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Philippians 1:1-2

Discipleship 101: The Servant Disciple

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What is a disciple? That's not a word we hear very often. When you think of a disciple, you may think of a religious person who adheres to the teachings of Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Plato, or some other religious teacher or philosopher. **Disciple** means "**learner**" or "**student**," but the idea of being a disciple seems to be less and less popular, at least among my generation, the **millennials**.

According to a Pew Research Center study, more than one-third of Millennials are not affiliated with a religion, which is double the amount of Baby Boomers who identify as unaffiliated. Additionally, another Pew study ... indicated that about one-quarter of American Millennials say they attend religious services on a weekly basis, and about half say they believe in God with absolute certainty, compared with seven-in-ten Americans in the Silent and Baby Boomer generations.¹

So in other words, millennials are less religious, and less interested in God (or being a disciple of Jesus) than ever before. Why is this? Two **Harvard Divinity School students** published a study entitled *How We Gather* that says instead of finding community and personal transformation at church, we find it in gatherings like Alcoholics Anonymous, community running clubs, yoga, and even CrossFit. Instead of going to church to hear a sermon, we go to TED talks or listen to a Podcasts to challenge ourselves intellectually and spiritually. We find our purpose in organizations like Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and Race for America.

Now I agree that my generation is looking for spiritual fulfillment elsewhere, and finding it, but I still think there's **something missing** that those things can't replicate. In this sermon series, **Discipleship 101**, I'm going to explain what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and why he is worth following in a world of options. Let's begin with a story of one of the first disciples, a man named **Saul**.

Saul, the unlikely disciple.

Saul is a character from the New Testament. But he doesn't enter the story until after Jesus' ministry on earth comes to an end. Jesus has died, risen again, and ascended into heaven, and now a new community is taking shape called the **church**. The church is made up of people who love and trust Jesus so much they are willing to die for him. In fact, we're introduced to Saul at the death of the very first Christian martyr, **Stephen**. When the religious leaders stone Stephen to death it says they "**laid their coats** at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58b). Saul was a Pharisee, one of the religious elite of the day, who hated Christians.

Saul hated Christianity so much he went house by house through Jerusalem and drags away men and women who believe in Jesus and throws them in prison (Acts 8:3). He wants to go even further than this.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:1-2

The first believers were not called Christians, but "the Way"—and Saul wants to kill the Way. But then...

¹ *CrossFit as Church? Examining How We Gather.* <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2015/11/04/crossfit-church-examining-how-we-gather#> Published November 4, 2015. Accessed September 7, 2017.

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” **Acts 9:3-4**

Imagine yourself walking from Jerusalem to Damascus, which is about 150 miles. It will take you 4-6 days, but you’re on a mission, so you’re Olympic speed-walking. It’s **dusty** and hot and you feel the **sweat** on your forehead, but as you come around a rocky outcrop **lightning** flashes all around you, and you fall on your hands and knees in the dirt trembling. You bite your lip so hard you taste **blood**, but what **scares you** the most is not the blinding light, but the voice, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Only **God speaks that way**. So what do you do? You ask for clarification...

“Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. **Acts 9:5**

It’s at this moment that Saul’s **whole life changes**. He realizes that up till this point, he’s had everything wrong. He thought he had life figured out. He was a Pharisee, well educated, probably had some money, his career was taking off (he’s head of the **inquisition**), and he certainly has respect from his community and friends. But in this moment, he realizes he’s got something very important wrong.

Maybe you’re here today and you’re the **most unlikely disciple** of them all. You’ve lived far away from God your whole life. In fact, it’s a **miracle** you’re even at church today. I hope that today, like Paul, you’ll consider the idea that maybe you’ve **missed something** worth re-examining. I believe if you honestly seek God through prayer, the Bible, and church community, asking “Who are you, Lord?” he will answer, “Jesus.”

Several years ago I read [The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner’s Semester at America’s Holiest University](#) by Kevin Roose. It’s the story of a **Brown University** student who spends a semester at **Liberty University**. Brown is an Ivy League school located in Providence Rhode Island made up of an “ultra-liberal student body” (that’s the way the book describes it); while Liberty is a Conservative Christian Baptist school in Lynchburg, Virginia. What I respect about Kevin is that when he went to Liberty, he tries to understand Christianity. He took Old Testament, New Testament, and even started praying. At the end of the book, he doesn’t commit his life to Jesus, but he gives it a pretty good effort. If you’re not a follower of Jesus yet, I hope you’ll give it your best effort. I hope you’ll consider, like Saul, that you may have missed something. *When Saul realizes his mistake, it changes everything.*

Saul becomes Paul, a disciple of Jesus.

Saul not only stops persecuting Christians, he becomes an **outspoke witness** for Jesus. Paul isn’t one of the original twelve disciples, but he does become an **Apostle**, which are *people in the New Testament Jesus has given special authority to lead and teach the church*. He dedicates his life to telling others, specifically non-Jewish people (the Gentiles), about Jesus. In the process, he loses everything, career, community standing, and even his health as he’s beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked (2 Cor 11:25). He even begins to be called by the **non-Jewish translation** of his name, **Paul**, instead of Saul.

God sends Paul to **ancient Macedonia** (modern-day Greece) to the city of Philippi. Philippi is a Roman city famous for trade (the Egnatian Way) and for its patriotism and nationalism. Roman soldiers retire here, so there was a great loyalty to the emperor. So much so that when Paul visits there for the first time in Acts 16, there’s not enough believing Jewish men to form a Jewish synagogue (need at least 10). So he goes to a river on the Sabbath outside of town where he finds women praying. He begins to teach them about Jesus and **Lydia**, a businesswoman, becomes the first recorded believer there.

Not long after that, Paul casts a demon out of possessed girl, which throws the city into an uproar. Paul is beaten and thrown into prison. But God uses this to actually save their **jailer**. God sends an earthquake, but

instead of running for it, they stay and share the good news of Jesus with him (who otherwise would have been executed for letting them escape). Through this the jailer comes to the Lord.

Now, as Paul is writing them this letter, he has known and loved the people of Philippi for **ten years**. He first met them in **50 AD**, and it's now **60-62 AD**. So in verse one, when they read, "Paul", they know exactly who he is. He is the **founder** of their church who was publicly beaten and thrown in prison so that they could know Jesus. The church at Philippi loves Paul and Paul loves them. *As he writes them this letter, although he never uses the word "disciple" he is modeling and explaining what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.*

A disciple is a willing-servant of Jesus.

What is the first thing Paul says about himself in his letter to the Philippians? He says they are "servants of Christ Jesus..." This word for "**servant**" actually means "**slave**." In ancient Israel, slaves belonged to their masters but this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.² If you had an important master, you carried some of that status. **Moses**, Joshua, and the prophets were all called *servants of God* (2 Kings 18:12; Josh 24:29, Dan 9:6).

The type of servant, or slave, Paul is describing is really a **bond-servant**. People could sell themselves into servitude for a maximum of **six-years** to pay off a debt. A bond-servant is a servant who had fulfilled the terms of his service, but instead of choosing to go free at the end, decides to stay with the family **for life**. Exodus 21 says that if someone wants to become a **bond-servant**, his master takes him to the door or doorpost of his house, and pierces his ear with an **awl**. An awl is a tool meant for piercing holes in leather. Then Exodus says, "Then he will be his servant for life." (Exod 21:6).

Now I have a **question** for you. What **pierced** Paul's heart? What made him become a **lifetime servant** of Jesus? Why would he give up everything to become a wandering preacher? It's the same thing that needs to **pierce** your heart if you're going to become a disciple of Jesus. It's not just the **blinding light** that brought Paul to Christ (if you're waiting for one, it won't happen); it's who Christ is.

[Jesus], he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! **Philippians 2:7-8**

Paul gave up everything to be a **servant disciple** because he met the **servant savior**. Christianity is not about throwing your life away, it's about giving your life to someone who gave his life away for you. Jesus willing served us by taking the penalty for our sins upon himself, suffering, and dying on a cross (Isa 53:11). Jesus is our **bond-servant**, he's our servant. That's why Paul is willing to sacrifice so much.

I enjoyed hearing **Terry's faith story** today. Did you notice how he grew in his desire to **serve** God? When he first came to know the Lord, he was **six years old**, and wasn't exactly ready to go to work for Jesus. But God took him and built him into a willing servant. Now, I actually have you beat Terry, because I was **four years old** when I became a Christian. I know it's not a contest, but if it were, I would win.

One day I decided I **wanted to become a Christian** (probably because my brothers were), so I walked into our living room and told my mom. We knelt down beside our old blue couch and she lead me in a prayer in

² Lawson, Steven. *Philippians For You: Shine with joy as you live by faith* (God's Word For You Book 18) (p. 17). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

which I told Jesus I would “**trust**” and “**serve**” Him forever. As I prayed it occurred to me I had just signed up to “serve” God for a very very long time, which sounded a lot like **slavery** to me. Mom said to go tell my brothers I had become a Christian, I ran into the next room and told my oldest brother I did not want to be a Christian anymore. I think because I’d read a children’s storybook Bible, I assumed every slave must be like the bald Egyptians in the pictures, and I did not want to be bald. So I did not want to be a Christian anymore. Simple **four-year old logic**. My oldest brother told me Christians are not slaves, so I kept the faith. But was my brother right? I actually don’t think so. Christians are willing slaves to the most humble master who ever lived, who laid his life down for us. *A disciple is a willing-servant of Jesus.*

If you’re interested in becoming a disciple of Christ, ask yourself if you’re willing to become his servant. Ask yourself, “Am I willing to no longer belong to myself, but to a master who gave himself up for me?” It’s not just Paul, or Terry, or myself who become servants. It’s all believers.

All saints are servant disciples.

Remember how Paul was **persecuting** the church before he became a disciple? The second half of verse one **defines the church** for us. The NIV says, “To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus...” Another translation says, “To all the **saints** in Christ Jesus...” (ESV). Some of you may come from a **Catholic background**. When I say “saints” I don’t mean a limited number of people who the **Pope** has **canonized**. The “saints” or “holy people” is anyone who belongs to Jesus. A saint is anyone whose master is Christ. A saint is anyone who says, “I am not my own because I belong to Jesus.”

Notice Paul also signals out “overseers and deacons”; or what we today call **Elders** and **Deacons**. If you’re an Elder, would you please **stand**? Our Elders are responsible with leading and shepherding the church (currently Terry Iles, Andy Bradshaw, John Ralls, and myself... Thanks, you can **sit**.). We lead the church by not just setting vision, and managing the organization, but by spending time praying and studying God’s word. Our **philosophy of ministry** says we’re supposed to follow Jesus’ model of **servant leadership**. I think Paul signals out the Elders and Deacons because servant discipleship has to start with our leadership.

We don’t have **Deacons** yet. We’re actually in the process of assessing and approving them. But Deacons are tasked with taking care of the material and logistical needs of the church, especially caring for people. The Greek word for Deacon actually **means “servant.”**

In the book Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons by **Thabiti Anyabwile** says finding a good Deacon is like finding a good waiter or waitress. In a restaurant, we love a great server, and we can’t stand a bad server. When I was in **Virginia** in this summer, Monica, my friend Michael and his wife went to a restaurant known for their **creative burgers**. Michael ordered a burger topped with a **fried, breaded, tomato**; but when they brought it out, there was no tomato. There was a slice of paper-thin breading, but nothing else. He waited and waited for the waiter to come, but he never did. Finally the bus boy came by and Michael tried to explain to him, “Where’s my tomato?” The bus boy ran into the kitchen and brought out a single, sliced, non-breaded tomato. At which time Michael sent the bus boy to get his manager. The manager brought the correctly breaded tomato, and her apologies. All was well with the world, until, two minutes later the waiter dropped in to check on us, then the cook another two minutes later, then the bus boy, followed by the manager after that, and then back through the lineup again. Suddenly they had transformed from the **least-attentive** wait-staff to an **overly attentive** wait staff. We don’t want servant disciples like that!

At the preaching breakfast each **Wednesday morning**, we have a great waitress named **Heidi**. She knows all of us by name, remembers what we order, if we like coffee or not, and always greets us with a friendly smile. She has shown us pictures of her dog and told us about her family, and asks how we are doing. I love going to **Paul’s Diner** because I love seeing Heidi. That kind of server is the kind of Deacon you want in a church.

But in reality, we want everyone in church to be like that, don't we? *We're all called to love and serve each other, some as Elders, some as Deacons, but all as saints.*

What does a **church full of servant-disciples** look like?

1. **We recognize our true master is Jesus.** We each swear our allegiance to him.
2. **We willingly sacrifice for each other.** Paul sacrificed his body and time for the Philippians and they sacrificed their money for him, even sending one of their own to encourage him. (Phil 2:25-30; 2 Cor 8:1-5). Are you willing to sacrifice your time, energy, and money for each other?
3. **We form friendships and love each other.** Paul calls the Philippians "dear friends" (2:12). Are you friends sitting with you? That's part of being a servant. If you're **new**, we want to be your friend.

All saints are servant disciples. But it's not because we're great people. It's only possible by God's grace.

We're servant disciples by God's grace.

Paul opens and closes his letter to the Philippians with the same word, "**Grace**" (4:23). At the end of the day, the only way you and I can be servant disciples is if God gives us the grace to do so. God has to help us through the **Holy Spirit**. This is one of the things that **separates** Christianity from all the other options we can choose to be a part of. At the end of the day, we realize we can't make it. We're not strong enough to truly follow Jesus, to sacrifice, to love, to be servant disciples. Instead, we find our strength in Jesus.

Jesus is the **perfect servant**. He knows what it is like to deserve it all. He lived in heaven before he came to earth, but he came anyways, humbling himself to save us. As he walked through this life, he healed the lame and the lepers, and opened the eyes of the blind so they could see. Then he died and rose again to give us the gift of his perfect life. So if you are **repenting** of your sins and putting your **faith** in Jesus, you get credit for that life. Now when God looks on you, he doesn't see your junk, he sees Jesus' **perfect service record**.

Paul opens with "grace **and peace**." We can have **peace** because we have grace. When I realize that in Jesus, I've made it, my heart calms. I don't need to pursue a life of success or prestige; because those things have come to me in the person of Christ Jesus. *I can experience true peace, because I've known true grace.*

So let me ask you, "**What is holding you back** from becoming a disciple of Jesus?" Do you feel that if you accept him as your master, you'll lose your freedom? **Live free, or die!** Right? *But what if you have to die to live free?* Will you go through this life like Saul? Master of his own destiny, but really master of nothing? Or like Paul, mastered by Christ, and truly free?

Come follow the Servant Savior.

This is my big idea. Jesus is calling you to come, to follow him, to become his servant disciple. But he's not asking you to do anything he hasn't already done for you. *Come follow the Servant Savior.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).