Definition of a Christian

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Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[0:00] Let us turn now to Philippians chapter 3. Philippians chapter 3. And we look this evening at verse 3.

For we are the circumcision which worship God in the spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh.
And we look this evening. People have many different views of what it means to be a Christian.
We have been discussing this recently in the Youth Fellowship. The young folks are keen to talk about the Christian view of the different public issues.
The Christian view on relationships. The Christian view on drags. The Christian view on drink. And so on. So with a view to that we have been discussing well what is the Christian view and what does it mean to have a Christian view.
[1:12] What really is a Christian. And what is the view of such a person. Or what directs the view of such a person. I hope I can say without sounding patronising just how encouraging it is to hear our young folks very clearly articulating what the Bible's view of a Christian is.

And how it differs from other views of what a Christian is. And perhaps I should add to the young folks themselves as we have indeed discussed at the Youth Fellowship itself that when you know what a Christian view of what a Christian is.
And this of course is true of all of us. When we know what the Bible's view of what a Christian is. Then we are under great responsibility to live according to what we know in our heads.
This is the truth. It is important to know exactly what we mean when we say that someone is a Christian.
Any who have become communicant members in the congregation here in the last year or two will know how keen I am that and indeed the session as well that new members should be able as simply as possible to show that they have an understanding of what it means to be a Christian.
[2:47] And the Bible even puts a much more important significance on it than that because the Bible makes clear, Jesus himself makes clear that understanding what it really means to be a Christian is a matter of life and day.

It's a matter of eternal life and eternal days. That's what Jesus is saying, isn't it, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount?
When he reminds us here that there will be many who will come before his throne on the great day of judgment and who will say, have we not done this and that in your name?
Surely we should receive entry into your kingdom. And Jesus will say, depart from me, I never knew you. In other words, these people thought they knew what it meant to be a Christian.
But they did not. And so it is going to have the most awful eternal consequences in their lives.
[4:05] That's how essential it is. To know what it means to be a Christian. And in this verse that is before us this evening, Paul gives us a good working definition of what it means to be a Christian.

I don't say that if any was to come for membership in the congregation here and I was to ask them, what would you say a Christian is?
I do not say that they would have to give their answer exactly in line with this verse. There may be other ways of defining what a Christian is that are most satisfactory in showing the difference between what a Christian is and what a Christian is not.
But here is one good working definition that Paul gives to us here. It is significant, it seems to me, that he really gives this wonderful definition, so clear, almost in the passing.
These verses are really connecting verses in the train of thought of Paul's mind as he is writing this letter to the Philippians.

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[5:33] It's a very personal letter. He's been talking about the Christian example of Timothy and Epaphroditus. He is going on to tell something of his own testimony and of his own experience.

And all to encourage Christians to rejoice in the Lord when they understand what God does in the lives of his own people.
But then it seems that the thought just comes to Paul that there are, of course, false teachers who have been affecting the congregation in Philippi and who, if they are listened to, will remove real Christian joy from the lives of the Philippian people.
These are people, you see, who have been going on about the necessity of extra rituals if you're going to be sure that you're a Christian. Especially demanding the ritual of circumcision in order to be sure that you're a Christian.
And so Paul has to fight against that teaching. And although Paul would say in other places that there are rituals in the Christian life that have their place, ritual itself never made anyone a Christian.
[6:57] And the necessity of rituals is not where we find the basis of what it means to be a Christian.

Mere religious rituals are not part of a definition of what a Christian is. What is important is the spiritual reality that these rituals may be a sign of or maybe an illustration of.
And that's what Paul is thinking about when he says at verse 3, we are the circumcision. Whether we have gone through the ritual of circumcision or not is not the point.
But true Christians are people who know the spiritual reality of what circumcision pointed to in Old Testament times. In other words, we are the covenant people of God.
We are the people with whom God has entered into covenant. With whom God has made a pact to whom God has given promises that he will never deny.
[8:10] We are the true Christians. Because, we might say, we could put a because in here to get the connection in the verse.

We are the circumcision because we worship God in the Spirit. We rejoice in Christ Jesus. We have no confidence in the flesh.
Paul says, rituals may have their place, but whether people keep rituals or not will never be a proof that they are Christians.
We'll never have a part in a definition of what a Christian is. But here are three essentials that go up to make a good working definition.
Here are three spiritual realities that will be the experience of every true child of God.
[9:15] Worship of God in Spirit. Rejoicing in Christ Jesus. And no confidence in the flesh. Let's look at them one by one.

First of all, a Christian is someone who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We are the circumcision because we worship God in the Spirit.
There are really two matters here in Paul's definition. indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying here that Christians recognize their responsibility to God and they worship Him.
This is the first thing. A very basic thing. Perhaps a good place to start if we are wondering how to help people outside the church to become Christians.
If we're trying to help them to think about their need to be Christians. A good thing to start with God and their attitude to God.
[10:48] Before we ever begin to talk about God being three persons. Before we ever begin to talk about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. To start where the Bible itself starts.

With the one living and true God. I think because of our own background we sometimes want to challenge people outside the church immediately about Jesus.
But really we may need to start a step further back and to start with God.
God. You see the truth is that every converted person knows about God. They may not know about Jesus.
You have to read the Bible to know about Jesus or you have to hear from another Christian or someone who has read the Bible about Jesus. But the Bible itself tells us really that we don't have to read the Bible to know about God.
[12:03] We may have to read the Bible to know God but we don't have to read the Bible to know about God. The Bible tells us you see that because God has made man in his image and even although sin has spoiled and distorted that image man knows about God by looking into himself.

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Man knows about God by looking up to the heavens and seeing the sun and the moon and the stars. Man can know about God by considering something of the order that there is in creation.
Oh, he may be slow to accept that. All men are sinners like ourselves and the Bible tells us that we hold down that truth in ungodliness.
But we don't have to go to the Bible to know that truth. That truth is still in our hearts because of the way that God has made us in his image.
And that's why I say that if we are looking for a link to begin to bring people outside the church to consider their need of salvation, it may be better for us to begin with God before we begin to speak about Jesus Christ.
[13:40] And that's really where Paul starts in his definition here. we are Christians or if we are Christians rather, we recognize our responsibility to God and we worship him as our God.

The commentators tell us that Paul uses a very specific word here for worship. The word really means service and of course service and worship even in our English language are basically the same sort of idea.
The word that Paul uses here can cover our English word service as we use it in two different ways. We talk about coming to a service as we have done this evening, by which we are talking about our formal worship of God, using the rituals that he has given to remember him and to remember that he is God and that he deserves our honor.
But we talk also about a life of service. Or we talk about people, missionaries perhaps, going into full-time service.
That's maybe an unfortunate phrase. Because of course the Bible teaches that every Christian should consider themselves to be in full-time service.
[15:14] We have particular times of worshipping God with the rituals that he has given us to help us to know him and to come face to face with him and to commune with him.

But if we really recognize God as God, our commitment is to live every moment of every day for him.
Our desire is, if we are his people, that everything that we do, our home life, our employment life, our lesser life, will be lived for him and for his honor and for his glory.
glory. That's why man was made at the beginning, to serve God, to know him as God, and to live for the glory of God.
That's what the catechism encapsulates in its very first answer. What is man's chief end? What is man's chief reason for living? It's to glorify God.
[16:29] God and to enjoy him forever. And when we lose that, when that disappears from the forefront of our living, we have really lost a true reason for living.

But that's exactly what happened when sin entered into the world. Satan made it clear to Adam and Eve, although they didn't recognize just what he was saying.
Perhaps Satan himself didn't recognize what he was saying. You eat of the forbidden fruit and you'll be as gods, knowing the difference between good and evil.
You'll be as gods. man and woman man and woman was never made to be gods. Man and woman were made to worship the living God and to know him as God and to enjoy him forever.
With sin, we lost our reason for living and this is what salvation is about. To restore to us the ability to live for God.
[17:46] That was exactly the promise that God gave to Abraham when he set up the covenant, indeed when he instituted circumcision. That was the spiritual reality that God was bringing back into the lives of his people.

I will be your God and you will be my people, he said to Abraham. That's what it is to be a Christian. To know God again as our God and to live for him. And Paul is saying that that can only happen by the work of the Holy Spirit.
We are the circumcision because we worship God in the Spirit. We worship God not by our own efforts. We worship God by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
It's most significant that it was to Nicodemus that Jesus said, you must be born again. You can't belong to Christ's kingdom.
[19:04] You can't be in the kingdom of heaven without being born of the Holy Spirit. You need the Holy Spirit to come to you and change you and to enable you.

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It's significant that he said it to Nicodemus because Nicodemus' whole life as a member of the Sanhedrin was taken up by finding a way of truly worshipping God.
He was full of desire for the service of God, to serve God faithfully, to worship him according to the law. That was his desire and maybe he thought that he was doing it.
And Jesus comes and cuts right across his thinking and says, except to be born again Nicodemus, except to be born of the Holy Spirit.
Those who are my people are those who worship me in the Spirit. You're a sinner. You can't do it in your own strength.
[20:12] There was a day when you could do it in your strength when I first made Adam and Eve, but by their first sin that ability has been lost forever.

and it needs a new ability that only the salvation of the Spirit of God can bring into your life.
Is there someone here this evening who thinks that by being here, by mouthing the Psalms and trying to say your amen to the prayers and listening as carefully as you can to the sermon, that you are worshipping God.
You're not, you know, if you're trusting in your own efforts. only by the Holy Spirit can we worship God.
Jesus said it to the woman of Samaria, those who worship God worship him in spirit and in truth.
[21:36] What does your life mean if it doesn't worship God? What's your life going to mean at the end if it's not a life that pleases God?

It can be a life that pleases God if the Holy Spirit can't and changes you and comes to dwell within you.
I thought I would try and get a slogan for the children whom it's lovely always to see at the evening services to remember at each point in this sermon. I wonder if you could remember this slogan.
To be a Christian, I need the Holy Spirit within me. To be a Christian, I need the Holy Spirit within me.
And that's as true for all of us as it is for the children. But Paul goes on in his definition. A Christian is someone not only who is indwelt by the Spirit but a Christian is someone who is indebted to Christ.
[22:59] Jesus comes in now. They are those who worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus. If we were to translate this as literally as possible, it would be they are they who boast in Christ Jesus.

Christians are people who really appreciate Jesus Christ. Now, Jesus Christ is not only Jesus' name, it's also his title.
it speaks not only of who Jesus is, the eternal Son of God who became man and who took the name Jesus, but it reminds us also of what Jesus has done.
He's the Christ, the Messiah, the one whom God set aside, the one whom God anointed to be his saviour of sinners. And Christians rejoice in Jesus Christ.
They boast in him, they really appreciate him for who he is and for what he has done. And yes, of course, although it comes second, it's absolutely fundamental if you're to be a Christian.
[24:11] It's absolutely fundamental if you're to be part of Christ's church. We were actually finding that out in the prayer meeting this past Wednesday. We were dealing with Peter at Caesarea Philippi and the confession that he gave when he said, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And in response to that, Jesus said to Peter, and you are Peter the rock, and upon this rock I will build my church. Peter, you're the sort of man that I'm going to use to build up my church from the very foundations because you're a man who has had it revealed to him by my Father in heaven who I am and what I have come to do.
You appreciate me, Peter, and you can be one of the stones in the building of my church. Everyone who is able to profess who Jesus is and what he has done is a Christian, is part of the church of Jesus Christ.
Now this goes hand in hand with the work of the Holy Spirit. These two parts of the definition are very closely bound together and the story of Nicodemus reminds us of this.
We're reminded by the text because they're bound together in the text. We are the circumcision which worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus. And the two things are bound together in the experience of Nicodemus as well when Jesus spoke to him there in John chapter 3.

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[25:57] Yes, he began just as Paul begins here by saying to Nicodemus, you need to be born again. You need to worship God but you can only do it with the work of the Holy Spirit in you.

And Nicodemus, you remember, said, how can this be? How can this happen? Jesus basically said two things in answer. The first thing he said was, well, it's in some ways a bit of a mystery like the wind.
There are things you don't know about it. You don't know where it's come from, you don't know where it's going, but you feel its effect and you know that it's at work. And then he goes on and he remembers an incident in the Old Testament and of course Jesus would know that Nicodemus was very familiar with the Old Testament and knew it very well.
And he says, remember that time away back in the wilderness with Moses when there was that awful plague of serpent bites and the people were dying all around. And there was that brass serpent that Moses was told to race up on a pole and when people looked at it, they were healed and saved from the angel of day.
God's son who has come to be the saviour.
[27:15] He will be raised up on the cross. And whoever looks to him and sees that he is the one who has died for their sins will be saved and will not just have physical life like the people in the wilderness had that will have spiritual life, will have eternal life, will have the life of God given to him forever.

And what Jesus was saying is the two things go together. You're asking Nicodemus, how can a person be born again? Well, there's a mystery about it, Nicodemus, that when a person is born again, there's an effect.
Perhaps you need to think about the effect. You need to think about Jesus, the Son of Man raised up on the cross for sinners. You need to see that Jesus is God's saviour.
You need to see that Jesus has done the work of suffering for the sins of his people. And you need to believe in him. As the people in the Old Testament believed in the serpent that God had provided and looked to it and trusted in it, there's much more reason for trusting in the Son of God dying on the cross than there is for trusting in a brass serpent.
God said it, trusted in a brass serpent and were saved.
[29:01] How much more should we trust in the Son of God dying on the cross for sinners when God says, look there, trust there and you'll be saved.

And when that happens, Nicodemus, then you'll know that the Holy Spirit has been at work in your life.
life. It's just like the wind. There's a mystery to the way it works. You cannot be sure of that exact moment when the Holy Spirit enters in to bring a person to the new birth.
But you always know it has happened when that person trusts in Jesus and his days for their salvation.
Where there is not that faith, there is no work of the Spirit. Where there is that faith, there is the work of the Spirit.
[30:18] And the two become intertwined. And that becomes the very reason why Christians follow the promptings of the Spirit and seek to live their lives more and more to please God because they are so indebted to God, forgiving them his Son to die for them.

Christian friends here this evening, isn't that what finally keeps you going in the hard times of being a Christian?
Isn't that what keeps you going finally? when you maybe feel that you're almost losing your faith because the way is hard, because you have so many disappointments and frustrations, and the devil is tempting you and has no sympathy for you and your weakness, and you feel almost like giving up.
What can keep you going? is it not this, that Christ died for you on that cross, that God gave his son to take your place?
However difficult it is, don't you have to say to yourself, I cannot leave him who has promised that he will never leave me, and I must keep going, and I can keep going, because I am so indebted to him for what he has done, and for what he has promised that he will do until the very end.
[32:18] So here's another slogan for the children. To be a Christian, I needed Jesus to die for me on the cross.

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To be a Christian, I needed Jesus to die for me on the cross. And when we've got these two parts of the definition right, there's a third part that is really the negative that complements the two positives. We often need negatives in our definitions. We often need to know not only what we believe, but what we don't believe. That makes it clearer very often.
We sometimes need that in our theological definitions. And it's good in the definition of a Christian as well. Because as a Christian, my trust is in the work of the Holy Spirit.
Because as a Christian, I'm indebted to Jesus for what he has done for me. I have no confidence in the flesh. My being a Christian is independent of works of my own.
[33:36] There are no works of mine that make me a Christian. Christian. It's that the Holy Spirit has brought me to the new birth. It's that Jesus has died for me on the cross and has enabled me to trust in him.

That and that alone has made me a Christian. And so only the work of Christ and only the work of his Holy Spirit has made me a Christian.
And there is nothing that I was able to add. And with empty hands, I have received it by faith.
And so as a Christian, I have no reason to boast in myself. What I seek every day as a Christian is humility. because of what it means to be a Christian, I have only reasons to be humble and to be a faithful, humble servant of Jesus Christ because I owe everything to him and to his spirit.
and I owe nothing to myself. And it is that independence from works that gives me such security.
[35:21] When the devil comes to tempt me, when the devil comes to tell me that I can never go on in the Christian life, that I can never finally be saved, God will be saved.

I am able to go back to this definition. Oh, if there was one iota of this foundation of my life that was due to myself, I would have real doubts of finally being saved.
But the foundation of my Christian life is Jesus Christ and the work of his spirit. will complete it. And so where he has begun this work that is his work, he will complete it.
And so because I have been saved, not by myself, but by Jesus, I will be saved. And I am able to go on.
And in indebtedness to him, I will persevere. in seeking to serve them, and seeking to make progress for his glory, for he is worthy.
[36:39] And so a final slogan for the children. To be a Christian, I need only Jesus to be sure I am a Christian.

I need only Jesus to be sure I am a Christian. If there is anyone here this evening who is still unable to rejoice as verse one encourages us to do, to rejoice in the Lord who has made us Christians, to do that, to do that, you must humble yourself at the feet of Jesus Christ this night.
You must recognize that your sin is such that only the work of his spirit can save you. And you must trust him and obey him when he says, I can save you because I am the one who has died on the cross for sinners like you.
I can save you. Trust me now. Amen.

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