

Gospel Greeting

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Introduction to Philippians

This letter, we're going to study, is maybe the most personal letter Paul writes in the New Testament. There doesn't seem to be any serious danger facing the church at Philippi. Paul doesn't invoke his apostleship, his authority, to confront any issues or problems among the Christians there. Largely, the letter is a letter of discipleship. What I mean is that Paul writes joyfully throughout it, and the warnings we do find are "of a cautionary and preventive nature."¹ They are warnings to the Philippians, and to us, in order to head-off danger before it arrives.

My wife and I are teaching our five children how to walk about Andersonville in a safe way—how to cross the street, how to check before crossing blind alleys, how to find their way from and back to our home. As far as we know, no motorist is out to get us—circling our block and looking for a good opportunity to run us down (though it sometimes feels that way). Nonetheless, we're teaching our kids to be safe because the streets, like the greater world around us, can and often will be dangerous. We prepare them, consequently, to prevent them from getting hurt.

This is how Paul is writing this letter to the church at Philippi—to prepare it to walk wisely into the future and to live well in what is oftentimes a hostile world. So, we need to keep that in mind as we study the letter.

Today's passage is composed of just two verses—just a greeting or salutation to the Philippian church. It's the kind of thing we pass over during our Bible reading without giving it a thought. We might wonder what we could possibly learn from it, what it has to teach us. Well, the answer (I believe) is a lot.

Let's read this salutation together, then pray for God to speak to us in it.

Philippians 1:1-2

1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

¹ Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Philippians*, 99.

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.

For just a second, I want you to think about the last email or last text you sent to someone. How did you address that individual? Did you address him or her at all? Or, did you simply get to the point—business, business, business?

If you did address the person with a greeting, it may have been one of these.²

- Hey—meaning, “I’m trying to start a conversation in a low-key way. Nothing to see here.”
- Hey there—meaning, “Hi, friend. Let’s start a casual conversation.”
- Hey.—meaning, “I care about punctuation and the English language, [therefore] I’ll add a period after my greetings.”
- Hay—meaning, “I’m the quirky friend who ends words with z’s ironically. WHO KNOWS WHAT I’LL DO NEXT?!”

Oh...the laziness! It’s enough to drive the former English teacher in me crazy. Where have the good old days of personal correspondence gone?!

(I need to be careful. I made this point in a sermon to my former congregation, and one of them, in loving mockery, wrote this to me when we were moving here.

From the G... family in all grace and humility, on the occasion of your departure from Harrisburg and Community Evangelical Free Church, To our Pastor and his dear family, a family of joyful expectation of the imminent and assured return of their great Savior.

Greetings in the name of our Almighty and All-powerful God who ordains all things and pursues us with great affection.

Well, at least I know someone in the congregation was listening.)

How many of you have watched the Ken Burns’ documentary: *The Civil War*? In that beautiful piece of film making, they read many letters from common soldiers

² You can read the full article on texting salutations and their meanings [here](#).

to family and friends back home. And in those letters, the greetings mean something. They speak movingly about the *identity* of the ones receiving the letters. They speak with *intimacy* about those they love.

(There are no “heys” or “hey theres” in their salutations!)

As with those Civil War letters, Paul’s greeting here speaks about our identity and the intimacy we have with God in Christ. His greeting is packed full of meaning as well as encouragement for all those who follow Jesus Christ.

In order to see it, we need to zoom in on and unpack three phrases Paul uses in the greeting. (1st) We’ll look at “servants of Christ Jesus” (v. 1). (2nd) We’ll look at “all God’s holy people” (v. 1). (3rd) We’ll look at “grace and peace to you” (v. 2). Let’s see what we can learn from each.

1. Servants of Christ Jesus.

Paul describes himself and Timothy as servants of Jesus, but really that term applies to all those who follow Jesus. In our special Christian language (that we like to speak with other Christians), we often like to refer to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. And, that Lordship part implies servanthood...doesn’t it? In fact, though we enjoy fashioning our relationship to Jesus in touchy-feely ways, the most common picture of that relationship in Scripture is more authoritative—more top-down.

Let me show you how.

- Jesus is our Lord, and we are his servants (Philippians 2).
- Jesus is our King, and we are his subjects (Revelation 17).
- Jesus is our Shepherd, and we are his sheep (John 10).
- Jesus is our Head, and we are his body (Ephesians 1).
- Jesus is our Creator, and we are his creatures (Colossians 1).

Now, don’t get me wrong. Our relationship to Jesus *is* characterized by love as well as by lordship. Jesus is our Shepherd, and he is a good one. Jesus is our Head, and he takes care of his body. Jesus is our King, and he protects and fights for us. So, lordship and love always go hand in hand with Jesus.

But, I'm convinced that too often today's church is preaching Jesus as lover at the expense of Jesus as lord—like Jesus just wants what we want, like Jesus just wants us to be happy. We, therefore, often talk about Jesus like he's our best friend. However, that description is misleading at best.

In John 15:15, we forget that friendship is granted only through the authority of Jesus. We do not first call Jesus friend. Indeed, we cannot. He gives us that right by *first* calling us his friends. Christ's love always walks in unity with his lordship! We have to constantly remind ourselves of this truth.

The lordship of Jesus crowns and mediates his love.

So, in unity with Paul and Timothy, begin thinking of yourselves as “servants of Christ Jesus.” This is the foundation of our identity as followers of Jesus.

Let's move to our second phrase.

2. All God's holy people.

I wonder if you've ever had somebody find out that you're a Christian and, then, immediately change the way they talk and act around you? Maybe they even apologized for having used foul language around you.

Have you had that happen? Why do you think that happens?

Now, imagine they find out you're a pastor. So, however they reacted to you, magnify that by about a billion. That, friends, is my awkward daily reality.

I've had people completely lose all confidence when speaking in front of me. They don't know what to talk about. They think every word is now under scrutiny—like they've been instantly transported to some heavenly interrogation room. In fact, it's so bad that I'm actually endeared to people who keep cussing like drunken sailors after finding out I'm a pastor. (*At least, then, I know I'm getting the real thing!*)

What's going on? Why do people change like that?

I think it's a misconception about holiness. I think it's a human misconception about what makes someone good and what makes someone bad.

You see, we all have an innate sense that some things are bad, and some things are good (cf. Romans 2:15). And, we have this instinct that there are those people

who are better at doing the good things than we are. People who are nicer than us. People who are more generous than us. Those who are more Boy Scout or Girl Scout than we are. People who don't cuss around children...or pastors.

But, this isn't what makes someone holy or good or right. In fact, it can't.

Paul calls this whole church God's holy people. He tells them they're saints. That's a bold claim. How can he say that? Did he know all the individual members of the church at Philippi? Even if he did, how would he know that they were acting like saints? (Is Paul playing at creepy Santa here: *He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good...?*)

No! Because, friends, that's not the measure of true holiness. They're not holy because of what they do. They're holy because of who they know—Jesus Christ. Look again at what Paul says.

To all God's holy people...in Christ Jesus (v. 1b).

It is the church, the people of God, who are in Christ—covered and wrapped in his holiness, in his righteousness. That's what makes us saints. It's not our good but Christ's good on our behalf. This is the good news; this is the gospel of God. When we trust in Jesus our sin is nailed to the cross with him and his perfect holiness is accounted as ours. And, only after this has happened, only after we have trusted in Jesus for this gift, will a true goodness ever appear in us.

But we, in the church, have so often given the world the wrong order of things at this very point. One of my mentors used to tell the story of a time in the mid-1970s when one of his seminary classmates—who was an extremely gifted evangelist—was invited to preach at a local church. And, as his friend was walking to the church, he met some recovering hippies smoking in a park whom he invited to the services. They agreed to come hear him, but when they got to the front doors of the sanctuary, the ushers turned his new friends away because they weren't wearing the right kind of clothing—shoes, slacks, shirt, and tie. They weren't cleaned up.

Their gospel message was clean-up *first* and, *then*, you can hear about Jesus. *That, however, is a lie!* The true gospel message tells us that only once we've heard about Jesus and met with Jesus and trusted in Jesus will we ever get cleaned up—will we ever be God's holy people.

If you're visiting with us today, please know that there are no perfect people in this church, or any other church. The church is simply a gathering of messy sinners whose only perfection or righteousness is being wrapped in the perfect righteousness of our Savior—Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen.

There's much more that could be said, but we have one last phrase to unpack.

3. Grace and peace to you.

This is a totally new kind of salutation. This is a uniquely Christian invention when it comes to a greeting in a letter. Paul, however, works to make it the standard for believers. Listen to the greetings from his other New Testament letters.

- *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ** (Romans 1:7).*
- *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.... **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** (1 Corinthians 1:2-3).*
- *To God's holy people in Ephesus.... **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** (Ephesians 1:1-2).*

I could read more—2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, 1st Thessalonians, and 2nd Thessalonians. All have this standard greeting. Why? What's Paul doing? What is he communicating?

Well, in short, he's relaying the gospel. But, here's the cool thing about this. He's not only literally communicating it—*grace* being what we need from the Lord and *peace* being what we have with the Lord, once we've received grace thru faith in Jesus. That's only half of the message.

Paul is also showing it. It's implicit in these two words.

Friends, Paul brings a form of the standard greeting in Greek letter writing—*χαίρειν* (greetings) and gives it a spiritual dimension by using a related form of it—*χάρις* (grace). But, then, Paul does something spectacular when he combines *χάρις*

(the Gentile greeting) with *εἰρήνη* (peace) the standard Hebrew greeting—shalom. So, here is what (I think) Paul is doing.

He's saying the gospel is about grace from God and peace with God thru faith in Jesus Christ. But, that same grace and peace that brings us together with the Lord must work its way into all our relationships. If it can bridge the gap between sinners, like us, and our holy Creator, then it can and will bridge all human divides.

So, friends, even as the Greek and Hebrew greetings are brought together here also Greek and Hebrew Christians must be brought together through the good news of Jesus Christ. This was radical two-thousand years ago. And, it still is today.

Dear brothers and sisters, no ethnic divide or racial divide or political divide or socioeconomic divide should ever separate those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen! This is what grace from God and peace with God will do to us and to our fellowship. Let's thank the Lord in prayer.