

Rethinking Your Religion

A Study of Philippians 3:1-11

Characteristic of Completeness: Salvation by Grace

Big Idea: Lose your religion.

Related Scriptures: Matthew 23:25-27; John 6:47; Acts 15:1-2; Romans 2:28-29; 3:21-28; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:8-9

Introduction:

- A. I suspect ► Karl Marx was right about religion. In 1843, the famous social, political, and economic theorist¹ wrote ► of religion: “It is the opium of the people.”²

Marx was onto something. It seems to me that religion comes from people, not God. Religion is a human construct, not a divine revelation. And if it's people and not God who invented religion, they must have reasons. It seems to me the most plausible reason is that religion somehow makes people feel better about themselves. In that way, religion is indeed “the opium of the people.”

But is it good to have a bunch of people on religious opium—all doped up, addicted, and out of touch with reality? I think not. People on opium can be dangerous. Dangerous to themselves. Dangerous to others.

And so, I think religious Christians can be dangerous people.

When I say religious, I don't mean serious or devout. Some Christians are quite serious about their faith, but they're not religious at all. It's not the devout Christians who are dangerous; it's the religious ones.

And so, to all you who call yourselves Christians, the big idea of my message this morning is ► this: Lose your religion.

- B. This idea is not original with me. It's not even original with Marx. It goes back much further. It goes back to the first century and the Apostle Paul in the Bible.

If you're feeling a little uncomfortable about the thought of losing your religion, you're not alone. Some religious folks in Paul's day got pretty uncomfortable when he suggested that they lose their religion. They stoned him. And not with opium.

Our biblical text for the week is ► Philippians 3:1-11. Here Paul speaks of religion. Granted, Paul doesn't use the word, “religion” in the text, but he does describe religious Christians, and he tells us they are dangerous. We should beware of them.

¹ *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Melanie Perry, 6th ed., s.v. “Marx, Karl,” (New York: Larousse plc, 1997).

² Available from http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium_of_the_People; Internet; accessed 17 October 2006.

- C. Before he describes the religious Christians, Paul provides a transitional statement in ► Verse 1:

^{NAU} Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

1. The word, ► “finally” makes it sound like Paul is wrapping up his letter, but he’s not. The Greek word could simply be translated, “so then.”³ Besides, we all know that when a preacher says “finally” he’s not really done.
2. The idea of ► rejoicing reaches back to Philippians 2:17-18, where Paul speaks of the joy of offering oneself in the sacrificial service of Christ.⁴
3. The idea of ► writing the same things again looks ahead to Philippians 3:2-11 as a review of what Paul had already taught the Philippians previously, most likely in person.⁵
4. The idea that what he is about to say is ► a safeguard foreshadows the danger of religious Christians.

- I. We ► learn a great deal about religious Christians in Verses 2-6.

- A. First ► comes the strongly worded warning about them in Verse 2. Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision

This threefold warning probably does not represent three different groups of people; rather, it describes three distinguishing characteristics of a single religious group.⁶

1. When Paul says, ► “beware the false circumcision,” he provides the clearest clue as to who he has in mind. He is referring to people who believe that circumcision is required in order to be saved, in order to receive eternal life, in order to be a true Christian.
 - a. We learn about such people in ► Acts 15:1-2, where it says,

³ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 80.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 347.

⁵ Carson, 81; O’Brien, 352.

⁶ O’Brien, 353-354.

^{NAU} Acts 15:1 Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And . . . Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them . . .

The reason Paul had great dissension and debate with these people and the reason he issues a warning about them in our text is that they’re doing what religious people do: They’re trying to earn God’s acceptance based on doing what they think will be pleasing to God. They’re trying to be good enough for God by performing certain duties like circumcision. The reasoning of religion is this: If I’m good enough, I’ll go to heaven.

- b. Circumcision ► was instituted by God in the Old Testament as an outward sign of a covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. Circumcision was a mark of Judaism; but God never intended it to be a condition of salvation.

When Christ came, many Jews believed in Him as the Messiah. As such they became Christians. In fact, the early church was predominantly Jewish. Jesus was a Jew. The twelve apostles were all Jews. The first converts were Jews. All circumcised.

Later, as Gentiles began to believe in Jesus for eternal life, some Jewish Christians got to thinking, “Wait a minute, these Gentiles aren’t circumcised. In order to be a Christian, you’ve got to be circumcised.” The people who thought this way were called Judaizers. The Judaizers did what religious people do: They added conditions to salvation that don’t belong.

- c. This was of particular concern in the Philippian church because it was made up of mostly uncircumcised Gentiles—Greeks and Romans, not Jews. Paul had communicated to them the good news of Jesus Christ: By His death and resurrection for our sins, Jesus Christ alone promises eternal life to all who simply believe Him for it. The good news is that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Circumcision is not part of the formula.

But apparently, some Judaizers came to the church in Philippi after Paul left. They came suggesting the Philippians were not saved after all. Faith is not enough. They need to be circumcised.

- d. Paul characterizes these Judaizers as the “false circumcision.” The Greek term Paul uses here literally means, “mutilation.”⁷ It’s not the usual biblical term for circumcision. It’s as if Paul doesn’t even want to dignify this false requirement by giving it a biblical name.
2. When Paul says, ► “beware of the dogs,” he’s using biting sarcasm to make another point about religious Christians.

- a. You see, some religious Jews, including Judaizers, used the term, “dog” to refer to Gentiles as morally inferior.⁸ “Dog” was a term of reproach.⁹ “Dog” was used to describe a morally impure people.¹⁰

The religious people who used the term, “dog” to describe Gentiles did what religious people tend to do: They become bigots. They look down their noses at people whom they consider to be morally inferior.

This is a perfectly logical and seemingly inevitable result of the thinking that if I’m good enough, I’ll go to heaven. You see, if I operate on the belief that if I’m good enough, I’ll go to heaven, the logical extent of this reasoning is a worldview that thinks some people are good enough and some aren’t. And if I think I’m probably good enough, I can become self-righteous. And if I think some other people aren’t good enough, then I can call them names, like “dogs.”

- b. Paul is sarcastically turning the term, “dogs” back onto the religious bigots who use it. The “dogs” are the Judaizers, the self-righteous religious Christians who look down their noses at the uncircumcised Gentiles who aren’t good enough.
3. When Paul says, ► “beware the evil workers,” he reveals yet another dimension of religion.
- a. The Greek term for “workers” is commonly used in the New Testament to refer to missionaries who are professing Christians. In fact, that’s the only way Paul uses the term in his writings.¹¹

⁷ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “κατατομή,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

⁸ John F. Walvoord, *Philippians: Triumph in Christ, Everyman’s Bible Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 78.

⁹ H.A.A. Kennedy, “The Epistle to the Philippians,” *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, Vol. 3, (Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 449.

¹⁰ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. “dog, κύων,” (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

¹¹ Other uses include 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 5:18; 2 Timothy 2:15.

So it seems that the religious people Paul has in mind are missionaries professing to be Christians who have infiltrated the church in Philippi.

- b. And Paul minces no words. He says these Christian missionaries in the church are “evil.” We are left with a rather startling conclusion: When religion works its way into Christianity, it is evil. When we “get religion” in the church, we get off track. Religion and Christianity do not mix.

Religion, as Paul has characterized it, is about thinking that if I’m good enough, I’ll go to heaven. It’s a kind of merit system.

I don’t pretend to be an expert on world religions, but every religion I know of, apart from authentic Christianity, operates on some kind of merit system. If you’re good enough, then after you die, you get to go to heaven or you get to come back around as an even better person and move up the ladder.

I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but religious people seem to have one thing in common. In one way or another, they think, “Hey, look at me. I’ve done some things that make me okay.” Even professing Christians think this way when they turn religious.

“Hey, look at me. I’ve been baptized.”

“Hey, look at me. I belong to the correct church.”

“Hey, look at me. I’ve avoided the really big sins.”

“Hey, look at me. I’m all confessed up.”

“Hey, look at me. I’ve been a consistently good person.”

“And so, based on what I’ve done, I’m good enough to go to heaven.”

- B. But authentic Christianity is not a hey-look-at-me religion. In ► Verse 3, Paul contrasts the hey-look-at-me religious Christians with the group of non-religious Christians with which he identifies himself. He says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:3 for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

When Paul says, ► “we” I think he’s referring to Christians with a clear fix on the gospel of Jesus Christ. They’re the non-religious Christians. They don’t say, “Hey look at me.” They say, “Hey, look at Christ.”

1. Paul says, we ► “glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” Paul recognizes that there is no way he could ever be good enough to go to heaven in and of himself. So he puts no confidence in his own efforts—his efforts “in the flesh.” It doesn’t mean he’s worthless. It doesn’t mean he’s as bad as he could possibly be. It doesn’t mean there’s nothing good about him. It doesn’t mean he’s not trying to live right. He simply realizes that he’s not good enough. Nobody is. No one deserves heaven because we’re all sinners.¹²

And so we glory not in ourselves but in Christ Jesus. He is the one who saves us by His grace alone. Eternal life is a gift God offers absolutely free of charge; there is nothing we do to earn it. It is free. Free, but not cheap. Christ paid the price of it with His life so He could offer it to us for free. Ours is to simply receive the priceless gift by faith. This is about salvation by grace. That is our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week: Salvation by grace.

So while the *religious* Christians glory in the work they do for Christ, *nonreligious* Christians glory in the work Christ did for us.

2. Paul also says we are the ones ► “who worship in the Spirit of God.” I think Paul’s point is that our worship is to be internal, “in the Spirit,” not merely external, in the flesh. You see, the problem with religious Christians is that they tend to focus exclusively on the externals: how good they look, conformity to a set of rules, “hey look at me.” They pretend to be good enough to go to heaven when they’re not. It’s hypocrisy—yet another common trait of religious Christians.

Jesus reserved His harshest words for religious people. In His day, the most religious people around were called scribes and Pharisees. In ► Matthew 23:25-27, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 23:25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. ► 26 You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. ► 27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”

¹² See Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:9-30; Galatians 3:22; 1 John 1:8.

Jesus was not into religious pretense. Non-religious Christians don't pretend. We are transformed from the inside out as our grateful, worshipful heart says, "hey, look at Christ," not "hey, look at me."

3. Paul is also emphasizing the internal over the external when, in ► Verse 3, he says we are "the true circumcision." He explains this in ► Romans 2:28-29, where he says,

^{NAU} Romans 2:28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ► 29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

- C. At this point, a religious detractor might say something like, "Well, maybe Paul is just sour grapes. Maybe this is all jealous disdain for us religious people because Paul can't be as good as we are."

Paul seems to address such a detractor in ► Verse 4, when he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more

Paul is saying that he could play the hey-look-at-me game of religion. He could run with the religious dogs and, in fact, he could be the big dog. In ► Verses 5 and 6, he offers his pedigree to prove it.

1. Want to play the "hey-look-at-my-heritage" game? Paul could play. He was ► "circumcised the eighth day," indicating that he was born into Judaism; he wasn't merely an "inferior" Gentile convert.
2. Want to play the "hey-look-at-my-race" game? Paul could play. He was ► "of the nation of Israel," God's covenant people. He was not from some "heathen" race.
3. Want to play the "hey-look-where-I'm-from" game? Paul could play. Paul was ► "of the tribe of Benjamin," the tribe whose territory included Jerusalem and the temple—one of only two tribes that remained loyal to the revered house of David.
4. Want to play the "hey-look-at-my-parentage" game? Paul could play. Paul was also ► "a Hebrew of Hebrews," the son of Hebrew parents who was himself proficient in the Hebrew language and culture.

5. Want to play the “hey-look-at-my-education” game? Paul could play. Paul was ► “a Pharisee,” a highly educated guardian and interpreter of the Mosaic Law.
6. Want to play the “hey-look-at-my-commitment” game? Paul could play. Before becoming a Christian, Paul was a zealous ► “persecutor of the church.”
7. Want to play the “hey-look-how-I-follow-the-rules” game? Paul could play. Paul was ► “blameless” when it comes to the Law. In the eyes of Jews and Judaizers, Paul had scrupulously followed all the rules of the Mosaic Law.

Modern parallels to Paul’s pedigree might include our wealth, our status, our education, our emotional stability, our families, our political affiliation, our country, our race, our business success, our theological alignments, or even the version of the Bible we use—anything we might use to define people outside our little group as inferior.¹³ Paul could play that game. In fact, he could beat religious people at their own religious game.

- II. But he ► doesn’t. He doesn’t because, while playing the hey-look-at-me game of religion might score some points for himself in the eyes of some other people, it is a loss for Christ. Paul comes right out and says it in ► Verse 7:

^{NAU} Philippians 3:7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

The ► “those things” of Verse 7 are the specific things that scored points for Paul. In ► Verse 8, Paul adds,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:8 More than that, I count all things to be loss . . .

The ► “all things” of Verse 8 includes all points scored in religious game-playing in general. To ► “count” means to think, to consider, to regard it a loss.¹⁴ This is Paul’s way of saying, “I lose my religion.” The implied message to us is clear: Lose your religion.

To be clear about the kind of religion we’re supposed to lose, let’s review the various aspects of religion we’ve considered so far. It’s a religion that tries to earn God’s favor on the thinking that if I’m good enough, I’ll go to heaven. It’s a religion that adds conditions to salvation that don’t belong. It’s a religion marked by self-righteous bigotry. It’s a religion that says, “Hey look at me. I’ve done some things to make myself okay.” It’s a religion that glories not in Christ, but in religious duties performed. It’s a religion characterized by external pretense and hypocrisy. That’s the religion we are to lose.

¹³ Carson, 86.

¹⁴ BDAG, s.v. “ἡγήομαι.”

Paul gives us ► three important reasons to lose our religion. Verses 8-11 constitute one long sentence in Greek. The main part of the sentence is “I count all things to be loss.” The rest of the sentence is made up of three subordinate clauses that present the three reasons to lose our religion.

- A. First, ► religion is a sorry substitute for a relationship with Christ. In ► Verse 8, Paul says he loses his religion . . .

^{NAU} Philippians 3:8 . . . in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish . . .

1. ► “Knowing” Christ is about having an ongoing, personal relationship with Him. Having a living, dynamic, listening, responding, empowering relationship with Christ is far better than just grinding through some religious rules and rituals.
 2. And Paul indeed ► “suffered the loss of all things” for Christ. When he believed in Jesus for eternal life, he went from a prestigious, religious mucky-muck to a persecuted outcast.
 3. Paul says he considers all his religious accomplishments ► to be “rubbish.” This is a polite English translation of a graphic Greek word that describes excrement or rotten food. Paul considers all his selfish, arrogant, look-at-me accomplishments to be nothing more than manure or compost. Religion is rancid. But a relationship with Christ is rich and rewarding.
- B. Second, ► religion obscures Christ as the only way to be justified before God. In ► Verses 8 and 9, Paul says he loses his religion for the following purpose:

^{NAU} Philippians 3:8 . . . so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith

I think it would be helpful to provide a theological context for what Paul is saying here. There is a very important ► exchange that happens between Jesus Christ and us. Jesus ► initiates the exchange. By His death and resurrection for our sins, Christ alone promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. The exchange takes place when we ► accept the offer by faith alone in Jesus.

When that happens, there is another important ► exchange that occurs at the same time. Through our faith in Jesus, all our sins are credited to His account, and all His righteousness is credited to our account. It is an extravagantly gracious and shockingly unfair exchange in which the sinless Jesus takes the rap for our sin and we, in turn, are

exonerated, forgiven, set free, and declared righteous by God. This is called justification. Paul explains this in ► 2 Corinthians 5:21, where he says,

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

1. With this in mind, we return to ► Verse 9 of our text and see that “not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law” means not trying to pretend like I’m good enough to get to heaven by following the rules. It means not trying to make it look like I earned something I got for free. It means not trying to put on a good religious show for other people. It means not trying to come off like I bring my own righteousness to the party when it comes to my salvation.

Let me illustrate the importance of this by relaying an imaginary scenario.

Let’s say you are a judge who has a guilty friend in prison sentenced to die. You also have an only son. Because of your son’s great love for this friend, your son volunteers to take your friend’s place so he can be set free. The exchange takes place and your son is executed while your friend goes free. Later, you hear that this friend is telling everyone that he earned his freedom from prison through his good behavior. The most precious thing you had, your only son, died for your friend’s freedom, but he has ignored what your son did and is bragging that he earned his freedom by his own effort!¹⁵

How would you feel? I think that’s pretty much how God feels about religious Christians. When I try to make it look like my own righteousness got me where I am today, it’s a profound insult.

2. So Paul wants to be found—he wants to present himself—as a man having a righteousness ► “which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith.”

It’s the righteousness or justification that comes from God to be received as a gracious gift. To emphasize that this gift is received by faith alone, Paul mentions faith as the sole condition both ► before and after this righteousness.

It’s faith before and after, in the front and in the back. So don’t frontload the gospel by saying you have to do anything other than believe in Jesus to be justified. And don’t backload the gospel by saying that, once you’ve believed, you have to do certain things to prove that you’ve been justified. Such

¹⁵ Charles C. Bing, *Living in the Family of Grace: A Workbook for Disciples*, (Burlleson, TX: Gracelife Ministries, 2003), 34.

frontloading and backloading is a bunch of—well, to quote Paul, it's a bunch of religious manure. Such religion obscures faith alone in Christ alone as the only way to be justified.

- C. This is free grace and it makes some religious people very uncomfortable. The most common objection I've heard is that this free grace thinking is an excuse for not following hard after God, for not surrendering to the lordship of Christ, for not giving your life to God. It's just an "easy believism" that, at worst, tricks people into thinking they're saved when they're not and, at best, stunts our growth as Christians.

It's almost as though Paul anticipates this objection, and in the final portion of our text, he turns this argument on its head by giving a ► third reason why he loses his religion: It's actually religion that stunts our growth as Christians, not free grace. In Verses ► 10 and 11, Paul explains that he has to ditch his religion for the following reason:

^{NAU} Philippians 3:10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

You see religious people tend be rowboat Christians, not sailboat Christians. Religious rowboat Christians tend to be so focused on their own rowing that they don't get ► to "know Him"—to know Christ like a sailor knows the wind.

They're so wrapped up in religious rowing under their own power that they don't get to experience ► "the power of His resurrection"—the power of the Spirit, the wind of God filling the hoisted sail that waits for Him.

They suffer outwardly from incessant rowing, but they don't get to experience ► "the fellowship of His sufferings," where the wind of God takes them through the stormy waters of inner character transformation toward true Christlikeness.

They're dying to be good enough to conform to some worldly idea of success, but they're not ► "being conformed to His death," by dying to themselves that Christ may live in them.

They're so busy trying to revive the corpse of their own righteousness that they don't live a life of ► "resurrection from the dead," in which Christ lives through them.

I ask you: Which one takes you farther for Christ, the wind in your sail or the row in your hand?

You're going to have to lose your religion if you really want to live for Christ. For Christ's sake, lose your religion.

III. How ► are we to apply this idea of losing your religion?

A. First, don't confuse the gospel with religion. Be crystal clear about the core of Christianity. In Acts, Chapter 16, when a Philippian jailer asks Paul,

^{NAU} Acts 16:30 “. . . what must I do to be saved?”

. . . Paul gives a simple, clear, unreligious answer:

^{NAU} Acts 16:31 . . . “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . .”

That's it. Faith alone in Christ alone. Don't turn this good news into a religious crock by adding anything.

B. Second, examine yourself to see if some religious thinking has crept into your life. Religious manure comes in different bags, but it all smells the same: self-righteousness, pretense, arrogance, bigotry, hypocrisy, hey look at me, look what I've done to make myself good enough.

The scary part is sometimes I'm not aware of how bad I smell. I have to prayerfully and reflectively step outside my barn for some fresh air before I even notice the stench.

Every once in a while, every Christian needs to clean the barn. Now is as good a time as any. If you need to clean the barn today, ask God to help you. Ask God to forgive you. Ask God for a clean start. Ask God to help you lose your religion.