

**6/7/2020**

**Scripture**

**Philippians 3:1-4**

Whatever happens, my dear brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith.

**2** Watch out for those dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved. **3** For we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Christ Jesus has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort, **4** though I could have confidence in my own effort if anyone could. Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

### **Heart & Soul**

We are back to our Philippians sermon series, starting into the second half of the short, 4 chapter letter from Paul to the people in Philippi. If you're following along in Philippians, you'll notice that Paul seems to be starting a new topic here in chapter 3. The end of the second chapter has a closing section about who Paul will be sending to the church in Philippi while he remains in prison. Paul's care and concern for the believers in Philippi is very obvious as he wants to send two disciples to them, Timothy and Epaphroditus, to encourage and support the new believers.

As we begin chapter 3 though, Paul is moving on to a new and different topic he'd like to talk about with the disciples in Philippi. And what is that topic? Circumcision. There seems to have been people in Philippi who were spreading the teaching that a Christian must first be circumcised (or first must become a Jew) to be considered those who are saved through Jesus. But we can see here in this section and in other letters from Paul that this teaching about circumcision

is completely false. You can even tell that Paul is pretty upset with the people who are espousing this false teaching; he calls them “dogs, those people who do evil, those mutilators who say you must be circumcised to be saved.” Wowza. Pretty strong language, right? Why is Paul so upset? Because Paul knew that this teaching was dangerous business.

But before we get to that, let’s learn a little bit about the Jewish tradition of circumcision. Where does this practice come from and why was it important? Well, all the way back in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in chapter 17, a very important chapter, God tells Abram that he shall be called Abraham and his wife Sarai will be called Sarah. And in between those two name changes from God, God also tells Abraham to circumcise every male in his family - this being a sign of the covenant promise. A sign that makes these people, Abraham and his descendants, as transformed and changed people - changed into the chosen people of God who are to be blessed to be a blessing, to be a light to the nations. This permanent sign of circumcision was to be a symbol of the indelible, unchanging promise from God to his people.

And we know that for many generations, all throughout the Old Testament we read of God’s chosen people being faithful sometimes, and other times, failing miserably to follow the teachings of the Lord, actually acting as if they are the changed, chosen people of God. But even through all the failings of the Israelites, God’s promise remained. His promise was that through them, his chosen people, the *whole world* would be blessed. And in time, that promise was

finally fulfilled. Jesus the world's savior was born as a Jewish man. But although Jesus was born a Jew, his healing power and salvation was and is not only for the nation of Israel. In Jesus' death and resurrection, every person, Jew or Gentile, can find saving grace by believing in Jesus as the Son of God. Every person.

But in Paul's day, as the Good News about Jesus was spreading among Gentiles (or non-Jewish people), as the Church was growing, there were differing beliefs about what made someone truly saved and included into the family of God. We think we've got disagreements among Christians today? Try living in the first century when Christianity was brand new to the world. As believers figured out what being a Christian meant, there were plenty of disagreements. And here in these verses of Philippians we find one of those major disagreements. And as I said earlier, Paul knew that this teaching about circumcision to be saved was dangerous business. As soon as we begin to tack on other things people must do *before* they are saved, in order to be saved, like being circumcised, then the beauty of Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross is tarnished. For as 2 Corinthians 5:21 says: "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The amazing grace offered in Jesus is amazing precisely because we don't have to do anything in order to come to God for forgiveness. We don't have to clean ourselves up before we come to him. We can come, as our hymn said earlier, just as we are to God and through Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross, we are

forgiven and made clean. Paul wanted to nip this teaching about “circumcision in order to saved “ right in the bud. Here in Philippi he knew how dangerous it was to begin to believe that there is something else we must do besides coming to God in repentance seeking forgiveness through Jesus. A person does not have to become a Jew or become anything else *before* they become a Christian. With Jesus’ sacrifice, the family of God was expanded to include Gentiles, people like you and me, and thanks be to God for that!

This really becomes clearer the more we read Paul’s words from Philippians. If we pick up where we left off in today’s scripture reading, Paul says in chapter 3:5-11: *“5 I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. 6 I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. 7 I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. 8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ 9 and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. 10 I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to*

*suffer with him, sharing in his death, 11 so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!"*

These verses make it so clear to us that it is not circumcision that makes a person become a part of God's chosen people. As Paul says, *"all that is worthless because of what Christ has done...everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."* That's the key. What's the sign of a Christian? Knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. Do you know Christ? I don't necessarily mean did you say a prayer once long ago that "made you a Christian." But do you *know* Christ? Do you have a relationship with Jesus? Do you wish to be with him? Do you want to read and study his words and get to know him more? Can you and I say today the words of the Apostle Paul, that "we count everything else worthless when compared to the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord?" Can we say that today?

Do you know what Paul called this knowing of Jesus? In Romans 2:29 Paul refers to what he calls a "circumcision of the heart." Once you come to God through God's Spirit to know Jesus, Christians possess this different kind of circumcision - a different kind of mark, but in this case, it is not physical - it is a mark on our heart, on our soul, on our spirit that makes others know that we are Jesus followers. When our heart is changed, the rest of us is transformed. When our soul is changed, people notice and ask "what makes you so different from

other people?” When our spirit is touched by the Holy Spirit, we can’t help but leave behind the ways of the world and seek to be more and more like Jesus.

You might know this story. One of the great preachers and movement makers who began the Methodist movement is John Wesley. John grew up in a Christian home, came to believe in Jesus as a young boy and went on to schooling to become a preacher. John became an Anglican priest and did the normal work of a pastor for a while. We even came here to North America on a missionary assignment and had a completely miserable and failed experience. But once when he was on a ship in the middle of a storm on the Atlantic ocean, he was petrified that he was going to die on that boat in that storm, but he noticed that another group of Christians on board the ship were calm, even singing songs of praise in the middle of the storm. John wondered why he did not have the kind of faith these others seemed to have. What did they have that he didn’t have? Well, two years later he was invited by that group of Christians to one of their meetings and as he listened to the teaching, John had a miraculous and life changing experience. He wrote in his journal later that night and said, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation.”

And from that day onward in his Christian life, he was on fire for Jesus. His influence is so widespread - perhaps you and I being Christians today is in part due to the work God did in John Wesley’s heart that day. On that day Wesley’s

heart was indelibly changed, you could say on that day he experienced a circumcision of the heart.

Take a moment to reflect on your heart. Do you know Christ? Is your heart changed to reflect that you are indeed a follower of Jesus? Maybe you've never known that you don't need to do anything to first come and be saved from your sins. Well hear the Good News! Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God's love for us! You don't need to clean up to come to God. God's amazing grace can touch you right as you are, to transform and change you into a person of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you've never before chosen to begin your relationship with Jesus, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

God, thank you for allowing me to come to you as I am, a sinner in need of a Savior. Jesus, I believe you died to take my place on the cross. Holy Spirit, help me to be a changed person. I give you my heart and my life. Amen.

Or maybe today you have been a Christian for a long time but you need a circumcision of the heart. It's so easy to allow our hearts to become hardened with the forces in this world that tell us to be self-seeking, self-protecting, unkind, impatient, complacent, and angry. It's easy to give into those ways of living, but God calls us to something better. He desires for us to be His light to the nations, loving him and loving our neighbors. And so if that's you today, if you need a heart transformation, a circumcision of the heart, I invite you to pray this along

with me: Lord, I desire more of you. Jesus, I want to be like you. Holy Spirit, you are welcome in my heart to convict me where I need it, to teach me the ways of God, and transform me. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Amen.

My prayer for you and I today is that the work begun here and now with those prayers continues in the days to come. Amen.