

We are starting a new sermon series this morning—an Eastertide series that will carry on into the summer—on the much-cherished book of Philippians. We’re going to take our time with it.

Because for a number of reasons, I think this is a timely book for us as a congregation in the wake of having celebrated Easter and focusing on our resurrection life in Christ. With everything happening in the world but also within our own congregation, the tone and content of this letter is one that I hope will resonate deeply with us.

So before we read the text, I want to give you a little bit of context here so that you can understand the background of this church.

The city of Philippi was a Roman military colony, which means that it had been given a special status by Caesar for having participated significantly in one or more of Rome’s wars. And so all of its inhabitants were endowed with Roman citizenship; and being a Roman colony, many of Rome’s soldiers were commissioned to retire there—to keep the presence of Rome in that area.

Now, according to Acts 16, Paul and his companions were swayed by the Holy Spirit not to go into Asia and not to enter Bithynia (modern-day Turkey). So instead they head towards Macedonia (modern-day Greece), and Paul gets a vision that *there* his message will be received. He’s anticipating that *there* they will find people ready and willing to receive the gospel message.

Which they do. Because they end up in Philippi, and on the Sabbath they go outside of the city to the river where they find a prayer meeting. Philippi wouldn’t have had a Jewish synagogue, so the Jews and other God-fearing Gentiles had to find other places for Sabbath prayers.

There happens to be a bunch of women there including a Greek named Lydia, a businesswoman who sold fabrics. And Acts 16 says that *“the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”* All the members of her household get baptized, and a church begins in her home.

Soon after, on another Sabbath day when they are heading to that same place of prayer, they get harassed by a demon-possessed female slave. Paul releases her from the demon, but the owner of the slave is upset and gets them arrested.

So Paul and Silas are severely beaten and thrown in prison. At this point, there doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of hope that any kind of church is going to be started. But it’s in this Philippian prison that—in the middle of the night, as these two men are praying and singing to God—a violent earthquake shakes all the prison doors open, and everyone’s chains come loose.

The jailer, then, seeing all the prisoners escaping, takes a sword to kill himself. But Paul and Silas stop him, tell him that in Jesus he can be saved, and he and his whole household are baptized.

This is how the church in Philippi begins. With this odd conglomeration of people – Jews and gentiles, slaves and free, men and women. And with such a backstory of experiences, you have to imagine that Paul has a pretty special relationship with this church.

So he sends them a letter that's just overflowing with Jesus—the Jesus to whom this beautiful group of very different people belong. Everything Paul says is grounded in Christ, as we see already in v. 1.

### **Read Philippians 1:1-2.**

For today's purposes, we're just going to explore one key theme that comes up in these opening two verses that set the stage for the rest of the letter, and one that is immediately applicable for us today.

Paul starts off his letter, in his regular fashion, with who this letter is coming from—an important thing to do in a predominately oral culture. If the letter was being read aloud, it was necessary to state right from the beginning who the letter was coming from.

*“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus.”*

We have to stop here, because although *we* are accustomed to the language, it wouldn't have been a common thing for an esteemed leader in Greco-Roman society to call himself a servant.

Why? Well, the word there for 'servant' (*doulos*) also—and in most cases—means a slave. Because in Greco-Roman society, those two terms were interchangeable.

In our modern minds, we tend to separate them. We might think of a servant as a paid employee of a household. Perhaps we think of the servants in Buckingham palace who wait on royalty.

And when we think of slaves, we probably think—just based on where we are geographically—of the transatlantic slave trade. Africans who were stripped of their homeland and dignity and sold to American landowners as free labour.

But neither of those historical realities accurately portray what Greco-Roman slavery was. Because for one, it wasn't ethnically bound. Racism—in the way that we think about it—wasn't the dominant reason why someone ended up as a slave.

You could end up as a slave because you were a prisoner of war. You could end up as a slave because you lost all your money and had no other way of providing for your family. You could end up as a slave simply because your parents were slaves.

To be a slave was predominately *a status*. It was a low status, for sure, but not one that you necessarily needed to get out of provided that your situation was benefiting you.

Most importantly, it was a status that implied that you were legally owned by someone else. You belonged to someone else in the sense that they had ownership authority over you. Which again, to our modern ears, sounds horribly belittling and dehumanizing. But we have to understand this to grasp why Paul uses this language.

Greek philosophers like Aristotle actually spoke about women, slaves, and children as all being on the same level because they were all ‘owned’ by the male (or head) of the household. Their ‘status’ was that they didn’t have any status.

Think about it terms of points. I know here in Canada, much to the chagrin of many newcomers to Canada, you need to get a certain number of points to get Canadian PR.

Well, in ancient Rome, if you were a Roman you got a certain number of points. If you were a male, you got more points. If you were a business owner or intellectual, etc.

Paul had Roman citizenship, was a male, and had an education. So he would never be a slave. He had too many points in the system.

And yet here he refers to himself—and Timothy, who also had status as a Greek—as slaves. Why?

Why does Paul start off his letter with this kind of terminology? Especially when—as we know—there were people of all classes and statuses in this church?

Wouldn’t it make *more* sense for Paul to own the Roman status that he has and speak with that high level of influence? He *belongs* to the Roman Empire. He’s got influence. He has friends in high places. He can be welcomed into all the spheres of society. He can make good money doing his whole preaching thing, and then use that money to have even *more* influence.

But no. Paul intentionally uses a term that the *entire* Philippian church—regardless of status or points—was meant to embrace. A term that unifies and puts everyone on the same level and gives everyone the same ‘status’ before God.

Why is this a leveling term? Because there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female in Christ’s church. There are no ‘points’ in Christ’s church. And so Paul is essentially saying that he—and Timothy—regardless of who they are in the eyes of Rome—are “owned” by Christ. Christ is their only Master. They belong to Him.

In other words, being a slave for *Jesus* is the assumed status for everyone in the church. Jesus said, “*No one can serve two masters,*” (Matt. 6:24). In other words, you *will be* constantly pressured to be owned by something else. To be a slave to something else. But you can only serve one Master.

Let's compare this to another model for a minute. In India, for example—through the influence of Hinduism—there's what's called the caste system. Basically it's a 3000-year-old system that divides people into hierarchical groups based on birth, heredity, and occupation.

Now, in this system, you are born into your status; you can't change it—and historically you weren't even allowed to associate with other levels. It was a way of maintaining social structures.

But then what's interesting about this system is that there's a group—known as the Dalits—who don't have any points whatsoever and aren't even on the pyramid. They're stuck in a kind of points-less existence that they can't escape. That's where they 'belong.'

But now imagine the impact of Paul's words on those kinds of people. You are no longer slave to *that* system. You don't belong to that system. You *can* be freed from it because you are not owned by it.

Instead, you now belong to Christ. You can move from a permanent dehumanization to a permanent freedom in Jesus.

That's how Paul thinks about being a slave for Jesus. It means that you have chosen which Master to serve, and that *nothing else*—as least in God's economy—has ownership over you.

Nothing. Nothing else can claim ownership over you. Nothing can take away your status in Christ. Not even death.

Because you now belong to Him.

In writing this opening line, Paul saw himself as subject to *this* Master, Jesus—not to any other power or authority. And in subjecting himself to *this* Master, he was experiencing perfect freedom—even while in prison and anticipating his own possible death. *This* Master, *this* Lord, was who Paul belonged to.

So what, then, are the implications of this leveling posture? This equalizing humility before Christ? Because historically, I don't think the Church hasn't embraced this very well. It's certainly how we aim to live, but I think we have to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge some of our failures in this area.

All the way back to the Reformation and beyond, the church gave a greater 'status' if you were—for example—a priest, or the son of a priest. If you were wealthy and a high contributor to the church budget. If you were married rather than single. If you had an education that furthered the connection between church and state—for the benefit of the church of course.

And honestly, as much as we like to say we live in an ‘equal and fair’ society today, *everything still* in our society functions off of some kind of hierarchy or standard, simply because human beings are naturally inclined to be categorical and selective. We put people on different levels all the time.

If you’ve spent much time in a hospital, you’ll know that there are certain hospital employees—namely nurses—who take care of wound care, IVs, bedding, etc. And then there are other employees who take care of bringing food in-and-out and cleaning the floors.

A few years ago, when Danny was in the hospital, our food tray had been left or forgotten, so I had placed it on the wide window sill—just to get it out of the way. And at one point a nurse came in to check in with us; and before she left, she went to the window to grab the tray.

And without thinking, I said to her, “Oh no, you don’t have to do that.” As if to say, don’t worry about it; that’s not your job. And in the moment, I meant it as a way of honoring her and her role. But at the same time, it was—of course—dishonoring to someone else.

And in her wisdom, she kindly said, “Oh, it’s okay. It’s not beneath me.”

The truth is, we are so shaped by our own societal structures, we hardly even realize when we say things that lift one person over another, or when we support systems that divide people among different levels.

But we do it all the time. Think about airplane tickets, or concert halls and sport arenas. People sit where they can afford to pay.

Think about family status. Wealth and privilege equal opportunity, so if you were born into a less wealthy family who couldn’t afford to give you piano lessons or send you to college, it’s likely that at some point you were made to feel as if you weren’t one the same level as others.

To *all* of this, Paul looks at the church and says boldly, “NOT SO WITH YOU.” You are *not* to be a place where these kinds of division exist, where you can ever look down on one another—or up at one another—for *any reason*.

Because you are all one in Christ. We are all slaves of Christ. We all *belong* to Christ. We don’t belong to those other systems or see our value in their categories because it is *Christ* who gives us our value and our status as His holy people.

Again, by using this language, Paul is highlighting the reality that we’re always owned by something. We’re always a slave to something. And he’s inviting us to be ‘enslaved’ or mastered only by Jesus.

But not just that. He's inviting us also to *imitate* the very one who we seek to be mastered *by*. The Master who got down on His own hands and knees like a slave and washed His disciples' feet. The Master who said in Mark 10:45, "*The son of man did not come to be served but to serve....*" The Master who—as we'll read about in chapter 2—took on the very nature of a servant, of a slave.

Why would we ever be hesitant to do for one another what our Master has already done for us? How could we ever be 'above' what Christ has clearly shown He's all about?

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee once said this: "The theology that bursts forth in this letter is not one option among others for Christian living; this is the only God there is, and he calls us to *bear his likeness* in every possible way."

Despite its many theological question-marks, I quite enjoy the movie "Bruce Almighty." Because in it, the character of Bruce gets an audience with God, who is depicted as a custodian. God Almighty, doing a very thankless task, picking up after other people and cleaning up their messes. He's shown as mopping the floor in an empty office building.

And a major climax in the movie, closer to the end, is when Bruce picks up a mop and joins him. As if to say that we can only imitate our Lord and *own* our status as His servants when we recognize the character of the Master we're serving.

And this is a revolutionary statement to make still today. There's a reason why the church in the global south is predominately made up of people who have everything to gain.

Because it's a place where they can claim to belong—not to the systems that be—but to their Lord and Master who has given them a status and citizenship that this world can never offer.

Because the Church is a place where we are all in the same 'caste.' We've all been born into the same family. We all have the same number of points. We're all in the same grade. We all sit in the same section.

Because *Christ* has given us our value. No one else. Paul calls the church at Philippi 'holy' because that's who they are in God's eyes. That's who they already are, *now*. Because of Jesus.

We're going to build on this next week when we look at Paul's opening words of thanksgiving, but it's this kind of attitude—this Christ-like servant attitude—that enables us to be truly grateful for one another. Because we see the good work that God is doing among each and every one of us.

We did nothing to earn what Christ did for us. We did nothing to achieve the doorway that opened up for us to be welcomed into the holy household of God. In fact, the Church is the only place in the world where you actually don't need to earn *anything* to belong.

Because *you already belong to Christ*. We are not our own. He *owns* us, in the best possible way. We don't need to shy away from that language. Because He's paid a price *for* us.

And it's *this* reality that transforms who we are. It's *this* reality that sets us free to live and breathe and yes, to die, in the protective and authoritative arms of Christ.

So to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Willoughby Church, grace and peace to you. Because you are servants of the Master who has made us one.

And what is your only comfort in life and in death?

*That I am not my own, but belong  
—body and soul, in life and in death—  
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.  
He has fully paid for all my sins  
with his precious blood,  
and has set me free  
from the tyranny of the devil.  
He also watches over me in such a way  
that not a hair can fall from my head  
without the will of my Father in heaven;  
in fact, all things must work together  
for my salvation.  
Because I belong to him,  
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,  
assures me of eternal life  
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready  
from now on to live for him.*