

Lowly Servants, Holy Saints

By [Dr. David Lamb](#)

By Dr. David Lamb, Dean of the Faculty and the Allan A. MacRae Professor of Old Testament at Missio Seminary

Last month—April 13, to be exact—I was working on my taxes. Yes, one of my least favorite annual activities. Fortunately, my good friend TurboTax was helping me. I was almost done when TurboTax informed me that my wife Shannon and I were going to owe about \$4,000.

So I ran upstairs to break the bad news: “We owe the Feds four thousand bucks.”

I went back to work, and then TurboTax—bless its digital heart—asked, “Did you make any estimated payments last year?” I had completely forgotten about those. Thanks for the reminder, TurboTax. Yes, we had. So I checked my checkbook and found four check stubs, each for about \$2,000.

Back upstairs I went: “Hey, good news! The Feds owe us four thousand bucks!” We celebrated briefly.

Then I logged into my bank’s website just to make sure the checks had cleared. And you know what I discovered? Only the first two had been cashed. So I went to my bedroom desk, and there they were—the last two estimated payments, still sitting exactly where I left them. Whoops. And this is despite the fact that I write the date on the back as a reminder.

So yes, I made one last sheepish trip upstairs: “Yeah... it’s not four thousand. It’s going to be a couple hundred bucks.” Whoops.

Our lives are busy. We all need reminders about what’s important. That’s why, here at Calvary, we’re doing a series on reminders from the book of Philippians. Let me give you a quick recap of where we’ve been so far.

Charles began by reviewing Acts 17—how Paul established the church in Philippi—and reminded us that Philippians is mainly about joy.

Carlos then walked us through Philippians 2, showing how grumbling and complaining damage our relationship with God and with others.

Two weeks ago, Charles spoke about how struggle makes us strong, focusing on “to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Last week, Charles reminded us that even though we’re messy works in progress, God is not done with us yet.

Today, we’re rewinding to look at the first two verses of Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. Let’s read Philippians 1:1–2:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

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

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

To put it in the language of a modern letter, verse 1 has two parts. First, the return address. For those of you who have never mailed a letter—you know who you are—that goes in the upper left corner. Paul and Timothy: the return address.

Second, the addressee. For those who have never written a letter, that goes in the middle of the envelope. Paul writes, “To God’s holy people.”

Now, you may be thinking, “A whole sermon on two verses? From me to you? Really?” Yes. Because in these two verses, we not only see many of the themes Paul will develop throughout the letter, but we also get a glimpse of who we are in Jesus Christ. And along the way, I’m going to give you five challenges—and at the end, I’ll ask you to pick one to do this week. Consider this your heads-up.

Let’s start with the return address: Paul and Timothy.

It sounds like they both wrote the letter. Didn’t Paul write Philippians by himself? Good question. The letter is clearly written by Paul—just look at all the “I,” “me,” and “my” statements. But his spiritual son Timothy was with him as he wrote it. And since Paul mentions Timothy in most of his letters, it’s likely Timothy served as Paul’s scribe. Paul dictated; Timothy wrote.

Next, Paul describes himself and Timothy as “servants of Christ Jesus.” I find it striking that Paul doesn’t begin by presenting his impressive résumé—and he had one. He could have said (insert monster-truck voice here), “I am the one Jesus appeared to on the road to Damascus! Called as an apostle to the Gentiles!” But he doesn’t. Instead, he says, “We are servants of Christ Jesus.”

The Philippians already knew Paul was a servant—they had benefited from his service. How did Paul serve them? I see three ways.

First, Paul introduced the Philippians to Jesus.

On his second missionary journey, recorded in Acts 16, Paul established the church in Philippi. Introducing people to Jesus was Paul's passion. That's what servants of Jesus do: they introduce people to Jesus.

Second, Paul visited them multiple times.

About five years after that second journey, Paul began his third missionary journey and visited the Philippians again—both on the way out and on the way back. In Philippians 2, Paul tells them he plans to send Timothy and Epaphroditus to visit. Why not go himself? Because, as Charles reminded us a couple weeks ago, Paul was in prison.

I actually visited Philippi in Greece back in March—probably when I should have been working on my taxes. If you go to ancient Philippi, you can see the place where Paul was imprisoned 2,000 years ago. Even though he was imprisoned on his first visit, Paul kept returning to encourage them.

Why? Because Paul was a servant of Jesus Christ.

And like Paul, servants of Jesus visit people to encourage them.

Challenge #1: Visit a friend you haven't seen in a while this week, and encourage them.

Third, Paul served the Philippians by writing them a letter.

Since he was imprisoned—likely in Rome—he couldn't visit them in person. But he still wanted to encourage them and remind them of the gospel. An in-person visit would have been best, but the next best thing was a letter. If Paul had had Zoom, I'm convinced he would have used it. But prison prevented him from visiting churches like Philippi.

But there was one huge upside. If Paul had not been in prison, he might never have written this letter. Because of his imprisonment, we get to read the book of Philippians and be reminded of its messages — including how Paul and Timothy saw themselves as servants of Christ Jesus.

And like Paul, servants of Jesus write letters and emails and texts to encourage people.

Challenge number two:

Email a friend in need this week. Tell them you're praying for them, and include a short prayer in your message. That's exactly what Paul does in Philippians — he includes his prayer for them.

This leads us to our first reminder from Philippians 1: We are lowly servants of Christ Jesus.

Like Paul and Timothy, we are called to be servants, because Jesus calls all His followers to serve.

When we think about service, it's easy to picture volunteering for an hour or two a week. Some of us already volunteer, and hopefully many of us will help out this summer to give our regular volunteers a break. But being a servant of Jesus is much bigger than a weekly volunteer slot. It's who we are. It's part of our identity. And for Paul, it was the very first thing he told the church in Philippi about himself: "Paul and Timothy, servants..."

Challenge number three:

Ask someone this week, "How can I serve you?"

It's a great question, because we are lowly servants of Christ Jesus.

About eight years ago, my wife Shannon began visiting the country of Liberia — and now she goes about twice a year. She does this because she is a servant of Jesus Christ. In Liberia, she serves as a consultant for the Liberian Christian College Fellowship. She and her Liberian partner, Moses, travel around the country — a little bit like Paul — planting new college Christian fellowships. When she can't visit in person, she Zooms or sends emails.

Eventually she invited me to join her. She said, "Hey, Peter was allowed to take along a believing spouse on his missionary journeys, so I can take you." I said, "Well... thanks, Peter."

I was a little reluctant. Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world, and it's always really hot. Shannon is a much better servant of Jesus than I am. But she convinced me to go, and I went. It was hard, but I had a great time. And just this past December, she convinced me to go again.

Before we went, we asked Moses, "When we come, how can we serve you? We want to help — how can we serve?"

He said, "Help me give the board a vision for deeper commitment to the mission." So I led a Bible study on King David from 2 Chronicles 26 and on David's leadership team. It was amazing to see how God was at work — not

only to expand the board's vision for the ministry, but also to move them toward specific, tangible commitments to the strategic student work in Liberia. God always blesses us when we serve.

Now let's move to the second half of verse 1 — the addressee: "to all God's holy people." The Greek word translated "holy people" is *hagios*, often translated "saints." Interestingly, Paul calls himself a lowly servant, but he calls the people in Philippi holy saints. The reality is that we're both.

This leads to our second reminder from Philippians: We are holy saints in Jesus Christ.

As you read the letter, though, there's a lot going on that doesn't seem particularly holy. Last week Charles reminded us that a work in progress is messy. Things were certainly messy in Philippi.

- In chapter 1, some preached the gospel out of envy and selfishness.
- In chapter 2, there were complainers and grumblers.
- In chapter 3, there were evildoers and people living as enemies of Christ.
- In chapter 4, two women — Euodia and Syntyche — were in a major conflict.

How would you feel if a conflict with one of your friends ended up mentioned in a letter that became part of the best-selling book of all time? That's enough motivation to get along a little better with your friends.

We don't know how much of this behavior was happening inside the Philippian church, but the fact that Paul mentions it suggests it was either happening among them or around them.

So how does a sinful community become holy saints in Jesus Christ?

In chapter 3, Paul lays out his spiritual résumé — all the things that might make someone look holy or righteous. But then he says he considers all of it rubbish. Junk. Trash.

Then he tells the Philippians what actually makes us righteous and holy. In his words (3:9): righteousness comes "through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith."

We are saints because we trust that Jesus was the ultimate servant, obedient even to death on a cross — just as chapter 2 describes.

If you haven't yet made a decision to follow Jesus and put your faith in Him, and you'd like to, please come talk to us afterward. Come up front and speak with someone. We would love to chat and pray with you.

We may not often feel like saints, but that's what God calls us through this letter. And notice: when Paul calls them "all the saints" in verse 1, he's emphasizing the whole church — a community of saints. He calls them saints in the first verse and again in the last verse.

And did you notice that Paul focuses on the whole church as holy saints before he mentions the overseers and deacons? It's almost an afterthought. Paul doesn't think only the leaders are saints. Some traditions canonize their leaders — they get halos in the artwork. Paul canonizes the whole church. You all get halos.

Paul got this idea of a community of saints from God Himself. Back in Exodus 19 at Mount Sinai, God called His people a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." That's what Paul is echoing here. As messy people seeking to follow Jesus, we need to remember: we are holy saints in Christ Jesus. We all have halos.

Challenge number four:

Sometime this week, put a Post-it note on your bathroom mirror that says, "You are a holy saint in Jesus Christ."

Read it while you brush your teeth. Say it out loud if you want: "I'm a holy saint." Hopefully you brush your teeth a couple of times a day.

Now, I have a confession to make. I actually have a really hard time teaching from Paul. And two days ago, I was really struggling with this sermon, and things just started to spiral. I got anxious. It is a little stressful speaking in front of over a thousand people. Then I started feeling bad about being anxious, and it just kept going downhill. I did not feel holy.

But then it felt like God spoke to me: "Listen to your sermon, Dave. You are already a holy saint in Jesus Christ." I needed a Post-it note reminder on my mirror. Thanks, God. We are all already saints in Jesus. We've all got halos.

Okay, so we've finished one verse—the return address and the addressee. We are flying. Now let's move on to verse two, where Paul starts the body of his letter: "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

Now, we may wonder if the Philippians were thinking, "Grace and peace... I bet you say that to all the churches."

Well, actually, Paul does.

“Grace and peace” is Paul’s standard greeting, and he uses it in all thirteen of his epistles. We might wonder if Paul’s frequent use of it means it’s not actually that special—just a trite phrase. But what we should really be asking is: What is it about grace and peace that made Paul begin every single letter with them?

Paul begins his letters with grace and peace because they are core values for saints and servants of Jesus Christ.

Which leads us to the third reminder: servants and saints share grace and peace.

So let’s talk a little more about grace and peace. The Greek word for grace is *charis*. I’ve met a couple of young women named Charis. Charis means undeserved favor—a free gift, a blessing. It’s a really wonderful word. Paul uses *charis* three times in Philippians, at the very beginning and the very end of the letter, and over a hundred times in all his epistles.

Paul was really into grace. Why?

Because our salvation in Jesus is the greatest act of *charis* in human history.

The Greek word for peace is *eirēnē*. The name Irene comes from this word. It literally means peace. Paul uses *eirēnē* three times in Philippians—again, at the beginning and the end—and over forty times in all his letters.

Paul was really into peace. Why?

Because Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and the greatest act of peace in human history was Jesus’ death on the cross to reconcile humanity to God.

Just curious—anybody here named Grace, Charis, or Irene? Quakertown folks, online folks, you can raise your hand too; I just won’t be able to see it. Anyone? Oh, there’s one over here. Yes, I see that hand. They’re not as common as they used to be.

Interestingly, we live in a world that desperately lacks grace and peace—not just the names, but the values. Ukraine. Israel. College campuses these last couple of weeks in the U.S. All desperately need grace and peace from Jesus Christ.

So what does it mean for us to be bringers of grace and peace today? Well, a lot of things. But it certainly includes extending grace and peace to the person

who cuts us off on the road. And this one is the worst: extending grace to family members who leave dirty dishes in the sink. That one is hard for me.

We make peace with coworkers and family members who have hurt us—or whom we have hurt. We should be people who ask forgiveness regularly, assuming we are sinners (and I'm assuming we all are). We are people of grace, so we grant grace and ask forgiveness often.

This leads us to challenge number five: extend grace and peace this week to someone you disagree with—even on political issues like immigration or abortion or campus protests. You can disagree—that's fine—but disagree graciously, peacefully. That's what servants of Jesus do.

These past few days, I've gotten a lot of last-minute requests from students who needed something right away because of their deadlines. I didn't feel very gracious about it. Shannon and I were walking the dog Friday morning, and I was grumbling and complaining—yes, I heard Carlos' sermon on that. I said to Shannon, "I don't have time for this right now. I need to prepare a sermon on grace."

Oh. Wait a minute.

Even I could see the problem with that. Fortunately, God intervened and gave me grace to respond with kindness.

So why was Paul so into grace and peace? Because grace and peace characterize God. God's grace and peace overflow to God's people. And therefore, God's people share grace and peace wherever they go. Servants and saints share grace and peace.

A little over a year ago, after a routine colonoscopy, I found out I had colon cancer. It was small, and they caught it early, but they still needed to operate. And when they opened me up, they found a large tumor. So instead of taking out just a couple inches of my colon, which was the plan, they took out a foot.

Now, unless you've had colon cancer, you have a five-foot colon. I have a four-foot colon. I like to say I'm colon-ally challenged. I've got a short colon. Don't joke about my short colon with me, though.

But honestly, I didn't like talking about my cancer. I like to think of myself as healthy, not "cancery." And I realized my situation was better than many others with more severe forms. I'd often say, "Well, my cancer isn't that bad," and people would say, "Dave, it's still cancer."

Ultimately, the main reason I didn't like talking about it was that I didn't want to be in a position where I needed grace from others. I did not want that. But at the heart of the gospel is the willingness to admit that we need grace.

Eventually, I began sharing about it with our community of saints here at Calvary—in our ABF, The Gathering—and that was hard for me. But I was blown away by the support we received. They prayed, they visited, they wrote cards, they brought food, and they asked, “How can we serve you?”

After the surgery, the tumor was sent to the lab. The doctor told Shannon—not me—“Well, that looks like a cancerous tumor. He's going to need three to six months of chemo.” So we waited for the results, and our friends prayed.

Ten days later, the results came back negative. No more cancer. No chemo. And our friends in The Gathering celebrated with us. It was good to receive grace from our fellow saints.

I've given you five challenges. I want you to pick one. Pick one and respond. Do something. Visit a friend. Email a prayer. Ask someone, “How can I serve you?” Write “You're a saint” on a Post-it on your mirror. Extend grace to someone you disagree with. Think about who that might be. And I want you to tell the people you drove to church with on the way home. Ask each other in the car. You've got something, right? Because I'm not moving forward until you have something. We could be here a while.

Let's remember what we learned about who we are in Jesus from Philippians 1:

We are lowly servants of Jesus Christ.

We are holy saints in Jesus Christ.

And as servants and saints, we share the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

Thank you, Jesus, for your death, which makes us saints. Help us, Jesus, to live as your servants. Give us grace and peace to share in this world that desperately needs you. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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