

Sermon Draft

Text: Philippians 3:(4b–7) 8–14

Sermon: “Happy Lent”

A man once confessed to his pastor, “I don’t particularly like Lent, but I love Christmas and Easter.” After a brief pause, the pastor replied, “I don’t particularly enjoy Lent either, but I need it.” We all need it.

The forty days of Lent are “a holy season of prayerful and penitential reflection. Our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. From ancient times the season of Lent has been kept as a time of special devotion, self-denial, and humble repentance born of a faithful heart that dwells confidently on His Word and draws from it life and hope” (“Ash Wednesday with Optional Imposition of Ashes,” *LSB Altar Book*, p 483). We reflect on God’s Law and on our failures, sins, and mortality. We also fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the pure and holy Lamb of God, whose suffering, sacrifice, and death saves us from the winter darkness and death of our unrighteousness.

The word *enjoy* requires an object. We don't enjoy joy. That is like saying, "I'm in love with being in love." Love requires an object outside of oneself, or it is nothing more than selfish narcissism. Thus, real love says, "I love *my wife*," "I love *my children*," or "I love *Jesus*." Likewise, one can say, "I found joy in winning the race," or "I found great joy in seeing the rescue party coming through the woods the day I was hopelessly lost and near death," or "I enjoyed hearing the doctor say, 'Good news, we found a cure. You will not die but live!'"

The apostle Paul gave thanks as he remembered his congregation in the city of Philippi, and he encouraged them to "***rejoice in the Lord***" (1:3–4; 3:1). On this last Sunday in Lent, as your pastor, I also give thanks to my God for you and encourage you to rejoice in the Lord as you heed Paul's repeated admonitions.

In the verses just prior to our text from Philippians Paul admonishes, first, to "***beware!***" then to put our confidence in Christ, and, ultimately, to press on. Beware of putting your confidence in works of the flesh, the righteousness that comes from the law.

Beware of the Judaizers who put their confidence in their own works of the flesh. Yes, we still have Judaizers today in the Christian church.

“Beware of the dogs” (v 2). Paul is not talking about the sweet, cuddly family pet, the faithful dog who watches and protects the children. He is warning the children about vicious “pit bulls” who bite and maim the unexpected. The flesh is bloodied. The skin is torn. Many of us have childhood memories of the stray or feared neighborhood dog. Paul is not opposed to the proper use of circumcision as prescribed by the Lord. He is vehemently opposed to those who demand Gentiles be circumcised and obey the Old Testament ceremonial law in order to become true, full Christians.

“Beware of evildoers” (v 2). In 2 Corinthians 11:13, Paul refers to Judaizers as evil workers because they disguise themselves as apostles of Christ but are false prophets whose deeds will expose them.

“Beware of those who mutilate their flesh” (v 2). Again, when circumcision is turned into a good work upon which to base one’s certainty of righteousness and salvation, it becomes a perverted mutilation, that is, “another Gospel.”

What does a Judaizer look like today? There are many denominations, sects, and religious movements that share a common theology and practice with the first-century Judaizers: Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, The Worldwide Church of God (which published *The Plain Truth* magazine), Zionists, and Holiness denominations. The spirit of the Judaizers is also alive in pietism, rationalism, and decision theology.

Rather than listing all such groups, it is more helpful to follow the apostle Paul’s admonition to recognize rubbish when we see it and reject anyone who tells us to put our hope and confidence in our own works and inner desires rather than solely in the righteousness of Christ. Paul’s clear articulation of the pure Gospel should be used to test all teachings that come our way.

What is at stake is eternal salvation—heaven and hell itself.

Airports repeatedly issue verbal warnings over the loudspeaker such as, “Anyone seeing anything suspicious, please notify airport security.” “Seeing” is the key word. If you see an abandoned suitcase or nervous-looking individual, you’re to inform the authorities.

In Philippians 3 and elsewhere, Paul repeatedly issues a warning to watch out for dogs, workers of evil, and people with mutilated flesh. Harsh words, but he’s warning about people who are intent on destruction worse than a terrorist bomber. They infiltrate the Lord’s Church with faith-destroying lies that will result in eternal destruction. “Watch out!” They can be seen, but like many modern-day terrorists they can be very clever and difficult to identify until one listens carefully to what they’re saying. The primary organ for detecting false teachers is the ear. Thus, Paul is saying, “Watch, watch, watch and listen, listen, listen.” He then teaches the Philippians and us how to listen with theological discernment so that we can identify the enemies of Christ and the Gospel.

Rather, put your confidence in the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, that is, in the righteousness of God (vs 8–11). The righteous Christ took our best efforts all dismal failures to the cross. Therefore, we count all our righteousness, our good works, and intentions as loss and as rubbish, and we rejoice in the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. We have been baptized into Jesus' death, our sins washed away, and the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us so that God now counts us righteous.

Having obtained this righteousness of God, press on toward the certain hope of the resurrection (vs 11–14). Why is it that like Paul, we still strain under the guilt and burden of sin? We sit in the pew throughout the Lenten season, and we will be here again during Holy Week. We sing and pray with other faithful Christians, yet in our heart, where no one can see, we are ashamed. We acknowledge this in the confession of sins: “I confess that I have sinned against You this day. Some of my sin I know—the thoughts and words and deeds of which I am ashamed, but some is known only to You” (*LSB*, p 254).

First of all, remember this is a common confession. It is common to all of here. All of us are making this same confession. Second, the apostle Paul also confesses this with us. He personally tells the congregation in Philippi and our congregation today that he has not yet obtained the final resurrection from the dead on the Last Day, when he will be raised in perfect holiness. He makes it clear he is not already perfect (v 12). Paul is describing the sinner-saint dichotomy. We are counted totally righteous by grace through faith in Jesus and yet continue to sin.

Paul describes his own struggle in Romans 7: ***“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*** (Romans 7:15, 19, 24–25).

With Paul and all those around us who have been baptized in Christ, into his death and resurrection, and have been clothed with Christ's righteousness, we press on toward the certain hope of the resurrection. Paul compares this to a demanding race in which sin and all the suffering it brings will end at the glorious finish line of the final resurrection, the resurrection that churches around the world celebrate together on Easter Sunday.

In our text Paul compares the life of the Christian to a race. Spectacular slow-motion videos from the Winter Olympics cross-country skiing or from Summer track and field show athletes straining forward toward the finish line after totally expending themselves throughout the race. The joy they feel is beyond description. To a great extent, those who witness the race from the grandstands share in the joy. However, they remain only observers and cannot fully grasp the exhilaration of the athletes themselves.

Each Lenten season is like a portion of the marathon of the Christian life. Then comes the finish line. There is nothing like the joy of the Divine Service on Easter Sunday. Those who've actually run the Lenten race through serious participation in the Sunday and weekday liturgies and through personal repentance and spiritual reflection are blessed with joy that surpasses that of the person who only shows up on Easter Sunday, similar to the person who merely switches on the television in time to view the agony and ecstasy of an Olympic race from his easy chair.

We don't enjoy Lent in the same way we enjoy the Resurrection of Our Lord on Easter Sunday. But it is a joy unlike any other, a very profound joy in God's mercy to us. O come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, ***“who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God”*** (Hebrews 12:2). O come, let us enjoy Lent and Holy Week, and in two weeks, let us enjoy the celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord on Easter Day. Amen