

with them and to guard them from those who might come into their community with errant teachings.

... *and it is a safeguard for you.* – It is the truth that sets us free and it is the truth that guards us, for it is by knowing the truth that we are enabled to stand against the schemes of the evil one and thereby to be living testimonies of God’s truth to a watching world.

In the first chapter of this epistle Paul does give a general warning to the Philippian community regarding those who oppose the true message of the gospel as presented by Paul.

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by *your* opponents — which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that *too*, from God. (Phil 1:27–28)

It may well be that there was an increased effort among the false teachers, seeking to dismantle the true apostolic message and to persuade followers of Yeshua to abandon their confession of faith in Yeshua. Whatever the circumstances, Paul was led by the Spirit to warn the Philippian believers not to be led astray by those who are seeking to undermine the true message of the Scriptures, all of which point to Yeshua as the promised Messiah and Savior.

## **2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;**

*Beware of the dogs* – Having admonished the believers in Yeshua who comprised the Philippian community to “rejoice in the Lord,” i.e., to recognize and glory in the salvation which Yeshua had secured for those who had come to saving faith in Him, Paul now gives a clear and emphatic warning regarding false teachers who would seek to lead them astray.

He skillfully constructs his warning in rhythmic and poetic fashion, no doubt so that it could be easily remembered and followed. He does this first by repeating “beware” (βλέπετε, *plepete*) three times. The word itself is the verb βλέπω (*blepō*), “to see, observe, to pay close atten-

tion.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the fact that this imperative or command is repeated three times shows the great emphasis Paul places upon this admonition and that he expected his readers and us to appreciate the gravity of his words. Moreover, the three designations grouped with “beware” all begin with the same Greek letter *kappa* (*κ*), *κύνας* (“dogs”), *κακούς* (“evil”), and *κατατομήν* (“mutilation, cutting in pieces”), which gives the line a poetic sound and therefore aids in recalling it to one’s memory.

He uses three designations for people about whom he gives a stern warning to the believing community in Philippi. The first designation is “dogs” (*κύων*, *κυῖον*, *κυνός*, *κυνος*), a word of derision used in the Greco-Roman world to denote persons who were transients, indecent, vagabonds, etc. This is because in the Greco-Roman world, packs of dogs roamed the country-side as well as in some environs of the cities, eating human filth and garbage, and even attacking people.

It is clear that Paul chose such a negative term to describe “Judaizers,” those who were teaching that only ethnically born Jews or Gentiles who underwent an “official conversion” to Judaism (thus giving them “approved Jewish identity,”) were received by God as His people. Their teaching was that only Jews and proselytes who maintained a “Torah-observant lifestyle” could be assured of God’s favor, blessing, and final salvation. Such teaching was absolutely contrary to the truth God revealed from the beginning, for even Abraham was justified (declared righteous) in God’s sight on the basis of his faith in God’s promised Redeemer and not on the basis of his good works.

And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:5–6)

By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Gen 22:16–18)

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1 BDAG, “βλέπω,” p. 178.

Here we see a perfect example, teaching us that it was Abraham's faith that enabled him to obey God, even in obeying the most difficult of God's commandments, to offer up his own son, Isaac. Of course, Isaac was spared, but Abraham was willing to do whatever God's instructed him to do, and such obedience is the fruit of genuine faith in God and His promises, as the author of Hebrews makes clear:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb 11:17-19)

Paul likewise establishes this foundational truth in Romans, that to be received as righteous by God is gained through faith in Yeshua's substitutionary sacrifice and not through works.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS COUNTED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.... (Rom 4:1-5)

Surely the person who has exercised saving faith in Yeshua will evidence this by living a righteous life, but conformity to the righteousness of God in one's life is the fruit of saving faith, not the means of gaining right standing before the Almighty. Thus, for Paul to use the designation "dogs" identifies the very debased character of those who were teaching that one could garner God's approval by doing what they considered to be "righteous deeds." Isaiah spoke to this matter:

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Is 64:6 [Heb. 64:5])

Apart from true faith in God and His Redeemer, Yeshua, all that mankind considers as "righteous deeds" are recorded in the divine

court as equivalent to “a filthy garment.”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, let us be diligent to recognize that those who claim “Jewish ethnicity” to be the basis for being received as righteous before God are teaching a falsehood. Moreover, whether Jew or non-Jew, all who are “in Messiah Yeshua” are equally loved by God and adopted into His family as eternally His chosen ones. One’s physical identity or ethnicity does not garner greater or lessor standing before God. All who are “in Messiah” are equally redeemed and loved by the Father and kept by the Ruach.

...*beware of the evil workers*, – When one consults the leading Christian commentators on this phrase, it is not uncommon to find that some of them consider this designation to reference those who were teaching that the followers of Yeshua were still to live in accordance with the Torah. In describing those Paul designates as “evil workers,” Fee notes:

In trying to make Gentiles submit to Torah observance, Judaizers (and their contemporary counterparts, the legalists) do not work “righteousness” at all but evil, just as those in the Psalter work iniquity because they have rejected God’s righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

But the Scriptures clearly teach that the Torah is good and a great gift of God to His people.

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. (Ps 19:7–9)

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matt 5:18)

So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Rom 7:12)

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. (1Jn 5:3)

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1 The Hebrew has *וְכַבֵּד עֲדִים כְּלִצְדֻקְתֵינוּ*, “like a menstrual cloth.”

2 Fee, *Philippians* in *IVP NT Commentary*, p. 133.

So what does Paul mean by the designation “evil workers” in our text? In the immediate context, sandwiched as it is between “dogs” and “false circumcision,” the meaning must center upon those in Paul’s day who were teaching that having “Jewish lineage” gave a person a higher and more prestigious standing the *ekklesia* of Yeshua. Those who held such a position most likely also were teaching that Gentile believers ought to consider undergoing a recognized “conversion” in order to garner “Jewish” status within the believing community and thus forever renouncing their previous status as “Gentiles.”

But of course, to do so not only neglects the promise made to Abraham, that “in your seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed” (Gen 18:18; 22:18) but also diminishes what it means to be “in Messiah,” that is, to have been redeemed by His life, death, resurrection, and intercession through the gift of faith, confessing that no one is able to effect one’s own righteous standing before God who is infinitely holy. Or to put it another way, to say that being “in Messiah” is not enough. But Paul makes it clear that to be “in Messiah” is to be fully accepted by the Almighty and to have a new and eternal relationship with God.

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Cor 5:17)

The “old things” that have “passed away” are the ungodly goals after which the unbeliever strives. These are replaced by an ongoing and maturing desire to bless God and to honor Him in all aspects of one’s life.

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1Cor 10:31)

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Yeshua, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Col 3:17)

...*beware of the false circumcision*; – Paul uses a word here for “false circumcision” which is found nowhere else in the Apostolic Scriptures nor even in the Lxx. The Greek word meaning “circumcision” is περιτομή (*peritomē*) which is made up of the preposition “around” (περί, *peri*) and “cutting” τομός (*tomos*). Paul has coined the word κατατομή (*katatomē*) which literally means “to cut into pieces,” “to mutilate.” His point is obvious: those who teach that circumcision, the cutting away of the

flesh, is what gives them right-standing with God are actually viewed by God as having been dismembered! For the very reason God gave Abraham the commandment of circumcision was to teach the lesson that one cannot rely upon the flesh, that is, one's own works and ability, to bring about God's blessing and plan. For when Sarah was unable to conceive, she gave her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham and it was by her that Ishmael was conceived and born. Thus Ishmael was a symbol of what the "flesh" produces. In contrast, having been promised that God would give Abraham a son birthed by Sarah, God then gave the covenant sign of circumcision to emphasize that the promised son would not come by way of the flesh but by the miraculous intervention of God Himself.

Thus, circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant forever teaches that God's ultimate and eternal blessing cannot be "earned" by fallen mankind, that is, by "good works" as man defines them, but by faith alone in the Messiah and His redeeming work. Such faith, itself the gift of God (Eph 4:32), always produces a life that honors the Lord by becoming more and more obedient to Him and in giving Him the honor and glory He deserves, thus being a testimony to others of His saving power.

Paul uses the term "false circumcision," to describe someone who believes their status as a Jew or acquired "Jewish status" through the man-made ritual of conversion, secures their eternal acceptance before God. But rather than having their fleshly status as gaining them acceptance before God, all of their "righteous deeds" are ruled as worthless, "cut off," in God's judgment.

The application of Paul's words in this verse are clear: we must never think that "religious association," i.e., having a membership in a given church or being a "good person," etc., are the means of gaining right-standing before God. Only the penalty for sin, paid by the very death and life of Yeshua, received by faith, brings the unspeakable gift of God's forgiveness and forever knits the believer's life together with the Almighty. This, together with Yeshua's own intercession as well as the presence of the indwelling Spirit, enables the believer more and more to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to give God increasing glory as one matures in their life of faith.

Moreover, the fact that both Jew and Gentile are united in the family of God means that we can rejoice and be glad that every nation and nationality will inevitably be represented in the body of Messiah. We are one in Messiah, and we therefore must strive to demonstrate this oneness as we all seek to become more and more like Yeshua, even as

Paul now teaches in verse three.

**3 – for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Messiah Yeshua and put no confidence in the flesh,**

*for we are the [true] circumcision,* The NASB adds the adjective “true” which may be implied in the Greek but does not directly translate a word in the Greek. However, that the word “circumcision” has the definite article (ἡ περιτομή, *hey peritomē*) does warrant the understanding that Paul is here emphasizing the reality of what circumcision, as given to Abraham, was to teach. And that is this: that being part of the eternal “family of God” cannot be achieved by one’s own works but only by coming to faith in Yeshua Who alone has secured right-standing with the Father for those who come to Him by faith. This, as we noted earlier, was the very revelation of God to Abraham. Thus, those whom God calls to Himself are drawn by His grace to admit their utter inability to please Him in their own strength and willingly receive His gift of salvation, a gift that through the work of the Ruach transforms their lives to be living testimonies of His grace and saving power. As Paul teaches us in his letter to Titus:

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, whom He poured out upon us richly through Yeshua Messiah our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Tit 3:5–7)

The application of this is obvious: as we live out our life of faith we must always confess and affirm that all we are and all we hope to be are dependent upon God’s unfailing mercy and power. Any and all successes we have in honoring Him in our lives must accrue to His glory and praise.

*...who worship in the Spirit of God* – The word here translated “worship” is the Greek verb λατρεύω (*latreuō*) which can mean “to worship” but which, in the Lxx, is very often used of the Levitical “service” in the Temple. Thus, we are reminded that true “worship” also includes genuinely “serving” the Lord by caring for one another within the community of faith and thereby expressing the very love of God which sustains and motivates us to serve Him in all aspects of our lives.

The phrase “in the Spirit of God” may likewise be understood to

mean “by the Spirit of God,” that is, the power, wisdom, and strength given by the indwelling Spirit of God, enabling the believer to serve others well. As the prophet brought the word of God to Zerubbabel:

Then he said to me, “This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel saying, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts. (Zech 4:6)

...and glory in Messiah Yeshua – The Greek word (*καυχάομαι, kauxaomai*), translated by the NASB as “glory,” can also carry the sense of “boast.” To “glory” or “boast” in the Lord is to give Him credit for all that is good in our lives, including the sustaining power He gives to enable His children to persevere even through the difficult times encountered in this fallen world. Surely this ought to become the very goal of our lives, to glory in the goodness of Yeshua and to let others know of His greatness. We are thus reminded that “Messiah” means “the anointed One,” emphasizing His power and sovereign control, while “Yeshua” emphasizes that He is the One Who saves, both now and for eternity.

...and put no confidence in the flesh, – This is a fitting conclusion to the previous verses, for it summarizes what a life given over to the worship and praise of Yeshua should be. The life of the believer in Yeshua is not based upon one’s ethnic status nor one’s own privileges that such a status might afford a person in the worldly circles of man’s religions. But rather the life of a true believer in Yeshua is marked by knowing and living out the truth, confessing that “all that I am and all I hope to be is dependent upon God’s grace and promises.” For it is by His strength that we live and move, and have our being.

...for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’ (Acts 17:28)