to accept the notion that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel who had died for the sins of the whole world.

The question on the minds of the Jewish Christians was: What do we do with these Gentiles? Until this point the assumption was that Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be right with God. But in Acts #10 the Apostle Peter saw the Holy Spirit come upon a group of Gentiles in the same way that He had come upon the followers of Jesus at Pentecost in Acts #2. Gentiles could apparently become right with God simply by trusting in Jesus. A meeting of church leaders described in Acts #15 came to that recognition.

Some Jewish Christians were not willing to accept this divinely revealed doctrine. They insisted that the Gentile Christians be circumcised and follow much of the Jewish law and traditions. The promoters of this viewpoint were called “Judaizers.” Some of them held such strong convictions that they went around to churches which Paul had been involved in establishing and tried to convince the Gentile Christians that they needed to

become Jews. Perhaps some of them had been to Philippi. Perhaps Paul knew that at some point the largely Gentile church at Philippi would encounter these Judaizers.

In v. 2 Paul calls these Judaizers “dogs.” The inherent value and worth of man’s best friend had not been recognized back in that time and culture. Dogs tended to run wild and eat any kind of food which they could lay their paws on. For that reason Jews regarded dogs as unclean. The Jews in their writings sometimes called Gentiles “dogs,” because of this defilement with unclean food. Paul reverses the image and calls these Judaizers “dogs.”

How could Paul use such harsh language to refer to another group of Christians? Did not Jesus tell His followers to seek unity with fellow Christians? Well, there were certain fundamentals of the faith about which Paul was unwilling to compromise. He saw the nature of the gospel message at stake. Is eternal salvation available to all on the basis of grace through faith? Was full acceptance before God possible apart from observance of the Mosaic Law?

Yes. These Judaizers were attacking the very heart of the gospel. Perhaps these Jewish outsiders had come to the solid church which Paul had established at Philippi and were causing disunity. They were teaching doctrines which were not true and which contradicted the nature of the true gospel. So it was fitting that Paul opposed them and their message strongly.

In v. 2 Paul also called these people “evildoers.” Some translations have “evil workers.” These guys were working hard to spread their message. But it was an evil message because it added works to the gospel of grace through faith. Some of the cults in our world are like that today. They associate themselves with Christianity and the Bible. But they promote the idea that some amount of work and human effort is necessary to get to heaven. Faith in Jesus alone is not enough. So this doing, this work, is regarded by God as evil.

Paul also calls the Judaizers in v. 2 **“those who mutilate the flesh.”** The Greek word is *katatome*. (KATATOME-PERITOME) In the Greek translation of the Old Testament it was used to describe the self-inflicted wounds that idol worshipers received in certain religious rituals. The normal Greek word for “circumcision” was not *katatome* but *peritome*. So Paul is using a derogatory word play to describe the Judaizers.

Paul goes on to say in v. 3 that Christians are the circumcision, the true circumcision. Why? Because we **“worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...”** Circumcision was intended as a sign of Israel’s identification with God. But it was only a sign.

In the Old Testament in Deuteronomy #30 (DEUTERONOMY 30:2-3A) Moses told his people, **“...[when you] return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on**

you...” In v. 6 he added (DEUTERONOMY 30:6), “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

Unfortunately the majority of the Jews by the time of Jesus had come to regard the sign as being the reality. They thought that they were accepted by God because they were circumcised. Paul was critical of that thinking. In Romans #2 vv. 28 & 29 (ROMANS 2:28-29) he wrote, **“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”** What characterizes the new people of God after the coming of Jesus is that they have circumcised hearts. These Jesus followers are Jews and Gentiles who have received circumcised hearts as a result of trusting in Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have a similar problem in churches today when people think that they are Christians because they have been baptized at some time in the past. For them the symbol has also come to be the reality. But it is the faith in Jesus which actually makes one a Christian. Water baptism is not sufficient.

III.A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- III. PAUL’S RESPONSE TO LEGALISM) In vv. 4-7 in our passage we come to PAUL’S RESPONSE TO LEGALISM. He begins by speaking about himself. In vv. 4-6 the text describes PAUL’S CREDENTIALS. (III. A. PAUL’S CREDENTIALS) A Christian at Philippi who came to faith after the apostle had left town might be suspicious from hearing or reading this letter that Paul had some jealousy reflected in this strong attack on the Judaizers. So Paul counters that possible thought by describing his own religious pedigree.

He writes in vv. 4-6, **“...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: 5 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; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”**

Keep in mind that Philippi, perhaps more than any other city in the empire, had a strong focus on individual achievement and honors. Many inscriptions and monuments in Philippi dating to this period have been discovered by archaeologists. Pedigree and achievement were an especially big deal to people there. If these Judaizers tried to gain an audience among the Philippians because of their pedigree, Paul could claim even better credentials.

Of the seven qualifications that he lists the first four were the result of birth. The last three were the result of personal choice and achievement. **First**, he was circumcised on the eighth day after birth. This was in accord with the Old Testament requirement. **Second**, he was of the nation of Israel. Some Jews were Gentiles who converted to

Judaism. These proselytes did not rate as highly on the religious scale as native born Jews like Paul.

Third, Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin. This tribe was the only one to side with the tribe of Judah when the other ten tribes split away from the rule of the Davidic kings who were declared by God to be the legitimate rulers of Israel. Paul's Hebrew name was Saul, which was the name of the first king of Israel. Thus Paul came from a tribe of prominence.

Fourth, Paul called himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews." Many Jews in the first century grew up and lived outside of Palestine. They were more familiar with Greek culture than with Jewish traditions. Many of these Jews spoke Greek and knew very little Hebrew. These Hellenistic Jews were regarded as second class Jews by the Jews who grew up and lived in Jerusalem.

Fifth, Paul was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives among the Jews. They followed a traditional interpretation of the Hebrew Bible that included made up rules that were even more detailed and strict than the original Old Testament regulations.

Sixth, Paul was a persecutor of the church. He originally saw the Jewish Christians as a threat to orthodox Judaism. So he took a lead in having these Jesus people thrown into jail and sometimes killed. There was no lack of zeal in Paul.

Then **seventh**, Paul was found blameless. According to the standards of the Pharisees Paul was kosher. He met the religious standards of the strictest religious sect among the Jews. He had been trained under the most famous rabbi of the world in that day, Gamaliel. He had accomplished all that could be expected of a young rabbi. He was at the religious top. Paul had travelled down the road that the Judaizers wanted everyone to follow, and he had been further down that road than almost all of them. Yet there was still something missing.

B.

Thus in v. 7 we come to PAUL'S BETTER WAY. (III. A. B. PAUL'S BETTER WAY) He writes, "**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.**" What credentials he had, which were regarded by the religious world as considerable, he gave up for the sake of his new master. There was nothing wrong with being Jewish. Indeed it was a blessing to be part of the chosen people of God. But the path which he had originally chosen to bring him closer to God had not produced the desired result. It did not give him a true relationship with God, and it did not provide him with real joy. That came only from discovering a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

IV.

Let's consider then OUR RESPONSE TO LEGALISM. (IV. OUR RESPONSE TO LEGALISM) The threat to the joy and spiritual growth of the Christians at Philippi from

the Judaizers involved the problem of legalism. "Legalism" is not a term that appears in the Old or the New Testaments. Because of that Christians have defined legalism in different ways. Some tend to think of legalism as a code of conduct that is strict, that has a lot of rules. It is permissible to define legalism in that way, since the term does not even appear in the Bible.

But if one chooses to define legalism as "adherence to a strict code of conduct," one must also realize that the Bible does not condemn adherence to a strict code of conduct. The Old Testament had a complicated, detailed set of rules. But that system came from God. It could not be bad if it came from Him. A godly Jew would follow that code of conduct carefully. Legalism with that understanding would not necessarily be bad in God's eyes.

The definition that I prefer to use for legalism comes from a theologian by the name of Charles Ryrie, who happened to be one of my theology professors in seminary. (LEGALISM DEFINITION) He defines legalism as "**obedience to a law in the power of the flesh for the purpose of glorifying self.**" There are three parts of this definition, each of which has a connection to our passage.

First, this understanding of legalism involves the presence of a law, or a code of conduct. The law that Paul was seeking to follow was the law of Christ. The Judaizers were trying to combine the law of Christ with the law of Moses, but what they ended up with was closer to the law of Moses than the law of Christ. According to this definition of legalism the fact that the Judaizers were seeking to follow the law of Moses did not make them legalists. They were simply following the wrong code of conduct.

A couple of weeks ago I heard a pastor say that God told him that he should not eat bacon, because the Book of Leviticus says that pig meat is unclean. He said that just because that rule is in the Old Testament does not mean that it should not be followed, because it is still part of the Bible. That claim showed me that this pastor does not have a proper understanding of the code under which Christians should live. The death of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit changed the rules under which God's people are supposed to operate today. We are not responsible to make animal sacrifices today, because the death of Jesus did away with that need. Jesus was the final sacrifice for sin. Likewise in the Book of Acts Jesus appeared to Peter and told him that formerly unclean animals are now permissible for the people of God to eat. The Judaizers in Paul's day, likewise, were following the wrong law code.

The **second** part of this definition for legalism has to do with the source of power for obeying a code of conduct. According to my suggested definition legalism is following a code of conduct in the power of the flesh. It is depending upon one's own energy or discipline or power to follow it. Thus in v. 3 Paul urges Christians to "put no confidence in the flesh." The term "flesh" here refers to man's sinful nature apart from a relationship with God. At the beginning of v. 4 Paul also uses this word. He says that he could have confidence in the flesh. He could have confidence in who he is because of his own human attainments. He could be prideful about all that he has accomplished apart from

his relationship with Christ. But in vv. 7 & 8 he says that all of this is worthless in terms of a true relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

So the Judaizers were legalistic in that the power to follow their wrong code of conduct came from the flesh, from the self. They were depending upon their own human attainments and accomplishments and status as Jews to win them acceptance from God.

A Christian's power to obey the Law of Christ ought to come from God. (PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13) Back in #2 vv. 12 & 13, Paul wrote, "... **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**" In v. 1 of our passage the apostle says, "**Rejoice in the Lord.**" The idea is that we are to obey Christ, but that we are to do it by trusting in God.

Sometimes we have habits and ways of being that are tough to break, and we have been unable to do it. Changing these habits and ways of being requires power from God. It necessitates prayer and an attitude of dependence upon God. It requires a mindset that says, "Lord, I can't do this in my own strength. I am trusting in you to change my life." In Galatians #5 v. 16 (GALATIANS 5:16) the Apostle Paul describes it in this way, "**...walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.**"

The **third** aspect of this definition of legalism involves the motivation for obeying a given law. The proper motivation for a Christian to obey the Law of Christ is the desire to glorify God. (PROJECTOR OFF) That is what Paul says in v. 3: "**[we] glory in Christ Jesus.**" Paul says that the Judaizers are glorifying themselves. They are bringing attention to what they have accomplished in their own strength. They are boasting about their own attainments, which was what so many of the Roman citizens in Philippi were doing. But that selfish motivation promotes legalism.

Many people have a legalistic attitude toward God. They follow a code of conduct that has some relationship to the Bible. They accept most of the Ten Commandments. They recognize that it is wrong to steal. It is wrong to run around with someone who is not your husband or wife. They may go to church with some regularity.

Yet they do it in the power of the flesh. They do it in their own strength. They do it as a result of childhood training and as a result of a pattern of life which they have developed over the years. They also do it for the purpose of glorifying self. They might not run around bragging about how religious they are. But when the subject of religion comes up, they are defensive. They talk about what they have accomplished, about how they go to church, or about how they live a pretty moral life, or how they don't do bad things that other people do. Their attitude toward God might be that they really deserve to go to heaven some day, because they live a pretty good life.

That is legalism. That is trying to follow a code of conduct in the power of the flesh for the purpose of glorifying self. The Bible says that eternal salvation is not something which can be earned. It is a gift which can be received only by faith in Jesus.

(PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Paul wrote in Ephesians # 2 vv. 8 & 9, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** Nobody, including pastors, can say that they deserve to go to heaven. Salvation is not a result of good works. It is only the result of receiving a gift by faith.

Paul was speaking in our passage primarily to people who were already Christians, who had accepted this gift of salvation by faith. (PROJECTOR OFF) He wanted them to experience joy. He also understood that legalism has the power to destroy joy. Legalism is not the same thing as having strict standards, at least according to the definition which I am using. It is a Biblical thing to follow the rules which we find, especially in the New Testament. It is a healthy thing to develop good routines and to avoid sinful things and temptations which are bad for us.

The code of conduct which I adopt becomes legalism if and when I try to meet those standards through my own power and discipline. It becomes legalism when I bring attention and glory to myself for the standards which I follow. If somebody decides to spend an hour every morning in Bible study and prayer, that might be a very good thing. If that person asks a friend to pray for him that he or she can extend that time by a half hour, that might be a very good thing. If that same person stands up in a meeting and describes that personal devotion time and asks for prayer to extend it, maybe he or she is being sincere. But maybe that person's power is coming from the flesh and their motivation is to show how spiritual they are before other people.

All of us have codes of conduct by which we order our lives. Much of our codes have little to do with Biblical standards. My personal code might be that I can wear tennis shoes to church but not sandals. Nothing wrong with having that kind of personal code. Legalism would enter in when I condemn my neighbor for wearing sandals to church. Then it is just personal glorification. There is no standard in the Bible for footwear. The reality is that in Biblical days probably a lot of people came to church meetings with bare feet. It is OK to make choices about all kinds of standards like this. We just have to be careful to recognize that many of these things are personal preferences and that we should not be glorifying ourselves for our standards and condemning others for whatever standards they have.

In a church congregation there is always a temptation to show fellow Christians what good Jesus followers we are. We all want acceptance and a certain amount of recognition. In addition to specifically Biblical standards there is always a pressure at work for people to adopt the standards and ways of being that are accepted and popular in a particular congregation. The danger of legalism is that we may be tempted to obey those standards, as well as Biblical standards, in the power of the flesh for the purpose of glorifying self.

Are you lacking joy in the Christian life? One thing that could be robbing you of joy is legalism. We first need to make sure that we have chosen a code of conduct regarding the important priorities in life that has some basis in the Bible.

Second, we need to check our motives. Am I doing what I am doing in the Christian life to glorify God, or am I doing it to bring attention to myself, to win acceptance and approval from others.

Third, from where does my power come to live the Christian life. Does it come from my own strength? We Christians usually understand that we become part of God's family as a result of trusting in Jesus. But then we can fall into thinking that the power for living the Christian life comes from our own discipline and strength and energy. Christian growth should also be based on trusting in Jesus and His Holy Spirit.

Paul urged his fellow Christians saying, **"Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord."** Five hundred years earlier the Jewish leaders told the exiles who had returned from captivity, **"The joy of the Lord is your strength."** Let's make it our goal as well to experience and demonstrate joy by trusting in Jesus and giving God the credit for whatever good results are produced in our lives. Rejoice in the Lord! The joy of the Lord is your strength!