

Good Enough

From the time we're little, humans have a habit of separating into tribes.

Sometimes they're long-term, sometimes they're just for a season, but we all look at the people around us and determine whether they are part of "us" or part of "them." And we determine this by our boundary markers.

These markers are often trivial. For instance, in middle-school, I was on the basketball team. My family wasn't dirt poor, but we didn't have a lot of money, so I didn't wear the best or most expensive shoes. But I remember when I was in 7th grade—12 years old—the most popular guy on the basketball team saying, "If you don't wear Nikes, you're nothing." Well, I had like Pro-Kicks or some off-brand like that. And when I tell the story today, 35 years later, the emotions come back to me like it was yesterday.

When we're kids, the boundary markers are things like clothing, the sport you play, your hair-style, the music you listen to, the color of your skin, or the grades you get.

As we get older, our boundary markers are different. We sort ourselves by favorite sports team, socio-economic status, race, and probably the most significant divide in our country today is over politics. Even people who consider themselves liberal and say they're all about inclusion, have boundary markers. Try posting something positive about president Trump on social media and see what happens. Though, to be fair, you'll probably get some negative responses from more conservative types, too.

Now, I know you probably expect me to say this is a terrible thing and that we need to stop. The problem is that it's impossible to avoid. And while there are certainly negative aspects, there are also some useful aspects of dividing ourselves into groups.

For instance, boundary-markers let you create standards and accomplish more as a group. It's pretty important in a basketball game that you define who's "our team" and who's "their team." It wouldn't be a fun if everyone was on the same team.

Also, the American Humanist Society probably wouldn't want a charismatic Christian as the president of their organization. Churches and denominations *should* have doctrinal and behavioral boundaries. Any group that wants to accomplish a goal needs to have some things in common or they won't be very effective.

But there are negative aspects of dividing ourselves into groups. For instance, it's easy to mistrust people who are "not us." We can label them, caricature them and, even demonize them. It's one thing to be a part of a group, it's another thing entirely to treat those who aren't as less valuable or worse. That's the real danger. It not necessarily in acknowledging that you're not "us" but in saying, "you're not worthy of my love or respect," or that God could never love you.

Now, there's much more to this issue than we can address here, but I wanted to get you thinking about it because this issue is at the heart of the passage we're studying today. Before we do, here's some important background.

It's hard for us to overestimate the division in the Bible between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews saw themselves as a huge family. They were God's chosen people. Everyone else was called "goyim" which means literally, "the nations." The word Gentile is the Latin version of goyim. The Jews were chosen by God, the Gentiles were not.

Now, the reason God chose the Jewish nation wasn't so they could be saved and everyone else damned. The Jews were chosen to be carriers of a blessing to the world. Back in Genesis 12, God spoke to a man named Abram and said, *"I am going to bless the world through you."*

Now, there was nothing special about Abram. He was a normal guy—had a big family and lots of livestock, but God never said, "I choose you because you're such a great guy." No, it was an act of grace by God and Abraham responded by believing God and his descendants became the nation of Israel.

Right from the start God gave them a boundary-marker that seems strange to us. The boundary marker was circumcision for all the males. Females were part of the covenant, but that marker wasn't required for them. So, why circumcision?

Well, circumcision was practiced in other cultures, but not to infants. It was done at puberty—as a rite of passage that symbolized strength and virility. But it had a different purpose for the Jews. God promised that Abraham's descendants would be many, so it was a fitting reminder of that promise. So, it became the boundary marker for Jewish men.

But later, the Jews were given other boundary markers—or at least they became boundary markers. Specifically, they were observing the sabbath and keeping kosher laws. They could tell who was “us” and who was “them” by these three practices. They were only part of the Law of Moses, but these became the practices that were singled out as the markers of God’s people. //

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the first converts to Christianity were Jews. But quickly—and maybe a bit surprisingly—to the Apostles, scores of Gentiles started following Jesus, too. Of course, this was great, but it created a real dilemma for the Apostles. Did Gentiles have to take on Jewish boundary markers to follow Jesus?

So, they met in Jerusalem to discuss and determined that the Gentiles didn’t have to submit to the Jewish Law in order to follow Jesus because people were *never* saved through the Law. They were *always* saved by grace.

From that time on, the Apostle Paul considered himself the Apostle to the Gentiles. The rest of the Apostles could focus on the Jews, but Paul was committed to the mission of bringing together Jews and Gentiles and forming them into the church. We often think Paul’s mission was to get individuals saved, but reconciling Jews and Gentiles was critical to his mission.

For instance, we love to read the part from Ephesians 2:8-9 where it says, **“It is by grace you are saved through faith faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast...”** But we don’t pay as much attention to

the next section, **“¹¹Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— ¹²remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”

That’s why you can’t just read Paul’s writings—Galatians, Ephesians, Romans through the lens of individual salvation. He certainly believed in it, but it’s impossible to overestimate how important the church is for Paul.

Well, throughout Paul’s ministry there were people who would go around to churches and teach people that all Christians needed to follow the Jewish Law. They were a thorn in Paul’s flesh the rest of his ministry. So, as we read this chapter, remember this letter is written to a church that was almost entirely made up of Gentiles.

So, with that background, let’s walk through Philippians 3. Verse 1, **“¹Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things**

to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.” This is Paul’s purpose statement for the chapter. Everything after this is the reason for them to be filled with joy.

Then verse 2 seems to take a dark turn. **“Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.”** Now, here, Paul is referring to men who go from church to church teaching new Gentile believers they had to follow the Jewish Law in order to follow Jesus. You might have guessed that when Paul calls them dogs, he’s not saying they’re like your cute little puppy. In Paul’s day, dogs weren’t pets, they were scavengers and most important to the Jews, dogs were unclean. So, Paul is turning the table to say that it’s the people who insist on following the Law who are unclean.

He goes even further in the reversal, calling them “mutilators of the flesh.” Their circumcision doesn’t mean anything, it’s just useless mutilation. But it’s those who trust in Christ, who bear the real marks of God’s people. Verse 3, **“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—⁴though I myself have reasons for such confidence.**

Then he goes on...**“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”**

He’s saying, “Listen, I could tell everyone that they need to do all this Jewish stuff to find favor with God because I’m the Jewish poster child.” And then he points out his

religious accomplishments AND his ethnic identity. He was Jewish in the things he *couldn't* control and in the things he *could* control. If anyone could get IN by being Jewish, it's Paul. But in verse 7, he does an about-face.

⁷But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Those are accounting terms—what I used to consider a credit, I now consider a debit. **⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage...** That's the Greek word "skubala." To translate it as "garbage" is too nice. Some translations use the word "dung," but I can't really use the word that would be the best translation because we'd have to bleep it out. (Yes, Paul swears in Scripture.)

Now, Paul isn't against the Law and he's not ashamed of his Jewish heritage. But he's using hyperbole here to compare the value of his Jewish ethnicity and achievements to the value of knowing Jesus. He says, **"I consider them *skubala* that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."**

Paul is saying that he used to find his identity in his Jewish heritage and religious accomplishments. Those were his people. His identity was that he was the "it" guy. People would look at him want to be like him. Everything he did centered on maintaining that identity. But when Christ got a hold of him, that identity faded into the background

and he took on the identity of being “in Christ.” He didn’t cease to be a part of the people of God, but because of Jesus, the way to gain that identity is through faith in Jesus.

Now, this should be a familiar enough story to people today. We talk a lot about identity today. We spend our lives crafting our identity. It’s how we get noticed. We use our identity to justify our existence on the earth. *I’m the fun-loving party guy. I’m the independent spirit who doesn’t conform to anyone else’s rules. I’m the high-level business man. I’m the renaissance man. I’m the do it all career working woman.*

Of course, there’s a religious version of it, too. *I’m the one who has all the answers. I’m the super-spiritual one...the one who has it all together. I’m the one who knows the Bible forward and backward. I’m the one who knows the way the church should be run.*

We work hard on crafting that image. It determines how we spend our time and energy. And it also reveals our greatest fear because we know just how fragile that identity is and how fast it can all come tumbling down, exposing us as a fraud.

And here’s the thing about our identity. We say we choose our identity for ourselves, but we actually curate our identity to get others to notice us. We either want to be accepted by a community or stand out from it. You can admit it, we all do it.

That’s what Paul did until he found a better identity and a better community. When Jesus got a hold of him, he joined a group of people who have stopped trying to build their identity on their accomplishments that are worth *skubala* in eternity. Instead, this community of people trust that their identity in Jesus will give them all the value they

ever wanted and more. If you want to be a part of that community, your resume will do you no good. There's no application—just a sign-up sheet.

And you can almost feel how passionate Paul is about this. The amazing grace of God is such good news, it motivates him...it draws him deeper. Verse 10, **“¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”**

He says, *“Yes, I want to know the resurrection of Jesus, but I'm so enamored with Jesus, I want to know everything. I want to experience what it's like to walk the road Jesus walked, even in his suffering, because what I want more than anything else is just to be like Jesus. And if suffering is what gets me there, then I'll take it.”*

And Paul finishes this section with this. Verse 13, **“¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”**

There was a lot of opportunity for Paul to look back. He could have looked back with pride considering all he accomplished in Judaism. But that would have been going back to what he was. He could have also looked back with regret and said, “I'm not worthy to be a part of these people. I certainly can't lead them. I don't belong.”

But he didn't fall into either temptation because both approaches lead nowhere and both approaches set aside the grace of Jesus. So, Paul says, "I don't look back. I only look forward because that's where Christ is calling me."

But not only is this good information about Paul's attitude. Look at what he writes in verse 15, "**All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things.**" In other words, not only is this Paul's attitude, this should also be ours.

So, then, what are some things we can take away from this chapter? Let me mention three: First, *there is such a thing as God's people*. When Paul came to Jesus, he didn't suddenly say that because of Jesus, everyone is in! You can believe or behave any way you want. God doesn't care! In one sense, it's true that everyone is a child of God because God created us all. But in another sense, there is a divide. Not everyone is saved. Not everyone wants what God wants. Not everyone is part of the people of God.

The second point of application is that *anyone can be a part of the people of God*. You don't have to be a certain ethnicity. Male and female can come in. Whatever your pedigree; whatever your past, whether good or bad; whatever your socio-economic status, it doesn't matter. There is no resume, only a sign-up sheet.

Now, just to explain this one a bit from two different perspectives. First, you might someone who believes God could never accept you. *Yeah, I know about this grace thing, but you don't know what I've done*. Well, I might not, but God does and I can guarantee

you, he's forgiven worse things than you've done. You don't have to be worthy for God to accept you—none of us are worthy. But Jesus makes us worthy.

Here's the second perspective. The church has to remember that anyone can be a part of the people of God. Sometimes Christians aren't very good at this. Yes, we know it on an intellectual level, but our actions might say, "we'll accept you once you get your stuff together. Once you look more like us...when we see some progress, then you'll be worthy. When we allow ourselves to think that way or even if we don't realize we're doing it—then it's time for us to go back and remind ourselves of the gospel.

And finally, *there are boundary markers for believers*. Now, this might seem contradictory at first because I just said that there's no application or resume to become a part of the people of God. But don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about doing things to make yourself worthy of God's acceptance. I'm talking about the marks of people who have put their trust in and build their identity around Jesus.

We said the Jewish boundary makers were circumcision, sabbath, and food laws. But what are the Christian boundary markers—the things that Christians should be known for?

Well, first and foremost, *we are people who find our identity in Christ*. You might be a successful businessman or woman. You might be really good at a sport or music. You might be a hard-core Vikings fan, or politically active. You might enjoy those things, but all of these should be *skubala* compared to your identity in Christ. If you identify stronger

with your occupation or sports team or political party than you do with Christ and his people, it's time to re-evaluate.

Another boundary marker is *a life characterized by self-sacrificial love*. In the Judaism of Paul's day, the boundary markers were set up to exclude people and keep them out. But that's not the way of Jesus. I mentioned toward the beginning of the message that a danger of separating into "us" and "them" is that we can tend to be mistrustful and even demonize the others.

But if your core identity is Jesus; if we are a community formed around following Jesus, we can never use our identity as a way to exclude others. Jesus was very different from the people he spent time with, but his difference was an invitation to a better life. If your Christian identity doesn't result in a great love for both the church and people outside the church, then pray that God would transform your heart.

Now, I'm sure there are other things we could mention—like the Fruit of the Spirit, for instance, but let me end with these two because I think people forget about them: *Baptism and Communion*. We call these sacraments. These are not works we do in order to be saved. But we participate in them because we are part of the people of God.

Baptism doesn't save you, but it's a symbol of the entry into the Church. Many people think baptism is a private thing—just between you and God. But Baptism is a community thing—showing solidarity with Christ and your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And finally, Communion, which we are about to take together. Communion is an act reserved for people who have put their trust in Jesus. It's a way of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus that made it possible for us to be in communion with God.