

STUDY GUIDE

True vs. False Faith

Philippians 3:2–3

Part One

KEY TEXT

“Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers! Beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

— Philippians 3:2–3

Overview

There are only two belief systems in the world: a system of works and the faith of the gospel. The Christian faith alone promises salvation by faith in Jesus’ finished work—not human effort. Paul’s urgent warning in Philippians 3:2–3 exposes false teachers (Judaizers) who added circumcision and law-keeping to faith in Christ, and it sets forth three marks of true, saving faith.

Central truth: Faith plus any additive negates grace. Salvation is received by faith alone in Christ alone.

Learning Objectives

- Identify the three characteristics of false faith in Philippians 3:2.
- Explain the three marks of true faith in Philippians 3:3.
- Distinguish between works done for salvation and works that flow from salvation.
- Recognize modern forms of “faith plus works” that undermine the gospel of grace.
- Examine whether personal confidence rests in Christ alone or in religious performance.

Sermon Outline

I. FALSE FAITH EXPOSED (Philippians 3:2)

Paul’s threefold warning: “Beware... Beware... Beware...”

He labels the false teachers: dogs, evil workers, mutilators.

(a) Outward and man-centered

Circumcision was an outward mark performed by human hands.

True separation unto God is spiritual, not physical (Deut. 10:16; Rom. 2:29).

Adding human effort leads to human boasting, not God’s glory.

(b) Ritualistic and ceremonial

A rite or ceremony cannot cleanse sin or join a sinner to God’s covenant.

The mark of the covenant is a changed heart (Deut. 30:6).

No sacrament has inherent power (ex opere operato) to convey grace.

(c) Faith plus works

Judaizers affirmed Jesus as Messiah yet required circumcision and the Law (Acts 15:5).

“Faith alone” was the battle cry of the Reformation—the word “alone” is decisive.

Any “plus” (baptism, prayer, membership, law-keeping) negates pure grace (Rom. 11:6).

II. TRUE FAITH EXPOUNDED (Philippians 3:3)

“We are the circumcision”—true Israel, God’s people marked by heart change.

(a) Spirit-enabled worship

True worship is by/in the Spirit of God (latreuō—worship/serve).

It is heart-felt, relational, and driven by love—not mechanical ritual (John 4:23–24).

All of life becomes a continuum of worship (Rom. 12:1).

(b) Christ-centered passion

We “boast” (kauchaomai) in Christ Jesus—exult, glory, brag on Him alone.

Jesus holds first place; there are no competing loyalties (Phil. 1:21; 3:8; Gal. 2:20).

Conversion puts Christ on the throne of the heart with joy and enthusiasm.

(c) Renounced human ability

True believers put “no confidence in the flesh.”

We bring nothing to the table; we are beggars dependent on the Master’s invitation.

Empty hands receive the gift; self-trust is abandoned (Rom. 7:18; Rom. 4:4–5).

Key Terms & Concepts

Judaizers — Jewish teachers who affirmed Jesus as Messiah but required circumcision and observance of the Mosaic Law for full covenant membership and salvation.

Circumcision (physical) — The Old Testament sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:10–11). It was outward, performed by human hands, and pointed to a deeper spiritual reality.

Circumcision of the heart — The inward work of God by the Spirit that regenerates and marks true covenant membership (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:29).

Sacramentalism — The belief that religious ceremonies and rituals themselves convey or impart saving grace (often summarized by the phrase *ex opere operato*—“from the work performed”).

Faith alone (sola fide) — The Reformation principle that sinners are justified by faith in Christ alone, apart from works of the law or religious performance (Eph. 2:8–9; Rom. 4:4–5).

Latreuō — Greek verb meaning to worship or serve; used of the Spirit-enabled, whole-life service of true believers (Phil. 3:3; Rom. 12:1).

Supporting Scriptures

- **Ephesians 2:8–9** — Salvation by grace through faith, not of works.
- **Romans 11:6** — If by grace, it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace.
- **Galatians 1:8** — Any gospel contrary to the apostolic gospel is accursed.
- **Acts 15:5–11** — The Jerusalem Council rejects the necessity of circumcision for salvation.
- **Romans 2:28–29** — A true Jew is one inwardly; circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit.
- **John 4:23–24** — True worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth.
- **Romans 4:4–5** — Faith is counted as righteousness to the one who does not work but believes.
- **Galatians 6:14–15** — Boast only in the cross; neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but a new creation.

Study Questions

Use these questions for personal reflection or group discussion.

Observation (What does the text say?)

1. How many times does Paul say “beware” in verse 2? What does the repetition communicate about the seriousness of the danger?

2. List the three labels Paul gives the false teachers. What Old Testament background or cultural force do these terms carry?
3. According to verse 3, who are “the circumcision”? What three activities or attitudes characterize them?
4. Compare the language of verse 2 with verse 3. How does Paul deliberately invert the claims of the Judaizers?

Interpretation (What does the text mean?)

5. Why was physical circumcision insufficient for salvation? How does the Old Testament itself already point beyond the outward rite (see Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4)?
6. What is the difference between doing good works for salvation and doing good works from salvation? Why does the distinction matter?
7. How does “faith plus works” actually nullify grace (Rom. 11:6)? Can you restate this principle in your own words?
8. What does it mean to “worship in/by the Spirit of God”? How is this different from ritualistic or sacramental worship?

Application (How does the text apply?)

1. In what ways might modern Christians subtly add “works” to faith (baptism, a decision, church membership, Bible reading, moral effort, etc.)?
2. When you give your testimony, do you tend to emphasize what you did (“I walked forward... I prayed...”) or what Christ has done? Why does that language matter?
3. Where are you tempted to put confidence in the flesh—religious performance, moral track record, spiritual disciplines, or comparison with others?
4. How can a believer cultivate a more Christ-centered passion (boasting in Christ) rather than duty-driven religion?

Personal Reflection

Take time alone with the Lord to answer honestly.

1. Is my Christianity primarily God-centered or man-centered?
2. Do I trust what I perform religiously for acceptance with God, or what Christ has done substitutionally?
3. What evidence is there that the Holy Spirit has given me a new heart that delights to worship and serve?
4. Can I say with Paul, “For to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21)? If not, what rivals Him for first place?

Memory Verses

1. **Philippians 3:2–3** — The primary text.
2. **Ephesians 2:8–9** — “For by grace you have been saved through faith... not of works, so that no one may boast.”
3. **Romans 4:4–5** — Faith counted as righteousness to the one who does not work but believes.

For Further Study

- Read Acts 15 in full — the Jerusalem Council’s decision on circumcision and the Law.

- Read Galatians 1–3 — Paul’s sustained argument against adding works to the gospel.
- Compare Romans 2:25–29 with Philippians 3:2–3 on true circumcision.
- Reflect on the five “solos” of the Reformation and how each guards the purity of the gospel.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

*The true circumcision is not those cut in the flesh, but those cut in the heart.
God creates a clean heart, raises us to new life, and puts His love within us
so that we worship by the Spirit, boast in Christ alone, and put no confidence in the flesh.*

Jesus paid it all — all to Him I owe.

AMEN.