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Series: What's So Great About the Gospel?
Philippians 2:5-11

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“God's Greatest Decision”

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Alright. We're coming in this message to some of the most sublime words about our God ever written. But it is going to take a while to set the context. We're going to go through a lot of historical material today. I think it will be worth going through because we're getting to a remarkable story. But I'm going to ask you to be patient while we're marching through there.

We have no Shepherd's Village this weekend...a lot of families with children here. We do have another room set up over there, and there are tables. You can watch the message on the screen. You can get, I think, like coffee and doughnuts and stuff like that. So if you're here with kids... You know how sometimes there are sermons where they're easy to listen to...lots of really interesting stories and humor...and it's exciting? This is not one of those sermons. We're going to be walking through a lot of stuff to just kind of wade through.

So if you're here with kids, and it just feels kind of laborious, feel free at any point...just head over that direction; you can get it all there in kind of a family-friendly environment. If you're here with an adult but their attention span is kind of short and they're getting a little antsy, you can take them over there if you want to. But I just wanted to give you kind of fair warning.

Start here. Look down at your hands and arms for a second. Is anybody wearing anything with gold in it today? Do you have a ring or a watch or a bracelet or a necklace, tooth fillings...anything with any gold? Now Paul has some fascinating advice he gives to Timothy about the church. Look at the screens. "I want women to dress modestly, not adorning themselves with elaborate hairstyles or gold."

So if you're a woman here today, I'd like to ask you to pass whatever gold you have to the center aisle where the ushers can collect it so we can be a biblically-functioning church...kind of on board with what Paul is writing. Actually, obviously he is addressing a cultural issue in that church.

But here is why I mentioned gold. About 2,500 years ago, they discovered gold in a coastal area of Macedonia. The king, Philip of Macedon, considered being with king something to be used for his advantage, for his wealth. So he commandeered the gold for himself. He had slaves mine it in brutal conditions. It would, you know, be lethal for them. But he got the gold. He wanted to safeguard this gold of these mines, so he kind of rebuilt a little town, put a garrison nearby, and he named the city Philippi. Anybody want to guess who he named it after? Himself! Kings do that kind of thing.

He had money and power; it didn't get him love. He got assassinated, so his kingdom got passed on to his son. You might have heard of this guy...Alexander the Great. All that gold went to pay for Alexander's armies who conquered the world...the world of Alexander the Great. But death is kind of funny. He died when he was 32 years old. The day he died, his kingdom began to disintegrate.

We don't hear about Philippi in history for a couple of centuries. Then it comes up again. The man who would become known as Caesar Augustus was having a struggle for control over Rome with the armies of Cassius and Brutus. They're the guys who assassinated Julius Caesar. He defeated them at the Battle of Philippi so decisively that they both killed themselves after the battle. Caesar Augustus went on to become Emperor of Rome.

Historians say that battle...the Battle of Philippi...was kind of the dividing mark between the Roman Republic that had certain ideas of democracy and the Roman Empire where one man, Caesar, would rule the world. The rise of Caesar Augustus at the Battle of Philippi...right at that spot...was also the beginning of emperor worship.

There is an inscription from 9 B.C. This is before Jesus was born, but you look at this language. This is from a Roman. We're talking about Caesar Augustus. "Augustus is a savior for us (they used that language for the Caesar...savior) and those who come after us...the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world"...now notice this..."of the glad tidings."

In the Greek, that was the *euangelion*. It was a technical expression...the gospel...the good news. It was used by the Romans before it was used by the church. The gospel was the good news that Caesar reigns. Come to all men through Caesar. The way the Romans expressed the gospel...the good news...was *Kyrios Kaiser*. *Kyrios* is the word for *lord*. "Caesar is lord." You had to say that.

By the way, a hundred years after Paul, an elderly follower of Jesus named Polycarp was arrested for refusing to say those words. This really happened. The magistrate said to him, "Just swear the oath...*Kyrios Kaiser*...and I'll release you." This old man, Polycarp, said, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He has been faithful to me. How can I betray Him?" They burned him at the stake. True story.

Well Philippi, this town, was the main place where Caesar Augustus became *Kyrios*...lord. Because it was a strategic city...had the gold...main gateway to get from Rome over to Asia or the Middle East...he made it a Roman colony. Part of its Latin name was *Colonia Augusta*. Guess who he named it after? Kings do that kind of thing. It ought to be a Roman colony was a big deal. This is going to help us understand Philippians. By the way, y'all still with me? Are you all still with me? Are you *excited* about this? Are you on the edge of your seats? Alright. It's going to pay off...trust me!

Philippi is in another country; it's in Macedonia...what we now think of as Greece. But it's a Roman colony. In other words, the elite people in Philippi now are Roman citizens. That means they had legal rights and privileges. They had a responsibility to reproduce the Roman way of life in Macedonia, and Roman life was arranged vertically. It was fascinating. There is a book on... I just found it this week. It's called *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi*. Doesn't that sound like a fascinating title? You can borrow it after the service if you'd like. Nobody has asked me so far all weekend.

The idea is that in Rome, they were preoccupied with the pursuit of status and recognition and power...all under the single word of *honor*. Everybody is after honor. There is this social hierarchy, and everybody in Rome knows where they are on the ladder. At the very top was the *senate*. Now initially this was made up of 600 men, and they called the shots. They were the guys everybody else bowed down to.

Right underneath them was the next category, and they were called the *equestrians*. Anybody want to guess what animal was associated with them? Initially those were guys who had enough money they could provide a horse for battle. Isn't it strange people would attach status to a mode of transportation? What a

goofy world. Can you believe there were once people who were that dim-bulbed? But they did! So this is another group.

Then underneath them were folks who were called the *decurans*. In every Roman city or colony, there would be at least some of these guys. These were the elite, but they were a tiny percentage. Maybe two percent of all of Roman people were these categories.

Then the next category down was Roman citizens. To be a citizen meant you had certain rights. You could vote. You could have property. You were owed due process of law. We'll come back to that. That's critical to this story.

Underneath them were *freedmen*. These people had liberty, but they didn't have the rights of a citizen.

Then there was one more category at the bottom of the ladder. Anybody want to guess who that was? That's exactly right. Those were slaves. Nobody wanted to be a slave.

Now if you were real gifted and you served in an honored household, your conditions might be okay. If you worked in the mines, you'd probably die really young. But slaves had no rights. Masters could dispose of them whenever they wanted to. Slaves owed obedience. We'll come back to this. They owed obedience, and nobody up here...no elite person in all the writings of theirs...none of them ever talked about their behavior in the category of obedience. Even if you were here, you would never call yourself a slave to this guy. You were maybe like a son to a father or something. Never used categories in language of obedience. That was for the guys on the bottom. Plato said, "How can a man be happy if he is a slave to anybody at all?"

So society was arranged vertically, and life was all about the pursuit of glory and honor. They were obsessed with this. Even within the top categories, there were offices and gifts that could be given out. So if you're in the senate, initially there were five different offices. They all had titles attached to them. You'd want to start here and curry favor...use your money or whatever...to work your way up this ladder. They had a name for this system. It was called the *cursus honorum*...the race for honors.

They were all into this. So even if you were in another category...you know, if you were down here...you were not going to make it up here. But you'd have your own categories down here. One historian says this, "Aristocratic authors...even if they grant slaves no honor in aristocratic eyes...realize slaves grant each other slavish honors with their slavish eyes." When Philippi got excavated, archeologists found this whole deal was so big in Philippi in particular that when people died, on their tombstones they would put whatever their titles were.

One father buried his son. Before he mentioned his son's name, he lists all the titles he has achieved. This is a big deal, and this is what they were doing in Philippi. This is where Paul went. Remember this is the first place in Europe the gospel goes. Everybody knew where they were on the ladder, and the goal was you go up the ladder. That is to be honored. Okay? It's quite concrete. That is to be honored...to be exalted. Once you got up here, you didn't want it cheapened by having people lower than you getting up there. Okay? It's a competitive sport.

The Roman historian Suetonius said, "Mark Antony taunted Caesar Augustus by saying that his great-grandfather was a rope maker and a freedman." Isn't that a great insult? Doesn't sound so bad to us, but what he is saying to Caesar is, "You belong down here because four generations ago, this is where your

people were from. Who defines you is where your people are from. You do not belong up here." Caesar Augustus defeated Mark Antony so brutally in battle that Mark Antony committed suicide.

Now the opposite of being exalted was being humbled. This meant you lose a title...you lose an office. Or maybe a senator...if you lost enough wealth...he would have to stop being the senator. That is to be humbled, and it happened. You know, they vied for each other climbing up. So it happened to people. But it was to be avoided at all costs. It was to be avoided at all costs. And...we'll come back to this...the idea of somebody humbling themselves...somebody deliberately coming down the ladder...was unthinkable. Simply did not exist. There was no language for it. Because see, in this world, humility is not a virtue; it's a tragedy. The goal of Roman life is to climb the ladder. The custom...the ways...of Roman life citizens were to engage in if they were in a colony like Philippi were all to reinforce the ladder.

If there was a feast, and I was the host, everybody would be seated around me in order of their status...not based on who I like or who it would be interesting to talk with. The highest person on the ladder would be seated on my right. The next highest would be seated on my left. By the way, anybody here remember a conversation James and John came to Jesus one time and said, "When You come to Your kingdom, would You grant us this one favor that one of us might be seated on Your right and one seated on Your left." They don't just want to be close to Jesus; see, they want to make sure they're up here. That's why the rest of the disciples got so mad at them.

Seating at public events like coming to a church... You know, at that time, where you sat was not based on how much you spent for a ticket...was not based on first-come, first-serve. In all public gathering places, seating sections were arranged according to status. When they've excavated auditoriums and so, there is a place where the senators sat...a place where the equestrians sat. If you're in this category down here and you tried to sit up there, you were in very, very serious trouble. It was illegal.

When I went to college, we had compulsory chapel. So you had to sit in assigned seats, and they always had to come up with different ways to assign seating. One quarter...this is a true story...at my college they assigned seating in chapel based on people's SAT scores. Do you think we were all happy about that? No...especially those of us in the balcony. That was a *very* bad move. They did it randomly, so you couldn't actually tell what somebody's score was by the way they were. But simply the knowledge that's how they did it created a revolt, and they had to reshuffle the deck and figure out another way of doing it.

But in Rome, you sat in your section. Everything was about reinforcing this. Your clothes... You believe clothes were used to declare status back in that day? Anybody here have a toga? Now a toga was a garment that was only to be worn by people who were citizens or higher. It wasn't convenient. You had to wrap it around. It was very cumbersome. Some slaves had to be trained in dressing people in togas. Your left arm would be bound. Only your right arm was free. It was drafty in the winter and hot in the summer. But see, it was a big deal because if you're in these categories, you can't wear a toga. As you go up the ladder, you would be able to wear certain threads with certain colors in it because your clothes...what you wear...is who you are. Where you sit is who you are. How you eat is who you are.

The legal process was designed not primarily around guilt or innocence. There would be laws and punishments that could fall on people here that could not fall on people here. The whole way of life...one author puts it like this, "Rome was the most status-conscious society in the ancient Mediterranean world, and no city is more obsessed with status than Philippi." Everything is about getting up here. If you're down here, you're nobody. In fact, this is fascinating. I was reading this this week. One of the aristocratic

authors said about people in this category that they were...here is the Latin phrase for it...a *personas mediocribus*. Doesn't that sound depressing? A nobody.

Ahhh...the Bible gets real interesting. Acts 16...Paul goes to Philippi. He starts preaching the gospel...the good news of Jesus. The good news is Jesus is Lord. Now those are real dangerous words because if Jesus is Lord, who isn't Lord? Caesar isn't Lord. You go around saying somebody else is Lord, somebody else has a claim on your ultimate obedience. Paul gets in trouble. Now it's just me...I never knew this till this week. Something staggering is going to happen. You follow this story.

He gets in trouble. They brought Paul and Silas before the magistrates...that would be people probably about this level here...and said, **"These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans..."** This is a Roman colony even though it's in Macedon. "We Romans are the acceptive practice. They're violating this way of life."

So Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten with rods, severely flogged, thrown into prison, placed in the innermost cell, and put in stocks. You read the language in Acts 16. It is, you know, deliberately, extremely brutal. They are brutalized and humiliated. Then they're miraculously delivered by God, and the jailor, a Roman soldier, becomes a follower of Jesus. Paul and Silas then after this are brought before top city officials who just want to get rid of them. Paul says, "No, you can't get rid of us." **"They beat us publically without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison."**

Obvious question...*Why in the world does Paul wait to say now that they've been beaten and locked up and put in stocks and nearly killed?* Why does he wait to say he is a Roman citizen until now? Why in the world didn't he say it before he got jailed and beaten? He would have been spared all that stuff. What was he thinking? Oh man. See Paul is starting a little colony...a little outpost...of Jesus' followers in honor worshiping Philippi.

When the church would get started, Paul knew there might be a couple of elite people in it, but not mostly. Mostly it will be these guys down here. But they're supposed to be a family now. Everything inside them...all their wiring, customs, training, thinking, language, habits...have been separate categories. You keep people down. You try to climb up. Now he is going to try to make a family...a community...out of all these different people so they become brothers and sisters and eat together and serve together and love together. How in the world would you do that?

Paul knew something else. Paul knew these low-status people, when they would become Christians...these unloved people...these nobodies...they would suffer for their faith, and they had no power. Paul knew he could have used his status as a citizen to avoid suffering, to avoid pain, to avoid hardship, to make his life easier. He could have, but they would not have that option. They would suffer for Jesus. How do you let them know they're loved and treasured? How do you show these guys what humble love looks like?

So Paul does something nobody else would have done. Paul humbles himself. He went from here down to here. This really happened. This is part of what changed the world. He refused to consider citizenship in Rome something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself like a non-citizen...like a nobody...like a *personas mediocribus*. He chose suffering and humiliation and pain and the risk of dying for the sake of people he loved.

When he didn't have to do it at all, he deliberately lowered himself. He used what he had to be poured out for the sake of other people so a new community...a little outpost of heaven...might get formed in that status-obsessed, wealth-seeking, ladder-climbing, honor-worshiping city of Philippi. What kind of man was this? What kind of life did he live? Why would he do such a thing? Who is he following?

What would that look like in our Philippi? What would that look like for you? Now we're ready to read what Paul wrote to that little community...what he writes to me and to you. ***"In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: who, being in very nature God..."*** Now when you read that line, see that's the top of the cosmic ladder. You don't get higher than that. ***"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage (to allow Him to escape suffering and pain); rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."*** Now Jesus is doing what nobody in Rome would ever do. He is coming down the ladder, and He isn't low enough yet.

"And being found in appearance as a human being..." All this language, see, is so loaded. The appearance thing...toga...your dress...proclaims who you are. ***"And being found in appearance as a human being, He humbled Himself."*** Nobody humbled themselves. Humility was a tragedy. ***"By becoming obedient..."*** Okay? Now He is a slave. ***"By becoming obedient to death."*** But even that's not low enough. ***"Even death on a cross!"*** Now see a dying slave...that's bad enough. A crucified slave...that's as low as you can go. No, that's the floor. That's the bottom.

In Rome, crucifixion was not even used for people who were citizens and above. It was deliberately chosen not just as a means of torture and execution and death, but also of humiliation, see. It was only used for people who were at the absolute bottom. That's where Jesus goes. Starts out here; ends up lower than the lowliest human being...a dishonored slave. Then comes the great reversal.

Now this is real, real deep about the kingdom of God. ***"Therefore (because Jesus did this) God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee"*** is going to bow one day, and every tongue is going to confess Jesus Christ is Lord. It isn't Caesar. It is not a CEO. It is not a president. It is not a rock star or a movie star or a sports star. ***"Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."***

All through this letter, Paul is saying, "Now you be like Him. You give up on this *cursus honorum*...on this honor race...on spending your lives pursuing titles and glory and exalting yourself. Just give it up." All through the letter. Notice something unique about how Paul starts this letter. His letters to the other churches have kind of a standard opening. Just look at this real quickly. ***"Paul, an Apostle sent by Jesus Christ..."*** he writes to the church at Galatia. To the church at Ephesus, ***"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."*** To the church at Colossae, ***"Paul, an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."*** That's just accurate. That's who he is. He wants them to know.

To the church at the Roman colony of Philippi, ***"Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus."*** Do you notice anything different? He puts Timothy right up there with him, and he lets go of the titles, see. church isn't going to be a place...one more place...where people climb ladders. "I'm a slave. I'm a slave of a dishonored slave."

So now you ***"do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."*** These are not empty words. These are not abstract attitudes. These are real life choices people make with their time and

their behavior and their money. They're going to cost them, you know, to climb up the ladder. They're not going to be into accumulating status symbols anymore with what they wear or their means of transportation.

Look at the language Paul uses when he writes this church. He loves this church. You know, he calls them his joy and his crown. But they have this problem with climbing and status. *"Whatever happens, as citizens of heaven* (look at the language...not citizens of Rome) *live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."* Jesus is Lord. He says, "Church...my joy and my crown...our citizenship is in heaven." It's only in this letter to the Philippians he uses this kind of language. "Our citizenship is not in some city on this earth; it's in heaven. We eagerly await a Savior from there." It's not Caesar...the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control.

Paul is using a language they all get, but it's loaded. "Some of you are citizens of Rome, and you wear the toga, and you're tempted to be climbers. Don't do it. Some of you are slaves, and you're tempted to think you're nobodies. Don't do it. Now we're all in the same family. We are citizens of this one kingdom, and it is real. This is how it works. Glory and honor come when you climb down. When you humble yourself, you get lifted up. When you empty yourself, you get filled up. When you lower yourself, you get exalted. When you forget yourself, you get remembered."

Show you a little picture. We had a staff barbecue this week. After almost a decade, Bill Parker is retiring from our staff. Some of you know Bill. Look at Bill Parker. Does that look like a happy guy? If you know Bill...you know, like one person after another got up and just talked about his servanthood. There is no task too humble for him to do. No person too obscure for Bill to notice. Whether he is managing people or just setting up chairs, Bill is just incapable of doing much of anything out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

If somebody were to ask me, "How do you know this is Jesus' church?" one of the first people I'd point to is Bill Parker. If somebody asked you, "Who is the minister at MPPC?" Best answer you can give is "Bill Parker."

What if we had thousands of Bill Parkers? *"Therefore let this mind be in you."* I bet you have something. I bet you have some intelligence or maybe some resources or maybe some people you know. Maybe some energy. I bet you're a citizen of some colony or another. I bet there is an office or a school or a neighborhood or an extended family where they're telling you, "Give your life to the race for honor." If you use what you have been given for your own advantage to help you climb...more gold...more status...you will get increasingly obsessive and dissatisfied and unhappy, and it will go badly with you.

If you find some people who are suffering, and you say, "God, if You'll help me, I'm going to give what I have for them," you will find it's your own life that gets exalted. Jesus will help you. We are followers of a dishonored slave. That's the way of Jesus. That's the way of the cross. That's what's so great about the gospel.

Heavenly Father, You know we live in a world that's a real different kind of reality and power and temptation than the kind of life Jesus lived. Thank You that You are such a God. Thank You for what Jesus has done. Help us to be like Him, God. We can't do it, but You can do it in us and through us. Help us to be like Him. Make a little colony...a little outpost...of Your kingdom right here in the Bay. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.