

**Series:** To Live is Christ

**Title:** Avoiding Inferior Christian Teaching

**Text:** Philippians 3:1-11

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### **Verse 1**

For many Christians, the word “doctrine” seems like one that should be relegated to the realms of academia and the seminary. Perhaps it would help to understand that the term simply refers to “teaching.” Doctrine is merely instruction related to the truth of the Lord. In the estimation of Jesus and His apostles, doctrine (teaching) mattered. In fact, they had much to say about the subject. For our Lord, truth and teaching were at the heart of His ministry. He said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). In addition, He taught that His teaching provided the pathway to spiritual freedom — “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Though some may slight the need for Scriptural study and theological understanding, Christ Himself viewed such things as a necessity for spiritual progression. In one of His final prayers for the church, He prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

As an apostle of the Lord, Paul had a similar devotion to doctrine. One cannot read His letters without sensing a continual concern for the truth of Christ. His epistle to the Philippians was no exception. In 3:1-11, he addressed a peculiar teaching that had infiltrated the church in that city. He began his discussion on the topic by saying, “In addition, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a safeguard for you” (Philippians 3:1).

The word “finally” transitioned the flow of Paul’s writing to the doctrinal matters plaguing the church in Philippi. The term literally meant “toward the rest.” Some think the phraseology marked a transition toward the close of Paul’s letter. It is more likely that the wording signified he was moving on from general admonitions to address some specific, pressing concerns associated with the Philippian church (this seems to be the meaning in Philippians 4:8 as well).

The apostle had strong words for the doctrinal deviators in Asia Minor. For him, truth mattered. He knew that beliefs are important, because beliefs affect behavior. Doctrine is of consequence, because it impacts one’s daily life. In regard to Paul’s words to the Philippians one has noted, “This passage makes clear, however, that theology and life go together and that the antidote to poor living is proper theology.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul knew that the spiritual vivaciousness of any individual, or any church, has direct correlation to its stance in the truth of God. One cannot be spiritually healthy if his or her thinking isn’t in line with the divine realities of God’s Word. Such is seen in our text through the way Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord.” In the original language of the text, his words are in the form of a command, calling for a continued commitment to spiritual contentment. It is interesting that Paul would begin his discussion on false

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<sup>1</sup> Melick, Richard R. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. Vol. 32. The New American Commentary.* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), [CD-Rom].

doctrine with a command concerning rejoicing; however, the apostle was just in doing so. He knew that proper beliefs are the bedrock foundation for spiritual joy.

In opening his discussion on the subject of doctrine, Paul addressed his readers as, "... my brothers and sisters..." The reference to "brothers and sisters" indicated that Paul's words were aimed at the true believers in Philippi. Paul was concerned that such individuals experienced the joy of the Lord. Such joy was a theme within his letter (Philippians 1:18; 2:18; 4:4 and 4:10). As one has noted, It seems that the church was "succumbing to depression and despondency."<sup>2</sup> Spurious teaching was darkening the countenance of the church. Without a clear conception of Christ, some were becoming gloomy in their spiritual outlook. Deceptive doctrines were breeding discouragement.

In addressing the inferior teaching at Philippi, Paul said, "To write to you again about this is no trouble for me and is a protection for you." John Calvin believed that Paul had previously written to the Philippians concerning the doctrinal problems in their midst. Whatever the case, the subject was one he had addressed on previous occasions in his ministry to the church, whether through personal preaching and teaching, or through an epistle. The means through which Paul had communicated weren't what was important. The fact that he felt the need to repeat himself was. One has said, "Paul, as a true teacher, is not afraid of repetition."<sup>3</sup> Apparently the doctrinal divide was of great concern for the apostle. He wouldn't let the matter go, addressing it on multiple occasions. He knew that the church's beliefs were important, since beliefs about God, Christ, and the gospel would set the tone for the church's spiritual outlook.

According to Philippians 3:1, Paul felt the need to address doctrinal matters because of a concern for the church's "protection." In the original language of the New Testament, Paul used a term that referred to safety.<sup>4</sup> It portrayed "anything which has stability and firmness enough not to be overthrown."<sup>5</sup> As used in our text, the word revealed that Paul was concerned about the spiritual strength of the church. He knew that spiritual security, stability, and safety were only found in the solid doctrine of Christ and the apostles. To cast off restraint and chase doctrines of legalistic heretics would result in spiritual peril for Paul's readers.

## **Verse 2**

Knowing what was at stake, Paul warned the church to avoid counterfeit Christian teachings. He said, "Watch out for the dogs, watch out for the evil workers, watch out for those who mutilate the flesh" (Philippians 3:2). Notice that Paul used the phrase "watch out" three times in one verse. His reputation placed emphasis on his

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<sup>2</sup> Martin, 144.

<sup>3</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>5</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 454.

command. It conveyed a sense of urgency.<sup>6</sup> In addition, he used a present tense imperative, implying the need for habitual action. One could translate Paul's instruction as meaning, "Continually be on the lookout."<sup>7</sup>

In issuing his warning, Paul applied three labels to the doctrinal deviators at Philippi — "dogs," "evil workers," and "those who mutilate the flesh." The first was a strong term of derision within the first-century world. In first-century Palestine, Jews often referred to their Gentile counterparts with this name (Matthew 15:26). Dogs were commonly regarded as the most lowly and dirty of all animals. They were seen as a nuisance to society. One has remarked how first-century dogs were normally hungry scavengers that "roamed the country side, eating whatever they could."<sup>8</sup> Paul used the animal as a title for Jewish teachers who made circumcision necessary for salvation. They were like religious dogs prowling on churches, scavenging for converts.

Secondly, Paul referred to the false teachers as "evil workers." To use such a label in reference to a first-century Jew would have been shocking for some of Paul's readers. Jewish devotees often prided themselves on their observance of the Mosaic Law, especially in regard to the custom of circumcision. In their mind, Gentile law-breakers were the real purveyors of evil. Paul, however, felt justified in referring to the Judaizers as "evil workers," since such individuals sowed evil through their anti-gospel legalism. Because they circumvented the Lord's ordained path to true righteousness (Philippians 3:9), the doctrinal deviators actually promoted sin. Instead of doing good works, as they assumed they did, they were guilty of evil works.

By calling the false teachers "mutilators" Paul alluded to their emphasis on circumcision. The language evoked thoughts of the cutting practices involved in ancient pagan rituals. In the incident involving Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal, such mutilation was present (1 Kings 18:28). Many of Paul's original readers undoubtedly thought of that event when his letter was read. The apostle's intent was to show that the religion of the Judaizers was a false religion.

### **Verse 3**

Paul continued his exposé of false teaching by saying, "For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). It is important to note that Paul was not strictly against the practice of circumcision. At times in his ministry, he actually encouraged some of his ministry counterparts to be circumcised. He did so in order to avoid conflict with non-Christian Jews. He realized that circumcision was sometimes a cultural necessity for gospel missions (Acts 16:3).

Though Paul wasn't against the act of circumcision, he was vehemently opposed to legalistic doctrines that made it a requirement for Christian salvation or sanctification. He was well aware that the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-35) had

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<sup>6</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>7</sup> Robertson Jr. and Robertson III, 454.

<sup>8</sup> Melick, [CD-Rom].

clarified the matter for the early church. Christ's gospel was what mattered most to him. Paul wanted his disciples to remain true to the message of Christ. He did not want them to be detoured by false doctrine that made the Ceremonial Law a prerequisite for godliness.

In arguing against the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers, Paul upheld the heart transformation produced by the gospel. He did so in verse 3 by saying, "We are the circumcision." The apostle used circumcision as a metaphor for the change produced by the Christian message. In doing so, he used a first-person plural pronoun ("we") to indicate that he was included in the activity in view. His words were not intended to speak of the literal, physical act of circumcision. Instead, he intended to turn the Judaizers' teaching on its head by using their cherished doctrine in an allegorical way. He figuratively portrayed all Christians, not just males, as having been spiritually circumcised in Christ.

Paul used circumcision as a metaphor for Christian salvation elsewhere in the New Testament. When writing to the Romans, he said: "For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not something visible in the flesh. On the contrary, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter. That man's praise is not from men but from God" (Romans 2:28-29). To the Colossians, he said, "You were also circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah" (Colossians 2:11).

After using circumcision to describe the inward change that takes place at conversion, Paul next gave a three-fold description of the Christian's mode of living. He said, "We are...the ones who serve by the Spirit of God, boast in Christ Jesus, and do not put confidence in the flesh." First, Paul said believers "serve by the Spirit of God." The word "serve" referred to "worship."<sup>9</sup> Through the "Spirit of God" that indwells them at salvation (Galatians 3:2), believers are animated to live lives of worship for the Lord (Romans 12:1-2). Emphasis on the Holy Spirit was important for Paul. Since Judaizers had an unhealthy focus on fleshly things (Galatians 5:19-21), they needed to learn to live by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 22-23).

Second, Paul made mention of the means by which believers are to boast. He said God's children are to "boast in Christ Jesus." Boasting is often thought of as sinful within modern society. In Paul's day, the Greek word rendered was applied to both holy and unholy boasting. One could boast in a bad way (1 Corinthians 1:29) or a good way (1 Corinthians 1:31). Paul spoke of the good type of boasting in Philippians 3:3. Though the legalistic teachers bragged about their adherence to the Mosaic Law, Paul encouraged people to "boast in Jesus Christ." His words upheld the idea of one finding his or her confidence in the gospel of Jesus, instead of legalistic religious observances.<sup>10</sup> Paul himself engaged in such holy boasting. In closing his letter to the Galatians, a church that was also plagued by legalistic teaching concerning circumcision, Paul said, "But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the

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<sup>9</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

<sup>10</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world. For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation” (Galatians 6:14-15).

Third, Paul referred to true believers as ones who put “no confidence in the flesh.” The word translated “confidence” was sometimes viewed in a negative way amongst ancient Greeks.<sup>11</sup> As with “boast,” Paul used a term that had dual meanings. The idea behind “flesh” didn’t refer to the fallen part of humanity (1 John 2:16). As in Philippians 1:21-24, Paul’s focus was on the physical shell of the body. He knew the legalists had a faith grounded in matters related to the human body. His point was that real believers have a faith that is based in Christ.

#### **Verse 4**

Paul’s letter to the Philippians had a lot to say about bickering amongst the body of Christ (Philippians 2:14). It did so for good reason. The apostle knew there were arguments in the church concerning the subject of circumcision. He wanted believers in Asia Minor to put an end to such controversy and trust in Christ alone for salvation and sanctification. His aim was similar to the one he had when writing to Titus: “But avoid foolish debates, genealogies, quarrels, and disputes about the law, because they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9).

From personal experience, Paul knew the folly of false religion. He had once persecuted the church out of zeal for his religious beliefs (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). He was well acquainted with the temptation to place confidence in one’s earthly accolades and achievements over the cross of Christ (Acts 22:1-5). In his pre-conversion life, he trusted in his religious heritage and accomplishments for spiritual security. After his salvation experience, he found his confidence in Christ alone. In Philippians 3:4, he testified, “...although I have reasons for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he has grounds for confidence in the flesh, I have more.” In what would follow, Paul would outline seven religious accolades he possessed prior to his conversion. Each fell into two categories. The first category focused on the apostle’s religious heritage (Philippians 3:5). The second centered on his religious accomplishments (Philippians 3:6).<sup>12</sup>

#### **Verse 5**

In Philippians 3:5, Paul catalogued his pre-conversion religious heritage by saying, “...circumcised the eighth day; of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; regarding the law, a Pharisee.” The fact that Paul was “circumcised the eighth day” proved that he was a true Israelite. He was not a foreigner or proselyte who converted to Judaism. In accordance with Mosaic requirements, his birth family presented him for circumcision at the appropriate time (Leviticus 12:3).

The tribe from which Paul came (“Benjamin”) was one of the most prestigious of the twelve. It was the one that gave the nation its first king (1 Samuel 9:1). By today’s standards, being of the tribe of Benjamin was similar to one being of the Tudor family in

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<sup>11</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>12</sup> Martin, 150.

England, or the Kennedy and Bush families in the United States. Paul's ability to name his tribe also showed that he "fully belonged to the race of Israel." The ability to trace one's ancestry proved one's legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> If asked to do so, Paul "could trace his family lineage all the way back to Abraham. He was a true member of the covenant people."<sup>14</sup>

He continued his argument by noting that he was "of the nation of Israel." This standing was important. William Barclay has noted, "when the Jews wished to stress their special relationship to God in its most unique sense it was the word *Israelite* they used." On top of being "of the nation of Israel," Paul was a "Hebrew born of Hebrews." The phraseology "emphasized not only the rights and privileges belonging to the Jewish nation, but also that those who lived in the Diaspora (outside of Palestine) had remained true to the religious practices and their language."<sup>15</sup> Paul hadn't adopted Greek customs.<sup>16</sup> He still had the ability to speak the mother tongue of his forefathers.<sup>17</sup> Though many had lost their ability to speak Hebrew because of national captivities and dispersions (Nehemiah 8:8; James 1:1), Paul still spoke the language. In regard to religion and his interpretation of "the law," Paul had previously been "a Pharisee." As such, he was part of the strictest sect amongst first-century Jews.<sup>18</sup> The sect was a special group, as there were not many in Canaan, only about 6,000. As one has noted, the Pharisees were the "spiritual athletes of Judaism."<sup>19</sup>

## Verse 6

In Philippians 3:6, Paul continued his documentation of his pre-Christian religious life by saying, "regarding zeal, persecuting the church; regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless." Notice the apostle's reference to "zeal." Paul gave testimony that his zealousness for his interpretation of the Law moved him to persecute Christians. Perhaps there is no greater proof of one's zeal for his or her religion, than the willingness to persecute others because of stated beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Such intolerance is wrong and misdirected, but it is no doubt an indicator of strong religious zeal. One has remarked on the situation amongst the Roman-occupied Jews — "In the first century, Jewish men often measured their commitment to God and the nation by how they

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<sup>13</sup> Calvin, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, 660.

<sup>15</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 455.

<sup>16</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, 660.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, 151.

<sup>18</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, 660.

<sup>19</sup> Barclay, William, ed. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. Electronic ed.* (The Daily Study Bible Series. Philadelphia: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), [CD-Rom].

<sup>20</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, 660.

opposed foreign religion and rule.”<sup>21</sup> Prior to his conversion, Paul engaged in outright persecution of Christians (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2).

To end his list of past religious achievements, Paul said, “Regarding the righteousness that is in the law, blameless.” Historical records indicate that some rabbis believed one could reach a state of moral and spiritual perfection through strict observance to the law. According to Paul’s testimony, he had once believed that he had fully attained human perfection through his pre-conversion religious efforts.<sup>22</sup>

Paul’s description of his pre-conversion religious pedigree and accomplishments wasn’t an act of selfish boasting. His purpose, as one has said, “was to show that in the flesh he had more in which he could have boasted than did any of the Judaizers.”<sup>23</sup> The false teachers in Philippi were putting great weight on legalistic religion and Jewish customs. Paul could have done the same thing, but He boasted in Christ alone. He had accomplished many things in his years as a devoted Pharisee; however, he had learned that true righteousness is obtained via the gospel.

### **Verse 7**

In verse 7, Paul transitioned to talk about his experiences in Christ. He said, “But everything that was a gain to me, I have considered to be a loss because of Christ.” Once he became a Christian, Paul “considered” all of his past religious achievements as “loss because of Christ.” The word rendered “considered” was a perfect tense verb, demonstrating a completed action with continual results.<sup>24</sup> The wording for “loss” was one used in the ancient world to refer to a commercial or business loss.<sup>25</sup> Calvin has commented, “It is a similitude taken from seamen, who, when urged on by danger of shipwreck, throw everything overboard, that, the ship being lightened, they may reach the harbour in safety.”<sup>26</sup> Paul held his past religious pedigree and accomplishments in such a light.

### **Verse 8**

Now that he was a Christian, Paul’s focus was on Christ, not legalistic requirements like circumcision. He said, “More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). The knowledge of which the apostle spoke was not a mere intellectual familiarity with God’s Son; rather, it involved “personal knowledge and

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<sup>21</sup> Melick, [CD-Rom].

<sup>22</sup> Martin, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Walvoord and Zuck, 659.

<sup>24</sup> Robertson, [CD-Rom].

<sup>25</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 455.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, 94.

acquaintance with Christ.”<sup>27</sup> True religion is marked by such an experimental knowledge. Jesus made reference to such realities when He said, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent—Jesus Christ” (John 17:3).

Because of Jesus, Paul “suffered the loss of all things.” That is, he had relinquished all of his worldly achievements, accolades, and accomplishments. Because of the change he had experienced in Christ, he considered such things as “filth.” In the first century world, the word referred “to such things as a half-eaten corpse...lumps of manure or human excrement...or to the scraps or leavings of a feast, the food thrown away from the table.”<sup>28</sup> Judaizers were pressuring the church at Philippi to accept legalistic doctrines. According to Paul, the true believers should have regarded such teachings as dung.

### **Verse 9**

Paul’s new spiritual aim was to grow in the righteousness of Christ. He said, “...and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith” (Philippians 3:9). In the Lord’s economy, a right relationship with God is always based upon a righteous standing before God. See Genesis 15:6.

Through previous remarks in the letter to the Philippians, Paul showed that he was driven by a desire to possess such a relationship with God (Philippians 1:11). The false teachers of Philippi would have boasted of a similar desire. They frequently talked about their zeal for sinless perfection. However, their understanding of how to achieve such righteousness was misguided. They looked to mechanical observances of the Law for righteousness. Paul looked to Christ. In particular, he sought righteousness “through faith in Christ.” Christian salvation and a right standing with God, always comes through faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

Paul’s words in Philippians 3:9 should not be interpreted to mean that he thought the law was evil. He had a healthy regard for the place of the law in God’s plan of salvation (Romans 3:31). However, he wanted his readers to know that the law had no ability to impart enduring righteousness. Faith in Christ, not obedience to legalistic commands, was what the Philippians needed. Paul’s teaching in our current text was in concert with what he told the Romans: “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe, since there is no distinction” (Romans 3:21-22).

### **Verse 10**

In Philippians 3:10, Paul said, “My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.” As

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<sup>27</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 455.

<sup>28</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 455.

before (Philippians 3:8), Paul's conception of knowing Christ didn't involve a mere mental assent to a set of facts. In using the word translated "know," he had an experiential type of knowledge in mind. Commenting on the meaning of the word, one has said, "The word implies a personal relation between the knower and the known, involving the influence of the object of knowledge upon the knower."<sup>29</sup> The meaning for Paul, as one has said, was that the apostle wanted to know Christ "in a life-shaping way."<sup>30</sup>

Along with knowing Jesus, Paul wanted to be acquainted with "the power of His resurrection." His admission indicated that there is power to be experienced in the Christian life which is caused by the resurrection.<sup>31</sup> Such life-transforming energy is unleashed initially at the moment of salvation, it continues with believers throughout their experience of Christian living, and it has its culmination at the end of time — when Christians will experience the resurrection of the dead (Romans 8:10-11). Jesus' victory over death gives dynamic power that operates throughout the life of the Christian.<sup>32</sup>

Along with the experience of resurrection power, Paul wanted to embrace the "fellowship of His sufferings." See 2 Corinthians 4:10 and 6:4-10 for a description of some of Paul's sufferings. The apostle knew that tribulations on behalf of Christ serve the purpose of accomplishing the Lord's sovereign purposes (Philippians 1:12-13 and Romans 5:3-4). Through what he suffered, Paul knew he would be conformed more and more into the image of Christ; thus, he would obtain a deeper degree of practical righteousness, a type that could not be found through the man-made rules of the Judaizers.

Finally, Paul wanted to be "conformed to" Jesus' "death." His words did not refer to a literal participation in Christ's crucifixion. Obviously, Paul couldn't share in the atonement. The issue at hand was the figurative dying to sin and self that takes place as one trusts in Christ's atonement (Romans 6:11; Galatians 2:20; and Philippians 1:20-21). In one of His hallmark teachings, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Paul was undoubtedly familiar with the aforementioned teaching from Jesus, and he likely had it in mind as he penned the words of Philippians 3:10.

### **Verse 11**

Paul continued his train of thought from verse 10 into verse 11, saying, "...assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead" (Philippians 3:11). The apostle's ultimate hope in life was "the resurrection from among the dead." His words revealed that there is a "not yet quality" about the Christian life. As long as they live on Earth, believers anticipate the final deliverance from sin and death (1

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<sup>29</sup> Rogers Jr and Rogers III, 455.

<sup>30</sup> Melick, [CD-Rom].

<sup>31</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 455.

<sup>32</sup> Barclay, [CD-Rom].

Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58). They realize that full emancipation from sin cannot be achieved through legalistic observances.

True believers await the day in which they will be radically renewed and made free from sin. While the false teachers of Philippi may have boasted in law-keeping, they were ignorant of the true righteousness available in Christ. Paul knew that there was an other-worldly form of holiness available in the gospel. It could not be obtained through religion, ritual, or rules. It could only be obtained through faith in Christ. Those who had experienced Christ's righteousness had hope of one day experiencing it fully at the resurrection of the dead.