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A Letter from Paul – Philippians

I. He Who Began a Good Work in You

Philippians 1:1-11

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Once upon a time – back when we still communicated in full sentences with all the words spelled out, and when emojis were just things we doodled on a note pad while listening to Aunt Agnes on the phone go on and on about her latest bout with rheumatism – once upon a time, we used to write letters. And we all knew the rules of writing letters. You began, “*Dear John*” – well, unless your name was actually John, you hoped never to receive a Dear John letter. And then you ended the letter with “*Sincerely yours*” or “*Most cordially yours*” or even “*Lovingly yours*” – whatever the occasion called for. And the opening paragraph of a letter – it was a rule that you never, except under exceptional distress, wrote anything too interesting in the opening paragraph. The opening paragraph was meant to be filled with bland pleasantries such as, “*How are you? We’re fine here. How’s the weather?*” and so forth. That’s how we used to write letters.

But when Paul writes a letter, it’s a whole different ballgame. Paul doesn’t mess around – he gets right to the point in his opening paragraphs. Consider the opening paragraph of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which we have just read – not a single comment about the weather! Paul is in prison in Rome as he writes this letter – and yet there is not even a single complaint about the food in the prison cafeteria! Instead, Paul just jumps right in and pretty much tells us everything we need to know about what is going to follow in the body of his letter – he’s already spelling it all out. In fact, Paul is pretty much spelling out the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ in his opening paragraph – everything we need to know about what God Has Done For Us and about what He is now calling upon us to do in response. In fact, we don’t even need the whole of the opening paragraph – all we really need are just those first two verses, and we will already have heard the Gospel in summary:

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints
in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus
Christ.*

That’s the whole Gospel in two verses! What else do we need? A little more explanation? Okay. Three main concepts are here in these opening verses – servants, saints, and then the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Let’s take them in turn.

“*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus . . .*” But, actually, the Greek word there is really not “servant”, it is “slave”. I can understand why a modern American translation would shy

away from that word, but we're missing a lot of what Paul is saying if we think he's calling himself a servant instead of what he's really calling himself – a slave of Christ Jesus. You see, a servant is free to come and go, to up and quit and find another employer. A slave, however, belongs to his master completely. Now, if we can, again, set aside the tragic and terrible historical connotations of that word here in our American context, what we will be able to hear Paul saying is something very important about the nature of his – and our – belonging to Jesus Christ.

By naming himself a slave of Christ Jesus, what Paul is communicating to us is the totality of his belonging to Jesus. He is letting us know that there is not one single iota of his life – his heart, mind, strength, and will – that he has not surrendered to Jesus. He is telling us that he is holding nothing back from the Lordship of Jesus Christ over his life – something he will spell out in more detail for us in chapter three, where he writes:

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 . . .¹

So Paul, in calling himself a slave of Christ Jesus, is describing the complete surrender of himself to the Lordship of Jesus. And thereby, also, inviting us to consider the nature and depth of our own commitment to Jesus. Our “commitment” to Jesus Christ – and therein lies the problem. Paul speaks of his “slavery” to Jesus, we speak of our “commitment” to Jesus. What’s the difference? Well, “commitment” implies that we are still in charge, that we are the ones still holding the reins, we are the ones setting the terms for how much or how little of our lives we are willing to commit to Christ’s control. “Commitment” implies that we’re still the real boss of ourselves. Slavery says something very different. Slavery states that we have surrendered all control to Jesus. That Jesus truly has become our boss, in every aspect of our being. That it is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who is directing how we live and for what we are living. From this Christian perspective and context, commitment may produce a servant of Jesus, but only full surrender can produce a slave of Christ Jesus. As Paul said to us back in Galatians 2: *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”²*

Let me come at this a different way. Ben Patterson tells of a common experience among American missionaries of an earlier generation in the jungles of the Amazon. The missionaries would come upon some isolated village deep in the rainforest and ask a villager to give them directions to where they wanted to go. The villager, of course, knew precisely the directions to get there, but instead he offers to take them there himself. *“No, no,”* say the missionaries, *“We don’t need a guide, we just want directions.”* *“That’s no good,”* answers the villager, *“I must take you there.”* *“But we have a map right here,”* say the missionaries, *“and a compass, and the coordinates.”* *“It does not work that way,”* explains the villager. *“I can get you there, but I must take you myself. You must follow me.”*

John Ortberg, who recounts Patterson’s story in one of his books, offers us the moral of the story:

We prefer directions, principles, steps, keys. We prefer these things because they leave us in control. If I'm holding the map, I'm still in charge of the trip. I can go where I want to go. If I have a guide, I must trust. I must follow. I must relinquish control.

God is not much on maps and compasses and coordinates. Life just doesn't work that way. We don't need directions. We need a Guide.³

In other words, we need the God who summons His disciples, not with the gift of a map, but with a word of command: *"Follow me!"*⁴

So, how is it with us? Are we servants of Christ Jesus, still holding on to the reins and still holding back from fully following after Jesus, wherever He leads? Or are we, as Paul puts it, *"slaves of Christ Jesus,"* having surrendered all to Him? An awful lot is riding on that question.

Let's keep going. Paul calls himself and Timothy *"slaves of Christ Jesus"* – but listen to what he calls the Philippian Christians: *"To all the saints in Christ Jesus . . ."* Saints – that's what he calls them. Now, we hear that word "saint" and we think of moral perfection, of spiritual wisdom beyond our imagining; we think of Mother Theresa and her extraordinary and sacrificial service. In other words, we think of someone and something utterly unlike ourselves! And yet – do we really think that the whole church of Philippi was composed of Mother Therasas? No. That church was most likely no different from our church in this regard, and those Christians were most likely no more spiritually, morally, and sacrificially advanced than you and me. The problem, then, is that we are using a different definition of that word "saint" than the one Paul is using. So, what does Paul have in mind – what is the Biblical definition – when Paul speaks of the Christians in Philippi as *"saints in Christ Jesus"*?

To be a saint, Biblically speaking and speaking as Paul, has two connected meanings. The first meaning comes from the Old Testament. After God has rescued His people Israel from out of their slavery in Egypt and is leading them towards the Promised Land, He instructs them that when they get to the Promised Land, they are not to live like the peoples and nations which will surround them. They are not to adopt the values and practices – especially not the religious practices – of the nations and cultures which will be their new neighbors. Instead, they are to be holy – a word which at its root means "set apart" – they are to be a people holy, set apart, to the Lord.⁵

In other words, the first criterion of sainthood is not moral perfection, nor even spiritual mastery. Sainthood simply means we are taking our orders from a different source than the world around us. We are marching to the beat of a different, even Divine, drummer. It means that we are those called to be contrast society – to be those whose lives contrast with the ways of the world around us. Just a few examples: where the world hates, God instructs us to practice love. Where the world seeks out revenge, God instructs us to seek reconciliation. Where the world seeks only to serve the self, God instructs us to lay down the self in service to Christ and to our neighbor. And so on and so on. A contrast society. To be a saint is not so much to be morally perfect as it is simply to be seeking to live by a different set of moral principles than the fallen world around

us – to be seeking to live by the Way and the Truth and the Life of our Savior Jesus, the sort of things He laid out for us in His Sermon on the Mount.

Which is the second meaning of saint in the Bible, and which will be the one which Paul will be keen to develop further throughout the rest of his letter. To be a saint means not just that we live as a contrast society, different from the world around us – but that we also are those who are, indeed, specifically seeking to live our lives in conformity to the life of Christ, in response to the grace of Christ. We are seeking to be those who are different from the world (meaning number one), but specifically those whose lives are lived in imitation of Jesus, our Lord and Savior (meaning number two). This is the idea Paul develops in the rest of this opening paragraph and which he will be exploring in greater detail in the body of his letter. But listen again to the teaser he gives us in this opening paragraph:

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

In other words, the hallmarks of one seeking to be transformed from the ways of the world and conformed to the ways of Christ and His Kingdom.⁶

To be a saint, whether in Philippi, in a prison cell in Rome, or right here in the pews of E.P.C., is the same thing. Not that we are perfect – none of us are, none of the Philippians were, not even Paul was perfect. But, instead, that in Christ we are in the process of becoming different from the world around us, and also more and more conformed to the life and teachings of our Lord and Savior. Using that list Paul just gave us, we are those who are in the process of becoming more loving, more discerning of what is true, that we might also be growing into purity and blamelessness, all the while bearing the fruit of the Spirit as we wait for Jesus to come again and fulfill His Kingdom. In fact, the key factor in all of what Paul has said to us thus far – all of this about being “slaves” and “saints” – is just that: our “becomingness”. Not that we are perfectly both of those things, but that we are those who are on the way, moving along in the right direction, daily seeking and yearning to become more and more of what God in Christ is calling us to become in response to His grace.

But that then poses one last question for us: how do we get there from here? Paul has the answer for us – it’s right there in verse two: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*” How do we give ourselves body and soul to the Lordship of Jesus, and so become those who are becoming “*slaves of Jesus Christ,*” as Paul puts it, and not merely servants? Through the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. How do we become those who are becoming *saints in Christ Jesus,*” as Paul puts it? Through the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, I sure would like to say a whole lot more about all this to you this morning. But we don’t have to get it all done this Sunday. Together, with Paul guiding us, we will find plenty to consider and to inform us concerning precisely this grace and peace as we move through the rest

of Paul's letter – grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ is, in fact, the central theme of Paul's letter to the Philippians. But, for this morning, let's end by hearing from Paul a little reassurance – actually a great big reassurance – when it comes to all of these matters we have discussed this morning, and especially about that grace and peace of God at work in us. Look at verse 6 – here's our reassurance to take home with us this week: *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* That's something we can take home with us and rest upon in the week ahead: *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*

When asked how we can be sure of our salvation, how we can be sure we won't lose our salvation, John Calvin used to speak of a doctrine called the “Perseverance of the Saints”. But I always have that doctrine was misnamed. If it is the perseverance of the saints which is the key – **our** ability to persevere – then we are on shaky ground. But it's not about our ability to persevere with God at all – that's what Calvin actually said and why I think this doctrine is misnamed. It's all about God's will and desire to persevere with us, until we have been made into saints by Him. The Perseverance of God within the life of His saints. Or, as Paul puts it: *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*

¹ Philippians 3:7-8.

² Galatians 2:20.

³ John Ortberg, Faith & Doubt (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), p. 172.

⁴ Mark 1:17.

⁵ Leviticus 19:1-2.

⁶ Romans 12:1-2.