

The Makings of a Monster – Philippians 3:3-11
Messiah Bible Church – February 22, 2026 - Adam Casalino

Introduction: Once, long ago, a young woman had a nightmare. It was just a single image, but it filled her with so much fear, she decided she wanted others to feel the same thing. *She was a little odd, I guess.* So, she wrote a story about a man obsessed with life and death. He stole body parts from corpses, stitched them into one body, and somehow reanimated it. He famously exclaimed “It’s alive! It’s alive!” But even though the thing could walk and talk, it was hardly a life. He made a monster, and it ended up tormenting him the rest of his life.

Mary Shelley’s book *Frankenstein* has captivated the imagination readers for generations. Although it was a work of fiction, it has an eerie ring of truth about it. There are people here today who are doing much the same thing as Frankenstein.

Now, if you’ve spent any amount of time in church, you’ve heard of “idols.” In biblical times, idols were literal statues people worshiped. Some of them were as grotesque and vile as Frankenstein’s creation. But, the New Testament identifies others kinds of idols: non-literal “gods” that people worship. Money, fame, power are three kinds.

But there is another kind of idolatry in our world today—I’d say it’s one of the biggest idol in our society. It’s so common and widespread, most of us don’t even notice it. But Paul reveals what it is in today’s text. My message is *The Makings of a Monster*. We’re going to learn about this putrid false god and what God wants us to do about it.

Philippians 3:3–4 (ESV) *For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more.*

Paul opens this chapter by addressing a lie spreading across the early church. Some were demanding Gentile Christians to be circumcised and convert to Judaism to be saved. Paul spends a lot of time in the book of Galatians refuting this lie. Here, he warns the Philippians not to give in to these false teachers. He explains in verse 3 that the people who put their trust in Jesus Christ are the true “circumcised.” Meaning they are God’s covenant people. Physical circumcision is not necessary.

Paul calls getting circumcised putting “confidence in the flesh.” He uses that phrase 3 times in 2 verses. What does it mean? Well, it’s more than just getting circumcised. To put confidence in something means you trust it. You rely on it. You make that thing your security. To put confidence in the *Lord* means you rely on him.

So, what does it mean to put confidence in the flesh? Here is an important fact: when the NT says “flesh” it is referring to the natural. What is of this physical realm that you engage with using your body (as opposed to the spiritual). It *can* mean “sinful”—but the default meaning is natural.

Someone who is fleshly is thinking and acting based on the natural: what their five senses tell them is true (instead of thinking and acting based on the word of God). So, to put *confidence in the flesh* means you are placing your security in the natural; something about your physical life.

What Paul is talking about here is a very big problem in our world. It’s a kind of idolatry. Christians will often say an idol is anything you worship other than God (something you love more than Jesus). And you might think of worship as bowing down to something external, something you covet, desire more than anything else. As I said, money, fame, power...

But there’s more to worship than that. Human beings were made for worship. Worship is much more integral to your life than you realize. You can argue that worship permeates every aspect of your life. In fact, the things you make your life about, you worship.

You worship anything *you think* gives you life, or gives your life meaning. Anything that keeps you going, both literally and figuratively. The things that get you up in the morning. The things that motivate you. These are the things that *define who you are.*

First point: The biggest idol in our modern world is self-worship. (Write that down). Many of you here today are worshipping things other than God and don’t even know it. You’ve taken features about your natural life (the flesh)—your personality, your physical attributes, etc—and you’ve stitched them together, and said, “This is me. These things define my identity and nobody can take them from me.”

This is self-worship: a form of idolatry where you base your identity on natural things in your life. Paul called it putting confidence in the flesh. *The things you think make*

you who you are, you worship. You place value on those things. They mean more to you than anything else. You'd kill for those things, and you'd die for them. This form of idolatry is so pervasive in our culture that we don't even see it.

Self-worship has poisoned every facet of our society: politics, education, business, and even religion. Because we are so influenced by culture, it is common in the Church. Whether you realize it or not, there is likely something you worship and cherish other than God, because you've allowed it to shape your identity.

Why do I call this idolatry? Don't we all have things that make up our identity? Isn't that part of being human? Well, if you are a believer in Christ, there is only one thing that defines you. Your identity does not come from the natural world.

Your real identity is defined by your union with Jesus. The moment you received Christ as savior, you became a totally different person (2 Corinthians 5:17). The real you is not made up of earthly things. So, if you try to make your identity out of anything other than Jesus, you are robbing yourself of who you're supposed to be.

But, what does self-worship look like? Paul describes it perfectly in the following verses, using himself as an example:

Philippians 3:4b, 5a (ESV) *...If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews...*

Paul uses himself to describe self-worship. At one time, Paul made his identity out of fleshly things. He took pride in his Jewishness. According to Genesis, every Jewish boy had to be circumcised. And it had to be on the eighth day. Perhaps some families were lax in this rule, so they missed that eighth-day window. But Paul, oh no. He had been circumcised on the right day. That gave Paul bragging rights among other Jews.

He goes on to mention he was from the tribe of Benjamin. At this point in history, not all Jews knew what tribe they were from. Years earlier, they were sent into exile; it was likely many records were lost or destroyed. When the Jews returned to the land, some families couldn't prove they were from the tribe of Levi—so they were barred from serving (see Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7).

But not Paul! He knew he was from the tribe of Benjamin. That made him a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” He was more Jewish than anyone else! People respected him for that—so it became an important part of his identity.

But consider one thing, nothing he's mentioned so far had anything to do with Paul's actions. He was born a Jew; his parents had him circumcised. Yet he bragged about all this!

This is the first form of self-worship we will look at today: Defining your identity by your natural qualities. (Write that down). This means deriving your identity on attributes you were born with—or claim to be born with. Our world places a tremendous priority on a person's natural qualities. Including their ethnicity, age, physical characteristics, and sexuality.

Today, more than ever, people idolize their skin color. We pretend we've moved past this in our country, but that is a lie. Once, people celebrated being white. Today, our culture celebrates people of color. Why should any of this matter? Because it's self-worship. People believe skin color makes them who they are.

Our culture tells people from a very young age that they are defined by their ethnicity.

That your ethnic background determines your temperament, intelligence, and so many other characteristics. People spend a fortune getting their DNA analyzed. “Ooo! How exciting! What part of the world did I come from?” Who cares!? Years ago, scientists dug up Roman gladiators skulls to study their DNA.¹ They were able to extract data from their bones. And did you know what they found out about these men? They were all dead! Nothing else matters at this point.

Do you know what you are going to find out, if you study your family tree? Every single one of your ancestors was a sinner. Go back far enough and every country owned slaves. If you look hard enough you’ll learn your ancestors committed every kind of evil thing in the book.

The great irony is, God made our ethnicities as an expression of his power. To demonstrate his creative work. All so that we would look back to him, our source of life, and worship him (see Acts 17:26–27). Your ethnicity is a good thing, if it points you back to your creator.

The real you isn’t your last name; it isn’t your accent; it isn’t your family tree. You are not your skin color; no matter how lovely it might be. Your true lineage stopped coming from the natural the moment you received Christ. You no longer descend from the First Adam, but the Second, Jesus.

This kind of self-worship goes beyond ethnicity. These days, people believe they were born homosexual or transgender. Children are being taught this in school before they learn science or math. For decades, our society has pushed these lies; and today gay and trans people shape their entire identities around their sexuality. It is so engrained in them that, if you disagree, they’ll say you are threatening their lives.

This is why sadly, in recent years, young trans-identity people have become mass shooters. Vulnerable children join online communities that teach them they were born trans. And they claim that any person who disagrees with that—particularly Bible-believing Christians—they are jeopardizing their right to exist. What would a person do if they are told Christians want them dead for just being themselves?

A message to LGBT people who are listening. Let me take a moment to speak to anyone here or listening online who’s been told they are gay or transgender and that the Christian Church hates them and wants them dead:

¹ <https://www.siliconrepublic.com/innovation/gladiators-genome-sequence-biology-trinity-college>

God loves you. *He* decided your gender and sexuality; it's based on the biology he gave you. He doesn't want you to change that. Christians are far from perfect, but we do not want you dead. In fact, we want you to live by putting your faith in Jesus Christ.

The people who want you dead are the very people telling you are transgender, gay, bisexual, and so on. They don't care about your physical, mental, or spiritual well-being. They are just using you to push their agenda. The only person who loves you perfectly is Jesus Christ. And he will never mistreat you or take advantage of you.

As I've been saying, self-worship is the idolizing of your natural qualities. It is making your identity about a physical thing from your natural life. None of those things are worthy of defining who you are. The only thing that can give your life meaning is the love of God found in Jesus Christ. In Christ you will find your true identity.

Paul knew this full well. After discussing the natural qualities he once idolized, he moves on to something else:

Philippians 3:5b–6 (ESV) *...as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

There were several religious groups in Judaism at that time. But the largest, and most respected were the Pharisees. This group was known for strict obedience to the law and an unwavering devotion to tradition. Paul had tremendous respect among the Jews for being a Pharisee. Even the high priest respected him (Acts 9:1–2).

But he went even further than that. Sure, his rivals in Judaism were diligent law-keepers—but were they killings Christians? Paul could brag that he was so devoted to his religion that he persecuted Jews who worshipped Jesus Christ. In his mind, they were blasphemers who needed to be punished.

His obsession for his traditions set him apart from his peers. People in Israel knew his name. They feared him as much as respected him. He even said that he was *blameless*. Which meant nobody could accuse him of breaking a commandment. You can just imagine how much Paul was wrapped up in this identity. It meant everything to him. At a young age, he dominated his religion. He would have probably ended up on the Sanhedrin. Everything he did defined his value and sense of self.

This is the second form of self-worship we will look at today: Defining your identity by your achievements. (Write that down). People base their identity on what they have or do. The first thing we ask someone when we meet them is, “What do you do?” Our culture has programmed us to think that our value is tied to our work.

“I’m a doctor.” “I’m a lawyer.” “I’m the CEO of a such-and-such company.” Do you really think that makes you who you are? Yet, it’s tempting to shape our identity out of what we do, because working hard and helping people are good things. But one day, you won’t be a doctor. One day, you won’t have the job you currently have. What will you be then? Will you suddenly lose your identity? Will you be crushed? Yes, if you make your job your identity.

Some people make their identity out of their family. This might be hard to accept, but one day you will not be parenting your children. They’ll grow up and move out. If you’ve made your identity being a parent, who will you be when you are no longer

raising kids? Some make their identity out of their marriage. What will you be if your spouse goes before you?

Nearly any good thing that you have in your life, can become an idol if you let it define you. Some people do that with politics. There are some Christians that have blurred the line between the Bible and their political views. They can't tell the difference between the two. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you are a Christian first... and an American second. If your political views cause you to get angry at someone because disagree with you... you are worshipping your politics. You've made them a central part of who you are.

Of course, you should vote. You should get involved in politics, to the extent that you want to. You can even run for public office—God help you! But conservatism or liberalism are not your true identities. They don't make you who you are. Some of you will disagree with that, but it's true.

Listen, you were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Part of what that means is you can't worship anything other than him and be satisfied. Material possessions, hobbies, lots of money or pleasure... none of it can satisfy you or define who you are. You were too fearfully and wonderfully made to make your life out of putrid, fleshly things.

Your identity can't come from anyone but the One who gave you life. And if you believe in Jesus, you have a new nature created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24). That's the real you. Nothing you can do or acquire can match what Jesus has done for you.

This is what Paul learned. He had everything a Jewish man could want. Then... he met Jesus.

Philippians 3:7–9a (ESV) *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.*

Just consider how much Paul changed. All his accolades, all his achievements, even his Jewishness—all of it became “rubbish.” That word is pretty tame in English. In Greek it means “dung.” Garbage. Filth. The stuff you throw to the rats. Mind you, *he’s not talking about his sin!* He’s talking about the good stuff. The stuff a person brags about. He counted all that as filth, a negative, compared to knowing Jesus. This is our next point: **Self-worship cannot compare to knowing Christ.**

Some of you don’t know understand how that can be true. You go to church, you participate in religious activities. *But you still put confidence in your flesh.* You’ve taken putrid things and stitched them together, and told yourself, “This is me.” But when compared to what Jesus has for you... the life you’ve made for yourself is a monster.

Paul wrote that knowing Jesus as Lord was of “surpassing worth” compared to his old life. Do you think the same way? Is knowing Jesus so important to you that you don’t want anything else to define your life?

You can only say that if you’ve meet the real Jesus. When you discover how much God loves you, what Jesus did for you, you’ll refuse to make your life about anything else. You’ll make him the reason you get up in the morning. The best part of your day is spending time with him. All you care about is learning from him and letting his nature define who you are.

You might be thinking, “Is Jesus really worth all that?” Well, if you think God is a distant being who exists just to condemn you, then no. But that’s not the real Jesus. The real Jesus will give you more than you’ll ever give up. The real Jesus goes above and beyond any expectation you’ll ever have of what a good and loving God is like. The real Jesus is worth so much, nothing in this life can come close to him.

If you don’t believe me, consider what Paul gave up. For him to embrace Jesus Christ meant walking away from his *everything* he knew. He didn’t just lose his job, but his family and his close friends; he lost his reputation, maybe even his home. People who once praised him cursed his name and wanted him dead.

Most of us can’t appreciate what Paul went through. It’s similar, these days, to a what gay person goes through when they turn to Jesus. For them to walk away from that lifestyle means they are losing everything. Immediately, people turn on them. Close friends become their enemies. They are kicked out of their social circles; they might even lose their job, home, and possessions. It’s no small thing. But they gladly do it, because what they have in Jesus is so much greater.

Paul wrote that he gave up everything to be “found in Christ.” What does that mean, to be “in Christ”? To be “*in Christ*” means you are no longer “*outside*” of him. There is nothing about you that exists apart from the life-sustaining grace and love that emanates from Christ.

That's a pretty profound thing to say, but Paul goes even further:

Philippians 3:9b (ESV) *...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.*

How does righteousness relate to our identity? You may not see the connection right away, so let me walk you through it. Righteousness means to be on good terms with God. This is what every human wants, even if they don't know it. It means God is not mad at you nor will punish you. How would that affect your identity, knowing God is on your side?

It had a great affect on Paul's. After leaving behind his old identity, he reveals what being in Christ really means:

Philippians 3:10–11 (ESV) *...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

What is does it mean to “share [Christ's] sufferings”? NKJV: says “fellowship with his sufferings.” Now, if you were quickly glossing over this passage, you might think that Paul is talking persecution. I think that part of it, but it's much bigger than that. Paul desired to be “like Christ in his death.” NKJV: “to be *conformed* to his death.”

To be “conformed” to something means becoming shaped by that thing.² That speaks of identity; you're becoming like that thing. *This doesn't mean Paul made suffering part of his identity.* Suffering is not a personality trait. It does not define a person.

² “**con•form** \kən-ˈfɔrm\ *verb* [Middle English, from Anglo-French *conformer*, from Latin *conformare*, from *com-* + *formare* to form, from *forma* form] *verb transitive* 14th century: to give the same shape, outline, or contour to: bring into harmony or accord” Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

For many people, though, suffering *is* part of their identity. In the world, it's called having a victim mentality. Some people allow a bad experience to define their entire lives. Others consider the sufferings of their people group as part their identity.

As wrong as that is, Christians do something similar. In this life, you are going to go through hard times. Some of you have experienced very trying times. I can say the same. I won't minimize the pain any of you have gone through.

But hear me: do not let suffering become your identity. You are a child of God. You are a citizen of heaven. Your real life comes from Christ, not the trials of this world. The biblical response to suffering is to trust God to deliver you in due time, knowing he always turns evil into good for his children.

All that being said, Paul did suffering for Jesus. Some have said that Paul suffered more than any Christian in Church history. I don't know if we can prove that. Even in modern times, there have been people who suffered tremendously for their faith in Jesus.

One of them was Richard Wurmbrand. He was a pastor in Romania during the Cold War. He wrote the book *Tortured for Christ* and started the Voice of the Martyrs ministry. He was imprisoned by the Soviets for fourteen years; prison guards beat him mercilessly. When he was finally released, he came to America. I remember a story from a pastor I know who hosted him at his church. He said that Wurmbrand would walk the streets of New York barefoot. That's because the Soviets beat his feet so badly, they were permanently deformed, so he couldn't wear shoes.

Another man who comes to mind is Brother Yun, who wrote the book *The Heavenly Man*. He was a house church pastor in Communist China who was imprisoned for his faith. He was beaten and was subject to forced labor and starvation. When he was finally freed, his wife came to greet him... she thought they had released the wrong man. She didn't even recognize him because he had become so malnourished. She said, "This isn't my husband, you brought out the wrong man!"

Maybe these men suffered as much as Paul, I don't know. Paul himself said "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Galatians 6:17). He could have lifted up his shirt and showed you jagged scars, welts, and bruises from his beatings for Christ. Paul went through a lot to bring the gospel to people around the world.

But hear me when I say this: everything he endured, all the beatings, all the imprisonments... were a drop in the bucket compared to what Christ went through for him.

Let's take a moment and consider the suffering Jesus went through to save us. The gospels provide detailed account of Jesus' passion. If you put them all together you get a clear account of what transpired.

But the book that gives us even more is Isaiah. The prophet wrote about Jesus' sufferings hundreds of years before it happened. But he is so detailed and precise, it's as if he was there. His account begins in Isaiah 52:13 through chapter 53.

Isaiah 52:13–14 (ESV) *Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you [Israel]—[so] his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.*

Isaiah wrote that Jesus' appearance, his face, became marred beyond "human semblance." That means, if you were to look at Jesus' face, it would have looked worse than any human's face that was ever afflicted. Isaiah then says in the same verse that Jesus' form (body) was marred beyond the "children of mankind." That means when Jesus hung on that cross, *he didn't even look human*. How was that possible? Was Isaiah just exaggerating for effect? The Bible doesn't exaggerate anything.

We know Jesus was scourged brutally by the Roman, tearing his body to shreds. The soldiers beat his head with rods, while he wore the crown of thorns. And after that, he was nailed to a cross and forced to hang for hours as he slowly asphyxiated. Shocking and inhumane treatment, but that wouldn't have been enough to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy—he still would have looked human.

Isaiah goes on to write that Jesus bore the sin of many (Isaiah 53:12). Peter agrees when he said Jesus bore in his own body our sins (1 Peter 2:24). All the evil things we've ever said, thought, or did were put on Jesus. Isaiah, quoted later by Matthew, says Jesus *also* bore our sicknesses and diseases (Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 8:17). These aren't figurative statements; that literally happened.

We can't imagine what happened to Jesus when he hung on that cross. How horribly disfigured did he become when our sins clung to his flesh? What did he look like when he bore all the sickness and condemnation of the world?

It was a scene so horrible that God had to cover the entire earth with darkness (Matthew 27:45–46). His torment was so terrible all Jesus could do was cry out, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!?”* Not even the people there saw what Jesus became on that cross.

Some of you here may have worked as a soldier, police officer, or as an EMT. You may have seen things that still haunt you. But if you were to see what Jesus Christ became on that cross, you’d never recover. I don’t think the human mind can comprehend what he endured. No movie, no painting could ever capture it. Jesus became a horror as he hung on that tree. It was unthinkable. Unspeakable. You’d never be the same if you saw it.

Jesus became the most despised, horrific, terrifying thing to ever exist. Nothing you in your nightmares can come close to what Jesus became. Paul says he became a *curse* (Galatians 3:13), a hated thing, a thing of total disgust. But that wasn’t even the end of it.

Isaiah wrote that Jesus’ soul became an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10). In the OT, sin offerings were burned with fire, which represented God’s anger against our wickedness. Jesus endured the anger of God against our sin, in our place. The torment we deserve was poured out on Jesus to the fullest—until at the end he cried out, *“It is finished!”*

Jesus endured something we can't begin to comprehend. It was the torment we would have faced, if he didn't take it for us. This is the God we serve. A God who loves us so much, he'd endure horror beyond belief, to save people who didn't deserve it.

That is why Paul was willing to give up everything for Christ. Because Christ endured so much to save him. Nothing and no one can suffer that much for you. Why would you make your life about anything else? It is all dung compared to our precious Savior.

This is what it means to share in Christ's sufferings. When you receive Jesus, he takes your old identity and destroys it (Romans 6:6). You are crucified with him. You are totally identifying with Jesus now. Nothing about you exists outside of him and his work to save you. He's not just your Savior, but he is your identity. And yes, that means you are willing to suffer for him as well.

But what happens when you totally identify with Jesus instead of your natural life? The same Savior who suffered such horror on the cross for you left all that filth in the grave. He rose from the dead without a trace of sin on him. He is alive forever. Everyone who gives up their old identity—being confirmed to his death—gets to know the power of his resurrection. They become new people with new identities. You receive a new life and a new purpose. That's our final point: *Self-worship is eradicated by our new life in Jesus.*

This how you overcome the idolatry of identity. You have to accept that your old life is gone. Then you must discover who you now are in Christ. If you believe in Jesus, you are *already* a new person. But you may not be walking in that new life if you are holding onto something else that gives your life meaning.

So, what are you going to do? If you're a Christian here today and you realize that you've been making your identity out of putrid things, there is only one way to respond: let them go. Reject your old identity and embrace who you are in Christ. The only way you can do that, is to by being grounded in the truth of who you really are.

And I'm here to help you. In the application section of your sermon notes, I've put a catalogue of Bible passages. They cover what Christ did for you and who you are in Christ. Paul says be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). I urge you to make it a priority, alongside whatever Bible reading you do, to meditate on these verses.

Write them out, journal your thoughts about them. Pray them out to God, thanking him for what he's done. In your small groups you can take a few of these, read and discuss them. Don't just do this for a little while; make it a daily habit. As you do, God will transform how you see yourself. And that will change your life.

For those of you who have not yet received Jesus as your Lord and Savior... As I said, nothing in this world can really define you. Only the One who suffered for you on the cross can. Jesus died for your sin so you can be forgiven. You don't do anything to earn forgiveness, you must only believe in Jesus Christ. In a few minutes we will have a time of prayer. I urge you to come forward and speak with one of our prayer team and they will pray with you as you receive Christ.