

Slaves of Jesus Christ

Last week we talked about how the church in Philippi was founded, and I hope you were able to spend some time in Acts 16 since then. The letter we are studying was written 10-12 years after the church was planted and we don't know anything that happened there in those years. Maybe the Philippian jailer was one of the first elders, joined by other men he had reached and disciplined. Perhaps Lydia led a women's ministry in the church that encouraged the sisters to seek the Lord with all their hearts and to love their husbands and children. Who knows but that the slave girl, the one who was once possessed by a demon, had reached many who lived in darkness and brought them into the light of the Gospel? We don't know. But let's start looking at this letter by examining Paul's greeting under these three headings: partners, slaves, and saints.

- **Partners**

- Who were the partners? Paul and Timothy! Those are the first words Paul wrote, and they are significant. Paul the Apostle shares his authority with Timothy, his disciple. He hopes to send Timothy to them soon so that his beloved disciple can see how the church is doing, and you will see his praise for Timothy in chapter 2. But including him in the greeting says a lot about Paul as a leader. He wasn't a "banyan tree." The saying is that "Under the banyan tree, nothing grows." But Paul was not that guy. Karl Barth said, "A hero, a genius, a 'religious personality' stands alone; an apostle has others beside him like himself and sets them on his level."
- These two partners in the ministry are writing to the saints in Philippi, who are with the overseers (elders) and deacons. Shared authority in writing the letter to the church that is under the shared authority of the elders, and served by the shared ministry of the deacons.
- Want to build disciples? Don't just share your responsibilities with them. Share your authority. They will become partners with you, equals in the task God has given us for the sake of the Gospel.

- **Slaves**

- Who were the slaves? Paul and Timothy! The letter begins, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus." We tend to put our name at the end of a letter or an email, don't we? We say, "Sincerely, a servant of Jesus" at the end, not at the beginning. But Paul started his letters by identifying who was writing it. It is significant in the letter to the church in Philippi that Paul does not identify himself as an apostle, as he often did in his greetings, but as a servant, literally, a slave, of Christ Jesus. That was the first thing that stood out to me as I approached the text to preach it. Remember, this is the only letter Paul wrote to a church that was not prompted by problems in the church. Maybe that is why he does not establish his authority in the greeting, though he certainly had that. But he establishes his fellowship in the greeting. He addresses them as one of them, as a fellow servant of the Lord Jesus. It's a warm embrace rather than a rap on the knuckles, if you will. But it is theologically important as well. To be a slave in Philippi, in the Roman culture, was to be at the bottom of the barrel. No one willingly put that on his business card. But Paul did, and starts the letter that way. Paul, slave of Christ. A slave was someone who was subject to the needs and the demands and the desires of another.
- Who does that describe better than mothers? Since it is Mother's Day, let me honor you who are willing servants in your home, for the sake of Christ. Here's some thoughts I shared in my newsletter column this week that I entitled, "There's nothing like a mom." A cartoon in the *Saturday Evening Post* years ago showed a young boy of 5 or 6 years old talking on the phone, saying, "Mom is in the hospital, the twins and Rozie and Billie and Sally and the dog and me and Dad are all home alone." That was a time when Moms were still held in high esteem by most in our nation. Mom was the heart of the home, Dad was the head. Moms were the tender-hearted nurturers, Dads the fearless warriors. They made quite a team, Mom and Dad. They were incomplete without each other; his strengths were her weaknesses, her strengths were his weaknesses. Dad was too harsh sometimes, Mom was too soft.

Together they raised children in a safe place. Not a perfect place, mind you. But one that was secure. There are millions of children in the country today who would give anything to be in a home like that. In his book, Love Must Be Tough, James Dobson tells the story of a sixth grade teacher in California who taught in an affluent area. She gave her students a writing assignment. They were to complete the sentence that began, "I wish..." She expected the boys and girls to wish for bicycles, dogs, laptops and trips to Hawaii. Instead, 20 of the 30 children made reference in their responses to their own disintegrating families. Here's what some of them wrote:

"I wish my parents wouldn't fight and my father would come back."

"I wish my mother didn't have a boyfriend."

"I wish I could get straight A's so my father would love me."

I am so thankful for the Mom who lives in my house. I couldn't imagine life without her. She truly is the heart of her household, and as the Proverb says, "The heart of her husband safely trusts her." That's why she deserves anything I and the kids give her tomorrow. No gift is too good for the Mom who lives and loves at our house.

I heard a story about a boy talking to a girl who lived next door. "I wonder what my mom would like for mother's day," he said. The girl answered, "Well, you could decide to keep your room clean and orderly. You could go to bed as soon as she calls you. You could brush your teeth without having to be told. You could quit fighting with your brothers and sisters, especially at the dinner table." The boy looked at her and said, "Naah, I mean something practical."

Are Moms important? You can change the textbooks and expunge the records and re-write history. But you will never, ever, take Mom out of the hearts of her children. Or out of the very center of the home. Moms, what you are doing matters. Don't give in or give up. I look at my seven grown children and now our five grandchildren who are all beneficiaries of loving moms, and I thank God for the fruit I see in their hearts and lives. Much of who they are as people is attributed to the love and attention they received from their moms.

Billy Graham wrote, "Only God Himself fully appreciates the influence of a Christian mother in the molding of character in her children." Amen!

- Moms, do who feel like servants sometimes? You are in good company. Paul referred to himself as a slave of Christ. The only other place he referred to a slave in the letter is when he described Jesus as the One who "emptied himself by taking the form of a servant (slave), being born in the likeness of men." (Phil. 2:7)
- **Saints**
- We don't know anything about the size of the Philippian church except that it is populated with saints, overseers and deacons, who were also saints. What is a saint? Paul tends to write his letters to them, doesn't he? He didn't write to the general population of Corinth or Philippi, but to the saints, to the believers. The word means "holy one," or "set-apart one," and it is the irreducible minimum of what to means to be a follower of Jesus. You became a saint the instant you were born again, and God exchanged your filthy spiritual rags for new, and a dead spirit for one made alive forever and ever. Jesus said, "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24) If you Google, "How does one become a saint," you will see thousands of sites devoted to the steps of canonization of Roman Catholic Saints, and the works that a person has to do to qualify in the eyes of the Vatican. But sainthood is not dependent on the Vatican. In the eyes of God, the works are done by Christ and the saint is someone who believes in HIS works, and entrusts his life to Jesus, and is therefore IN Christ Jesus. Paul is not writing to a select few, but to "all the saints in Christ Jesus." He is writing to you and me as well, which is why we study the Bible. God led 40 writers over a period of 1500 years to write down the words in this book, and they were written to two audiences: the immediate audience, in this case, the church in Philippi, and the eventual audience, every person who

hears the voice of the Lord. Jesus said, speaking to the Jews who believed in Him, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock. One shepherd." That's it. We are the saints of Antioch who have been grafted in with the saints in Philippi, and all others who believe, and there is one flock, one shepherd. Many churches, but one flock. Many elders, but one shepherd.

- **Partners, slaves, saints. All the same. We are a part of the fellowship of the Gospel. It doesn't get any better than that.**