

Sinners, Servants, and Saints

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Bible Verse: Philippians 1:1-2
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Our Old Testament reading this morning is from Jeremiah 31:33-34. Hear now the reading of God's word: "33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

We will turn to Philippians for our New Testament reading. Philippians 1, the first two verses, which will simultaneously serve as our sermon text this morning. That's Philippians 1:1-2, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus, who, at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." This is the word of the Lord.

Let's pray together. *Almighty God will you teach us your word today and may we be like the man who was blessed in Psalm one, who walks not in the counsel of the wicked but who delights in the law of the Lord. Do this in Jesus name, amen.*

Paul's letter to the church in Philippians, or in Philippi, is a remarkable letter. It is short, it is relatively straight forward, yet it is simultaneously very rich. It begins with grace and it ends with grace. As soon as Paul is possibly able to get the word out in his letter, he says 'Grace to you, and peace, from God our father and the lord Jesus Christ.' Friends, grace is a distinguishing mark of Christianity. It sets Christianity apart from every other religion on the face of the earth. An in Christ, there is grace. There is grace for sinners, such as us. And grace is for the undeserving, for those who are marked by shame, by sin, and by sorrow. And it's offered to all of us, even if we are not yet aware of it, or are too proud to admit it. Grace is for those who have no interest in Christ. Grace is for those who are set against Christ and hostile to the church. Which is true of the author of this letter, Paul. And grace is also for those who have been found by Christ and now, as such, are in Christ, true recipients of this letter; that being the church in Philippi.

This morning we are considering just two verses, the opening two verse, which in many senses reveals the standard practice of letter writing back in that day. You have the author, you have the recipients of the letter, and then you have the greeting. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

to all the saints in Christ Jesus, who, at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Now, so often we are quick to read over these pleasantries. We are eager to get to the meat of the letter and the body of the letter. What is this letter about? But I want to exhort us to pause a little. To not rush over. Not to hurry ahead. And to see that in these two little opening verses, we find the centrality of Christ; who is already mentioned three times, found in these two verses, as well as the key theme of God’s grace.

So, this morning, as we look upon Christ and we look upon His grace, we are going to do so through the lens of sinners, servants, and saints. Our three points for this morning. Sinners, servants, and saints.

Our first point this morning, sinners. As we’ve already noted, the opening of this letter begins with the words ‘Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus’ and immediately we are made aware of who this letter is from. This is Paul, the apostle of Christ, and his son in the faith, who is Timothy, that is the biological of Eunice and the grandson of Lois, as we read about in 2 Timothy 1:5. But I want to go back a little this morning and consider who this main human author is speaking; who is this man that we have come to well know as ‘Paul’.

Well, Paul is a Jew. He was a Roman citizen by birth. He was born to Jewish parents around the time of 85, and he was born in the city of Tarsus which was the capital of the Roman city Cilicia in Southeast Asia Minor, which is found in modern day Turkey today, about twenty miles inland of the Mediterranean Sea. And so, he’s a long way away from Jerusalem; from the Holy Land. And as such, they were, this family, were part of the diaspora; Jews who had been scattered far and wide from the Holy Land during this, and into this Gentile world of the day. So Paul speaks of his Jewish heritage, we find in the Bible, far more than he does of his roman citizenship. We see that later on in Philippians. He says that he was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. As to the law, a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to Righteousness, under the law, blameless. In other words, Paul was not always a follower of Christ. His formal education came at the feet of the famous Pharisee and teacher of the law Gamaliel, who likely held the most senior position in the great Sanhedrin, in Jerusalem, which is the highest court or council of the Jewish nation of Israel.

Paul’s own zeal matched his training. He was a persecutor of the church in the fiercest of ways. In this light, we find Paul says in Galatians 1, “¹³For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.” This is who we’re talking about. This is Paul. In fact, in Acts 9, Paul is not simply content with trying to destroy the church in Jerusalem, he wanted to drag those new converts to the faith, those new converts to Christ who were now in Damascus, dragging them back to Jerusalem. Why? Because they had fled. They had fled from Jerusalem out of fear of persecution for their faith.

Listen now to these opening verses in Acts 9, “But Saul [which is Paul’s Jewish name, Paul is his Roman name] But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³Now as he

went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”⁵ And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” This text could not be more clear. In his extreme zeal, Paul, or Saul’s, persecution of the church was in fact persecution of Christ. In other words, Christ was Saul’s enemy. And with everything in his power, he wanted to extinguish anything positively associated with Christ, that being His Church.

And so, with papers from the Jewish high priest in his hands, papers authorizing the forcible removal of Christians from the synagogue in Damascus, and with ever present murderous threats on his lips, Christ stops Saul in his tracks. And in effect says, “you are mine. Come, follow me. You are a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the gentiles and the kings and the children of Israel.” Talk about an absolutely unexpected set of events. Absolute turn in the life of a man headed one way and, in an instant, all is changed. No one saw this coming. This was not in alignment with what he had heard from the teaching of his teacher, Gamaliel. One second, Paul was persecuting Christ and the very next he is confessing him as Lord and as God. Saul gives comment on what happened in Galatians 1 “¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles,” we’ll pause there.

This is remarkable. Paul gives us a window into the very nature of salvation. A picture of salvation that is not only true of this man, how Paul came to salvation in Christ, but how it is true of all believers. There are three things that stand out in this text in Galatians 1. One, that God has set Paul apart for Himself from eternity. Before he had done anything good or bad, that being Saul, before the world had come to be, before there was any reason why God should call Saul to Himself. God set Saul apart. This, friends, is what our bible terms predestination. God Saul to Himself before he was born of Jewish parents in tarsus. He set himself apart, for God, and for the proclamation of the gospel. Secondly, we see that there came a time in Saul’s life where he was a murderer. He was a tormentor on the road to Damascus, where God was pleased, in that hostility, to open his eyes. The eyes of his heart. To see Christ. To reveal his son to this enemy of the Gospel. You know what’s remarkable? That in that instant, God opens the eyes of Saul and reveal Christ to him, not as a judge, but as a Savior. This is so remarkably counter cultural to our present moment, isn’t it? In which public shaming of the cancel culture deals with those who oppose their set ends. Here, have a man, who is absolutely hostile, a murderer, trying to extinguish everything of God’s agenda, and God says ‘enough, come follow me, you are mine.’ Thirdly, we see in this text that Saul was called to God in love. Not only was he pardoned, but he was called to preach the good news to sinners like himself. In God’s unparalleled grace, a murderer was made an ambassador. A saint, or a sinner, was made a saint. An enemy of God was adopted and made a son.

There’s no cancel culture. This is not the cancel culture that we find in the world. This is the undeserved kindness of God that comes from above. Salvation is not of yourself; it is of the Lord. It is from God, from beginning to end, and this is perfectly illustrated in fact, by the resurrection of Lazarus. Man, being dead in his sin, is akin to Lazarus being dead in the grave. It’s only at the initiative and the call of God that a sinner, a sinner such as Saul, would know resurrection life. Just as Jesus says to Lazarus, ‘come out from the grave’, and he did. Now the initiative did not come

from Lazarus. He was dead. The initiative originated wholly from Christ. And yet, Lazarus heard the call and he came forth. But both the call and the ability to come forth were, in fact, from God. Lazarus could not take any credit for his own resurrection. Could you imagine Lazarus walking around and telling people what he contributed to his own resurrection from the dead? No, there is one to whom I can point, and that is to Christ and Christ alone. The same was true of Saul for his own salvation, and our salvation is akin to how Jesus called his own disciples and simply said 'come'. Andrews and John, Matthew, *come*. Come, follow me. And they did. And this is why baptism, interestingly, is not fundamentally about a believer's testimony. It's not fundamentally about your faith or mine. It's about the sovereign goodness of God, who puts His sign and His seal upon those who He calls to Himself. Baptism is a reflection of the very nature of the Gospel itself.

So, moving from sinners to servants, our second point, we see that Philippians begins with identification of our authors. Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ. He immediately qualifies himself as a servant. He does not introduce himself, as he does in so many of his other letters, as an apostle. He had no need to show his apostolic authority to the church in Thessalonica and to the church in Philippi. Why? Because his dear relationship with these two churches. Paul says that he and Timothy are servants of Christ; or, more properly stated, slaves of Christ. They are subject to God, doing the work of their master. And this language of servants or slaves is very jarring today, if we're honest. Our understanding of this terminology is very negative. They have wicked connotations of one man owning another as if he were owning a piece of property. Not to mention, all the abuse, the trauma, and the disorders that go hand in hand with such a subjection of a man's dignity. But this is not what Paul has in mind when he talks about being a servant of Christ Jesus. The descriptor that Paul uses of himself is with reference not to another man, but to God Himself, in relation to him being previously mastered by sin. That's the parallel. That's the contrast that we got to keep in mind. In scripture we see that all of mankind is either under the dominion of sin and its mastery or under the hand of a gracious and good God.

In our day and age, we are prone to shudder at such a notion, whether we be under the hand of another man or under the hand of God himself. We today, are said to be, autonomous, so we recoil by any notion of being mastered by another or by anything whatsoever. We alone are the masters of our own destiny. It's interesting to have a look at social media and newspaper and the like today, our current platforms of communication out there. And many apologies that come forth as folk are found out about doing X or Y that is not currently affirmed. People speak of being flawed, of making mistakes, of erring, though often unintentionally and saying 'I'm going to be a better man than what I am'. But to call such wayward actions 'sin' and then to be told, that if one is not in Christ that one is in fact under the mastery of sin is just way too much for us to stomach. Now, Jesus gets to the heart of this issue when he says quite plainly in John 8:34 "everyone who sins is a slave to sin". Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. To be in sin is to be under sin. It is to be under sin's controlling power. And we desire sin; it's tasty and it's appealing to our carnal appetites. It's sweet to the tongue but so poisonous to the belly. And sin is like a fire that never says 'enough'. Always wanting more. And when one is in sin, one's very disposition, the inclination of our hearts, is unto sin. And in that way, our hearts are just like a compass that always desires truth north. The only freedom that one has in such situation is a freedom unto sin. We do not have a freedom, a true freedom to the contrary, to choose God.

This is what happens in salvation. This is what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. He was rescued from an abusive, controlling, and a wicked master. He was freed from the clutches of sin to do something that he could have never otherwise done. That is, to confess his sins and to believe in God as his Lord and his savior. You see, when we are in sin we are not only enslaved to sin, which seeks to have us and ultimately destroy us. We actually desire what harms us; what will hurt our loved ones; and what leads to our condemnation and death. That's the very nature of sin. Simply go and look at James 1. Look at Genesis 4 that says "sin is crouching at the door, crouching at the door desiring to have you". Sin is not good, though it certainly disguises itself as a good. And this is not surprising whatsoever when the father of lies, the serpent, the devil, masquerades as an angel of light. It disguises itself and so sin appears to be good. Its tantalizing, it's tasty. The marketing promo is good.

But here we find that Christ stops Paul in his tracks on the Damascus road and he is freed from the enslavement to another master. This master that is sin. A master that is more wicked, or more negative, than we could ever imagine. And now, what took place on that Damascus road, is that Saul's heart is renewed. It is now inclined unto the good, not to eh mirage or some false good, as in sin, but to the One who is perfect goodness Himself. That being the Lord God Almighty. That is exactly what Christ came to do. As we see in Isaiah, to proclaim liberty to the captives. Paul recognizes here that the will of man is not some idle or neutral instrument as if it was some tool that sat on the carpenter's bench waiting to be used, this way or that. The will of man is free only to do as much as it can in alignment with the nature that it finds itself in. The will of man is freed only to do as much as it follows the nature of man. We might even go so far as to say that the will of man is bound; it is bound in such a way that it complies only with our constitution of being either in Christ or in Adam. And so, if you are by nature in sin, sin will be your master, and in the end your will can only choose to ultimately desire sin. But if you are in Christ, your will is, in fact, set upon Him. We are freed from the domain and that controlling power of sin.

You see, our will, technically speaking, is known as a rational appetite that desires the good. And so, as a sinner, we desire that which is presented as a false good. But as those who are in Christ, our will seeks after the good just like our intellect seeks after that which is true. And so, in Christ, we have been set free from seeking after, or setting our hearts upon temptation and sin that masquerades as something good. Instead, we are now ordered, by nature, by the Holy Spirit, to desire Christ. And this reality is seen if one has died to sin and lives to Christ. We have bought with a price; we are not our own. We have been transferred out of darkness and into light. We are out of sin and into righteousness. Out of Adam and into Second Adam, who is Christ. There is no neutrality in respect to mastery. This is what took place on that Damascus road. Bob Dylan, all those years back, was right when he said "You've gonna have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." Timothy and Paul were servants of Christ, at his bidding, to do the will of Him who is perfect goodness and one who came to die for such sinners.

Our third point is saints. So we have sinners, servants, and saints. In the second half of our first verse we find that Timothy and Paul have identified their intended recipients. The saints, who are in Christ Jesus. These saints, who are in Philippi, with the overseers, or the shepherds of the church, and the deacons. And Paul qualifies what he means: the saints who are in view are those persons who are in Christ. That's what it means to be a saint. To be a saint is to be In Christ. In this

particular sense, Paul is writing, with Timothy, to the saints who are in the city of Philippi. Those believers who are alive, part of the congregation, the church of God, in that city. These saints were not dead, they were alive. In fact, Paul closes the letter to the Philippians with the following greeting: “²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.”

Listen to Paul's testifying about his days prior to being in Christ, prior to that Damascus road encounter. We find in Acts 26 “⁹ I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.” In other words, these believers were called saints prior to their martyrdom.

Colossians 1:2 “² To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae:”.

Hebrews 13 “²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the saints.”.

1 Corinthians 16: 15 “[Y]ou know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints”.

It's interesting to note that actually, the term saints is the most common title in all the New Testament to refer to Christians. That's the collective title, term, referring to the church. TO the saints. Those who are in Christ. And Paul defines the term in 1 Corinthians, he says those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. Those who have been cleansed. Those who have been made holy. What we find is that this term, 'saints', in fact originates in the Old Testament. It refers to God's establishment of his covenant with Israel, in which he set his people apart to be holy; to be a holy nation. And this language of being a holy nation is then taken up in the New Testament, as we read in 1 Peter 2 “⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” that is, a nation that consists of people cleansed in Christ. The saints.

And here, these New Testament believers are identified as the people of God, the children of Israel, and restored Israel itself. So Paul simply states that to be a saint is to be in Christ. If you are in Christ, you are no longer under the mastery of sin. The power of sin has been broken and you no longer belong to sin as sin's servant, but you belong to Christ. You've been washed by His blood. You need no other mediator than Christ. Any veneration or prayers to the saints is not only unbiblical, but it casts a shadow on the perfect mediation of Christ for us.

Friends, you and I are not saints because we are good, but because He was good in our stead. Taking our sin upon Himself at the cross, such that He who knew no sin would be sin for us so that sinners may not be called saints. Sanctified. Set apart for God and His service. Servants of Christ. There is no higher privilege or joy than to be saints of God and servants of Christ Jesus and this, dear friends, is the work of God's matchless grace.

Let's pray: *Almighty God let us live as You've made us to be, in Christ, servants of Christ, and saints of the most high God. Having our identity grounded and reenforced by what You say of us and what You have done in us and for us. And may we know the grace and peace that come from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.*