

Who Are You Trusting In?

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Would you turn in your Bibles to Philippians? Chapter three, verses one through three. We're going to look there this morning, just a few verses. And at first they might seem a little odd, quite frankly, but as we'll see, they teach a wonderful and maybe familiar to the point of losing its luster in our minds, a familiar point that I hope to shine brightly today so that you might live in view of it. Philippians, chapter three, verses one through three. And if you are joining us online, always great to have you here. You know many of you are on vacation, and we want you to know we haven't forgotten about you. We are praying for you. So Philippians 3:1-3:

Finally, my brothers, Rejoice in the Lord to write the same things to you. Is no trouble to me, and it is safe for you. Look out for those 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 we put no confidence in the flesh.

Let's pray:

Father. We thank you for these words. They strike our modern ears a little funny, if we are honest, these are things we don't often speak of, and ways of speaking that seem maybe a little distant from us, but even so, we know that behind these words is your power, the Holy Spirit, who can open our minds and hearts to understand these things and to apply them to our lives for Your glory and for our good and for the good of all those that you call us to love. Lord, we do pray for those who are part of our church family, who are traveling this morning, who are away on restful vacations. We pray. We ask Lord that in your time, you would bring them home safely and return them to our fellowship. But in this time when we can join together in worship, in person and online, we ask that your Spirit's work would be powerful in all ways and places, in Jesus name, we pray amen.

I want to start this morning by talking to you about when the weight starts to build in our lives. And I want to share with you what I mean by that. I just got back from a vacation. And to be very clear, it was a good vacation. I didn't go anywhere terribly far away. Went to visit family, but I got to rest, got to step away and get some perspective, as they like to say. And leading up to the vacation, I tried very hard to do the work to get ready for it. I did everything that I could do to prepare

for a vacation. If you've gone on a vacation, you know that you don't want to leave a whole lot of loose ends back home, because they will carry over into that.

A restful experience that you desire. And so I did everything that I could do to prepare well. I tried to tie up all the loose ends. I knocked out a lot of emails, I paid a lot of bills, I trimmed the lawn, I prepped the house. I was trying to do everything I could at every place I could think of to settle things down so that I could enjoy a peaceful time away. And honestly, as I pulled out of the driveway, I felt good. I felt responsible. I felt like I was prepared. There was a sense of peace that came from knowing that I had done the work, I laid the groundwork for a nice rest, and I was eager to enjoy it, and I had a nice time with my family back home, enjoying Creation. Got to celebrate Independence Day. See some wonderful fireworks over a lake. It was gorgeous, but as the vacation wound down. I started packing up to return. My brain started spinning.

Have you ever had that experience of knowing you are about to reenter life as you formerly knew it? And now the anxiety is starting to build, tasks that I knew would be waiting for me, started to flood back in yard work. It's been warm, it's been it's been wet outside. Grass grows very, very quickly. I knew that my yard was waiting for me. I knew that there were new bills to pay. There were new repairs, undoubtedly, that needed to be complete. Projects that I had strategically postponed before were going to be waiting for me when I got home, and I could start feeling it in my chest and shoulders. I could start feeling that weight and that anxiety that comes from knowing you have a lot to do and every reason to do it, that sense of peace that I had and enjoyed started to slip away, and what I noticed is that sense of peace eroded a little bit. So did my sense of joy.

There wasn't anything wrong. Nothing had gone particularly sideways, and nobody was pressuring me to re-engage or to lose that sense of rest and peace. There was no undue burden. There was none of that at all. It was much subtler than that. It was the feeling that I had to be on again. And I'm sure you know that feeling where your peace and your joy, they are tied, in some way, to controlling your environment, checking things off the to do list, and the more tasks that you see incomplete, the more the anxiety starts to build. I started to believe in that moment, that the answer was to earn that peace again by working harder.

I can't tell you how the past few days of my vacation, I had the temptation time and time again to check email, to do things that I had disciplined myself beforehand; to say I wasn't going to do all because I wanted to get back to that place. And here's the thing that got me thinking.

It got me thinking how easy it is to do the very same things when it comes to our relationship with God.

How often do we feel most secure in our walks with God when everything seems to be in order, when we've done all the right things, when we're feeling strong,

responsible, prepared, on top of things, and how quickly does that confidence in the Lord and His love, fade in our relationship with Him? How often does that confidence unravel and become less strong as life gets busy, even messy, and so many things remain incomplete. Now I wasn't falling apart. I wasn't coming off the rails, but suddenly, beneath the surface, there was a shift in my spirit, and it made me wonder, why is that? Why do I put such confidence in what I do?

The truth is, we are oftentimes carrying more than we were ever meant to carry. Many of you know what it's like to live with that quiet pressure. You have so many things going on in your lives. That's one of the great privileges of being a pastor, is being able to gain a window into people's lives. And I know Pastor Alex would feel the same way as I feel as we know what's going on in your lives. We know the great burdens that you're carrying, and the great responsibilities that you feel the need to fulfill, and how easy it is to delay a sense of peace and dismiss a sense of joy until you have those things in place, not necessarily because anybody is watching you, but because something inside of you is whispering, "if I don't hold this all together, who will?"

It shows up in our spiritual lives, as much as our day to day lives. We often feel closest to God when life is under that control, when the budget is balanced, when the bills are paid, when the emails are answered, when we've had a few solid mornings of prayer, when we're going to the Bible studies and attending worship every week, we feel closest to God when we are performing in those ways, when those things are in place, there's a kind of peace that we feel, a sense that I'm okay, and God must be pleased with me.

But let me ask you this, what happens to that feeling when the list doesn't get done, when the routines fall apart, when we snap at someone, or when we just feel spiritually flat that we've done everything we should do, but we're doing it more out of a sense of obligation or duty routine than anything born of true joy and peace, that peace that we want and long for can vanish, and joy feels harder and harder to come by, and without realizing it, we start to wonder whether God is disappointed or moving away from us. And this is where it gets tricky. This is where it gets very tricky, because the things that I describe, they all matter.

God does call us to faithfulness. He does call us to be careful how we live. He wants us to do many of these good things, obedience, good spiritual habits. They're not the basis of our joy. They're rather the overflow of it. And God desires those things for us and of us when we make peace with God, something we earn instead of something we receive, we bring all of that apart.

If we're completely honest, following Jesus at times feels a little bit like a job evaluation.

Did I read enough? Did you pray enough this quarter? Did you avoid the obvious sins? Did you serve at the church? Am I doing better than I was doing last year?

We treat our Christian life as a sort of spiritual resume, and we hope it's good enough to make us feel secure in our position. But Paul says to all of this, "this is the wrong foundation."

The Gospel doesn't offer you joy after you get your act together. It gives you joy because Jesus held it together for you, His perfect life, his faithful obedience, his sacrifice on the cross, that's where our confidence should come from, and objectively, that is where our confidence does come from. Your spiritual practices, they still matter. Your efforts still have value, but they were never meant to carry the weight of your worth or provide you with that ultimate sense of peace. And when we forget that, even for a moment, our joy becomes fragile, peace gets tangled up in our performance, and we end up exhausted. We end up tired chasing a kind of approval that was already ours.

And Paul sees that danger, and that's why he writes these verses. He wants to tell us that there's only one foundation that can hold. There's a home on the lake near where I vacationed. I always look forward to seeing it every year. It's not the biggest house on the lake. It's not the flashiest by any stretch, but there's something about this house that I love. If I had to guess, I would say it was built in the early 1900s or the late 1800s. It's a lakeside mansion, and from what I can tell from the street, it's been perfectly preserved. It seems someone has taken great care to maintain this property, just as it was meant to be, the trim, the roof line, the simplicity of its design, everything fits. It's gorgeous. Nothing is overdone. Nothing is gaudy looking. It's dignified, it's serene looking, and it looks completely at home in its setting.

Now you might say to yourself, "Well, that's all well and good, but what makes that so special?" Here's the reason: I say that there are other houses all around it on the lake, and many of them have been renovated, many of them rebuilt, some of them expanded, even beyond all recognition.

Additions were tacked on, other designs were erased and modernized. In many cases, what was once elegance and well-proportioned has become cluttered, clashing in the effort to improve something. I really think something was lost.

And that's a picture, however limited, I think, of what Paul is warning about right here in Philippians three. He starts this section by writing. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord. To write the same thing to you. Is no trouble to me, and it's safe for you." So what? What is Paul saying in verse one, he's saying he's repeating himself. He's repeating himself on purpose "Rejoice in the Lord." He's saying this again because he wants to guard what is precious.

The joy and the security that children of God should feel in the Gospel is a precious thing that is too easily lost when we start adding things to it, when we start renovating it.

No additions should be made to the gospel Message. Paul says, even if they're made without bad intentions, additions will cloud and complicate what was meant to be pristinely simple and crystal clear.

In Paul's day, there were religious teachers insisting that Gentile Christians, (that is, converts to the Christian faith who did not come from a Jewish background), who taught that they needed to be circumcised to be fully included among God's people. In other words, in order to be a Christian, you must first become a Jew. You must place yourself under the Mosaic law. You must be circumcised. You must subject yourselves to the dietary regulations of the Old Testament, the clothing regulations of the Old Testament, all of the different ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. You must continue to worship in the temple, you must continue to worship as the Jews worship, even as you recognize the fulfillment of all of the ceremonial law keeping in Jesus.

These religious teachers were, in their minds, no doubt, well intentioned. What they were saying was, Jesus is good, but he's not enough.

In order to come to God, you need Jesus, but you also need a little more than Jesus. You need to add to his performance, your performance to be truly accepted. And I want you to notice in verse two, how Paul responds to this additional weight and pressure, this idea that in order to experience peace and joy with God and true peace and joy in this life, you can't just rest that on Jesus. You need to add to it yourself. Paul doesn't say, "just be careful." In verse two, he says, "look out for the dogs. Look out for the evildoers. Look out for those who mutilate the flesh."

Now I'm a dog lover, and so when I come to a verse like this, when I read the words dogs, I think of my two golden retrievers, and they're adorable, and they would never mutilate anything except maybe like a marshmallow or something that I feed them without my wife knowing.

But these are not the kinds of dogs that Paul is talking about here. Needless to say, He's talking about something closer to what we would think of as a wolf, something that is aggressive, something that is capable and desiring to do great harm. It might look beautiful and attractive at a distance, but as it moves closer and you learn its true motivation and capability. Ability, you recognize it's a destructive force, not a healing one.

This is strong language - intentionally, because Paul is not really lashing out as much as defending that Christianity, the faith of Jesus, is really all about the true gospel, the heart of the gospel. And what Paul is saying is, when you add anything to Christ's work as the basis of your standing before God and your enjoyment of peace and His joy in your life, you're not enhancing the gospel. You're not taking an early 20th century mansion and making it more beautiful.

You're replacing it. Your addition at that point becomes subtraction. You can't add anything to the performance of Christ.

And Paul knew that temptation firsthand. If anyone's going to deliver this message, it's Paul, because his spiritual resume, which he's about to list, is pristine in verses four through six, something we're going to talk about next week. He says he was circumcised on the eighth day. He's a Hebrew of Hebrews, blameless under the law tribe of Benjamin, the perfect pedigree. He had all the credentials.

Paul was trained under the preeminent rabbi of his day. He had an Oxford education. He had Roman citizenship. There was nothing that Paul lacked. He had all the credentials -the kind of spiritual record people admired. His "to do" list had everything checked off. And in verse nine, he will go on to say that the righteousness by which he stands is not his own, but instead that which comes through faith in Christ. And then in verse seven, something we'll see in greater detail next week, he said, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ."

Now, what's Paul's point? His point is not that obedience doesn't matter. I hope you hear me clearly and carefully on that point. Paul's not saying that obedience doesn't matter. Paul's not saying that your "to do" list doesn't matter. Paul's not saying that you shouldn't pay your bills on time, you shouldn't mow your grass, you shouldn't love your wife and love your kids. He's not saying any of that. He's not saying that spiritual disciplines in day-to-day obedience that flows from faith in Christ are meaningless.

He spent his entire life pouring out himself in service to others, teaching and worship. He took obedience seriously. But here's the key difference. Paul learned the difference between trusting in Christ alone and trusting in Christ plus his own achievements.

That's why verse three is key. We are the circumcision, he says, who worship by the Spirit of God, glory in Christ, Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. In other words, we are in a covenant relationship with God, if we put no confidence in our flesh.

That doesn't mean we're indifferent to our flesh. Doesn't mean we're indifferent to our obedience. It means that it's not our ultimate source of trust and confidence and peace and joy. What is?

We worship the Spirit of God and we glory in Christ Jesus. True faith isn't made man made. It's not self-assured. It's spirit led. And true worship doesn't flow from pride. It flows from the presence of Christ. And real, lasting confidence doesn't come from what we do for God, important as it is, but from what Christ has already done for us.

So yes, we should read good theology. We should definitely serve in the church. I'm so grateful that you do. We should discipline ourselves for godliness, husbands and fathers, we should lead our families well, but we don't let those good things become the structures that we lean on for our worth, for our identity, our joy, our peace. Listen carefully. They are responses to God's gracious acceptance. They are not replacements for it. They're the way that we reflect newness of life to the glory of God and for the good of those around us, and they do matter greatly. If we're cavalier about our obedience, other people will suffer, and we will suffer too. There will be consequences, even if there is no condemnation anymore for us, who are in Christ,

The truth is that the Gospel that Paul preaches in its pure and unadulterated form is better than anything that we could try to add or create. It's totally and all surpassingly sufficient.

When we stop, stop trying to renovate it, prop it up with our performance. That's when we begin to rest. That's when our joy returns, because our confidence is finally rooted where it belongs, something that doesn't change, doesn't rise and fall. It's the same, yesterday, today and forever. It's in Christ.

So if we were to follow what Paul says here, what would this look like first for us as a church? What happens when a church like ours shifts its weight more and more from itself to Christ?

Well, you can imagine a community where people still serve, they give generously, they grow robustly, but they don't do any of it to earn God's approval or to impress one another, or to feel good about themselves over and against others around them.

Picture small groups where people are free to say, "I am really struggling," and they can do so without fear of judgment, because the culture is built on grace, not performance.

Now, of course, when we're in small groups and other settings, we don't want to make it all about us, and that's another mark of those who fear the Lord - concern for others, not just self. Imagine Sunday school teachers who are preparing for Sunday morning, not under pressure to deliver the goods or do a good job so that they don't feel embarrassed, but they do it out of joy, an overflow, because the burden to be impressive, to leave everyone impressed. It's just gone, because that burden has already been lifted by Christ.

Imagine parents raising their kids with courage, not guilt, not a prevailing fear, but of faith that because of Christ, their children can struggle and still be loved, still accepted and still find a way forward in forgiveness from even the most grievous

of wrongs, that kind of gospel shaped community would feel different. A mom wouldn't feel disqualified because she missed three days of quiet time.

This past spring, I was teaching on church history. We talked about Susanna Wesley, a wonderful example of great faith, who had many children, and she would pull an apron over her head and pray for them in quiet time and then resolve that she would spend certain amounts of time with her children, a minimum amount every week, in spiritual instruction.

And even as I was teaching that, I was thinking how laudable her example is, how beautiful it is, how wonderful it is. And now the church has been blessed by it, through the legacy of men like John and Charles Wesley and the Methodist and all of that.

But, privately, part of me was thinking, "Oh, what a burden this example is placing on people who feel, as moms, they could never keep up with that example." Well, the good news in Christ is we're not playing comparative games of religious performance anymore.

A volunteer wouldn't burn out trying to be everywhere at once, thinking the church depends on them so much that they can't take a break.

A new believer wouldn't feel that they have to catch up to be fully included among all the spiritually mature people who know all the references and say amazingly deep things at every study,

Even mature Christians would stop measuring their worth by how many people they've converted or discipled or how much theology they would know. As important as those things are and as beautiful as those pursuits are, we'd stop striving for approval that's already been given.

But here's the irony, if we were to do that, and to whatever degree we do that, when we stop obsessing over our performance, a most curious thing happens. Have you ever noticed this? Your performance actually improves, not perfectly, but more freely, more joyfully, more sincerely. Why is that? Well? Because now you're serving out of peace, joy, freedom, not pressure. The joy of the Lord truly does become your strength when you are free to look away from the checklist, free to stop obsessing over the image that people have of you or your record.

In 2012 you'll remember the name Nick Wallenda. He became the first person to walk over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Do you remember that? 1800 feet of steel cable stretched high above the roaring water? Millions of people watched this as he took slow, deliberate steps through wind and mist.

But here's what made it all possible. He wasn't really looking at his feet. He didn't look down a whole lot. He fixed his gaze as far ahead as he could. He tried to look at things that weren't moving as he was. Tried to look far down the wire.

Tightrope walkers are trained to do that. If you focus on yourself every little step, you're going to lose your balance. But when you lock your eyes on something that is steady, you walk straighter more freely. Several years ago, I went through the north Huntington township citizens police academy. It lasted like 12 weeks. It was very cool if, if you're a resident of a town that does something like that, I totally encourage you to do that. But I enjoyed it on the 11th or the 12th week toward the end. We went outside the municipal building, and they had set up a bunch of things for us to do. And one of those was to

pretend that we were involved in arresting somebody and doing like, a sobriety check. So they asked for a volunteer to pretend that he was driving when he shouldn't have been. And so I volunteered, and they did the sobriety check on me. And they're saying, "stand on one foot. And so I was standing on one foot, looking down, and I keep falling over. I think: "Oh no, they're gonna arrest me right here."

The police officer came over. He said, "Would you quit looking at your feet? Look over there, at that tree." And when I looked at that tree and I stood, I was just solid.

That's how the Christian life works. When we are obsessed over our spiritual footing: "Am I doing enough? Am I praying enough? Am I growing fast enough?" The more we obsess over all those things, the more unsteady we become.

But if we fix our eyes on Christ, the one who already finished the walk that we're currently on, we're steadied when Jesus is the focus and his performance is the focus, not our own. We're freed. We're strengthened, not because we're perfect, but because we're looking to the one who is. The writer of Hebrews said that. He said, "Let us run with endurance, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith."

Don't look at your feet while you're running. Look to the finish, where Jesus already is waiting for you to cross the line. The more clearly that you see his sufficiency, the more freely you can live out your calling.

Freedom doesn't just change individual lives, it changes a whole culture in a church, and our church has a wonderful history that we love to celebrate, but we're not called to move backward. We're called to move forward. It's easy to look back and celebrate all the good stuff and forget all the bad stuff. It's a lot harder to look to the future and stay hopeful and confident, even in the face of the challenges that we fear are coming down the line.

The Philippians had the same potential to lose heart, and so Paul wants them to rediscover that God still invites them into a joy, an identity, a freedom that's fixed isn't going to change.

So let me close by asking you personally, to consider what happens when you shift your weight to Christ. Let me ask you first, where is your confidence resting? Really, not just what you believe theologically, I'm sure you could all pass a wonderful theological exam this morning, but, but what do you lean on emotionally?

Where do you go to feel secure? Where do you go to find relief, to store, to restore a sense of peace and calm? Where do you try to find escape, to feel like you're okay, okay with the world around you and okay with the Lord above you.

Is it in your spiritual habits, your busyness, your Bible knowledge, your parenting, your giving, your theological tribe? Is it in any of a number of amusements or hobbies, capable distractions from the feelings you don't really want to grapple with? Or can you look these things in the face, because you're ultimately looking beyond them to Christ alone?

Paul's inviting us urgently and joyfully to shift our weight, to stop putting confidence in anything that we were never meant to put that confidence upon, only one foundation that can hold us when life gets shaky, and only one person can give us peace that doesn't change with our performance, a joy that remains regardless of circumstance, because he is unchanging. What would that look like to live it out this coming week?

Well, it pains me to say this because I'm such a checklist guy, but maybe it begins with you not having a checklist this week, but with a moment of honest prayer to start your week.

Maybe you need to start this week just praying something simple, like Jesus. Thank You. Thank You that I am loved today because of what you did, not because of what I do or what I fail to do, Jesus. Thank you that I will never be loved any more or any less than I am right now, no matter what I've done or failed to do, because your love for Me rests on Christ's performance, not my own.

Maybe it means serving without grumbling, because you're no longer trying to earn anything in your service, you're just giving something away in response to what's been given.

Maybe it means resting without guilt, knowing that God commands you to rest. Some of you need to stop and rest and just learn to be quiet, because Jesus already carried the weight, and you have all the permission you need to just say, "I'm going to rest," not permission to be lazy.

But not permission to just let it all go forever, because rhythms of rest are not optional, and they're not sinful. They're obedience to the God who rests.

Maybe it means letting go of a pressure that you've placed on yourself for far too long, the pressure to be impressive, keep up, prove your worth, have all the right answers. Always know what to say. You don't have to wear those pressures anymore.

Maybe it just means breathing a little deeper, rejoicing a little more freely, because you know you have a source of peace and joy that comes from Christ.

So let me encourage you as you enter this week and as your summer continues, lift your eyes, fix your gaze. Do what Paul says, Rejoice in the Lord. Let your confidence and your calm rest in Christ, and watch how that changes the way that you walk. A free Christian is a flourishing Christian.

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, thank You that we don't have to carry what you've already carried. Free us from the quiet and the ridiculous pressure to prove ourselves. Teach us to rejoice in you, to lean on your strength, not on our own, and let our confidence rest in your finished work. And Lord, help us to do good things for good reasons, and may our lives reflect the joy, the peace and the freedom that only you can give in your name, we pray amen.

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