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Bridgeway Church

Philippians / #2

## Sermon Summary #2

### Slaves, Saints, and Sojourners

#### Philippians 1:1-2

My guess is that many of you are thinking to yourselves: “Sam, are you kidding me? You actually plan on preaching an entire sermon on the opening greeting of a NT epistle. Come on! Give us some biblical meat, something we can really chew on and apply to our lives, something that’s going to make a difference in how I conduct my life next week, something that’s going to stick in my soul and change how I think and feel and act. For heaven’s sake, don’t waste my time *with the meaningless trivialities of an ancient salutation!*”

Oh, how wrong you are! Oh, you’re not wrong in thinking that I’m actually going to preach on this salutation in Philippians. Where you are profoundly wrong and misguided is in thinking that there’s nothing of practical and eternal value in what Paul says as he opens his letter to the Philippians.

#### *What is a Christian?*

Since I feel like I have to defend my decision to preach from Philippians 1:1-2, let me do it by asking you a question. ***What is a Christian?*** Surely you will agree that it’s important for us to know the answer. Surely you will acknowledge that ***knowing who you are*** is of indescribable practical importance if you are going to live as you ought. I’m convinced that the struggle many Christians face each day is largely due to the fact that they have very little understanding of their ***identity*** as children of God. Ask a lot of Christians to identify themselves and you’ll hear such things as:

“I’m a painful boil on the backside of the body of Christ.”

“I’m an embarrassment to the church, a drain on the energy of other Christians, an unsightly pimple on the public face of Christianity.”

“I’m a massive disappointment to God and a waste of everyone’s time.”

“I’m quite simply good for nothing when it comes to the needs of the church.”

I didn’t make those up. I’ve actually heard Christian men and women describe themselves in precisely those terms. That is why this seemingly unimportant and merely formal introduction to Paul’s letter to the Philippians is so massively significant and helpful to all of us today.

Today I want you to see *three glorious truths about the identity of every Christian man and woman*. It may not yet be the case that all of us are living consistently with who we are in Christ. No one does it perfectly. But I want to call you to think about who you are. A close look at Paul's language reveals that we are "slaves of Jesus Christ," that we are also "saints in Christ Jesus," and "sojourners" on this earth.

### *Slaves*

Immediately upon hearing the word "**slaves**" of Jesus Christ we run into a problem. In fact, the problem is a double whammy. In the first place, people today can't think of that word without associating it with the racial slavery that was so prevalent in the early years of America until the Civil War. The enslavement of black people in this country is such a reprehensible and nauseating chapter in our history that steps have been taken by English translators of the Bible to remove it entirely. That is why you see here in the ESV the word "bondservants." Few people will flinch when they hear that term, but "slaves" is another matter.

But we must remember two things. First, the slavery that existed in the ancient world, especially in Paul's day, had virtually *nothing to do with race*. The color of one's skin was irrelevant when it came to the issue of slavery in Philippi. Slavery was almost entirely the result of *military conquest or economic indebtedness*. A conquered people could be enslaved by their enemies and forced to work in service to them. More often when an individual incurred massive amounts of debt that couldn't be repaid they were put into slavery to their debtors until such time as their labor paid off the amount they owed.

The second thing to remember is that slavery in the ancient world rarely if ever suggested the moral or intellectual inferiority of the enslaved. Slaves were often quite well educated and extremely competent. There was never the thought that one was subjected to slavery because they lacked human dignity or worth or were in some sense of an inferior quality of person. So please put out of your mind altogether any link between Paul's use of the word here in Philippians and what you may have seen in the recent film by Stephen Spielberg that chronicled the life of Abraham Lincoln and his efforts to abolish slavery in America and bring into law the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

There is a second reason why people in the west, and especially in America, flinch at the word "slave" and react so negatively against it. It has nothing to do with race or equality or human dignity. Rather, it runs *directly counter to the notion of individual liberty and freedom of choice* so precious to people today. In other words, people love to think of themselves as in charge of their own lives, obligated to no one and free to pursue whatever course of life or behavior they choose. You often hear people say, "I'm free to think whatever I please, to hold any opinion I choose, to believe whatever satisfies my soul. I'm no man's slave. I don't have to consult with anyone before I make a decision. If I want to get drunk, I'll get drunk. If I feel inclined to live a sexually immoral lifestyle, then by golly that's what I will do regardless of what anyone else says."

Listen to me well. The Christian has no such freedom! *To be a "slave of Jesus Christ" means that I have no right to use my mind or body or money in any way I choose*. I can claim no right to *how I think*. My mind is captive to the Lord Jesus Christ. I can claim no right to *what I believe*. My opinions and preferences and prejudices must be brought into conformity with the mind of Jesus as revealed in Scripture. I can claim no right to my *mouth*, as if I were free to say whatever I want whenever I choose. My lips have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. He owns them and he is sovereign over everything I say.

I can claim no right to my *feet*, as if I were free to go wherever I choose. My path is directed by my Lord and Master Jesus Christ. I can claim no right to my *eyes*. I'm not free to look at whatever my flesh desires. My eyes belong to

him and he has authority to tell me when to shut them and when to look away and when and on what to focus my attention. I'm not free to read whatever I want or to watch any movie released by Hollywood or to let my eyes surf the net indiscriminately or to channel surf on the TV without discernment.

I can claim no right in these *hands*. What I do with them, what I write, what I touch, what I take, what I build or destroy, is all subject to the supremacy and authority of my Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. I can claim no right to these *ears*. What I listen to on the radio or on a CD or at a concert or during a conversation with other people is under his scrutiny and subject to his will. I can claim no right in what I *eat or drink*. I can claim no right in *where I live or what I wear*. I can claim no right over the smallest cell or fiber of my being.

Some of you may think that sounds horrible and restricting and binding and oppressive. But I'm here to tell you that it is *gloriously liberating!* It is true freedom indeed. It is authentic liberty. Nothing is more satisfying to the soul or peaceful to one's spirit or affirming to one's will or joyful to one's affections than living each moment in submission to the leading and lordship of Jesus Christ. We were not made to live unto and only for ourselves but unto and only for Jesus Christ.

This is why being a "slave" of Jesus Christ is such *a glad-hearted and glorious privilege* for Paul and Timothy and every man or woman who has been purchased by his blood and set free from the dictates and bondage of fleshly desires.

There is something *massively ironic*, if not paradoxical, in this truth. Paul revels in the fact that he is a slave of Jesus Christ. For most people, there is no lower or more menial or more degrading status than to be another person's slave. To be a slave is the lowest state of humiliation possible. Paul, on the other hand, regards it as the highest of honors.

For a man to be the slave of another man is reprehensible. For one to enslave another, for one to oppress and exploit another in this way is the worst imaginable violation of fundamental human rights. *But to be a slave of Jesus Christ is the highest dignity, the most glorious and liberating experience one can conceive.*

A slave is put in chains designed to restrict his freedom and shame him publicly. But the chains placed on the soul of the saint *bind us to Jesus in love*. They do not restrict our freedom but keep us from the sin that would destroy our souls. These chains of love unite us to him. They bind us to him in spiritual intimacy and wed us to his heart, his purposes, his will, his thoughts, and his ways.

### *Saints*

Following his standard practice, Paul addresses this letter to "the *saints*" in Christ at Philippi. As you know, "saints" is a precious word that has been sorely perverted. For many people it conjures up images of a painfully thin, sad-faced monastic sort of soul who looks like he's been sucking on a lemon. As someone once said, a "saint" is a man or woman who lives in constant fear and dread that someone, somewhere is actually having fun. What a tragic distortion of such a glorious descriptive word.

Most of you are aware, I hope, that the word translated “saints” was used primarily to describe people *set apart or separated unto God*. A “saint” is someone *consecrated* by God’s grace to be a unique and treasured possession. If I could put it as simply as possible, to say that a Christian is a “saint” is to declare that he/she is possessed by God and especially designed for his purposes and praise.

The OT background for this terminology is found in Exodus 19:6, which is then restated in 1 Peter 2:9 – “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The focus is more on *separation* than *sanctity* (although the former should always lead to the latter). It has in view more one’s *position* than *purity*.

It is important to know that the word “saint” (as with the word “priest”) is always found in the *plural* in the NT, with but once exception (Philippians 4:21; but even there, Paul refers to “every” saint!). This does not bode well for the “solitary saint,” the “Lone-Ranger Christian” so often seen in our highly individualized western way of looking at the faith.

Sadly, the Roman Catholic Church has hijacked this word and used it in a profoundly unbiblical way. The process by which a person is declared a “saint” by Rome is called *canonization*. It used to be that this could only occur five years after the person died, but that requirement was dropped in 1999. To achieve the exalted status of a saint calls for a lengthy and detailed process. A bishop of the church must investigate the candidate’s life to determine if there is evidence of “heroic virtue.” This information is then sent to the Vatican where a panel of theologians and cardinals evaluate it. The next step is called *beatification*, which comes only if it can be shown that the person is responsible for at least two posthumous miracles, that is to say, miracles that occurred because of and in the name of that individual following their death.

No, No, a thousand times No! *Every child who has been born again and trusts and treasures Jesus as Lord and Savior is now and forever will be a “saint” of the Most High God*. The same applies to every man and woman, out of every tongue, tribe, and nation. One becomes a “saint” by virtue of *God’s action for us through Christ*, not because of our deeds or works or miracles. So take a good look folks: it’s **Saint Sam** standing before you!

Now, is it true that this status, this position, this privilege of being set apart and consecrated unto God ought to lead to purity of life and obedience and holiness and a daily existence that reflects and is consistent with biblical morality? Absolutely. By all means, Yes. But though we still be selfish and stubborn and soiled by sin, we are still, by God’s gracious act in and through Christ Jesus, saints!

Make no mistake: we are saints *“in Christ Jesus.”* That is to say, our status as “saints” is not due to anything we have done or merited. It is because we have been taken hold of by God’s grace and placed in spiritual union with Jesus, set apart for his service and his praise that we are called “saints”.

He is the air we breathe, the food that sustains us, the drink that refreshes us, the power that energizes us, the foundation for all we are and the goal to which we are moving.

This, dear Christian friend, is your identity! You are a “slave” of Jesus Christ. You are a “saint” in Jesus Christ. And finally, you are a sojourner on this earth.

## *Sojourners*

Now why do I say that? Where is it in this opening salutation? It is found in Paul's description of them as being simultaneously "in" Christ Jesus and "at Philippi." Paul is declaring that Christians are simultaneously citizens of two kingdoms. They live at one and the same time "in Christ" and "in the world of this ancient Roman city."

Note well the emphasis on both *earthly and spiritual geography: they live in two places at once: in Philippi and in Christ!* In one sense the culture and political climate and geographical terrain of ancient Philippi shaped these people. But in another and more profound sense the sphere of influence in which they live and walk and talk and breathe is Jesus Christ. He is the determinative power in their lives. They are "in" him all the while they are "at" Philippi.

Thus there are two levels of experience for the believer, two kingdoms of which he/she is a citizen, two perspectives from which we may view life. For me today, I am in/at Oklahoma City. In a real sense, that is *where* I am. But it cannot and must not ever exhaust *who or what* I am. We are more than citizens of an earthly city or state or country. Bishop Handley Moule put it this way:

"They moved about Philippi 'in Christ.' They worked, served, kept the house, followed the business, met the neighbors, entered into their sorrows and joys, . . . suffered their abuse and insults when such things came – all 'in Christ.' They carried about with them a private atmosphere, which was not of [Macedonia] . . . but of heaven. To them Christ was the inner home, the dear invisible but real resting place. . . . And what a rich gain for poor Philippi, that they, being in Him, were in it" (28).

No matter where you are geographically and physically, what you are spiritually will never change. You may be *at* work, *at* play, *overseas*, *under* the weather, *out of* money, but you are always and unchangeably *in* Christ!

You may be *down* in the dumps, *over* the hill, or *beside* yourself, but you are always and unchangeably *in* Christ! You may be *at* paradise or *in* prison, *at* the movies or *in* Chicago, but you are always and unchangeably *in* Christ! Your geographical, earthly, physical location has no effect on your spiritual identity.

But the reverse is different. It is precisely because you are *in* Christ that wherever you live and work and play, you make an impact, you carry an influence, you make a difference. Your spiritual identity as one in Christ must control and characterize how you live, *wherever* you live.

And remember: it is *in* Oklahoma City or Chicago or Dallas or whatever geographical location you call home that you are *in* Christ. They are true simultaneously. You do not live in Christ only while you are at church, on your knees, or in a home group, then to return to being simply in your city when you leave that more "holy" atmosphere. ***Your "in-Christness" is not simply a heavenly reality that obtains only somewhere up there.*** You are "in Christ" even when you are "in sin", although the reality of the former ought to progressively diminish ones experience of the latter!

But there's more. Although we are sojourners on this earth we are not without a home: the local church is our home. ***Notice carefully that "all the saints" who are at Philippi are "with the overseers and deacons" of the local church.***

Paul makes this even more clear in 1 Corinthians 1:2 where "the church of God that is in Corinth" stands as further defining "those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." ***Thus to be a "saint" is not an experience or status you enjoy alone, by yourself, but is a distinctly corporate and communal designation.*** If you have been called and trust in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ you are by definition assumed to be a part of the "church" that is gathered in whatever geographical location where you find yourself. Paul would have been befuddled and incredulous had someone referred to a person as a "saint" in Christ Jesus who was not part of the local "church of God" in their particular region.

I want you also to see two things said about the "overseers" or Elders and Deacons in Philippi. First, both terms are in the ***plural***. There is not a single instance anywhere in the NT where a church is described as being led or governed by only one Elder or one Pastor. The local church, if it is true to the NT pattern, must strive to establish a plurality of Elders.

Second, they are not to be thought of as separate from or somehow of a different class or quality. They are "with" the saints and servants of Christ. There are no special privileges for Elders that others don't experience. There are no freedoms or perks or benefits that come to the overseers that are not the equal share of all the saints. Elders are not described as "lords over" but as "leaders among" the people of God. They are "alongside of" or "together with" the rest of the saints in the church.

### ***The Power of God's Grace and Peace***

It's one thing to learn who we are in Christ. It's another thing entirely to live a life that is morally and biblically and spiritually consistent with who we are in Christ. How in the world can we function as "slaves" of Christ and "saints" in Christ Jesus and as "sojourners" on this earth? What hope do we have that we who are weak and selfish and ungrateful and sinful in so many ways can actually live in a way that is befitting a saint? The answer is found in v. 2!

There is a great truth and glorious encouragement in the fact that Paul begins and ends his letters the way he does. Consider the following examples:

"Grace **to** you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:3).

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be **with** you" (1 Cor. 16:23).

"Grace **to** you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:2).

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . be **with** you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

“Grace **to** you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:3).

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be **with** your spirit, brothers. Amen” (Gal. 6:18).

“Grace **to** you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2).

“Grace be **with** all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (Eph. 6:4).

“Grace **to** you and peace from God our Father” (Col. 1:2).

“Grace be **with** you” (Col. 4:18b).

See also 1 Thessalonians 1:1b and 5:28; 2 Thessalonians 1:2 and 3:18; 1 Timothy 1:2b and 6:21b; 2 Timothy 1:2 and 4:22; Titus 1:4b and 3:15b; Philemon 3 and 25.

This reference to "grace" is more than a standard literary device by which letters were begun. It is a sincere *prayer for the release of divine favor and power into the lives of those to whom he writes*.

First, this will all make sense only if we expand our understanding of what “grace” is. Divine grace is more than an attitude or disposition in the divine nature according to which he treats us without regard for what we deserve. It is surely that, but an examination of the usage of this word in Scripture reveals that grace, if thought of only as an abstract and static principle, is deprived of its deeper implications.

Grace is also something far more dynamic and active and powerful. Grace is *divine energy* released into the lives of God’s people to work and to change and to transform them. Thus this spoken blessing is no mere literary formality but *a literal unleashing or release or impartation of power that changes and transforms*.

The grace of God, for example, is the *power* of God's Spirit converting the soul. It is the activity or movement of God whereby he saves and justifies the individual through faith (see esp. Rom. 3:24; 5:15,17). Therefore, *grace is not something in which we merely believe; it is something we experience as well*.

Grace, however, is not only the divine act by which God initiates our spiritual life, but also the very power by which we are sustained in, nourished, and proceed through that life. *The energizing and sanctifying work of the indwelling Spirit is the grace of God*.

After Paul had prayed three times for God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, he received this answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Although Paul undoubtedly derived encouragement and strength to face his daily trials by reflecting on the magnificence of God's unmerited favor, in this text he appears to speak rather of *an experiential reality of a more dynamic nature*. It is the *operative power of the indwelling Spirit* to which Paul refers. That is the grace of God.

Do you see now why it is so significant that Paul opens his letter by saying “grace **to** you” and closes his letter by saying “grace be **with** you”? The change of prepositions from “to” to “with” is massively important for you today. Here is how John Piper explains it:

"[A]t the beginning of his letters Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God's grace *to* the readers. Grace is about to flow 'from God' through Paul's writing *to* the Christians. So he says, 'Grace *to* you.' That is, grace is now active and is about to flow from God through my inspired writing *to* you as you read – 'grace [be] *to* you.' But as the end of the letter approaches, Paul realizes that the reading is almost finished and the question rises, 'What becomes of the grace that has been flowing to the readers through the reading of the inspired letter?' He answers with a blessing at the end of every letter: 'Grace [be] *with* you.' *With* you as you put the letter away and leave the church. *With* you as you go home to deal with a sick child and an unaffectionate spouse. *With* you as you go to work and face the temptations of anger and dishonesty and lust. *With* you as you muster courage to speak up for Christ over lunch. . . . [Thus] we learn that grace is ready to flow *to* us every time we take up the inspired Scriptures to read them. And we learn that grace will abide *with* us when we lay the Bible down and go about our daily living" (*Future Grace*, 66-67).

If Piper is right and the “grace” of God comes “to” us and abides “with” us via the instrumentality of Holy Scripture and its inspired truths, then we see here yet another example of what theologians have called “*the means of grace*.” Among the latter have often been mentioned the sacraments or ordinances of the church: the Eucharist and Baptism. But ***the sanctifying, sin-killing, Christ-exalting, soul-satisfying presence of the Holy Spirit also comes to us by means of the written Word!*** There can be little if any expectation of triumphant Christian living apart from the grace that is mediated to us and diffused throughout our hearts and minds pre-eminently through the Scriptures. When the Word, by the power of the Spirit, is heard, embraced, and enjoyed, we are strengthened to resist the flesh and to savor the Son.

And it isn't just grace but also “peace” that comes to us through the Word of God. The word “peace” is used 54x by Paul alone. It refers both to the “harmony” among God's people as well as the content of the gospel that we preach and have believed (Eph. 6:15), as well as a sense of wholeness and well-being, a tranquility of soul, spirit, heart, mind, and affections that flows out of a saving relationship with Jesus. This is a quality of life that is present even when the believer is suffering or is surrounded by enemies or is afflicted on every side or is inundated by war and conflict and opposition.

All this, both the power of God's grace and the calming presence of his peace, come to you through the Word of God preached and proclaimed, prayed and taught, explained and applied.

### *Conclusion*

This, then, is who you are: slaves of Christ Jesus, saints in Christ Jesus, sojourners in Oklahoma City yet “in” Christ at all times and in every place.

So I say to you today, you who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Master and Savior of your souls, may the empowering, all-sufficient grace of God, together with the peace that flows from his heart into yours, come **to** you and go **with** you.