

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series through the New Testament book known as Philippians, which I am calling “To live is Christ and to die is gain,” a line which Paul writes in chapter 1, verse 21 of this letter. Philippians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison, most likely in Rome, sometime between 60-64 AD, to a church in Philippi that he had started about 10-15 years earlier, which you can read about in Acts 16. And if you’re interested, you can listen to the sermon I preached on Acts 16 on July 31st of last year.

The approach to this series is going to be to read shorter sections and to dive deep, to suck the marrow out of every passage, so to speak, to truly consider what it means to not just be hearers of the word but doers as well. Because we believe that these words are not only Paul’s words, but are God’s words as the Holy Spirit inspired Paul. Trust me, even if you have read or studied this book before or even if you’ve memorized it, there is always something new that God wants to teach you, and His desire is that you would not just know this book but know and love and trust and obey Him more fully.

This morning we are going to read the two introductory verses. I encourage you to always have a Bible with you, as well as something to write with and something to write on.

Philippians 1:1-2 - Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray.

How do you describe yourself? If a stranger were to say to you, “Tell me about yourself,” where would you begin? Maybe you would talk about your **family** – I’m married with three children, or I live with my parents and siblings. Maybe you would talk about what you do for **work** – I’m an accountant, or I’m a teacher. Maybe you would talk about **where you live** or where you’ve come from – I’ve lived in Wethersfield for 15 years, or I grew up in New York. Maybe you would talk about your **personality** – I’m an easygoing guy, I’m an adventurous woman. Or maybe you would talk about your **hobbies** – I love to cook, I love to ride my bike. What is your fundamental identity, the first thing that you would say when asked who you are?

In Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, he begins by identifying himself, along with Timothy, **as servants of Christ Jesus**. Who are you, Paul? Tell me about

yourself. I am a servant. A servant of Christ Jesus. The Greek word translated here as servant is the word **doulos**, which can mean slave or servant or bondservant, which is a servant who chooses willingly to serve a master instead of going free. Out of all the descriptions Paul could have used, Paul deliberately chooses a word to describe himself that communicates both the humble status he feels he possesses – he doesn't call himself an apostle or rabbi or their spiritual father, but a slave, a bondservant – and the one He is serving – Christ Jesus.

There is a relevant passage in John 15, when Jesus is meeting with his disciples before he is betrayed and crucified:

***John 15:13-17** - Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer **call you servants**, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called **you friends**, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to **you**. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.*

Jesus tells His disciples that He no longer calls them servants, but friends. It is a beautiful and stunning declaration, that the eternal God of the universe calls those of us who follow Him His friends. But despite this invitation, Paul calls himself Jesus' servant. In other words, this is not Jesus enslaving Paul, this is not God calling us His slaves. This is Paul choosing to submit himself to Jesus like a bondservant to his master. **I want you to think about what it means to be a slave, or bondservant**, and what it would be like to see your primary identity as a slave to Christ Jesus, one who is willingly serving Jesus. **Let me share three characteristics of a slave that come to mind.**

First, a slave belongs to another person. A slave is not free, but is the property of a master.

Secondly, a slave's schedule is dictated by the master. A slave does not wake up in the morning and say "what do I want to do today?" A slave checks in with the master and then does what the master tells him or her to do.

Thirdly, a slave has no rights. A slave just has responsibilities, duties to perform.

Again, what does it mean to be a slave? A slave is not free but belongs to another person. A slave's schedule is dictated by the master. And a slave has no rights, only duties to perform.

This is how Paul defines his primary identity. He is a slave, a bondservant of Jesus Christ. He is not free, but he belongs to His master, His Lord, Jesus. His schedule, His itinerary, the very purpose and goals of His life, are all dictated by the master. And he has no rights, only responsibilities and duties to perform. Before Paul talks about family, or heritage, or what he does for a living, or hobbies, or anything else, he begins here. Paul's primary identity is that of a slave to Jesus Christ.

What would it look like for you to choose to live your life as a slave, a bondservant of Jesus Christ? To recognize that you are not free, but belong to your master. To let Him dictate your schedule, your itinerary, your life's purpose and goals. To lay down your rights, and to pick up your responsibilities, to perform the duties He has given you to do.

Now, we live in the land of the free. We belong to a culture that elevates freedom and choice and human rights as three core, essential values. We have forefathers who left the tyranny of the king of England four centuries ago, and men and women who have fought valiantly to protect those freedoms, and other brave men and women who have fought for the rights of every individual. And so, to choose to emphasize submission, servitude, and responsibility, instead of freedom, choice, and rights, is completely counter-cultural and seems so strange. Who in their right mind would willingly choose to surrender their rights, their freedom to choose, and their independence to another? How could that be preferable to doing whatever it is we want to do? Maybe you've even heard people scoff at you or at Christians as people who don't think for themselves, who need someone to tell them what to do. Is that what is going on here with Paul?

But here's the thing. Paul is not just choosing to identify as a slave because of some fear of freedom or rights or inability to think for himself. He identifies as a slave, a bondservant **to Jesus Christ**. He has chosen to live with Jesus as His master, as His Lord, as the one to whom he belongs. He has given up his rights and set aside his freedoms in order to follow Jesus. **He is not just a slave, but a slave to Jesus Christ**. Why? **Who is this Jesus?**

He is the one who created all things and holds all things together:

Colossians 1:15-18 - *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

He is the one who loves us so much that he gave up his life on the cross for our sins.

Romans 5:6-8 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Jesus is the one who knows all things, who knows what is best for us, who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Hebrews 4:13 - *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account*

Jesus is the one who will work everything together for our good, to transform us into better people:

Romans 8:28-29 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Jesus is the one who gives us the power for living by advocating for us before the Father and by giving us His Holy Spirit:

John 14:12-17 - *I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even **greater things** than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. ¹⁵ "If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- ¹⁷ the*

Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

Jesus is the one who has walked through the suffering of this world, yet did not sin, and can help us when we are in need:

Hebrews 4:14-16 - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Jesus is the one who will hold on to us, protect us, and take us to be with him, because He has overcome the grave.

Ephesians 1:13-14 - *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.*

Paul is not just a slave, a man without rights or freedom, with duties to perform, held against his will. **He has chosen to be a bondservant to Jesus Christ**, the one who created all things, loves him more than anyone else, knows him better than he knows himself, will work everything together for his good, empowers him for living in this world, will help him when he is in need, and will protect him and eventually take him to be with him forever, because He has overcome the grave. **When you choose to live with Jesus as your Lord, to be His servant**, you are choosing to follow the lead of the one who created all things, including you, who loves you so much that he gave his life for you when you were his enemy, who knows you better than you know yourself, who is working everything together for your good, who empowers you by His Holy Spirit to overcome anything in this world, who helps you when you are in need, who protects you and will eventually take you to be with Him forever, for He has overcome the grave.

When you stop to think about it, this concept of giving up your freedoms and rights in order to follow the lead of another person, is not as foreign as it seems. Think of **athletes with coaches**, or **musicians with their instructors**, who submit themselves to another because they believe that their coach or instructor can bring something

better out of them than they can bring out of themselves. And there are others who willingly submit themselves to another person because they believe in the mission or purpose of that person, and want to join him or her in their journey, like in the military or in a company or organization.

Here is the incredible, counter-cultural, mind-blowing thing about what I am saying. Ironically, the choice to live as a slave, a bondservant to Jesus Christ ends up becoming the most freeing decision you can ever make, because you are surrendering your life to the one who will unlock your greatest potential, as His lordship in your life can transform you into the person you were created to be, empowering you to be and do what you could never be or do on your own. And the choice to follow Jesus, to live as His servant, gives your life its greatest possible purpose, the mission of saving people from death and bringing God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace to this broken world.

Yes, our culture preaches freedom and rights – you do you, no one can tell you what is right for you – but to what end? So that you can experiment with the things of this world? So that you can accumulate more stuff? So you can live authentically no matter how it hurts those around you? There is a better way. As Paul put it:

1 Corinthians 10:23,31 - "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

And as Jesus put it:

John 10:9-10 - I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

True freedom is found in living as a slave, a bondservant to Jesus Christ. And true purpose and meaning in life is not found in focusing on your rights but in picking up your responsibilities and performing the duties given to you by your Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

What does it mean in practice to live your life as a bondservant or slave of Jesus, with Jesus as your Lord?

1) Seek Him in the morning and return to Him throughout the day

If you truly believe that Jesus is not only your Savior but Lord, seek him in the morning, like a slave reporting to the master for duty. Return to him throughout your day to check in with what His will is for your life. This is where we have a lot to learn from some of the ancient practices of the church like the Daily Office. The Daily Office is not a calendar of quotes from your favorite NBC sitcom, but is an ancient practice of turning to God at set times throughout the day to be with Him. Setting aside times to check in. In many monasteries, there will be a schedule like this:

Vigils – 3:45 am
 Lauds – 6:00 am
 Prime: 6:25 am
 Sext – 12:15 pm
 None – 2:00 pm
 Vespers – 5:40 pm
 Compline – 7:40 pm

At these times, monks would stop their work and gather for silence and worship and recentering themselves on God. Many of you might What would a daily rhythm look like for you? Morning. Lunch time. When you get home from work. When the kids go to sleep. How can you check in with Him regularly throughout the day?

The most important work is to be with Him, to be filled up by His Spirit, to be centered on Him. Everything else flows out of that. Stop, center, silence, Scripture.

John 15:4-5 - *Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

2) Know His Word

We're not talking about asking what kind of cereal to eat. I'm not talking about looking for signs and impressions. He has told you His will in His Word. If you want Him to be Lord, then you need to know His Word. This is where He will speak to you the most regularly.

***Romans 12:2** - Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

3) Be in fellowship with other believers

God will also speak through His people. You will learn from them, and you will have opportunity to serve others. Remember, Paul writes this along with Timothy to the saints at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. As we read through Philippians we will learn more about who Paul is and how God miraculously transformed his life from a persecutor of Christians to the most fervent follower of Jesus. Along the way, Paul met Timothy, a young man in Lystra, who becomes like a spiritual son to Paul, who was never married and had no children of his own. Paul mentors Timothy in the faith and in the ministry, and eventually Timothy becomes the leader of the church in Ephesus.

As central as Paul is to the early church, he does not serve God alone, nor does he start or lead churches by himself. Neither are you meant to go on this journey alone. As young believers, it is essential to have older men or women to look up to and learn from, just as Timothy did from Paul. And as you grow in your faith, it is just as important to come alongside those who are younger in the faith and to help them along, just as Paul did with Timothy. Take today and reflect upon that dynamic in your life. Who is a Paul in your life? To whom do you turn when you have questions, or need guidance? If you don't have anyone, who might you ask to play that role? And who is a Timothy in your life? Who is someone younger in the faith that you can get to know, share your life and faith with, and encourage in their journey?

4) Obey Him

You are a saint – set apart, belonging to God. You are not to be someone who lives like the world, but someone whose desire is to be like Jesus Christ. And the overseers and deacons are to be the lead servants, setting an example of godly living, being set apart to serve the Lord Jesus, by protecting them from false teachers and ungodly influences, by teaching the faith passed down from the apostles, by pastoring, caring for the needs of the church. Any hint of domineering leadership is ungodly. As Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:3, elders are not to lord it over the church, but to set an example of service and godliness.

1 Peter 5:1-3 - To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

How would you describe yourself? Paul identifies himself primarily to the Philippians as a slave, a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus calls him friend, Paul's passion is to know and serve Jesus. To belong to Jesus and know Him and have His Spiritual life empower and flow through him. To let Jesus dictate his life and schedule. To lay down his rights, pick up his responsibilities, and fulfill the duties that His Lord Jesus gives him to do. What will it look like for you to live with Jesus as Lord, and what step can you take today towards seeking Him in the morning and returning to Him throughout the day, to knowing His word, to being in fellowship with other believers, and to obeying Him?