



APRIL 18, 2021 | PASTOR PETER YI

“Nothing Compares to Christ” (Philippians 3:1-11)

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Almost every Asian remembers growing up with the fear that came along with report card day. As an Asian, growing up in America I didn't understand my non-Asian friends. When they brought home a weak report card, their parents would say something like, "That's okay son, just as long as you tried your best." That was *not* what my parents said to me. I got reamed at the end of every semester for bringing home a less than stellar report card. When I was in junior high school, the report card was a half sheet of paper and you got one for each class. One for math, one for English, one for science, and so on. On the report card was the name of the class; at the bottom were some lines for the teacher to write down some comments, and then on the top were the grades. E for excellent, S+ for satisfactory plus, S, S-, and F.

Well, I knew that my parents would not settle for anything less than an S+ grade, but from time to time, I would bring home a S and yes, on the rare occasion, an S- grade. I never got an F grade. So, the teachers would hand you your stack of 5-6 report cards for each class in a yellow envelope and we'd have to bring it home, show our parents, and get a signature and return it to school. There were two ways you could go about avoiding getting in big trouble for getting bad grades. One was of course by forging your parents' signature, which I never did, because my dad had the most un-forgable signature. Believe me, I tried, but it was too difficult. As well, the risk of this option was that someday mom and dad would ask, "hey isn't it around the time to get your report cards?" The other option was to get some whiteout, and carefully white over the circle that circled the bad grade. Then we'd go to the library and photocopy the report card and then circle the better grade. I have to confess that on one or two occasions, I did do that and thus began my life of crime.

Well, I went through all that trouble not only to avoid getting the beats from my dad, but I think that I had come to understand that my worth was based on my academic performance. If I got good grades, I'd get a new bike.



If I got bad grades, I'd be in the doghouse. And that's the way it works in almost all areas of life. You perform, you get rewarded. Isn't that true?

The same is true in religion. All the religions of the world are based on performance and achievement. Buddhism's main premise is achieving the state of enlightenment through acts of self-denial and the avoidance of certain sinful behaviors. What about Islam? The word itself means to submit. One becomes a devout Muslim by performing the five pillars, which includes prayers, fasting, and a pilgrimage. Even Roman Catholicism is fundamentally a religion of works. When I was in university my first roommate was a devout Roman Catholic who was planning to enter the priesthood. We had many late-night discussions about the differences between Christianity and Roman Catholicism and I vividly remember debating about how a person is saved. Over and over, he insisted that our salvation is based on faith in Jesus and our good works.

Here is one way to see if a person's religion is based on faith or works. Several decades ago, the late D. James Kennedy, who was a pastor in Florida, came up with a method to help Christians evangelize their friends and even strangers. It was called Evangelism Explosion or EE. EE's approach to evangelism was through a questionnaire. Once you got permission to ask a few questions, here's what you would ask. "If you were to die today, do you know if you would be in God's heaven?" The second question went like this. "If you were to die today and stand before God, and he asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?"

Well, people's response to the first one would be, "I don't know" or "I hope so" or you may even come across the person who says with confidence, "yes" or "no". But when you get to the second question, of what you would say to God when he asks you why he should let you into heaven, almost everyone would answer with responses like "I'm a pretty good person." "I've gone to church." "I treat people fairly." "I pray to God." All of these answers base their entrance into heaven upon their performance of religious exercises or moral behavior. Every religion works that way. Well, this idea is nothing new. It's been there since the fall of mankind. Because ever since there have been humans, there has been religion, a seeking after the gods. This was no less true in the days of the Apostle Paul and it is no less true today. In fact, even Christians who grew up in bible believing churches, that faithfully preached the gospel, can revert back to a performance-based religion.

Let's take a look at what was going on in the church in Philippi. It's obvious that there was a kind of teaching that was a perversion of Christianity and the way it was distorted was by adding a Jewish element to it. Now, let me tell you. One of the most dangerous words to authentic Christianity is the word, "and". As soon as you see the word 'and,' alarm bells should be going off in your head. Faith in Christ *and* my works. Jesus *and* Mary *and* the saints are my mediators. The bible *and* church tradition are equal authorities for faith and truth. Jesus *and* my perfect church attendance. Jesus *and* my stellar bible reading habits. Jesus *and* the fact that I've never uttered a swear word or slept around or whatever else. Those are all signs of false Christianity.

In the church at Philippi the "AND" was circumcision. A person had to be circumcised first and then come to Jesus. Or after they had come to Jesus they had to be circumcised. Now this wasn't the first time something like this had happened. In the book of Acts, which records the growth of the early church, Paul and his companions had just returned from their first missionary journey, and God had given them great success. Many people had turned to Jesus Christ. Now listen to the issue that had arisen.

(Acts 15:1) Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.



The very first church council was about the matter of circumcision. As this council went on, Peter got up and said,

“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke (the rite of circumcision, law) that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

So, you would think that since the Apostles decided that this is the way it should be, that everything was done and settled, but that wasn't to be the case. We see this issue rearing its head again here among the Philippians, but even the Apostle Peter reverted back to a Jewish way, which happened to be a discriminatory way, of living out his Christian faith. You can read about that in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

What does this tell us? Well, it tells us that old habits die hard. There is a tendency even in Christians to revert back to a works-based faith. John Piper in his book *Future Grace* called it the debtor's ethic. The debtor's ethic is this. Because God did so much for me in saving me from my sin, I must now begin paying back God for his incredible gift. It's like the kid on Christmas morning who opens up a present with great joy, and then his face drops as he looks up to mom and dad and says, “How much do I owe you?”

In Philippians, Paul calls these false teachers, dogs, evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. Dogs was the derogatory term that Jews used for non-Jews. Just as you wouldn't share your dinner table with a dog, you would never dare to share a meal or enter the home of a Gentile. Paul flips that word on its head and applies it to these so-called Jewish Christians. As well these false teachers are not neutral; it's not that they're just a little off in their theology. Paul calls them evil doers. Why? Because they're opposing the truth of the true gospel. Whether they're doing it intentionally or unknowingly is irrelevant. Paul considers them evil doers.

What then does he say? He says, contrary to what the false teachers are saying, it's actually us, you and I, who are the true circumcision. True circumcision is not a matter of going through the religious ritual. Circumcision is not what makes us righteous, just as for us today, baptism is not what makes us righteous. Circumcision has always symbolized a sincere devotion of the heart. Listen to what Moses writes in Deuteronomy.

(Deuteronomy 10:15) Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. ¹⁶ **Circumcise** your **hearts**, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

If circumcising our hearts is set in contrast to being stiff-necked before the Lord, what does circumcision mean? It must mean to open your heart to receive his love, don't harden your heart to God. Continue to trust in his salvation, as you first did when he rescued you from Pharaoh in Egypt.

Or what about this passage?

(Deuteronomy 30:5) He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. 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.



Circumcision of the heart here is equal to spiritual regeneration. God will make hearts that are dead in sin, to be alive in Him. He will do. He will perform the procedure of cutting away the sin from your hearts, so that you may love him with all your heart and all your soul, and live.

Let's sum it up this way from what Paul writes in Galatians 5:6:

For in Christ Jesus neither **circumcision** nor uncircumcision has any **value**. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

In the next section, Paul entertains their line of reasoning and says, okay, you wanna play that game? You wanna play the confidence in the flesh, confidence in religion game, then let's play.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put 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; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

What's Paul doing here? He's saying, let's compare resumes. If getting right with God was based on qualifications, then let's go toe-to-toe, and see who would get in. So, Paul lists seven things. Some of things he had no control over, and other things were the result of his determination and effort. Here are the things he had no control over: circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. Since we're talking about circumcision here Paul begins with his own circumcision, as one that is first-rate. He was circumcised on the eighth day, just as was prescribed in the Law, unlike a Gentile convert who would have been circumcised as an adult. A Gentile convert would never be able to compare to a Jew who was circumcised like Paul was.

Then he was of the race of Israel. He's a descendent of God's chose people. He doesn't come from polluted stock. He's not a mixed blooded Samaritan, and he's not a pagan Gentile either. If Paul did a DNA ancestry test, it would come out 99% Israelite. And if it was possible to narrow it down further, he was a Benjamite. Even among the Israelites, there seemed to be some kind of tribal hierarchy, or tribal pride. It's not uncommon, to be a proud Torontonion, or a proud southerner in the States. The same was true with Jews. The tribe of Benjamin produced the first king of Israel in Saul. And do you remember what Paul's name was before he became a Christian? Saul.

Next, when Paul says he was a Hebrew of Hebrews he means he didn't assimilate into the Roman culture. He didn't become a Hellenized Jew. Again, as immigrants or children of immigrants we know something about that. It's like the immigrant who takes pride in saying, I'm not a Korean American, or a Chinese Canadian. I'm a Korean Korean, I'm a Chinese Chinese. That's what Paul was; he was a Hebrew of Hebrews.

Then Paul moves from his religious pedigree to his religious accomplishments. "In regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless." The Pharisees were the strictest, they were literally the "separated ones." There was no other Jewish group that was as serious about obeying the law than the Pharisees.

In terms of putting your money where your mouth is, Paul says, in terms of zeal, in terms of his fervent commitment to his Jewish faith, he persecuted the church. He was a zealot. He did whatever was necessary to protect the Jewish faith from all threats, and Christianity and the church was a threat.



We can see how that same zeal transferred over to his Christian faith. Whatever threats arose against the church, Paul was there to defend them. Here's how he speaks about this in his letter to the Galatians,

(Galatians 1:13) For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

We know this is true just from reading Acts 9. Here's how he's introduced to the reader:

(Acts 9:1) Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.

We know that later, he deeply regretted what he did in his ignorance. He writes in

(1 Corinthians 15:9) For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I **persecuted** the **church** of God.

But, that's the kind of passion he had for his religion.

Then finally he says that in regard to righteousness based on the law, he was faultless. We may think that is an arrogant statement, but just think of a Jew who is very devout in his faith, and you ask him, "Have you ever considered any other god but God? Have you ever worshiped an idol? Have you ever taken the Lord's name in vain? Have you ever violated the Sabbath and its regulations? Have you ever killed a man? Have you ever fornicated or committed adultery? Have you ever taken something that did not belong to you? Have you ever lied against your neighbor? Have you ever desired something that was not yours, your neighbor's wife, their servant, or their animal?" Can you see how a very, very devout religious person could say truthfully, that he was faultless in keeping the commands? Remember, Jesus encountered such a person. The man asked about gaining eternal life. Jesus asked if he'd kept the commandments, and he says, without flinching, yes. I don't think he was trying to deceive Jesus. According to his recollection, he had kept God's commands. Of course, Jesus saw through him and said, "One thing you still lack. Sell everything, give to the poor and follow me." At which the man went away sad, because he had great wealth. So, Paul is not far off in admitting that he was faultless.

In these seven things, Paul has just given us a snapshot of his religious lineage and his religious achievements. And he says to those who think that religious achievement is the way to God, "Try and beat that!" It's like Martin Luther who strived and strived to please God by being the best and most religious of all the monks. He later said,

"I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that **if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I**. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."

So, how about you? By what means are you trying to get to heaven? What religious accomplishment, what act of performance are you basing your confidence on?



Here's what Paul, the super zealot says.

(Philippians 3:7) But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul says, all those things, I consider as loss. Just think about it. Picture an excel file that logs all your assets, all those things that he's just mentioned. Great things. Amazing things. Serious accomplishments. Things that will get you places. And in one fell swoop, file deleted. Worthless. Zero! Loss! He wasn't merely devaluing of some of the items. It wasn't even about removing some of line items. All of it, with the click of a mouse, was deleted forever. Everything that he would have included in his religious resume to gain him entrance to heaven, he counted as loss. And it's considered a loss for the sake of Christ.

However, there's even more that needs to be deleted. He's already deleted his pre-Christian, Jewish resume. But now he says, "What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. What does he mean by that? Well, one clue is from the change in verb tense. The first use of loss was in relation to his pre-Christian accomplishments, past tense. The second use of loss, he's speaking in the present tense. The second clue is between the words "whatever" which refer to his pedigree; and the word "everything." His pre-Christian accomplishments are not the only things he considers loss. He considers everything from his conversion forward a loss as well. The everything here refers to anything on this side of Christ, on this side of his conversion that would tempt him to place confidence in his flesh. If he ever said to himself, "Paul, you think your hot stuff because you're an apostle? Because you are God's mouthpiece? Because you planted so many churches? Because you've had unbelievable visions of God? Because you can perform miracles? Because you bear on your body the scars of Christ?" He wouldn't dare place his trust in those things. If he did, they would be like garbage....compared to Christ.

Several times in these verses he compares his accomplishments to Christ. V7 – for the sake of Christ. V8 – because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, and again in V8 – that I may gain Christ.

What self-righteousness are you holding on to? You were a great parent. You went on a mission trip. You read your bible today. Your stellar church attendance. Some act of service in the church. What about some moral achievement? You never cheated on your taxes. You always played by the rules. Or maybe your confidence is in a religious experience. You spoke in tongues or had a vision or some unexplainable occurrence. Is that your confidence? Is that what you're holding on to? Are you basing your value and worth, and your salvation on those things?

All our achievements mean nothing, they are only fit for the garbage bin, in comparison to knowing Christ as Lord and Savior, and to gain Christ, and to be found in Christ, and gaining righteousness from him that comes through faith in him. That's what's most important. Take an inventory with me. Have you gained Christ? Are you found in Christ? Is your righteousness one that comes from Christ is on the basis of faith, and not on your accomplishments or pedigree? Only Christ can save, only Christ can make us righteous. None of us can bring home straight A's before God. Only through Christ and in Christ can we be made righteous in the sight of God.



So here is the great difference between the other religions and Christianity. All the other religions are about achievement, they're about reaching a goal, nirvana, enlightenment, even heaven, but Christianity, at its essence is to know God. When you describe Christianity to someone, or when you assess the way, you practice your faith, is knowing God the very essence of it? There is a ring of truth when Christians say that it's not a religion, it's a relationship. And the great thing is that he can be known, even by you. He's reaching out to you. He wants to know you and he wants you to know him. That's why he came. Don't harden your heart. Invite him in. And you will come to know the most amazing person in the universe, your creator, the one who made you the way you are, and even more importantly, you'll come to know your savior, the one who died for your sins. So, let's strive together, not to do religion, but to pursue the Lord, because he first pursued us. The way that we view time is totally determined by our calendar. And as you know there are two major epochs in the calendar: BC and AD. BC stands for Before Christ and AD means Anno Domini, the Year of our Lord. So important a figure was Jesus Christ, that the way we look at history and dates and years revolves around him. Before Christ, and the Year of our Lord. For every Christian, the same can be said. Every Christian has a BC, before Christ time. As well every Christian has an AD time. Can you think back to when that was? Jesus and what he did on the cross for our sins is so earth-shifting, so life-altering, that the only way to describe it is with BC and AD. So, let's ask ourselves, has it been that earth-shifting and life-altering for you? Do you look back and can you also say that every achievement, every accomplishment, every aspect of whatever pedigree I inherited, anything that I put my hope in other than Christ, anything I depended on for my righteousness, all of it is garbage! Is that you? It must be. There's no other way to be a Christian.

Let's pray.