

Lesson Summary: Sainthood, or being set apart for God's purposes, is a status conferred on all Christians because of our relationship to Jesus. It is also a calling to be embraced and lived into with the help of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Encounter the Text

A Few Notes on Paul and Philippi

As the apostle called especially to carry the gospel to Gentiles, Paul spent much of his post-conversion life planting churches throughout the Roman Empire. The congregation at Philippi was one of those churches and was involved in some of the more familiar stories from Paul's ministry. These stories are all found in Acts 16 and include:

- The Macedonian Call - According to Acts 16, Paul and his companions were barred by the Spirit from pursuing ministry in Asia. Then, Paul had a dream about a Macedonian man begging him, "Come over to Macedonia to help us." This dream prompted a visit to Philippi, "the leading city of that district of Macedonia" (Acts 16:12).
- The conversion of Lydia - Lydia was a wealthy worshiper of God who was converted at a Jewish Sabbath service that was attended by Paul and his companions. She hosted Paul and company during their stay in the area and may have been the patron of the church, though this last bit isn't stated.
- The conversion of the Philippian jailer - At one point during his stay in Philippi, Paul cast a demon out of a female slave whose owners hauled Paul and Silas before the authorities. After a flogging, Paul and Silas were jailed and famously sang hymns while their feet were fastened in stocks. As they sang, an earthquake opened the prison doors, and the jailer almost killed himself because he assumed that the prisoners had escaped. Paul and Silas, however, had not run and took the opportunity to lead the man to Christ.

Regarding Philippi itself, the main thing to know when reading Philippians is that it was a Roman colony, meaning that citizens enjoyed "the significant benefit of equal rights with Roman citizens and freedom from direct taxation." This background information becomes important when Paul plays on the idea of citizenship in chapter 3 (more on that in a later lesson). Beyond its colonial status, Philippi was known for its gold mines and located on a major roadway, making it a regular stopping place for troops and travelers.¹

Returning now to Paul's ministry at Philippi, his letter to the Philippians displays a warm relationship between pastor and congregation. More than this, Paul also counts the Philippians as his partners in the gospel due to their financial support of his ministry and the shared experience of standing firm under persecution. In all, Paul writes to a supportive congregation to acknowledge their support. As he does, he takes on the pastoral role of guiding and exhorting the congregation during a moment of difficulty.

¹ Information for this paragraph from: *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, Volume 4, "Philippi."

¹Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.²

Most of the letters in the Pauline corpus³ begin with an assertion of Paul's apostolic authority. So, for instance, his first letter to the Corinthians starts like this: "Paul, **called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus** by the will of God..." (1 Corinthians 1:1; emphasis mine). By opening his letters in this way, Paul from the outset lets his audiences know that he has been set apart by God for leadership in the church. As such, folks should

respect his authority and receive his message. Only in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, and here in Philippians does Paul forego his apostolic title. Paul's relationships with these congregations and individuals, it seems, are strong enough that he doesn't feel the need to remind them of his authority. In the case of the Philippians, the congregation is actively supporting Paul's ministry, meaning that they already acknowledge his apostleship. Moreover, the text of Philippians reveals a warm relationship between Paul and the congregation at Philippi. Rather than needing to assert his authority as he did when writing to strangers or wayward congregations, Paul puts himself on the same level as all Christians by simply calling himself a servant of Christ Jesus.

After identifying himself as a servant along with Timothy, Paul names his audience: "all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons". The Greek word that the NIV translates "holy people" can also be translated as "saints" (see most other translations). Though I can't speak with any authority as to why the NIV chose to speak of holy people rather than saints, I think a good guess has to do with the baggage that the word "saint" carries in modern culture. In the Catholic tradition, saints are remarkable Christians whose lives are marked by "heroic sanctity".⁴ Protestants don't use that kind of language, but we do reserve a special place for Christians of note like Billy Graham. In both traditions, the idea of sainthood trends toward the idea of remarkable Christians who live better lives than the rest of us. That's not at all how Paul employs the term. For Paul, every Christian is a saint. That's why the NIV uses the phrase "holy people". When something is holy that means that it is set apart for God's purposes. That's something that is true of all Christians. We are all holy, meaning that we are all set apart. By the grace of God, each and every one of us is a saint.

How did we become saints? That has to do with the qualifier that Paul includes with the term - we are "saints *in Christ Jesus*" (emphasis mine). The idea of being *in Christ* is found throughout Paul's letters and has been the topic of renewed academic interest in the past few decades. I find it helpful to talk about *in Christ* language from two directions: space and story. Regarding space, the image of an embassy comes to the fore. We've all

² All scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted.

³ The Pauline corpus (a fancy way of referring to the letters attributed to Paul in the NT) includes thirteen letters: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Of these, scholars widely agree that seven were genuinely penned by Paul: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The authorship of the other letters is disputed. I personally lean toward more conservative scholars who attribute all or at least most of the letters to Paul. However we slice this issue, we end up with the greeting in Philippians displaying a familiarity between Paul and his audience that is not always present in his letters. If we take just the undisputed letters, four of eight do not include a self-identification of Paul as an apostle in the greeting. If we take the corpus as a whole, we end up with four of thirteen in the same vein. See *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, Volume 4, "Paul, Authorship."

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/story/roman-catholic-saints-hallowed-from-the-other-side>

seen those movies where someone who is in trouble with a country's authorities races to the US embassy. Why? Because the rules change once you cross the embassy line. You might be in Germany or Russia or some other country, but once you cross the embassy line, US rules apply. Now think of a Christ Embassy. Though we live in a fallen world that stands under God's judgment, there is one space where a different set of rules apply - *in Christ*. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has opened a space where judgment has already been passed in his favor and where new creation has already begun. When we put our faith in Jesus, it's like we cross over the line into the Christ Embassy. In this new space, we are justified before God, have been given the firstfruits of the Spirit, and are set aside for God's purposes. *In Christ*, all of us are saints.

Moving now to story, Ephesians 1 and 2 shows a remarkable sharing of stories between Jesus and his people. Jesus' story, of course, is one of sharing in humanity's lot. Or, to put that differently, of sharing in our story. He entered a fallen world, taking on human flesh, lived among us, and was tempted like us - though he never sinned. Ultimately, Jesus followed our story to its conclusion. The story of scripture is that the wages of sin is death and that Jesus died for our sins. That's the end of our story. But, Jesus' story didn't end there. Ephesians 1:20 tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. Then, in Ephesians 2:6, we hear the same language applied to Christ's people: "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus..." Note that Jesus has been raised (chapter 1), and we have been raised with him (chapter 2). Likewise, Jesus has been seated (chapter 1), and we have been seated with him (chapter 2). First Jesus shared in our story and followed it to its deadly conclusion. Then, his story extended beyond ours in resurrection life, and we share in it! Once again, being in Christ changes our status. We move from death to life, from judgment to salvation. And, when we share in Christ's story, we are set aside for God's purposes. As was the case with the Christ Embassy, *in Christ* we are all saints.

To be a saint, then, is not so much a matter of our effort as it is of our relationship to Jesus. We are saints because of *his* work, not our own. Sainthood is a status bestowed upon us. Yet, that doesn't mean there's nothing for us to do. In this, being a saint is like being a parent. A person becomes a parent when he or she has a child through birth or adoption. It is something that happens to them. At the same time, a parent can live into that new identity or neglect or even abuse it. Parenting is both a status and a calling. The status comes with the child. The calling comes with loving and raising the child well. In the same way, sainthood is both a status and a calling. The status is conferred on us when we place our faith in Christ. The calling has to do with living into that status, which is really just becoming the people that God always intended for us to be. More on that in a later lesson. Thankfully, as we'll see in following verses, living into our sainthood isn't something we're left to do on our own.

As Paul comes to the end of his letter introduction, he pronounces grace and peace upon his audience. Here, we find that grace and peace are not static in the life of the believer. Yes, we receive grace and peace when we first come to Christ. Then, we continue to receive the same throughout our lives in Christ. In a sense, Paul is asking God to confer extra grace and peace on the Philippian congregation.

³I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul follows his letter opening with a description of how he talks to God about the Philippians in prayer. Two words characterize the conversation: thanksgiving and joy. Whereas we must infer from Paul's greeting (see above) that he is on good footing with the Philippian church, here his feelings are writ large. As the passage progresses, we find that Paul's thanksgiving and joy are attached to a specific aspect of his relationship with the Philippians: they have partnered with him in the gospel from the very beginning. This interesting turn of phrase (your partnership in the gospel) refers at least in part to the Philippians' financial support of Paul's ministry, of which Paul writes in chapter four. Indeed, the whole reason that Paul is writing this letter in the first place is that the Philippians sent him financial and physical aid as he awaited trial in Rome.⁵ At the same time, I think that it is fair to consider the "partnership" that Paul refers to as being bigger than simply a matter of funding his ministry. Later in chapter one, we learn that the Philippians are bearing up under some kind of persecution even as Paul is. In this we see a sharing in the hardship for the sake of the gospel. If financial support is a sharing in ministry, then staying true to the gospel when things are hard (and staying true in general) is a sharing in purpose. Think of the first like a donor partnering in the work of an artist by funding it and the second like a sports team partnering with each other in the game as they play their different positions.

In verse 6, Paul makes it clear that he prays with confidence that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Here we find that the calling of sainthood discussed in the previous section is not a matter of our own effort, as if we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps to be better people. Instead, God himself has begun a good work in and among us (the Greek word for "in" can be translated as either in or among). In particular, we are talking here about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, which can be summed up in part as making us like Jesus and empowering us to serve in Jesus' body, the church. Paul is confident that what God has started God will also finish, meaning that the Philippians can rest secure in God's work as they embrace and further the way of Jesus.

Verses 7 and 8 include an interesting look to unity in the Philippian congregation. Notice how Paul says that it is right for him to feel this way about *all* of them, that *all* of them share in God's grace with him, and that he longs for *all* of them with the affection of Christ Jesus. It's as if Paul is taking pains to include everyone in the Philippian church in his thanksgiving and joy. Actually, this focus on *all* of the Philippians stretches back to earlier verses in the chapter - maybe all the way to verse 1! We'll talk more about this in a couple of weeks when we look at 2:1-11.

⁵ Traditionally, Philippians has been understood as having been written by Paul while under house arrest in Rome. Other theories of just which prison Paul wrote from and at which point in his ministry have been put forth, but I find the traditional understanding sufficient.

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

After noting the thanksgiving and joy that accompany his prayers for the Philippians, Paul goes on in verses 9-11 to relay the content of those same prayers, which has everything to do with love. Importantly, when Paul speaks of love, he does so in a robust sense rather than in a way that can be boiled down to feelings, though of course feelings can and often do play a role. This robust understanding of love is what leads Paul to pray that the Philippians' love would "abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight." At first glance, these may seem like strange qualifiers to add to love (what does love have to do with knowledge or insight?).

However, when we think about the way love plays out in real life, Paul's prayer starts to make a lot of sense. Have you ever wanted to show love to someone but weren't sure how to go about it? I think here of parents of wayward teen or adult children who aren't making the best choices in life. The parents love their children and want desperately to show that love. What that actually looks like in practice isn't always clear, though. Does love mean drawing a hard line regarding destructive behavior or welcoming back? At what point does welcoming back lead to enabling rather than redirecting? And so on. In real life, love can be confusing and messy, which means that our love often needs to be infused with knowledge and depth of insight (a better translation here is probably knowledge and discernment) so that we can choose the best path forward. We have already seen that Paul is stressing that he is thankful and joyful for *all* of the Philippians, and we'll see in later parts of the letter that at least some level of disunity exists in the congregation. The Philippians may well be in one of those situations where divisions have occurred and it is difficult to know the loving way forward. If this is the case, Paul's prayer makes a lot of sense!

Ultimately, love that abounds in knowledge and discernment makes us able to "discern what is best" or, more literally, to approve the superior way forward. And, approving the superior way helps us walk a path that is "pure and blameless". It is so important for us to see what Paul is saying here. Sometimes we get the idea that every decision needs to be informed by the Holy Spirit. This is true to an extent but can be taken to ridiculous extremes, as was the case when an acquaintance of mine in college consulted the Spirit when deciding whether or not to go to Wendy's. Don't get me wrong, mature Christians are those who have learned to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading. However, they are also those who have been formed so thoroughly by the Spirit that they are able to discern what is best in given situations. *Rather than controlling every decision, the Spirit makes us into the kind of people who can see and embrace the better way.*

Along with being pure and blameless because of knowledgeable and discerning love, Paul also prays that the Philippians will be filled with "the fruit of righteousness that comes through Christ" because of the same. The fruit of righteousness, of course, is the result of a life well-lived. Note how this fruit comes about, though. Once again, it's not a matter of us trying harder. Instead, it comes "through Christ". God has begun a work in our lives by the Spirit that produces the fruit of righteousness. As we noted earlier we saints are *in Christ Jesus*, which is the space or sphere where this work of the Spirit takes place (hence Paul's addition of "through Christ" when talks about the fruit). Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of this culminates in the glory and praise of God. This is so first because God's work in our lives causes us to glorify and praise him and second because when we bear the fruit of righteousness, we reflect God's glory like humanity was always meant to.

Apply the Text

Though it is easy to miss, the little phrase *saints in Christ Jesus* packs a big punch for the life of the believer. Indeed, I think that it is safe to argue that this concept of being set apart for God because of our relationship to Christ (see the discussion on saints in the exposition of verses 1 and 2) should be the primary self understanding of each believer. So often, salvation has been boiled down to what happens after we die, but it also has great meaning for life here and now! To be saved means that we have crossed over into the Christ Embassy and are sharing in the story of Christ's resurrected life. As such, we are justified before God and reconciled to him, indwelt and empowered by the Spirit, made a part of Christ's body, the church, made partakers of new creation, and set apart for God. And yes, we also rest secure in the new creation inheritance that will come with Christ's return. To be saved is to have our lives infused with purpose and significance as we learn to discern and embrace our place in God's great plan of redemption. Not only are we ourselves redeemed, but we also are graciously given a part to play! All of this happens because of our relationship to Jesus. *In Christ* you have been given the status of saint and the honor of living into it.

It is also important for us to understand that we don't live into our identity as saints on our own steam. To be a saint means that God himself has begun a good work in us that he will bring to completion. Of course, this doesn't mean there's nothing for us to do. For instance, Galatians 6 tells us that we should "keep in step with" the Spirit, meaning that we should agree with and embrace the work of the Spirit in our lives. We'll talk more about this in a future lesson on chapter 2. Yet, the primary work is God's!

Ultimately, the work that God is doing in us is good for both us and the world around us. Take a moment to think with me of a Christian you look up to. I'm guessing he or she isn't a holier-than-thou curmudgeon who looks down on others. Instead, the Christians we look up to are those who live good lives that enrich the lives of those who know them. These folks probably laugh often, love well, and display a deep love and knowledge of Jesus. When we talk about the fruit of righteousness in our lives, *this* is what we mean. When we agree with the work God is doing within us, he makes us into good people who bless the world around us. More than this, he draws us into his plan of redemption and allows us to act as partners in the gospel, a role that can look different at different moments in our lives. Always, though, God is making us into a people whose love is so robust that it is able to discern the best way forward in a messy and fallen world.

Resources:

In past studies of Philippians, I have consulted the following resources, which no doubt inform what I have written above. If you would like to find an approachable commentary on the book, I'd start with Still or Melick.

Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians, 40th Anniversary Edition*

Markus Bockmuehl, Black's New Testament Commentary, Volume 11, *The Epistle to the Philippians*

Gordon D. Fee, The New International Commentary on the New Testament: *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*

David E. Garland, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: *Philippians*

Morna D. Hooker, The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 11: *The Letter to the Philippians*

Richard Melick, Jr., The New American Bible Commentary, Volume 32: *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*

Todd D. Still, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: *Philippians and Philemon*

Jerry L. Sumney, *Philippians: A Greek Student's Intermediate Reader*