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Paul’s Opponents

3: 2-3

Paul’s opponents DIG: Who were the Judaizers? What problem accounts for Paul’s change of tone between verses 1 and 2? Why was it important for Paul to give all his Jewish credentials? Why does Paul call the Judaizers dogs, evil doers, and mutilators? Instead of militating the flesh, what does Paul propose? Why is it important to get back to the basics? What conclusions does Paul draw for us today?

REFLECT: There were plenty of opponents during Paul’s day. Who are the opponents of Isra’el today? Who is the real enemy? Why is the ability to discern so important for believers? Why is replacement theology so dangerous today? How does this file speak to the need for Jewish evangelism today? How can you stand up for Isra’el today? What are the differences between a Gentile, a Jew, and a Messianic Jew?

Salvation equals faith plus nothing.

As David Stern relates in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary on Philippians*, apparently there was a problem with **Judaizers** in **Philippi** as there was in **Galatia** (see **Galatians**, to see link click **Ag - Who Were the Judaizers**). Indeed, it seems as though this was the major cause of dissension in **Philippi**. Some believe from the shift in tone from **3:1** that **Paul** had planned to end **his** letter there, but suddenly evaluated the new activity among the **Judaizers** and responded with the sharp warning that follows. But **the apostle** probably had already decided to repeat what **he** had written before (namely, the appeal to the humility of **Chapter 2**), by restating it negatively as a warning **not to boast (2:3)**, since humility excludes pride. Further, just as **he** used **Messiah Himself** as the supreme example (**2:5-11**), **Paul** uses the boasting **Judaizers** as a counterexample.

Some think that those **Judaizers** were not **Jews** by birth but fanatical **Gentile proselytes** (see the commentary **Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53: see proselytes at the gate**), preoccupied with physical **circumcision**, in which

they took great pride, regarding it as the necessary means of initiation into **the people of God** (see [Bj](#) - **A Tale of Two Citizenships**). Against this hypothesis is raised the objection that **Paul** would not list all **his Jewish** credentials (**2:5-6**) if **the Judaizers** had none **themselves**; hence **the Judaizers** must have been born **Jews**. Possibly a little distressed at having to toot **his** own horn, **Paul** hastens to add that **he** does **not put any confidence in the flesh** and regards it as **garbage** (**3:8**). **He** introduces **his** credentials only because those who oppose **him** consider their own meager qualifications so impressive.¹²³



After commanding **the Philippians** to **rejoice** (see [Bf](#) - **Rejoice in the Lord**), **Paul** turns to **his** next major theme in the letter. **His** strong and direct warning implies another distinguishing mark of true believers: their ability to **discern**. Yes, there is the spiritual gift of **discernment** (see the commentary on [First Corinthians Cq](#) - **The Distinguishing of Spirits**), but every believer needs to understand the fundamental truths of the Gospel (**Romans 6:17, 10:14** and **17**). But since **discernment**, like **faith**, needs to grow and mature, Messianic rabbis, pastors and elders must warn their congregations about the danger of **false teachers** (see [Ephesians Bk](#) - **Building Up the Body of Messiah**). So in the present passage, **Paul** tells **the Philippians** how to recognize **them**. **They** were more than **critics** (see [Ap](#) - **Paul’s Critics**), **they** were **his opponents**. **He** describes those **false teachers** who opposed the Gospel using **three terms**, each introduced by the word **Beware**.

Beware of the dogs (3:2a Greek). Unlike the pet **dogs** (Greek: *kunarium*) described in **Matthew 15:26-27**, **the dogs** (Greek: *kuon*) **Paul** refers to are wild scavengers that plagued ancient cities. **They** roamed in packs, feeding on garbage

(**Exodus 22:31; First Kings 14:11, 16:4, 21:23-24**) and occasionally attacking humans. **They** were despised, and **dog** was frequently used as a derogatory term (cf. **Deuteronomy 23:18; First Samuel 17:43 and 24:14; Second Samuel 9:8 and 16:9; 2 Kings 8:23; Psalm 22:16; Revelation 22:15**).¹²⁴

By labeling **his Jewish opponents** as **dogs**, **Paul** turns the tables on **them**. It was a common **Jewish** slur to refer to Gentiles as **dogs**. In a world view that denies **the people of God** on the basis of **Jewish** privilege, all who are outside of that circle of privilege are **dogs**. But in a world view that defines **the people of God** on the basis of **their** relationship of **Messiah**, all who seek to define **the people of God** on any other basis are in fact the **dogs**. For the world view that grants **the Jew** a privileged position before **God** on the basis of ethnicity, all Gentiles are **dogs**. Such a mindset thinks that being **Jewish** provides a privileged seat at the table in the Kingdom, while the Gentiles remain outside as **dogs** to scavenge the discarded leftovers of the feast. But instead, it is those who abandon confidence in their status and cling to **Yeshua Messiah** by **faith** that are the true sons of **the Kingdom** who enjoy **God’s Great Wedding Banquet** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Hp - The Parable of the Great Banquet](#)), while all who stubbornly cling to **their** privilege status ironically find **themselves** outside **the Banquet** as scavenger **dogs** feeding on the discarded scraps.¹²⁵

Beware of the evil workers (3:2b Greek). In contrast to **Epaphroditus** (see [Bd - Send Epaphroditus at Once](#)), **Paul’s fellow worker** in **2:25**, these men were **evil workers**. In **Second Corinthians 11:13b**, **Paul** calls **them** **deceitful workers**. It is in a similar light that **the apostle** warned **the Philippians** to **beware** those **evil workers**. Typically, those involved in external, ritualistic, ceremonial religions see themselves as doing good to please **God**. In **Galatians 1:14**, **Paul himself** had once been proud of **advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries among [his] countrymen, being extremely zealous for the Oral Law** (see [The Life of Christ Ei - Oral Law](#)). After **his** conversion, **the apostle** realized that all **his good works** were worthless: **But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as mere rubbish, so that I may gain Messiah (3:7-8)**. Instead of seeing **himself** as doing **good** in **God’s** sight, **Paul**, at the end of **his** ministry, felt that **he** was in fact **the foremost of sinners (First Timothy 1:15-16)**.

Only believers controlled by **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** can do genuine **good works** (**Eph 2:10; Colossians 1:10; 2 Timothy 2:21 and 3:17; Titus 2:14**).

Unbelievers can do bad things for bad reasons. They can also do good things, but only out of selfish pride, not for **God's** glory. Only the redeemed can do **good deeds** motivated by a desire to glorify **ADONAI**. **The false teachers** plaguing **the Philippians** saw **themselves** as pleasing **God**, earning **His** favor and **their** salvation. But **they** perverted the commandments of **God** through a legalistic interpretation of the Torah. Thus, **Paul** exposed **them** for the prideful **evil workers** that **they** were.¹²⁶

Beware of the mutilators (3:2c). Finally, these **false teachers** are **those who mutilate the flesh**, or more literally **the mutilation** (Greek: *katatome*). Although **they** claimed to be promoting **the true circumcision** (Greek: *peritome*), **they** were promoting **mutilation**. **Paul** skillfully uses a play on words to indicate a point that **he** makes elsewhere, that physical **circumcision** is not required to be right with **God** (**Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 5:2-12 and 6:15**). The irony here is as sharp as **the circumcisers'** knife – **the circumcision** that **Paul's opponents** promote as the path of obedience to the Torah, is in fact, a violation of the Torah in light of the coming of **the Messiah** and the Dispensation of Grace (see the commentary on **Hebrews Bp - The Dispensation of Grace**). Thinking **they** were advocating for the removal of the foreskin as the clear sign of **their** covenant status; **they** were actually encouraging a **mutilation** that separated **them** from the B'rit Chadashah sealed in the **Messiah's blood** (see **The Life of Christ Kk - The Third Cup of Redemption**).

Of course, believers today can fall prey to the same type of attitude displayed by **Paul's opponents**. We can look down on others for their lack of status and privilege, which is in fact the opposite of thinking more highly than ourselves. We can encourage others to pursue a life of **good works**, but do so in a way that encourages them to place their confidence in those works rather than **Messiah**. In doing so, we become **evildoers**.¹²⁷

Beware of those who say you must be circumcised to be saved (3:2 NLT). Pagan priests mutilated their own bodies, and **the Judaizers mutilated** the message of the Gospel by adding legalism to grace. **Paul** was saying that **circumcision** did not provide **the Judaizers** with any spiritual advantage but resulted in **their** spiritual **mutilation**.¹²⁸ **The apostle** was only human, and **he** became so upset at **their** false teaching that **he** exploded: **I only wish those who**

are agitating you would castrate (Greek: *apokopto*, meaning *bodily mutilation, to cut off*) **themselves (Galatians 5:12)! Paul** expresses the wish that **the Judaizers** would not stop at cutting off their foreskin, but would go on to cutting the whole thing off for all the good it would do! If cutting off a little bit of skin would improve **your** standing before **God**, why stop there? Why not cut a lot of skin off! Obviously, **he** was using exaggeration to make **his** point that no amount of cutting would result in justification.¹²⁹

On the contrary, **the spiritually circumcised** are we who have **circumcised hearts and ears (Acts 7:51a)**, we who have had the **foreskins of our old nature** removed, **we who worship by the Spirit of God are the ones who are truly circumcised. We rely on what Messiah Yeshua has done for us. We put no confidence in human effort (3:3 NLT).** Later, **Paul** would write to the church at **Colosse: Also it was in union with Yeshua that you were circumcised with a circumcision not done by human hands, but accomplished by stripping away the old nature’s control over the body (Colossians 2:11a).** An important question for Messianic **Judaism** is whether **Paul** is teaching that believing Gentiles are counted as **the circumcised** and unbelieving **Jews** are not. The answer is that this is a verse with several levels of meaning, so that it teaches several things; but it is important not to get the levels confused. The *p’shat*, *the plain, literal sense of the text*, is not that unbelieving **Jews** are not **circumcised**, or, as some Christians (who believe in Replacement Theology) claim, that “Christians are the true Jews.” Rather, **the apostle** is saying that Gentiles who undergo an outward conversion of **Judaism** without an inward change of **heart** are certainly not spiritually **circumcised**, even though they might claim to be.¹³⁰

Back to the basics: Jews are Jews . . . always have been, are, and always will be. Messianic **Jews** are **Jews**. Non-Messianic **Jews** are **Jews**. Messianic **Jews** and believing Gentiles (**Jews** and Gentiles who put **their** trust in **Yeshua Messiah**) constitute **the Body of Messiah**. By their **faith**, Gentiles become believers in **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**; and as such, they are grafted into **the Olive Tree** without becoming **Jews** (see the commentary on **Dani’el Dx - The Mystery of the Olive Tree**). They remain Gentiles, but can become non-Messianic **Jews** by conversion to either Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed sects.

Conclusions: A believing Gentile, spiritually **circumcised** but physically **uncircumcised**, has been grafted into **Isra’el** by **faith (Romans 11:16-26; Ephesians 2:11-16)**, so that the promises given to **Abraham** apply to him as well

(see the commentary on [Galatians Bn](#) - **There is Neither Jew nor Greek in the Body of Messiah**). Yet, he remains a Gentile, and is not the so-called “True Isra’el” or the “House of Isra’el” (specifically the “lost tribes” of Isra’el) as espoused by false cults like the Hebrew Roots Movement (see [Galatians Ak](#) - **The Hebrew Roots Movement: A Different Gospel**). One the other hand, a non-Messianic **Jew**, physically **circumcised** but spiritually **uncircumcised** because he does not trust in **Messiah**, is however, still a **Jew**; and even though he is a cut-off branch, he can be grafted back in again (see the commentary on [Romans Cz](#) - **The Illustration of Isra’el’s Future**). A Messianic **Jew**, **circumcised** both physically and spiritually, should take **Paul’s** warning (see [Bh](#) - **Paul’s Response to His Opponents**) not to make this “double **circumcision**” into an excuse for boasting, which is always a temptation. For in **the Body of Messiah** there is no first-and-second class citizenships based on whether one is **circumcised (First Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6 and 6:15)** or **Jewish (Ephesians 2:14)**, or any other external criterion (**Galatians 3:28** and **Colossians 3:11**).¹³¹

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** that though there will always be **opponents** in this world, **You** are always right there by my side, to guide and comfort me. **Your** power and wisdom are always much greater than all the **opponents** in this world. **Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds (Psalms 36:5)**. Praise **You** that no **opponent** is greater than **You**, and **You** open the door to union with **Your Messiah** to all. **The plan of the fullness of times is to bring all things together in the Messiah - both things in heaven and things on earth, all in Him (Ephesians 1:10)**. **Opponents** may say many things; but what counts is what **You** say: Salvation is by grace alone, through **faith** alone, in **Messiah** alone, so that **God** alone receives all the glory. **For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:9)**. In **Messiah Yeshua’s** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*