

Vigilance

Essay 11 in the series “Ode to Joy”

Chapter 3 in Paul’s letter to the Philippians begins just as we would expect, “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord!” Joy is the dominant theme in Philippians, and here it’s stated again. But then something happens. Paul writes, “It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again,” and he gives them a warning he’s given before, maybe even written to them before in one of perhaps many letters we do not have. You think about it: Paul to this point had been in active ministry from, say, AD 48 until AD 62, fourteen years in all, likely often writing letters. We have by traditional estimates thirteen of them. Likely there were more, maybe quite a few more.

In any case, he writes, “It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” Then he warns them against a group of Jewish Christians who insisted that to be a real Christian you had to be a real Jew and be circumcised (if you were male) and eat kosher and observe the Sabbath; in short, you had to observe the whole Torah. But catch the words Paul uses, “Watch out for those dogs!” Really, Paul! Whatever happened to Christian civility? It reminds us of Galatians 5:12 when Paul said of the same kind of people, “I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves.” So here in Philippians 3:2, “Watch out for those dogs!”

Certainly this a sharp turn in tone. And we’ve talked about that before – how Paul sets forth a theme, in this case, joy in the Lord. It’s clear. It’s beautiful. But then he offers a counter-theme that challenges the first theme, in this case, vigilance. Watch out! Be on your guard against! And so he writes, “Watch out for those dogs!” Note here, with all due respect to those of you who spend thousands of dollars on your favorite pets, it wasn’t that way in the first-century world. Dogs weren’t usually domesticated. In the cities of the Mediterranean dogs roamed in packs. They were scavengers. They snapped and snarled at anyone they met. So in Scripture and in society, the lowest thing you could call a person was “a dog.” Jesus would say in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not give dogs what is sacred.” And now Paul warns, “Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil.” With all their insistence on Torah they think they do good, but in fact, Paul says, they do evil. He goes on, drawing on a play on Greek words, “They claim to be circumcised, but in fact the best that can be said for them is that they are mutilated.” Paul further asserts, “It is we who are the circumcision, we who serve by the Spirit of God, not by the letter of the law, we who glory in Christ Jesus, and we who put no confidence in our own status or achievements.”

Then in verses 4-6, Paul reminds his readers: I know who these guys are. I was once like them. In fact, if they want to play this game, this game of legalistic righteousness, I can play it better. I have more credentials than they do. I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am of the people of Israel. I am of the tribe of Benjamin. I know my tribe. My tribe surrounds the holy city of Jerusalem. I am a Hebrew of Hebrews. I am racially pure. I am fluent in Hebrew, not just the Greek of the Diaspora. I was trained by the most famous rabbi of all, Gamaliel. In regard to the law, I am a Pharisee. I am one of those, say, 6000 who have mastered the Torah. As for zeal (because zeal is what lights these

guys' fire), I once persecuted the church. As for legalistic righteousness, that is, as for observance of the Torah, I was faultless. If that's the game they want to play, I can play that game. But then in verse 7 he goes on to say: But it's all worthless. I count it all as loss. None of those things really matter.

So here we have a theme – joy in the Lord, and now a diatribe against someone. And those two themes tumble over one another. It seems like chaos. It seems like they don't belong together. It seems like the person so full of joy should never ever say such things. Until we see that Paul's warning is against what? Against joy-killers! These letter-of-the-law guys kill joy. And Paul's not having it. Because it's joy that's at stake! We are meant to be walking free in God's good creation, innocent, trusting, sure of God's love, surrounded by grace, conscious of the gifts of God all around us, sensing our very oneness with God. We are meant to be joyful. But these guys kill joy. This approach to God and Scripture and life and righteousness kills joy. And of course it does.

I was raised in a religion of Do's and Don'ts. And honestly I could never make sense of it. There were all these catch-22s, all these inconsistencies, all these unintended consequences. There was a pervasive fearfulness: a fear of questions, a fear of ever thinking outside the box or ever reading outside one's own little circle, a chronic fear of disapproval. There was a perfectionism that squelched honest disclosure. And then there was the picture of God. God, I was told, was loving so long as you kept his law perfectly. And so I came to know in my bones that such law-based religion kills spiritual passion. It puts out the sparkle in the eyes and dampens the fire in the belly. It stifles the human spirit and more seriously quenches the Spirit of God.

Now I learned all this both from life and from the apostle Paul. Poor Paul still gets a bum rap on these matters. Many think of him as stern, moralistic and legalistic. But the truth is: He was just the opposite. He was the apostle of revolutionary Christian liberty. Paul says over and over in his letters – it's truly hard to see how anyone missed this – that the old way of the written code limits us, restricts us, weighs us down, and holds us back. It traps us in wrong stories. It locks us into doing things that were great for another time and place, but make no sense for us now. And it keeps us focused on our own performances. The new way of grace and the Spirit, in contrast, expands our souls, empowers us, is forever current (is right for here and now) and keeps us focused on God's performance, not ours.

Even more importantly, it does what no law code can do: it changes our hearts. So now the morally heroic and humanly very difficult things we are meant to do (were born to do) can be done. The Sermon on the Mount can be lived. Now, finally now, it makes sense. Now we are led by the Spirit. Now we are filled with the Spirit. Now we live lives surrounded by grace, surrounded by the Spirit of God. Now sometimes we have these transforming moments when we are so overcome with the Spirit of God that it's like an electrical flow, liquid fire, an intense, penetrating warmth surging through us, until we're energized by God and full of his life in us. And now just maybe we can begin to understand what it means to move mountains.

What's more, life by the Spirit gives us joy. Now we know that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the spirit of God, a world filled with amazing possibilities, a world where grace reigns, where in all things – absolutely all things, even in our darkest moments – God works for our good, where we always get to start over, where by emptying ourselves God fills us.

For this reason then, there must be vigilance. The path to joy is protected by vigilance, by our watching out for those who would rob us of our joy. In fact, that's what elders are for. When I read Acts 20:18-35, Paul's instructions to the elders of Ephesus, I see that Paul is saying that the task of an elder is to protect the joy, to stand up against those savage wolves who kill it. But even on a personal level, joy calls for vigilance. Because if we follow the old way of the written code, we'll be overwhelmed with failure, ours and everybody else's. We'll be constantly critical. We'll alienate everyone. We'll be bitter and resentful at the success of others, at grace, at forgiveness. We'll divide and fragment. We'll end up playacting all the time. We'll always be cycling in and out of depression and anxiety. And we won't ever get to joy. We'll get nowhere near it.

Now we can see that here in Philippians we have two themes. The first one, the dominant one, the baseline one, is joy. The second is vigilance. Watch out. Take care. There are those who would kill your joy in the Lord. And these two themes belong together. And now seeing the connection we can feel the music in our souls again.

– Dale Pauls