

Ordinary Saints

Philippians 4:21-23

Extravagant Grace Part 7

The Chicago Tribune ran an article a couple of years ago about the plight of unidentified people who turn up at police stations and hospitals. Most are older adults who've experienced a stroke, or suffer from dementia and for whatever reason get separated from their families.

Most of them are eventually identified by family members who come searching for them. But this article in particular talked about those that never are – one man in particular was highlighted in this Tribune article – he was among a half-dozen “John Does” as they are referred – and one day he showed up without any identification on them or memory to offer.

The staff at the care facility nicknamed this Hispanic man, Carlos. And there he stayed for more than a decade – longer than any other John Doe in the entire state of Illinois. He didn't speak well at all – he'd had a stroke that caused brain damage. He used a wheelchair to get around and his only reaction to people was a wide smile.

According to the Chicago Tribune article, the Care Facility office received information that, at long last, revealed the identity of Carlos. His name was Crispin Mareno. In fact, the day the Care Facility discovered his true identity, was the same day as his 53rd birthday. That day, one of the directors went to Carlos and told him what they'd learned and he bent down and spoke quietly into this man's ear his name – Crispin Mareno – and wished him a happy birthday. Crispin grew very quiet after

hearing his name – for the first time in 13 years he knew who he was – and tears began running down his cheeks.¹

The headline of the Chicago Tribune article read, “Living a Life Unknown.” It generated a wonderful amount of interest and insight into this strange world of unidentified people who, for one reason or another, have no idea who they are.

It struck me, that one of the primary reasons behind Paul's very personal letter to the believers in Philippi, was to remind them of their true identity. To remind them of who they were . . . and to Whom they belonged.

Has it ever occurred to you that whenever you pick up this inspired word of God, it has a way of clearing up our genetically programmed bent toward spiritual amnesia – we tend to forget who we are.

From the 1st century to the 21st century, believers in any generation and in any culture are prone to memory lapses:

- the fog of sinful culture can cause us to lose our spiritual bearings;
- the noisy distractions of our generation can dull our spiritual hearing;
- the corrupt and competing voices around us can cause us to forget who we are . . . and to Whom we belong.

Paul is effectively writing to a group of believers who might come to the conclusion that they are citizens of Philippi and that they belong to Rome – I

mean it's true, Rome is making all the noise and they seem to be holding all the cards and writing all the rules – but let me remind you, Paul writes, you happen to be citizens of heaven and you belong to God (Philippians 3:20).

It might look like Rome is in charge, but God is. It might look like Caesar is all powerful, but God is. And that's pretty remarkable, coming from the Apostle Paul who happens to be writing this letter, chained between two elite Praetorian guards who are earning double wages on special assignment from Caesar to keep Paul under house arrest.

But in Paul's perspective, he wasn't arrested by Caesar, he has been arrested by Christ – he writes – *and I know that this will turn out for my deliverance . . . and Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death (Philippians 1:19-20)*. Paul is saying, "I know who I am . . . and I know to Whom I belong."

Take your New Testament copy of Paul's letter to the Philippians and turn one last time to the last chapter and the last 3 verses as we conclude our study.

This is our 41st sermon in this study, and there are just over 100 verses in this letter . . . we averaged right at 2 verses per sermon – which is pretty fast, don't you think?

And I just love the way you never complain . . . most of you. I don't know, as I get older, I think I'm actually speeding up. And here today we're going to cover 3 entire verses.

And in these verses, Paul is going to acknowledge four different groups of people.

1. The first group is the church in Philippi, to whom he's writing.

Notice *verse 21. Greet every saint in Christ Jesus*. This is customary language from Paul as he wraps up his letters.

In fact, he'll say the same thing in three letters – to the Roman believer's and in both letters to the Corinthian believers – although in all three of those letters he tells them to greet one another with a holy kiss (*Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12*). A greeting with a kiss wasn't inappropriate – it was cultural and a lot like a hug or a big handshake to us.

Even to this day, when I travel to other countries, a kiss on both cheeks is still the customary greeting among believers – it's really more like kissing the

air on both sides of another person's face. When I speak, for instance, in South American countries where our sermons are broadcast in Spanish, after the meetings, the greeting takes a long time because of this custom – although it is so endearing. This morning in Santiago, Chile, my daughter and her husband will arrive at their assembly and they will greet everyone they meet with a holy kiss.

But here in this letter to the Philippians, Paul drops the holy kiss part completely out – either because he really didn't need to say it, or – more than likely – because in all his other letters Paul was telling the church family to greet one another.

But here in this context Paul is telling the elders and deacons, mentioned early in chapter 1, to greet every single member of the church on his behalf. And the stress is on the verbal part of this greeting.

In fact, Paul stresses the word "every" – *greet every one of them* – which is Paul's way of saying that he wants each and every individual member of the Philippian church to receive a personal, verbal greeting from him.ⁱⁱ

As if to remind every one of these dear, faithful praying supporting church members that he loves them and prays for them and appreciates each one of them.

And would you notice what Paul calls them here? He writes, *greet every saint*. You might be tempted to think that this just got easy – I mean, the greeting line is really going to be short. And we think that primarily because we've lost the theological understanding of who we are.

We think more like the Roman Catholic Church or the Eastern Orthodox Church which canonizes those rare individuals who were the superstars – they are the saints.

The western church of Rome and the Orthodox church in the east requires that saints be connected in some way to verifiable miracles associated with their ministry, their teaching, or even in connection to some physical relic from their past.

In the case of Mother Theresa, who died several decades ago – it's been claimed that a woman was healed by physical contact with her photograph – the woman claimed, a beam of light came from the locket which contained her photograph and it healed her body. And this helped the Vatican affirm her candidacy for sainthood.

I don't want to get off track here – because the point I want to make is that there are a lot of people

who think that only really amazing people who have something to do with miracles or spotless records deserve to be called saints. Spiritual celebrities become saints. Even outside any religious system, people refer to really good people as saints – oh, she’s a saint . . . he’s such a saint!

What chance do any of us have? Well, for starters, you need to understand that all of what religion requires has nothing to do with scripture. It is entirely man-made.

The New Testament word for saint here is *hagios* and it means *separated one*. It’s a reference, not to special Christians, but to every Christian, because every Christian has been separated unto God as one of His own.

In fact, the term *saint* happens to be the Apostle Paul’s favorite term for Christians and he uses it 40 times in his letters.ⁱⁱⁱ

He addresses all the believers in Philippi as saints – back in chapter 1 of this letter he writes in *verse 1, To all the saints in Christ Jesus, including the overseers and deacons*. Even to the problem-riddled and immature congregation in Corinth, Paul removes any doubt that every Christian is considered a saint as he writes that they are *saints by calling (1 Corinthians 1:2)*.

One author writes, in biblical terms, a saint is not a superhero of the faith; a saint is anyone who has eternal life in Christ.^{iv}

In fact, you’ll notice the basis for being a saint – here in *Philippians chapter 4* – Paul clarifies – *greet every saint in Christ Jesus*. Because of your union with Jesus Christ, your status happens to be sainthood . . . you are a saint, right now. You are separated unto God, by faith in Christ Jesus as His unique and precious possession.

So Paul is saying to every member of this church and ours:

- here’s your identity – here’s who you are – you’re a saint.

Which means:

- you’re not a saint because of your perfect performance;
- you’re not a saint only after you’ve reached some graduated level of maturity;
- you’re not a saint because you’ve got it all figured out.

You are called a saint because God called you to Himself by faith in Christ – and all who are in Christ are called saints.

And by the way – nothing in scripture encourages you to venerate or pedestalize or burn candles or incense to or pray to – any past or living saint. That’s simply manmade religion. Saints are not people to be worshipped – saints are people who worship, the true and living Lord.^v

2. Paul acknowledges a second group of people in these closing remarks.

Notice *verse 21 again* – *Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you*. In other words, the brothers who are here in my company also want to say hello too!

Now Paul doesn’t mention who they are – but this would have included Timothy, Paul’s ministry apprentice. When this letter to the Philippians began in *verse 1*, Paul actually made Timothy a co-author – the letter begins, *Paul and Timothy*.

We’re also told in *chapter 2 and verse 25* that Paul was sending *Epaphroditus* to them, no doubt carrying this epistle to the church in Philippi.

And by the way, even though these men were uniquely gifted and given tremendous responsibility in the early church – don’t miss the fact that Paul doesn’t write here – something like – now you all in the church are saints, but these guys here with me are super saints.

No, he simply calls them *brothers*. This speaks highly of Paul as well. He could have taken on an air of distance and superiority – these men are my apprentices – these men are my understudies – these men are my students; no . . . these guys are my brothers. Which is another way of saying, as members of the body of Christ, we are equal in the sight of God – we are brothers.

Paul is also implicitly telling the church in Philippi that they are their brothers too. We happen to be in the same family because we belong to Christ.

And this is true to this day – because you happen to belong to Christ, every female believer is your sister and every male believer is your brother.

Who are you? A saint! And you’re also a brother or sister to all the other saints in the family around you. So we not only belong to God, we belong to each other – we’re family.

Keep in mind Paul is writing a church, as we’ve learned in past studies that struggled with division . . . it’s as if Paul reminds them here that their unity in

Christ is as deep and unchangeable as their own kindred bonds.

Beloved, we have never been called by God to produce unity as one family in the body. We've never been told to produce unity – we've been told to protect unity. It's our role *to protect the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)*.

And the larger any family grows, the more challenging it is to protect unity; especially when there are a lot of brothers and sisters, right?

A church isn't unified because it's small; a church doesn't have unity because they all happen to have the same personality; a church is unified because they happen to have the same purpose – and the same priority . . . in making disciples and glorifying Christ. Nobody is a big shot . . . everybody is a brother or a sister in the family.

Remember, Paul has already challenged the Philippians in chapter 2 of this letter to have the attitude of Jesus Christ who humbled Himself and lived, not to be served, but to be a servant. There's no room in the family and in the church family for self-serving pride.

Paul writes to the Corinthians – let me read the colorful paraphrase of Eugene Petersen who puts it in street clothes as he paraphrases, *“Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of the brightest and the best among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks . . . chose nobodies to expose the pretensions of the somebodies. That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God; everything that we have – right thinking and right living . . . and a clean slate . . . comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, “If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)*

Who are we? We're just a bunch of redeemed brothers and sisters who haven't forgotten the church is a family, to which we belong.

The brothers who are with me greet you.

3. Now Paul acknowledges a third group.

He writes at the beginning of *verse 22, all the saints greet you*. The context indicates Paul is now

including all the saints in the churches in his area – here in Rome where he's under house arrest.

I find this incredibly gracious of Paul. We've already learned that most of the believers in Rome had basically written Paul off . . . they weren't caring for him; they weren't supporting his financial needs; there wasn't an official pastoral delegation encouraging him or checking in on him.

And yet, instead of really backing up the truck here and saying, “there aren't any saints here in Rome that care about me – and they probably don't care about you either – he instead includes them in his letter.

Paul is simply a gracious bridge builder – and how gracious he is. No doubt he realizes that this letter to the Philippians will eventually make its way back around to Rome . . . and all the believers in Rome would only be embarrassed by their obvious lack of concern for the global body of Christ – and certainly for Paul himself.

And so Paul includes them – with the best of intentions and with the best of motives – he builds a bridge so that eventually they can cross it and not be left out in the fellowship of the saints.

You can sort of read in between the lines . . . no names are mentioned – just . . . a rather general, “all the saints here greet you too.”

4. The fourth and final group that Paul acknowledges now makes an appearance in the text.

They are mentioned at the end of *verse 22. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household*. Here Paul becomes specific, yet at the same time without mentioning any names – more than likely for their own protection.

It wouldn't be wise for Paul, an enemy of Caesar, to mention by name, friends of his who are deeply embedded inside the administration of Caesar. So he leaves their names out. But the effect is the same – people were being saved – right under Nero's nose.^{vi}

There are *saints in Caesar's household!*

Now this use of the word *household* doesn't necessarily refer to Nero's own personal family, although one story had made the rounds said that when Nero was away on one particular journey, his wife had heard the gospel and gave her life to Christ. But that hasn't been verified historically.^{vii}

The phrase, *Caesar's household*, was the regular phrase in this culture for what we might call the Royal Civil Service. In our country we would refer to all those who worked for the government or the State.

Here in Paul's day this would have included slaves or freed men and women who served in the kitchens, making Caesar's meals or tending his gardens.^{viii} It could have included property managers, imperial architects, masons and painters, housekeepers and farm hands. It could have included high ranking palace officials – like Daniel in the Kingdoms of Persia. These were the ones in Caesar's court, responsible for handling the imperial revenue; managing the day-to-day administration of the empire.^{ix}

Paul doesn't name them, but he tells the believers in Philippi that they are everywhere – in our generation Paul was effectively saying that there were redeemed followers of Christ serving at Number 10 Downing Street, London; in the capital building in Beijing; Paul would have been saying, listen, there are believers with offices in the White House.

The nineteenth-century New Testament scholar, J.B. Lightfoot found some striking parallels between the names Paul lists in his letter to the Roman believers and the names of members of Caesar's household, dating to the very time of Paul.^x

William Barclay summarized it so well when he wrote with great joy, "This Galilean carpenter had already begun to rule those who ruled the greatest empire in the world."^{xi}

Just imagine the implication of this little phrase – here's Paul, chained to imperial guards on either side, effectively writing with this almost coded statement the fact that the imperial power could not stop the power of the gospel.^{xii}

And with that Paul now comes full circle. He began his letter by wishing the Philippians "grace" – and now he closes with the same.^{xiii}

Verse 23. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Who are you? You're a saint – a separated one unto God by His own choosing. To whom do you belong? To the family of God – and to each other as brothers and sisters. And what do you have? Grace . . . the unmerited, undeserved favor and unfailing, unending love of God.

I came across this news release – just a byline in the newspaper, but it said it all. Lillie Baltrip is a

good bus driver. In fact, according to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, in an article that ran several years ago, she drove a school bus for the Houston school district. And she was going to receive their annual award for safe-driving.

Her colleagues knew she was an outstanding bus driver. In fact, many of them piled on board for the trip to the awards ceremony for safe drivers so they could cheer her on. On the way to the awards ceremony, Lillie turned a corner too sharply and flipped the bus on its side, sending not only herself but 16 others to the hospital for minor emergency treatment.

She had gone all year accident free. So, did she still get her award? Of course not! Award committees don't operate on the basis of grace.^{xiv} Let me put it this way, by way of contrast:

- Justice is receiving what you deserve.
- Mercy is *not* receiving what you deserve.
- Grace is receiving what you do *not* deserve.

And how did you receive this undeserved grace? Paul writes here in **verse 23** – it belongs to – and it is dispensed through ***the Lord Jesus Christ***.

Listen, everything in this letter ties back to Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul mentions the Lord 40 times in this little letter – and every responsibility of the believer; every benefit given to the believer; every ambition and desire in the believer – all of it is summed up in what Christ does or who Christ is or what Christ gives or what Christ was going to do in the future.

- Paul opened this letter by writing that he was a slave of Christ (**1:1**)
- His imprisonment was for the gospel advancement to glorify Christ (**1:13**)
- For Paul, living was all about Christ (**1:21**) and dying was nothing more than a reunion with Christ (**1:23**)
- Paul exhorted the Philippian believers to adopt the attitude of Christ (**2:5**)
- To find their greatest glory in Christ (**3:3**)
- To eagerly anticipate the coming of Christ (**3:20**)
- To anchor their contentment in Christ (**4:13**)
- To find their identity in Christ (**4:21**) and all the grace they would need for every aspect of life (**4:23**)

As Paul writes this letter, his quill has been dipped in the ink of grace. This letter has been saturated with the grace of Christ – and that alone is enough to encourage the *spirit* of every believer.

I had heard this from my professors at Dallas when I studied there years ago; but the incident was included in a book by the Chancellor of Dallas seminary, Chuck Swindoll.

His book is entitled, *The Grace Awakening*. In it he writes, I never knew Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of the seminary I attended. He had died a few years before I began my studies in 1959. Some of my professors knew him well and without exception they remembered him as a man of great grace. He was an articulate defender of the doctrine of grace.

One of my mentors tells of the time when this dear man of God had concluded his final lecture on grace, one hot afternoon in Dallas. It was springtime in 1952. This aging man, who taught that particular semester from a wheelchair, ended his final comments. No one in the class moved as the session ended. It was as though the young theologians were basking in what they had heard, awestruck with their professor's insights and enthusiasm about God's matchless grace. Then, this gray-haired gentleman rolled his chair to the door, and as he flipped the light switch off, the class spontaneously broke into thunderous applause.

As the beloved theologian wiped away tears, with his head bowed, he lifted one hand, gesturing them to stop. As a hush fell over that class, he spoke softly – and unforgettably – “Gentlemen, for over half my

life I have been studying this truth . . . and I am just beginning to discover what the grace of God is all about.” Twelve weeks later, this champion of grace was ushered into the Lord's presence at the age of 81.^{xv}

He was only beginning to discover the treasure of grace.

Who are you? You're a saint – separated unto God by His undeserving grace. You're a saint. To Whom do you belong? You belong to the family of God – and you happen to have a lot of brothers and sisters too – bound together in unity by our union with Jesus Christ.

And you also happen to be living, right now, under a lavish downpour of grace . . . enough for you to meet every need . . . enough for you to face every day . . . until that day when we see Christ, face to face.

And then . . . and then, the extravagance of His grace will begin to be unveiled in spectacular dimensions that we cannot imagine – and He will never cease to amaze us . . . and His grace will forever define us.

We are who we are and where we are forever . . . forever . . . because of His grace! In the meantime, don't forget who you are . . . and to Whom you belong.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/22/2016 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Becky Schlikerman, *Living a Life Unknown*, Chicago Tribune (2-21-12)

ⁱⁱ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 329

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 310

^{iv} MacArthur, p. 310

v Adapted from MacArthur, p. 311

vi Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 182

vii Gordon, p. 182

viii Dennis E. Johnson, *Philippians* (P & R Publishing, 2013), p. 314

ix William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Westminster, 1975), p. 87

x MacArthur, p. 317

xi Barclay, p. 87

xii Hansen, p. 330

xiii MacArthur, p. 318

xiv Craig Brian Larson & Leadership Journal, *750 Engaging Illustrations* (Baker Books, 1993), p. 215

xv Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 57