

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
The Unnecessary Checklist
Philippians 3

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My grandpa Al was a person who *fascinated* me. (picture) He was the person who jumped and pounded his fists on the pulpit, and amazingly conducted church choirs, *a capela only*, into his 80's. He never seemed to run out of energy. He would tell me all about his walks, and how he stopped at benches to rest his legs at predictable spots every time, to navigate his nearly debilitating sciatica. He would often say, "Carry on!" And growing up, I took it as an encouragement to keep working hard at whatever I had set my mind to. But grandpa was not merely trying to encourage me; he was quoting Paul in his own words from Philippians 3:14: Carry on, toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus. He wrote "Philippians 3:14" in the corner of *every* birthday card. Grandpa *loved* Philippians, and I can't help but smile as we begin this exploration of chapter 3.

Paul's letter, of course, was not written in chapters and verses. (Those were added later for our reference.) His was a letter, written in some ways like many of ours, was written out of love for his recipient. Paul loved the church in Philippi, and felt responsible for them. He was, after all, the one who first brought the good news of Jesus to Philippi. He wanted to *encourage* them in the face of persecution, amidst a myriad of voices, calling them to believe and do something else. He could speak

from personal experience, because he was imprisoned for his faith, yet had *not only* an incredible ministry while in chains, but also an increasing *intimacy* with Jesus.

So let's get into the text! Chapter 3 is both a warning and an encouragement. Paul is aware of some who are tempting the church to believe that it is necessary to be circumcised. In verse 2, Paul uses some fun language, "Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is *we* who are the circumcision, *we* who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3:2 - 4).

Now, in the book of Acts, the church had a very serious conversation about circumcision. Jews were the first to become Christian, so the first Christians were all circumcised. But as the good news spread to the Gentiles, to non-Jews, the question then became, "Do they also need to be circumcised?" They reasoned that since it is through the *grace of Jesus alone* that anyone is saved, it was unnecessary to make it more difficult for the Gentiles who turned to God (Acts 15:11, 19). In short, their answer was a resounding, "No, circumcision is *not* necessary!"

With the Philippians, Paul circles back to that determination made in Acts, and confirms with the church that they don't need to add *anything* to their faith in order to make it "valid." In verses 4 - 6, Paul gives his reasoning - his story. From before his birth to his adult life, Paul did everything that a person of God *should* do - and be. He was Jewish by birth, and born of the tribe of Benjamin, a royal line. He was circumcised on the eighth day. He became a Pharisee, a man who lived strictly according to the Law of Moses and did everything in his power to obey it. He believed so strongly that God's truth was *not* revealed through Jesus, so he

persecuted the church with *zeal*. He believed that he was absolutely right and justified in himself, until he had an encounter with Jesus, which knocked him off his horse and caused him to go blind. He recognized that he had been wrong; Jesus is the self-revelation of God and the Person through whom salvation is given.

Paul had been and done *everything* that he could to please God, yet it all meant nothing. Paul had believed that all of these things, these sacrifices, this obedience and allegiance, had really accumulated to something, to attaining God's pleasure. He thought he had filled God's "star chart," but he came to realize to none of that meant *anything*; it was all *garbage*. And *more* than that, it was a *waste* of his time. As Paul writes in verse 7, "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

What freedom! *Nothing* can be done to attain God's pleasure, *nothing!*

For many of us, we nod in agreement, because this is something that we've heard *many* times before. We are saved by *grace* through faith, and this is not some work of our own. It is a gift of God, *not* by works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:8 – 9). The salvation piece, many of us can readily agree upon. But if we really think about it, we might have some trouble believing that God's *favor* is not contingent upon what we do.

It can become like a checklist. Have I prayed today? Check. Have I read Scripture lately? Check. Have I been kind to others? Mostly. I'll give it a check. Did I give to the church or a non-profit this month? Check. Have I reasonably shared my possessions with others? Check. Have I spent my time well? If you exclude Saturday's Netflix binge, check.

I hope that you don't hear me exempting myself from this checklist. I do it too, and frankly, it feels really good to think of all of the good or benevolent things I have done. I'm sure you feel it too! We finish our day with a smile on our faces, assured that God must be smiling, too.

But Paul reminds the church, and reminds us, that *nothing* we do can gain God's favor. So why do we act like it does? Why do we feel this inherent need to fill the checklist?

One reason is that we desire to believe that we really *aren't* so bad, so sinful. The idea being if my good outweighs my bad, maybe there *isn't* an inherent problem within me. Maybe I *am* good and *don't* need anyone else.

If you've ever tried to live a day without sinning, you will come face-to-face with the truth: "What [we] do is not the good [we] want to do; no, the evil [we] do not want to do – this [we] keep on doing" (Rom 7:19). We can't help ourselves. Every *single* one of us is caught in that same egocentric cycle. You and I are sinners, and no matter how old we get, number one will always be the one with the thumbs pointing back. It is *tremendously* humbling to come face-to-face with ourselves – our selfish, base, dark, sinful selves. We would rather not do it; we don't want to believe that *that* is a part of us.

Another reason we desire to fill this checklist, to gain God's favor, is because we want to increase pleasure and decrease pain. From experience, we have learned that generally, if we are good and kind to people, they will be good and kind back to us. It becomes impossible *not* to extend that thinking to God. If I am generous, kind, show love toward others, am disciplined with my walk with Jesus, watch these worship

services, won't God be pleased with me and give me an easier, better life? If I am good, God will be good to me, and I will have a much more enjoyable life. Tit for tat.

But Scripture never promises us "tit for tat." It instead offers plenty of examples of the selfish younger brother receiving honor and inheritance, of someone who was healed because of his *friends'* faith, of enemies appointed by God to teach His people a lesson, and the list goes on...There is no guarantee of a "good" and simple life for following Jesus.

My dad once pastored a congregation who aspired to reach "the good life" on this side of eternity. They generally believed that if you do good and have enough faith, you will receive good from God. A woman in the congregation became sick with cancer. And someone circulated a letter, stating that she must not have great faith, because God would never have allowed the cancer if she had great faith.

Friends, this is *so far* from the promises of God, *so far* from the truth of Scripture! We *do not* deserve the favor of God or good things to come to us because we have done some good things. You and I deserve the punishment that Jesus received. But thanks be to God, that in His love for you and for me, He sent Jesus to do the good that you and I could *never* do, to make us right with God.

This is why Paul says that everything he was and everything he had done was meaningless, garbage, a *waste of time*. "What is more, [he considered] everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord, for whose sake [he had] lost all things" (Phil 3:8). More than anything, Paul desired to know Jesus. He wanted to know him intimately, sharing in his sufferings and death, and so knowing the power of his resurrection. *This* was why Paul could rejoice in his

sufferings and not fear, even death itself. Everything else faded into the background; his goal was Jesus. So he encouraged the Philippian church, as they were facing persecution, to be like him, to focus on the singular goal of knowing Jesus.

There is a woman at St. Tim's who is a great inspiration to me. She came to know Jesus as an adult, and *exudes* joy. She is not the person who would make herself the center of attention, so you likely have not heard her story of coming to faith. I'd like you to hear her humble story. (play video)

Like Paul, Holly's story of coming to faith in Jesus was not a simple story; it was a path paved with suffering *and* with joy. And yet, you can hear it in her voice and see it on her expression – there is *nothing* that she would trade – no pain and no relationship – for knowing Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the ultimate prize, and the *only* prize worth striving for.

Press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of you. Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, press on, *carry on*, toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus. Amen.