



## **CHRIST OR CREDENTIALS**

### **Philippians 3:1-11**

The distinguished preacher, Phillip Brooks, once shared, “There are two things to be aware of in life: A timid surgeon and a timid preacher of the gospel. Neither of them will do you much good in life’s journey.”

As we open our scripture lesson for today - we see that the Apostle Paul is hardly a timid preacher and he certainly performs major surgery on the religious thinking that under girded the setting in life of this passage.

Paul begins in **verse one** with an exhortation to rejoice in our relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not apologetic about the number of times he has urged the church at Philippi to always focus in on their relationship to Jesus Christ. Paul never wanted any set of circumstances to prevent the Christian believer from drawing strength from the inner happiness they possessed - and that possessed them by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. To “re-joyce” means to go back to the original source of that joy - which was Jesus Christ.

However, as we approach **verse two**, we see that the tone of the letter changes dramatically. This is our first piece of evidence that Paul is hardly a timid preacher.

Something has so angered him that he warns the people of a power that would attempt to strip the believer of the joy of their salvation. They are not to focus in on human achievement and performance – but rather the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Much like our Lord who spoke harsh words against the Pharisees and their teachings - Paul follows in that same spirit.

Now, I agree it might seem out of place and out of character in a letter that is dominated by the themes of joy and spirit, for Paul to speak so harshly against other human beings - but Paul knew that the stakes were very high if these folks succeeded by infecting this congregation with their false teachings. It could bring spiritual death to this young struggling group of believers.

Paul is warning the Philippians that the evil workers and teachers will use some of the same words and vocabulary. They will not free the human spirit to love God, but place emphasis on human achievement and performance. Paul warns against any religious system that is based on ceremony and rituals rather than a living relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ which are to be reflected in our religious celebration of life.

The Apostle Paul did not want the Philippians to exchange one form of legalism for another one. It would be like a prisoner in Sydney, Australia, that I heard about recently. It seems that a certain prisoner managed to escape from the facility. He hid in a delivery truck that made stops at the prison. A few minutes later, when the truck stopped, the prisoner dropped down to the ground and rolled out to freedom. Unfortunately, he discovered that he was now in the courtyard of another prison 5 miles from the first.

The Apostle Paul knew from his own conversion experience that God's grace and joy it produces does not imprison the human spirit and soul but results in our sharing the experience of grace and joy in an atmosphere of a party. We now celebrate a living, loving relationship with God, not rigid rules and forced restrictions. The Apostle Paul always points to the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ.

Many of you read in the article that my friend Laurie wrote in our January newsletter, how John and Charles Wesley got into trouble in Georgia because they sang some hymns and songs not in the official hymn book. That same struggle exists in the body of Christ today.

In 1808 a great controversy took place in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church NYC and the other Presbyterian Churches as well. The Calvinist tradition discouraged any singing except the biblical Psalms. Only the texts of the Psalms were deemed appropriate. Unfortunately the results were often dreary and unmusical. A few radicals, like Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, had begun to write hymns based on biblical and religious concepts. They set the words to music which was sing-able and melodious. The Scottish preachers greatly disapproved of it.<sup>1</sup> Imagine all the great music the Christian faith would have been denied if this form of legalism had not given way to this radical expression of faith.

The Os Guinness' book **THE CALL**, he tells the story about Dr. Arthur Burns, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. It seems that Dr. Arthur Burns joined a Bible study made up of those who work at the White House and other governmental offices. Dr. Burns is Jewish. Since he was of the Jewish faith – and wanting him to feel welcomed – they never called on him to lead the group in prayer. However, at one particular session, there was a guest leader of the study and he simply asked for a volunteer to close the session with prayer – so Dr. Burns volunteered. He prayed the following: “O God – may the day come when all Muslims will come to know Jesus – and when all Jews will come to know Jesus – and when all Christians will come to know Jesus as well.”

In the 1500's there was a devout monk named Martin Luther – who one day discovered the Living God by reading the Bible – despite all the efforts of the religious institution to impede his progress. His discovery led to a reformation to connect people to that living God. He was religious – he went through ceremonies and rituals – but

never was connected to the God of grace. As Paul taught in **verse 1**, he had to go back to the source of that joy which was Christ.

In England in 1738 – a deeply committed and conservative ordained Anglican clergyman by the name of John Wesley had his heart warmed by the power and presence of Christ – and we gather here today as part of that great movement. When John Wesley was assigned as a missionary to the Americas he had the privilege to teach the faith to the American Indians. In his journal he records these words, “I went to convert the Indians, but who will convert me?” John Wesley was often asked why his movement had some great results. He said, “**I offered them Christ.**” As Paul taught in **verse 1**, he had to go back to the source of that joy which was Christ.

That is what compelled Charles Wesley to write:

“Jesus! The name high over all  
in hell or earth or sky.  
Angels and mortals prostrate fall  
and devils fear and fly.”

Many years later Bill and Gloria Gaither wrote:

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,  
there’s just something about that name.  
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,  
But there’s something about that name.”

One is classical – one is contemporary and gratefully all point to Jesus Christ. You don’t need a worship war about these 2 expressions. They were written to do spiritual warfare against Satan – not your friends in the church.

I believe – despite the challenging and pointed words that Paul shares in **verses 1, 2, & 3** – he still has the heart of a pastor. In **verses 1, 2, & 3** Paul shares an explanation of why not to return to the former bondage of human wisdom.

In **verse 4-7** Paul shares from the very depths of his own experience how he foolishly sought to earn his salvation by human wisdom and credentials. If anyone had the proper pedigree it was Saul of Tarsus.

As Dr. Charles R. Swindoll shares in today’s terms, that proud Pharisee known as Saul of Tarsus won all the marbles – the Pulitzer, the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Most Valuable Player, the Heisman Trophy, the Gold Medal . . . . The Nobel of Ancient Jewry. Had they had newspapers or magazines in his day, his picture would have been on the front page and the headline would have read **RELIGIOUS ZEALOT OF THE DECADE**. His name was dropped by everyone who was anybody.<sup>2</sup>

I have always been thankful for this tender – but earth-shaking testimony that Paul shares in our lesson today. Perhaps it was the cherished relationship Paul had with the church at Philippi that allowed him to share so honestly.

As the pastor of a local church – the “religious professional” – this passage has always challenged me to the very depths of my being. This is why. Paul was one of the most religious folks to ever walk the face of the earth. However – this did not stop God from pursuing him like the Hound of Heaven – until Paul finally surrendered himself to God and was converted.

Just because we are religious does not guarantee that we have a love relationship with God in Jesus Christ. In fact – sometimes it might prevent it. We also can go through rituals and ceremonies and never give one thought to God as well. Sometimes Christ needs to perform major surgery here that enables our worship to be fixed and focused on Him.

When Paul shares that he counts everything as garbage or rubbish in life – except for Jesus Christ it is because he has come to realize that our ultimate hope for life – love and liberty – must rest solely in God’s power revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and not in our man-made credentials despite how good they look on paper – because paper is still paper.

As the late Billy Sunday used to say, “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian anymore than going to a garage makes you an automobile.”

Arthur Burns was right:

O God – may the day come when all the Muslims will come to know Jesus.  
O God – may the day come when all the Jews will come to know Jesus as well.  
O God – may the day come when all the Christians will come to know Jesus as well.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz  
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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, [www.fapc.org](http://www.fapc.org), Music Menu.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, **LAUGH AGAIN**, 1991, Word Publishing, page 134.