

March 2, 2014 by Steve Brandon



No Confidence in the Flesh

Philippians 3:4-7

1. Gain (verses 4-6)

2. Loss (verse 7)

I want to read to you portions of an article from Friday's edition of the Contra Costa Times, a major newspaper in the Bay Area of California where my wife grew up. When we visit California on vacation, I read the Contra Costa Times. Anyway, the headline to this article reads, "Majority of Hercules High School teachers vote no confidence in principal." I read from the article, ...

HERCULES -- Ninety-four percent of tenured teachers at Hercules High School have voted no confidence in Principal Jennifer Bender, citing a "bad" school climate, lack of respect for teachers and ineffective leadership, according to a teacher at the school.

"Her expectations for students and teachers are not in line with reality," the no-confidence resolution states. "She has not engendered any trust in her staff, nor has she created a safer school, but has instead created a toxic environment for students and staff."

Taking the no-confidence vote was "an extraordinary step and hard decision," but after observing Bender for a year and a half, teachers saw no way forward with her as principal, according to the resolution.

The teacher, who did not want to be identified due to fear of retaliation, said the vote took place Feb. 12-25.

...

The two-page, single-spaced typed resolution paints a picture of a school that has gone so far downhill since Bender's arrival one-and-a-half years ago that learning and safety have been adversely affected. It alleges the principal has alienated teachers and community members while failing to provide students with clear expectations. "Students know that this unacceptable behavior is tolerated so they continue to act accordingly," the resolution states. "This lack of reasonable expectations and clear guidelines is counterproductive for students and creates a toxic school climate. It has led to altercations, fights and arrests of both students and parents."

...

The no confidence resolution alleges that Bender blames others for her own errors and vindictively docks the pay of teachers with whom she disagrees, reprimands them or places letters in their personnel files.

"Without the recognition of mistakes or the willingness to listen to key stakeholders there is no hope for learning or improvement and thus no way forward," the resolution states. "We, as professionals and union members, feel that this cannot continue."

Here's the ballot for the Hercules Middle High School:

Ballot: "I, as a staff member at Hercules Middle High School, have lost confidence in our Principal Ms. Bender. I feel that the climate at our school has become bad for students and staff and that there is no way forward with our current principal."

[\[1\]](#)

My message this morning is entitled, "No Confidence in the Flesh." Should the members of your body take up a "no confidence" vote in your ability to stand before God on your own merit, I would hope that such a vote would not be 94%. I would hope that such a vote would be 100%.

This is the clear application in our text this morning. Our text is Philippians, chapter 3, verses 4 through 7. However, I want to begin reading in verse 1.

Philippians 3:1-7

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Last week we looked at the first three verses of what I read. Verse 1 contains an exhortation to "rejoice in the Lord." Verse 2 contains a warning to "beware" of the false teachers, whom Paul identifies as "the false circumcision." Certainly, he is speaking of those who maintain that circumcision is necessary for your salvation.

In contrast to the false teachers, verse 3 puts forth three characteristics of what Paul calls, "The true circumcision," that is, the genuine believer in Jesus Christ.

- Genuine believers worship in the Spirit of God. That is, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in them and lifts them up to the heavenly realms.
- Genuine believers glory in Christ Jesus. That is, it is our joy to see Jesus exalted and ourselves.
- Genuine believers put no confidence in the flesh. That is, we come to God, not on the basis of our own merits in the flesh, but through the merits of Jesus Christ.

That's the gospel. This is what the book of Philippians is calling us to rejoice in. We are to rejoice in the gospel. We are to rejoice in the fact that Jesus Christ came and did for us what we could never do. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We come to the Father only through Him! And we come, not on the basis of our own righteousness or our works or our prayers or our birthright or our religious achievements. No, we come to God solely upon His merits, and not our own.

Titus 3:5 says, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." And in Ephesians 2, we read, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

My aim this morning is to convince you that you ought to put no confidence in the flesh and that you must come to Christ without any trust in yourself. My aim this morning is for a 100% vote of your members. No confidence in the flesh!!

My aim this morning is to convince you of the truth so well articulated in the hymn, "Rock of Ages."

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;

Not the labors of my hands
can fulfill thy law's commands;
could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone;
thou must save, and thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Savior, or I die.

That's the heart of our text this morning. When you come to God, come naked and empty and broken and helpless. We need, with God, to be clothed and filled and fixed and helped. So, cling only to the cross. Don't trust in the labors of your hands. Don't trust in your zeal. Don't trust in your tears. Don't trust in your righteousness. But, fly to the fountain of God's grace and say, "Wash me, Savior, or I die." Because, if Christ doesn't wash us clean in His blood, we will die.

Church family, I exhort you to put, "No confidence in the flesh." That's what Paul says in verse 3. That's what Paul expands upon in verses 4-6. That's what Paul explains in verse 7.

Now, don't pass this by lightly. I believe that this is something that all of us struggle with. Spiritual pride can easily drift into our hearts. We can easily come to trust in our own goodness. We can easily look to our Bible reading or our praying or our involvement in church or our charitable giving or our overall attitude and think that God must accept us and bless us. But, this morning, my message is to trust none of that.

Don't trust in your goodness. Don't trust in your unfailing church attendance. Don't trust in your successes over sin. Don't trust in your zeal for the Lord. And it is so easy to do so.

Jerry Bridges shares a great illustration of how subtle it can be in his book, "The Discipline of Grace." He describes two days. He writes, ...

Consider two radically different days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. You get up promptly when your alarm goes off and have a refreshing and profitable quiet time as you read your Bible and pray. Your plans for the day generally fall into place, and somehow sense the presence of God with you. To top it off, you unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is truly searching. As you talk with the person, you silently pray for the Holy Spirit to help you and to also work in your friend's heart.

The second day is just the opposite. You don't arise at the first ring of your alarm. Instead, you shut it off and go back to

sleep. When you finally awaken, it's too late to have a quiet time. You hurriedly gulp down some breakfast and rush off to the day's activities. You feel guilty about oversleeping and missing your quiet time, and things just generally go wrong all day. You become more and more irritable as the day wears on, and you certainly don't sense God's presence in your life. That evening, however, you quite unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is really interested in receiving Christ as Savior.

Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with a different degree of confidence? Would you be less confident on the bad day than on the good day? Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day?

If you answered yes to those questions, you have lots of company among believers. I've described these two scenarios to a number of audiences and asked, "Would you respond different?" Invariably, about 80 percent indicate that they would. They would be less confident of God's blessing while sharing Christ at the end of a bad day than they would after a good one. Is such thinking justified? Does God work that way? The answer to both questions is no, because God's blessing does not depend on our performance.

Why then do we think this way? It is because we do believe that God's blessing on our lives is somehow conditioned upon our spiritual performance. [\[2\]](#)

I share that story because it illustrated how easy it is to have confidence in the flesh. What Jerry Bridges has described hits me right in the heart. I can easily find myself putting confidence in my flesh.

When walking in obedience to the Lord, I can easily think that we deserve the blessing of God. When sin overcomes me, I can easily think that God's curse will be upon me as well.

But Paul says, "NO! Don't do it! Don't place any confidence in your flesh." May the Lord help us this morning to boast only in the cross.

Let's look into Paul's argument before we dig into the details. Having mentioned in verse 3 how the "true circumcision" puts no confidence in the flesh, he then goes on to give a brief resume of his religious achievements (in verses 5-6). This little autobiography is set up in verse 4, ...

Philippians 3:4
although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:

In other words, Paul's life was such a model of righteousness, that he could very easily have confidence in the flesh. He was born to the right family. He went through all of the rituals. He was an expert in the law. He was zealous in his religion. Nobody could accuse him of any sin.

And if anyone could have confidence in the flesh, it was Paul. Of anyone, he could place his confidence in the flesh. So certain is he of this, that he mentions it twice in verse 4, ...

Philippians 3:4
although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:

In some degree, I believe that Paul puts forth his religious achievements to circumvent the argument of the false circumcision. They could easily argue, "Paul, the only reason why you are saying these things is because you are jealous. You don't have these credentials. And so, you want to bring us down by saying that they are not necessary."

But, Paul says, "No. I have these credentials. In fact, I would argue that I have more credentials than any of you. And still, the truth of verse 7 stands."

Philippians 3:7
But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

In other words, Paul had it all! But, when it comes to knowing Christ, all those things that were gain to Paul, he considered as loss. And the application comes straight to us. If Paul was the most righteous person on the planet, and all of his righteousness was considered to be nothing in his sight. Then, we ought to consider our righteousness as nothing as well.

It's like the guy who climbed the corporate ladder, making millions along the way. But, then, he comes and talks with us and says, ...

"It's not worth it. It cost me my family. It cost me my wife, who divorced me. It cost me my children, who never knew me, because I was always at the office.

"Sure, I have a lot of money in the bank right now. I have total financial freedom. I'm done with working, as I retired early. But, who do I have to share it with? Nobody.

"I'm telling you, when you are old, it's not money that you will want. You want your family. You want to share the fruit of your labor.

"So, work less. Value your family. Dig deep into relationships. That's where the true value is."

And that's what Paul is saying. Only, he didn't climb the corporate ladder. He climbed the religious ladder. And he made it to the top. And he said, "It doesn't matter. You can have all of the righteous credentials in the world, but when you compare them with the value of the righteousness we have in Christ, my righteous standing is nothing!"

That's where this text is going. So, let's dig into our text. Let's use Paul's verbiage in verse 7 for our outline this morning. Let's look first at Paul's ...

1. Gain (verses 4-6)

In verses 5 and 6, Paul puts forth seven of his gains. The first four have been inherited. The last three have been earned.

- a. Circumcised the eighth day
- b. Of the nation of Israel
- c. Of the tribe of Benjamin
- d. A Hebrew of Hebrews
- e. As to the Law, a Pharisee.
- f. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.
- g. As to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless.

Let's take each of these one by one. And as we do, listen for how Paul is building his case for how he can have confidence in the flesh.

a. Circumcised the eighth day

Literally, Paul was an "eight day-er." Eight days after his birth, he was circumcised. When God gave the covenant of circumcision to Abraham in Genesis 17, He said, "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations." Later in Leviticus 12:3, it was confirmed in the law.

This has been the custom for all Jews all down through history. Even Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21). Today, there are still some Jewish people who practice this custom today. And when it came to Paul's baptism, he was an "eight day-er."

Now, it's not an accident here that Paul mentions his own circumcision. The false teachers who were around in the first century placed a high emphasis upon circumcision, even saying that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:2). These are probably the ones he is talking about in verse 2: "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision" (Philippians 3:2).

And Paul says this, "When it comes to circumcision, these guys have nothing on me. I wasn't circumcised when I was 13 like Ishmael was. My parents were obedient to the Lord and saw to it that I was circumcised according to the strictest letter of the law!" Even before Paul had a say in anything, he was placed under the law.

Paul continues by saying that he was ...

b. Of the nation of Israel

That is, he wasn't a proselyte. He didn't come into the faith later in life. No, he was born of Jewish parents. He was born into the chosen people of Israel. He was a descendent of Abraham. He was a descendent of Isaac. He was a descendent of Jacob.

As such, he was a child of the promise. Religiously, this carried great advantages and benefits.

In Romans 3:1-2, Paul said, "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Greater in every respect. First of all, they were entrusted with the oracles of God." God had given His word to the Jews. God had given His promise to the Jews. God had set them up as a light for the nations.

And throughout history, God has always provided for and protected the Jews. I believe that much of the blessing still continues today, even though the Jews en masse have rejected God and His word. God is still faithful to His covenant people.

But, Paul continued with the depth of his Jewish lineage.

c. Of the tribe of Benjamin

Remember, the Jewish people had twelve tribes, all descendent from the sons of Jacob. Of all the tribes of Israel, you can well argue that two of them were the most faithful to the Lord -- the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin.

When the nation split in two after Solomon died, the ten tribes in the north utterly abandoned the ways of God. But, the two tribes in the south (Judah and Benjamin) remained more loyal to the Lord. They had their struggles. They had their wicked kings. But, of all the tribes, Judah

and Benjamin were by far the most noteworthy of them all.

From the tribe of Judah came the Messiah. From the tribe of Benjamin came the first king, King Saul. This was Paul's name before he was converted on the road to Damascus. Surely, he was named after the first king.

The city of Jerusalem is in land that was allocated to the tribe of Benjamin, perhaps suggesting a soft spot in the heart of God. Because, Jerusalem has a soft spot in the heart of God. It was there that the Lord chose to dwell. And of all the tribes, this is where Paul was from.

d. A Hebrew of Hebrews

This phrase sort of sums up everything that Paul said in verse 5. He is as pure a Jew as they get. Now, there very well may have been some question about this, as he was born in Tarsus, which is well north of Israel. It was not particularly a strong-hold of Judaism. And yet, he was brought up in a strong, Jewish home. His parents raised him according to the law.

He wasn't a Jew by name, but Hellenistic in culture. Though he lived in a Pagan town, his upbringing was entirely Jewish. And none of this was by his choice.

He didn't purchase his way into the Jewish faith. He didn't come in when he came of age. No, he was born into it.

Circumcised the eighth day; Of the nation of Israel; Of the tribe of Benjamin; A Hebrew of Hebrews. He inherited such a pedigree. Of anybody on the planet, it was the apostle Paul who had the lineage.

My guess is that this alone was sufficient to silence most of those who were troubling the church in Philippi, because there were only a few who had such pedigree. But, he goes on with three more ways in which he could place his confidence in the flesh. And these were earned.

First of all, he says, ...

e. As to the Law, a Pharisee.

Now, when we hear "Pharisee," we naturally think hypocrite -- those who are clean on the outside, but filthy on the inside. Jesus blasted the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. But, think about what a Pharisee was. A Pharisee was an expert in the law. A Pharisee studied long and hard to know what the Scripture says. Such was Paul.

He was trained under Gamaliel, one of the most influential rabbis of his day (Acts 22:3). On several occasions, he boasted of his religious training as a Pharisee (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5). At one point he even called it "the strictest sect of our religion."

Not only did he have one of the best teachers, but he had one of the best minds. He said of himself that he was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen" (Galatians 1:14). Perhaps you remember the time when Paul was giving his defense before Agrippa. Festus shouted out, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad" (Acts 26:24). He replied, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth" (Acts 26:25). It was just that the king couldn't take his learning!

And when you work through the book of Acts, you can see Paul's incredible mind. Immediately after his conversion, he was in the synagogue, "confounding the Jews, ... by proving that ... Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22). When there was a dispute in Jerusalem regarding the matter of circumcision and salvation, Paul stood right with the apostles in the church. When Paul came into Athens, an utterly pagan town, he was able to speak to them and quote from their own poets. Eventually, Paul's ministry was devoted to the Gentiles.

J. Oswald Sanders said that a modern day parallel of learning would be, "One who could speak in Peking in Chinese, quoting Confucius and Mencius; write closely-reasoned theology in English and expound it in Oxford; and defend his cause before the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Russian in Moscow." [\[3\]](#) That was Paul's point, "as to the Law, a Pharisee."

Let's continue on.

f. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.

At this point, Paul was talking about his pre-conversion days. And when it came to promoting Judaism and resisting those who contradicted, Paul was the first in line. When Stephen was being stoned for believing in Christ, Paul was there, giving his "heartly agreement" with all that was taking place (Acts 8:1). When Christianity began to spread, Paul was right there on the front lines, seeking to stop its progress. He was, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples [of Jesus]" (Acts 9:1). He gathered papers from the high priest allowing him to arrest any Christians he would find in Damascus, and bring them bound to Jerusalem (Acts 9:2).

Now, certainly, those were evil things against our Lord. But, they show the tenacity of his faith. He was genuine and real. He was sincere, but wrong. He really believed that his way of religion was the right way. His actions demonstrated it. Now, later, he would denounce these things, calling himself a, "blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (1 Timothy 1:13); and calling himself the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). And yet, they speak of his passion. They speak of his great attempts at religion. Few were as zealous as the apostle Paul.

Finally, ...

g. As to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless.

In other words, if you would read through the entire law and match it up to Paul's life, there is nothing that you could find to accuse him in any way. There was no command that he transgressed. There was no command that he failed to carry out. Of course, Paul is talking only about the external requirements of the law. In Romans 7, he talks about how the commandment not to covet sunk deep into his heart, revealing his sinful ways to himself. But, regarding the externals, there was no ground of fault with Paul.

If there was a sacrifice that needed to be offered, he offered it. If there was a religious festival to be observed, he went. If there were foods to abstain from, they never entered his mouth. If there were things that would defile him, he stayed away.

When it came to the law, Paul was blameless. Such was the gain of Paul.

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- b. Of the nation of Israel
- c. Of the tribe of Benjamin
- d. A Hebrew of Hebrews
- e. As to the Law, a Pharisee.
- f. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.
- g. As to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless.

And I don't think that there was a more righteous person who has ever lived. That's why Paul said that he was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions" (Galatians 1:14). And that's what makes verse 7 so powerful, ...

Philippians 3:7

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

This is my second point this morning, ...

2. Loss (verse 7)

Where once Paul saw that his circumcision and his heritage and his learning and zeal and righteousness were gain before God, he now sees that they are actually a loss. In many ways, Paul was "The Biggest Loser." Oh, he didn't lose weight like the modern reality television show, but, he did lose all of his righteous merit. Religious things don't help in one's standing before the Lord. Do you know this? Are you placing confidence in your flesh?

Now, I have no doubt that any of you are trusting in your circumcision. And not many of you are Jewish. I don't think any of you would say that you are blameless when it comes to God's requirement in your life. Nor are you entirely satisfied with your zeal for the Lord.

But, I fear that some of you might be able to put forth a testimony like this. "I was baptized as a baby and confirmed as a teenager; I earned the Timothy award in AWANA; I faithfully served in my youth group; I went to Bible college; I read my Bible and pray every day; I never miss church; I tithe off of my gross pay; I support a poor child in a foreign land; I give to missions; I go door to door witnessing every week."

And Paul would say, count all of those things as loss for the sake of Christ.

Yes, it's good to be raised in a Christian home. Yes, it's good to read your Bible daily. Yes, it is good to be actively engaged in evangelism. But, in standing before God, it is utterly useless. Don't trust in those things. There is only one thing in which you can trust. You can only trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's where Paul is going.

Philippians 3:8-9

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,

But we'll get to that next week. This week, I want you to focus upon how much confidence you are placing in your flesh.

Now, I know that it is hard. Because with most things in life, you need to have a measure of confidence. If you are shooting a basketball, you need to envision the ball going through the hoop and you need to shoot every shot, confident that you will make it. If you are a salesman, you need to assert yourself and be confident that you can close the sale. If you are a construction worker, you must be confident that your house will stand. It doesn't work for you to build up a house and say, "I have no confidence that it will stand." So, when it comes to life, you must have some humble confidence.

But, when it comes to our standing before the Lord, all of your confidence must be thrown out the window. We may be able to shoot baskets and sell products and build houses in the flesh. But, we cannot come before God with confidence in our flesh.

Now, that's not to say that we cannot come before the Lord with confidence. God wants us to be bold in our prayers to Him. We can approach Him with confidence. But, our confidence is in the Lord. Listen carefully....

Hebrews 4:14-16

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Do you see where our confidence lies? It's not in our flesh. It's in the Lord.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 2, 2014 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] By Theresa Harrington; Contra Costa Times, http://www.contracostatimes.com/hercules/ci_25243176/majority-hercules-high-teachers-vote-no-confidence-principal.

[2] Jerry Bridges, The Discipline of Grace, pp. 13-14.

[3] J. Oswald Sanders, Spiritual Leadership, p. 50.