

In Christ Alone!

Phil 3:1-11 (text)

23 February 2020, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 10:30 am

(Put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It was January 2009.

I had been in ministry for a year and a half!

One of our dear brothers in the Reformed Church Foxton (a 65-year old man) had just passed away after a long period of suffering from cancer.

So it happened that I had to conduct my first funeral service.

But at that time, the folks in Foxton did not yet have a big enough building to cater for large funerals. And this brother's funeral was going to be huge.

So, we asked a church in neighbouring Levin whether we could use their big auditorium. This church was of another denomination, but their pastor was kind and agreed that we could hold the funeral service there.

"But," said he, "because you are not familiar with our church's sound system, I will come and sit in the service and work the sound for you!"

Good plan! So, we agreed!

Well, on the day, the church was packed with people – churchgoers and non-churchgoers.

And in my sermon, I thanked the Lord for the faith He had worked in our deceased brother.

And I preached the Gospel – i.e. that our Lord Jesus is the only way to the Father, to heaven, and to eternal salvation!

Well, when the service was over, the pastor came to me and said, "You should not have done this!" "You should not have preached that salvation is only through Christ!" "You might well have offended many people here today!"

My brother & sister, why am I sharing this with you?

Well, to show you how different this pastor's message was to that of our text!

You see, the main message of our text is that eternal salvation comes through believing in Jesus Christ alone – not through self-wise human efforts!

Now, someone might say, "Come on, Pastor, we are Reformed Christians!" "We *know* salvation is only in/through Christ!" "So, don't preach to us!"

Well, my answer would be: "Wait! Let's not get too comfortable with our current state!"

"After all, it's deeply entrenched in fallen man (even in the Christian) to put the emphasis on human effort – or on Christ *and* human effort – for our salvation!"

But our text warns against this!

And here are three points which our text gives to us:

- Not through Human Effort
- In Christ Alone
- By the Spirit

Not through Human Effort

In v.2, the Apostle Paul uses strong words. He warns the Philippians against false teachers – and he calls these false teachers, "dogs," and "evil workers," and "the false circumcision" (or "mutilators of the flesh")!

What is Paul on about?

My brother & sister, he warns the young & vulnerable Philippian church against the so-called “Judaisers.”

Who were the Judaisers?

Well they were Jewish Christians who made life hard for *non*-Jewish Christians – for *Gentile* Christians!

In what way?

Well, in that these Jewish Christians were telling the non-Jewish Christians that they could not be right with God by just believing that Christ died for their sins! “No,” said these Judaisers, “unless you also follow Jewish customs, you cannot be right with God!”

You ask, “What Jewish customs?”

Well, the Jewish ritual laws like celebrating the Jewish feast days, sticking to Jewish food laws and, most of all, that all males must be circumcised!

See what these Judaisers were teaching?

For all practical purposes, this is what they were saying: “Hi non-Jewish Christians, if you want to be right with God, you have to have Jesus *and* human effort!”

My brother & sister, in a way, you & I cannot blame the Judaisers for thinking this way.

I mean, did God not once tell their ancestor Abraham that all males who belong to God’s covenant people should be circumcised? Yes, did God not tell Abraham that every male who was not circumcised should be cut off from God’s people?¹ And did God not say that circumcision should be His covenant sign with them *forever*?²

Yes, God did say all of that!

But what the Judaisers did not understand was that, in their lifetime, God’s Old Covenant had just been swallowed up (overtaken) by God’s New Covenant, and the Old-Covenant sign of circumcision had just been swallowed up (overtaken) by the New-Covenant sign of baptism!

Besides, even in Old-Covenant times it never was that outward circumcision itself would make anyone right with God. No, outward circumcision’s task was only ever meant to be a *sign* that you belong to God’s *covenant people*. And mere belonging to God’s covenant *people* never meant that you were automatically *right with God*! After all, even in Old-Testament times, those who were right with God were only those who had a *change of heart* – who really *loved* God from the heart and believed that their sins were forgiven *through the blood of their sacrifices* brought in *sincere sorrow* for their sins!³

Look, is this not why God, already in Old-Covenant times, often used to tell His people, “It’s not outward circumcision that makes you right with Me – it’s not a cutting away of a piece of flesh from your body that will make you right with Me!” “No, it’s being cut to the heart (circumcision of the heart) through which you will be acceptable in My sight!”⁴

¹ Cf. Gn 17:10-11, 14 “***This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.... Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.***”

² Cf. Gn 17:13, ***Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant.***

³ Like Abel’s sacrifice – not like Cain’s

⁴ Cf. Jer. 4:4 ***Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done— burn with no one to quench it.*** (Also cf. Jer 6:10; 9:25).

Also Deut. 10:16 ***Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer;*** and Deut. 30:6 ***The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.***

But these Judaisers did not want to listen. Therefore, Paul had to warn the Philippians like he had also warned the churches in Galatia, in Rome, and in Colossae!⁵

So, no wonder, in v.3 of our text, Paul describes the Judaisers as people who *put confidence in the flesh*.

What does “putting confidence in the flesh” mean?

Well, it means to think that you can make yourself right with God *through human effort!*

So, seeing that these Judaisers just wouldn’t listen, Paul got a holy anger against them and used the sharp words of v.2 by calling them, “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “false circumcision (mutilators of the flesh).”

Wow! Is it right to call people such names even though they’re at fault and stubborn?

Well, *John the Baptist* did that when he called the Pharisees and Sadducees, “You brood of vipers...”⁶ And our *Lord Jesus* did it when He called the Pharisees and Law Teachers: “You hypocrites...”⁷

So now, Paul uses similarly sharp words! I mean, the young Philippian church *must* be warned against such seriously false teaching!

Someone might say, “But, Pastor, we know that we are only saved through faith in our Lord Jesus and not through human effort!” “So, tell us, in what way this text applies to us!”

Well, how many of us can honestly say that we’re not doing with the New-Covenant sign (with baptism) what the Judaisers did with the Old-Covenant sign (with circumcision)?

I mean, is it not so that so many Christians (even in our churches) make the mistake of thinking that the outward sign of baptism makes a person right with God?

Some Christians in other denominations have even gone so far to say that, if you’re not baptised with water – in fact, by full immersion into water – then you’re not right with God! See? See how sinful man is always bent on thinking it’s Christ plus my human effort that saves me – it’s Christ plus outward baptism?

Perhaps you say, “But, Pastor, *I* don’t sin in this way, because I accepted all along that outward baptism does not make us right with God!”

Well, great! But how do you do with church membership? You know, it’s so easy to fall into thinking, “Well, I am right with God, because I’m a member of this church and I faithfully attend church, and, overall, I’m a good person”?

See? See the human effort?

⁵ Cf. e.g. Gal 3:1-5 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

Also Gal 5:12, ***As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*** (NIV84; But the NASB, “...***they would mutilate themselves;***” and the NKJV, “...***they would cut themselves off***”).

Also cf. Rm 2:28-29 ***A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.***

Also cf. Col 2:11, ***In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ...***

⁶ Cf. Matt. 3:7; Luke 3:7

⁷ Cf. Matt. 23:13 and parallel texts

Perhaps, even to this application, someone says, “But, Pastor, that’s not me!” “I know that although baptism and church membership/attendance are all good and God-ordained things, they cannot save me!”

Well, great! But what about this application...

You see, there once was an elder – a man who in his weekly job was a salesman!

Well, as salesman, he underwent a course in marketing skills.

So, says this elder to his church’s session, “Look, our church has not had much success with our Christian outreach. If we use the skills which I’ve just learned in this marketing course, we could communicate the Gospel as clearly as possible to the greatest number of people!” “After all,” says this elder, “we could use the four basic marketing principles this textbook has taught me – they are: product, place, promotion, and price!” “I mean we’ve got the greatest ‘product’ to sell – the Gospel of Christ!”

Wow! My brother & sister, of course, we’re not against evangelism, but *can the “business” of the church be shaped into the mould developed by a consumer-oriented society for selling its goods and services?*⁸

After all, is not the goal of worldly marketing strategies to help businesses design products that people will buy, and then to persuade people to buy them?

And what happens if people don’t see a need for the product, and cannot be persuaded to see such a need?

Well, then the marketing team decides that that product-line be radically changed or its price reduced, or that it be dropped altogether in favour of something more marketable!

See the human effort?

You see, my brother & sister, here’s the bottom-line: in the business world, the success of the strategy, is measured in terms of the response of the people.

But you know what? Preaching Christ crucified, is, as someone has said, “a marketing strategist’s nightmare.”⁹

After all, here’s the reality: Preaching Christ crucified, is foolishness to some, a stumbling block to others!

And we can’t use human effort to try and make our “Gospel product” more attractive for people who don’t see the need to “buy” it on Christ’s terms!

See how human effort can even infiltrate the mind of a well-intending elder!?

Well, so far re the very long point 1: “Through Human Effort.”

Here’s the second, smaller, point...

In Christ Alone

In v.3 Paul says that those who belong to the true circumcision – the circumcision of the heart (yes, those who are *cut* to the heart about their sins) – they are those who only glory (boast, put their highest confidence)¹⁰ in Christ.

And how could it be different!?

I mean, what room is there for boasting in human effort? After all, have we not just seen how no human effort will make us right with God!?

⁸ Well-put by Thielman, F. (1995). [Philippians](#) (pp. 165–192). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁹ Thielman (ibid)

¹⁰ The Greek word for glorying/boasting is *kauchaomai* (καυχᾶμαι) “...to express an unusually high degree of confidence in someone or something being exceptionally noteworthy—‘to boast’.....” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 430). New York: United Bible Societies).

But happy/blessed the man/woman (the boy/girl) who boasts in Christ – who gives our Lord Jesus Christ all the honour, praise and gratitude for making him/her right with God! And how happy was Paul – indeed, how blessed – that the risen Christ opened his eyes on the road to Damascus and, from that moment on, Paul regarded all his prior human efforts as rubbish – efforts which he once *boasted* in, as if they could make him right with God:

- his circumcision
- his nationhood (that he was an Israelite)
- that he was of the elite tribe of Benjamin!¹¹
- that he was Pharisee with greater zeal than any of his colleagues.

Yes, when Paul finally grasped who Jesus really is and what Jesus had done, that was the moment when Paul saw all his earlier achievements for what they were – “fleshy,” which means fallible human efforts, nothing to boast in!

And so, for the same reason by which Paul rejected his past human efforts of salvation, by that very same reason he wants the Philippians to now also reject the Judaisers.

My brother & sister, by the same reason should you & I now reject any notion of trying to score points with God through our human effort!

And now, now that Paul is in Christ, what is his next desire?

Well, twice in our text, Paul says that his desire is to know Christ (v.8, 10).

What does that mean?

Well, that Paul would not just believe that Christ is who He said He is, for, after all, even the demons believed that (Jn 2:19), but that Paul would have all three components of a true faith; yes, that Paul would 1) have the true *knowledge*¹² of Christ; 2) that he would give to that his intellectual *assent*;¹³ and 3) that he would then excel to also have full *reliance* in Christ.¹⁴

What would that leave Paul with?

Well, with not just feeling the wonderful presence of Christ all the time, but that he would also *obey* Christ from the heart, just as our Lord Himself once said, “***If you love Me, you will obey My commandments!***”¹⁵

How would Paul (how will you & I) be able to have this fully committed walk with Christ?

Well, only if he (we) could receive from Christ an ever-increasing supply of the power that goes out from the One who rose from the dead!

This way, Paul would be able to even suffer hardship for Christ – yes, share with Christ in His sufferings.

I mean, there where Paul was writing this very letter, he was already in prison. A few years later he would be executed for his faith in Christ!

But as Paul once said (in Rm 8:17), We will be “...***heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings...***”¹⁶

And, indeed, by this resurrection power of Christ, Paul did run the race and did keep the faith!

So, in Paul’s death he did become, as he desired, *conformed to Christ’s death* (cf. v.10).

¹¹ After all, the tribe of Benjamin stem from Benjamin, the preferred son of patriarch Jacob!

¹² Latin – “notitia”

¹³ Latin – “assensus”

¹⁴ Latin – “fiducia”

¹⁵ Cf. Jn 14:15

¹⁶ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Ro 8:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

See Paul's relationship with Jesus?

My brother & sister, if you & I could live/be that close to our Lord Jesus, then look what such relationship will bless us with – it will be (as Paul says in v.1) a *safeguard* for us protecting us from ever again putting our confidence in human effort for our salvation!

Well, we have now seen two (out of three) characteristics of those who are the *true believers*:¹⁷ those who for their eternal salvation 1) put no trust in human effort, and those who 2) glory in Christ!

So, here, in the last very small point, is their third characteristic of the true believer...

Worshiping by the Spirit

In v.3, Paul says, "...we are the true circumcision – we who worship in the Spirit of God..."

What does Paul mean?

Well, remember that time, just after Pentecost Day, when the Jewish Christians¹⁸ heard that a non-Jew, yes, a Gentile by the name of Cornelius (a Centurion in the Roman military) had received Christ in faith?

Remember how those Jewish Christians then reacted?

At first, they were not happy with Peter that he had brought the Gospel to Cornelius. This was what they said to Peter, "***You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.***"¹⁹

See how these men reacted the same way as the Judaisers – trusting in human effort (assuming that you cannot have Christ unless you have been circumcised!!)?

What did Peter then tell them?

Well, he said as much as, "Dear men, do you remember what happened to us apostles on Pentecost Day?" "Christ poured His Holy Spirit out on us!" "Well, when I, by the Lord's instruction went and brought the Gospel to Cornelius' household, guess what?" "The same Spirit fell on them too!" "So, dear fellow apostles, see?" "See that what has happened with Cornelius' household was the Lord's doing?" "And see, how even in their un-circumcision (their lack of human effort), God brought these people into His kingdom?"

Then?

Well, "***When they*** (i.e. the apostles and brothers) ***heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."***"²⁰

¹⁷ Of the true circumcision (cf. v.3)

¹⁸ The apostles and brothers (Cf. Acts 11:1-3, ***The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them"*** – emphasis mine).

¹⁹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ac 11:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁰ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ac 11:18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Also cf. Gal 3:1-5 for how the Galatians, too, gentiles what they were, got saved by the inworking of the Holy Spirit: "***You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work***

So, what do we see?

Well, that the non-Jew, Cornelius, was made right with God without trusting on human effort, but by believing in Christ – a belief worked by the Holy Spirit!

Dear Wainui member, even today, we are made right with God in the same way – by the Holy Spirit!

Our Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus, “***I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and (that is) the Spirit.***”²¹ Then Jesus continued, “...***You must be born again.***”²²

What does the Holy Spirit use to work rebirth in our hearts?

The Gospel! The preaching of God’s Word!

Question: How often do you read God’s Word?

AMEN (2727 words excluding footnotes)

miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?”
(Emphasis mine).

²¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 3:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²² [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Jn 3:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.