

Defining Faith and Righteousness

Philippians 3:4b-14 (April 3, 2022)

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⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Historical Context

Just two verses earlier Paul had warned about "the dogs" and "the circumcision". The target of his attack is not so much Jews as Jewish Christians, who dispute Paul's legitimacy and object to his attitude to scripture. They demanded that scripture and its commands were infallible and saw Paul as watering down God's word in the interests of winning people to his way. It was cheap evangelism, selling the gospel short. Paul, for his part, saw such fundamentalism as one of the very things which stood in the way of true faith and from which people needed to be liberated. Paul is not always exemplary in his handling of such conflicts. They generated a lot of heat, both in his day and in the ministry of Jesus - just as they often do today.

Theme: Defining Faith and Righteousness

We need to clarify what Paul does **not** mean by "faith." It does **not** mean adherence to some cognitive or behavioral formula that specifies what we are to think or do, even when it contradicts our best sense of what is true and just. Rather, "faith" has to do with fidelity or loyalty to the way of life God's promises open up for us—a way of life characterized by holding fast to God's promise of unconditional goodness and mercy, precisely when we are in the midst of what appears to be a precarious future or an irreversible past.

In turn, the "righteousness" that comes through faith does **not** refer to some kind of legal merit, whether that be something we achieve by our own effort or something forensically declared to us as if in a law court. Rather, "righteousness," as defined by its usage in scripture, has to do with living in such a way that we embody God's mercy and justice, as exemplified, for instance, by how we care for those around us, especially those who are poor and vulnerable, and thus are not in a position to reward us for our good work.