

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 2,

Podcast Audio Overview

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Think about how you start a typical work email today. Oh, it's usually something completely hollow. Right, it's like, hope this finds you well, or per my last email.

Yeah, just total filler. Exactly, we just skim right past it to get to the actual point of the message. But imagine if the very first sentence of a letter didn't just say hello, but actually dismantled the entire social hierarchy of the culture it was written in.

Which is exactly what we're looking at today. Yeah, today we are taking you on a deep dive into how a simple 2,000-year-old letter opening holds this like radical blueprint for how we define our own identity, how we exercise leadership, and even how we experience profound gratitude. It really is a blueprint.

We are unpacking a teaching session by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. It's titled Greetings and Gratitude in the Gospel, and it focuses on the first 11 verses of the Book of Philippians. And, you know, we are so conditioned to treat the opening of any correspondence like the terms and conditions on a software update.

Oh my gosh, yes, just blindly scrolling to the bottom. Right, you just hit accept and look for the actual content. But in the ancient world, and specifically in this text we're looking at, the author Paul is intentionally dropping these profound thematic hints right in the first few sentences.

He's setting the stage. Exactly. These are massive theological ideas that are going to echo and explode throughout the rest of his letter.

The opening isn't just filler. I mean, it is setting the terms of reality. Well, I know in Jewish history, calling yourself a servant of the Lord, as Moses or David did, that was actually a massive flex, right? It was this badge of honor saying you hold a critical role in God's plan.

So when Paul opens this letter by writing, Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, is he just leaning into that Jewish heritage? Well, the Old Testament pedigree is definitely there. I mean, to a Jewish listener, that phrase carries the weight of a prophet. Right.

But you have to remember who is opening this letter. Philippi is a Roman colony. So they aren't just hearing the Jewish history.

To a Greco-Roman ear, the Greek word Paul uses here, which is *doulos*, it didn't evoke King David. It meant one thing, which is slave. OK, let's unpack this, because if I'm writing a letter to a group of people I want to influence, I'm putting my best foot forward, right? Naturally.

And Paul introduces himself as an *apomel* in other letters, which is a title of massive authority. But here he says *doulos*. Yeah, he completely shifts it.

To me, this is like a famous, incredibly powerful CEO sending out a company-wide memo, and instead of listing their title as chief executive officer, they introduce themselves as the janitor. That's a great way to think about it. Why in the world would he intentionally lower his status like that right out of the gate? Well, the janitor analogy gets us halfway there.

But to understand the true shock value, we really have to remember that a modern janitor still has human rights, right? They have agency; they get a paycheck. True, yeah. The word *doulos* describes someone who possessed absolutely zero legal rights.

Wow. Zero. Zero.

You are totally subservient to a master. Your master sets your priorities, your agenda, your itinerary, I mean, your very sense of purpose. There's a total surrender of autonomy.

Exactly. By calling himself a *doulos*, Paul is establishing an absolute radical devotion to Jesus as his master. He is completely obliterating any personal claim to status or rights.

It's a complete leadership flip. Because, I mean, in the Greek and Roman world, and let's be honest, in our world today, too, leadership is almost always about using your position of power for your own benefit. Oh, 100%.

You only help others if it somehow elevates you, or at least, you know, maintains your leverage. And Paul introduces this subservient language to preview a totally different kind of power dynamic. He's actually anticipating chapter two of his letter.

Oh, where he talks about Christ humbling himself. Right, where he describes Christ himself taking on the form of a servant. So Paul is signaling to them from sentence one that true leadership in this community is going to look like downward mobility, not upward climbing.

Downward mobility, I love that. So he's a servant with no rights, but then he addresses the audience and he calls them saints. Yes.

He says, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi. Now, if you ask someone on the street today what a saint is, they're probably going to picture, like, a flawless, super spiritual person. Or a literal marble statue in a cathedral.

Exactly. But Paul doesn't mean a spiritual elite here, right? He means every single everyday Christian in that church. He does, yeah.

But we shouldn't strip the word of its weight just because it applies to everyone. The source material digs into the roots of this term, which literally translates to holy ones. It means those who are set apart for God's special purposes.

And the historical backdrop here is actually Exodus 19. Oh, at Mount Sinai. Right, where God brings the recently freed slaves of Israel to the mountain and calls them a holy nation.

It's positional. Just by being united to Christ, you are set apart. But it's not just a label, is it? Because Dr. Harmon points out there's a massive moral weight to it.

It's not just about a status; it's about active reflection. Yeah, to really grasp the mechanism of what it means to be holy. Dr. Harmon brings up this terrifying, awe-inspiring scene from Isaiah chapter 6. Oh, this is where the prophet Isaiah gets a vision of the actual throne room of God, right? Yes.

And we really have to strip away our, you know, sanitized Sunday school version of this. Right, it wasn't just a polite church service. Not at all.

Isaiah sees God on his throne, surrounded by these angelic beings whose voices are literally shaking the foundations of the building. The room is filling with smoke. Exactly.

The holiness of God is described as this blazing, fiery, brilliant purity. And Isaiah's immediate reaction isn't to pull out a journal and write down how beautiful it is. No, his reaction is sheer terror.

Pure terror. He instantly realizes his own utter corruption. He cries out that he is a man of unclean lips, just ruined and undone.

Because he realizes that unholy things cannot physiologically or spiritually exist in the presence of that kind of pure, consuming fire. Right. He needs a burning coal taken from the altar just to sear and cleanse his lips so he can survive the encounter.

That is so intense. It is. So when Paul calls these everyday blue-collar people and Philippi saints, he is saying two massive things.

Positionally, because of Christ, you have been cleansed with that burning coal so you can actually stand in that blazing throne room. But practically, your everyday life should now actively reflect that intense, pure fire to the dark world around you. Okay, that is a staggering amount of pressure for a greeting.

It really sets the bar high. It does. But he doesn't just stop at the general congregation.

After addressing all the saints, Paul specifically singles out the, quote, overseers and deacons. Overseers being the elders or shepherds, and deacons being those set apart to serve the tangible, physical needs of the church. Tracing all the way back to Acts chapter 6. Exactly.

But I have to push back a little here, or at least ask the cynical question. Go for it. We know from the historical context that this entire letter was prompted because the Philippians sent Paul a financial gift while he was locked up in prison.

Yes, they did. So is this basically Paul making sure he CC's the accounting and HR departments right at the top of the letter because they were the ones who approved his funding? You know, it's really easy to read it cynically, and honestly, the context validates exactly what you are sensing. Oh, really? Yes, scholars largely agree that Paul is specifically acknowledging these leaders because they were the ones who organized the logistics of that financial gift.

The one delivered by Epaphroditus. Exactly, but it's far more strategic than just a polite, politically savvy thank you to his major donors. What's his strategy then? By calling out the

specific leaders early on, he's intentionally laying the groundwork for some internal unity issues he has to address later in the letter.

Ah, so there's drama in Philippi. There is interpersonal conflict happening, so by naming the overseers and deacons up front, Paul is affirming their God-given leadership structure before he asks them to mediate the drama. He's basically saying, I recognize your authority, now use it to keep this community together.

That's exactly what he's doing. Okay, that makes sense. It's structural reinforcement.

And then he delivers the actual hello, verse 2: grace to you and peace. Right. Again, it sounds like standard religious filler, like something you'd see on a bumper sticker, but Dr. Harmon completely dismantled that assumption for me.

What's fascinating here is how Paul takes the mundane, everyday language of the street and just packs it with theological dynamite. He really does. He starts with grace, which in Greek is charis.

Which sounds suspiciously like the standard Greek greeting of the day, charien. It's a very deliberate play on words. He tweaks the standard cultural hello into charis, meaning grace.

But grace isn't just a polite disposition here. No, he is using a summary term for all of God's unearned unilateral work in saving humanity. It's the ultimate generous gift given to people who are actively rebelling against the giver.

And then he pairs it with peace, which is an adaptation of the standard Jewish greeting, shalom. Right. But shalom means so much more than just a lack of conflict, right? It's not just a ceasefire.

Far from it. Shalom means holistic flourishing. It means absolute wholeness.

Wow. It is the concept of everything in the universe functioning exactly in its right, originally intended order. Wait, okay, shalom means everything in its intended order.

How does Paul square that with his current reality? I mean, the man is chained to a Roman guard. Yes, he is. He is facing potential execution.

How does the mechanism of this grace and peace actually override the physical reality of a miserable prison cell? To understand that, you have to realize that a Roman prison in the first century wasn't like a modern white-collar lockup. It was essentially a dark, damp holding pit. You were often reliant on friends on the outside just to bring you food so you wouldn't starve before your trial.

So his physical reality is the absolute opposite of flourishing. Exactly. And that introduces the critical theological mechanism known as the already-not-yet tension.

Already-not-yet. How does that work? Think of it like a massive, decisive military victory that guarantees the end of a war, like D-Day. The war is fundamentally won.

That's the already. The decisive blow has been struck. But there are still skirmishes.

There is still suffering. And you are waiting for the final peace treaty to be signed. That's the not-yet.

Oh, that makes so much sense. Through this greeting, Paul is reminding them that, because of what Jesus did, you already possess this grace and this profound cosmic peace as an unbreakable present reality already. But we are waiting for its ultimate physical completion when Christ returns to fix the broken world.

Not yet. Precisely. So every time they greet each other with grace and peace, they are reminding themselves of where they stand in the timeline of history.

They are living in the messy middle, but the outcome is completely secure. That's a great way to put it. And if Paul is sitting in a miserable prison cell, claiming he is currently experiencing total shalom on a cosmic level, that completely reframes what he says next.

It really does. This isn't just a polite thank-you note to his donors. It explains why he suddenly bursts into this massive outpouring of emotional gratitude in verses 3-8.

Because the greeting establishes the terms of their relationship, which provides the foundation for that intense emotion. And what really stands out to me is his emphasis on unity here. He keeps using the words all and every, like always and every prayer of mine for you all.

Yeah, he's very intentional with that. He wants them to know there are no factions in his heart, despite whatever drama is happening in their church. But my absolute favorite part of this section is verse 6. It's a powerful verse.

He says, Dr. Harmon connects this to Galatians 3:3. And honestly, what an unbelievable psychological relief that verse is. It addresses a very specific kind of spiritual exhaustion, doesn't it? Exactly. Anyone who has tried to follow any kind of moral path or tried to break a bad habit knows about the highs and lows.

You have days where you feel like a saint and days where you feel like a total failure. We ride this roller coaster of spiritual momentum, and it is just exhausting trying to maintain it. It really is.

Verse 6 takes the burden of ultimate completion completely off our shoulders. The mechanism of our growth isn't our own white-knuckled willpower. It says, It anchors your transformation in God's faithfulness, not your own fluctuating performance.

Such a relief. And this shared experience of God's grace brings us to a really vital Greek word in the text, which is koinonia. In verse 5, Paul thanks them for their partnership in the gospel.

See, I feel like koinonia is one of those words that gets slapped on corporate synergy retreats or church potlucks where people just politely exchange pleasantries. It's a tragedy that the word has been watered down like that. It's often translated as fellowship or partnership.

And yes, it encompasses the financial gift they sent Paul. But Dr. Harmon emphasizes that *koinonia* is a deeply shared participation in a life-or-death reality. Not just a shared interest in a hobby.

Right. A better analogy would be the bond between soldiers who have shared a trench during an artillery bombardment. You have a shared stake in survival.

It's a bond forged by mutual dependence on God's grace against a culture that is entirely hostile to what you believe. And that intense trench warfare bond gets incredibly emotional. Here's where it gets really fascinating to me.

In verses 7 and 8, Paul says he yearns for them all with the, quote, affection of Christ Jesus. Yes. Now, Dr. Harmon points out something wild here about the underlying Greek.

He says this doesn't just mean Paul loves them the way Christ loves them, like an imitation. No, it goes much deeper. It means Christ's actual affection is being expressed through Paul.

Right. So, if I'm understanding the mechanics of this correctly, when someone shows us true, deep compassion, they aren't just acting like Jesus. We are basically acting as physical extension cords for God's actual love to reach another human being.

That is precisely the mechanism Dr. Harmon is highlighting. It's a staggering thought. It really is.

Paul's love for the Philippians isn't just human empathy. It is the actual living affection of the resurrected Jesus flowing through Paul's human nervous system and emotional capacity. That completely elevates the way we treat each other.

It really does. When you show genuine gospel-rooted compassion to someone, you are acting as a conduit, a literal channel, for divine affection to enter the physical world. It's not just being nice.

It is a holy, supernatural act. Wow. An extension cord for divine affection.

I love that so much. It's beautiful. And because of this deep, profound affection, Paul naturally transitions from just feeling grateful for them to actively interceding for them.

Verses 9-11 are an absolute master class in prayer. They really challenge how we normally pray. Yeah, because usually if you ask me to pray for someone, I'm praying for circumstantial stuff, like help them get that job, or heal their bad back, or help them find a parking spot.

We treat prayer like a cosmic vending machine for a smoother life. Exactly. But Paul's prayer is entirely different.

He isn't praying for their circumstances to get easier. He prays that their love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment. Paul is fundamentally upgrading how we think about discernment here.

How so? Well, in a modern world with endless options, we often think of discernment as simply knowing right from wrong. Black and white. Good versus bad.

Right. But Dr. Harmon points out that true biblical discernment is much more sophisticated and, frankly, requires a lot more cognitive and spiritual load. Because usually the choices we face aren't between, like, robbing a bank and volunteering at a soup kitchen.

Exactly. It's not just avoiding the obvious bad stuff. The real challenge of life is having the wisdom to know what is good, what is better, and what is absolutely best.

The nuance. Right. It's the ability to look at two perfectly fine options and know the difference between what is merely permissible for you to do and what is actually preferable for your spiritual growth and the good of others.

So it's spiritual maturity. Like, it might be a good thing for me to take on a massive new project at work that helps the company, but it might be the best thing for me to pass on it so I have the emotional bandwidth to be present with my kids. That's a perfect everyday example.

And Dr. Harmon maps out the chain reaction Paul describes here. Okay. What's the chain reaction? When your love is grounded in that kind of deep knowledge and nuance, it allows you to approve what is excellent.

And when you consistently choose what is excellent, the best, over the merely good, it leads to progressive growth. Which produces what Paul calls the fruit of righteousness. Exactly.

Which ties right back to being a saint. It's the mechanism of actively reflecting that blazing holiness from Isaiah 6 into your everyday decisions. You've got it.

And what is the ultimate end goal of that entire chain reaction? The final verse of our section tells us, it culminates in the glory and praise of God. That is the bullseye of Paul's prayer. It is.

He isn't praying they have an easier life. He's praying their lives become a radiant display of God's character to a watching world. When you combine all of this- the rejection of societal status by claiming to be a servant, the calling to reflect the blazing holiness of a saint, and being a literal conduit for divine affection- it builds directly to Dr. Harmon's central thesis for this text.

Which is so crucial to remember. The gospel unites us to display the glory of God by fundamentally determining our identity and demanding our gratitude. Identity and gratitude.

Those are the two pillars everything rests on. And Dr. Harmon actually offers a really helpful four-part framework to apply this to our lives right now. Four simple verbs.

Think, believe, desire, and do. It's a great practical takeaway. First, think.

You have to recognize intellectually that everything you are and everything you have is a gift. You didn't earn the grace. Right.

Second, believe. Trust that God is the one who determines your identity, your society, your career, your bank account, your follower count. They do not define you.

You are a saint positionally set apart. Such a needed reminder. Third, desire.

Actively long for a life marked by gratitude. And we shouldn't underestimate how vital that third step, desiring gratitude, really is. Why is that? Well, it raises a fascinating and kind of dark question about human nature.

Dr. Harmon brings in a heavy insight from another one of Paul's letters, Romans chapter 1. When Paul describes the fundamental fall of humanity, the core brokenness of the world, he doesn't start with murder or theft or lying. No. He says humanity's foundational flaw is a bent toward a lack of gratitude for who God is and what he has done.

Ungratefulness is the root of the human rot. Wow. That is incredibly heavy.

The idea is that everything broken in us traces back to simply refusing to say thank you to our Creator. It completely changes how you view a simple thank you. It really does.

And that brings us to the fourth verb, which is do. Take a tangible action. The challenge for you today is to take five minutes to send a text or write a physical note of gratitude to someone who has been a conduit of grace in your life.

It's such a simple but profound application. And it leaves us with a final provocative thought to mull over as we wrap up. Think back to that empty, thoughtless email greeting we talked about at the very beginning.

I hope this finds you well. Right. We live in a world that is rushing, cynical, incredibly entitled, and fundamentally ungrateful.

Unfortunately, yes. But if the root of all human brokenness, the very mechanism of our fall from grace, is tied directly to ungratefulness, then gratitude isn't just polite manners. No.

It's so much more. Could it be that the simple, everyday act of writing a thank you note, or pausing to truly mean it when you wish someone peace, is actually a profound act of spiritual rebellion? Oh, I love that phrase. Spiritual rebellion.

Right. By simply choosing to be grateful, you might be engaging in the most radical way to fight back against a cynical world. It's a powerful challenge.

A simple hello truly has the potential to change the atmosphere of a room or a life if it's backed by true grace and deep gratitude. We'll leave you with that. Thank you for joining us on this deep dive.

Keep asking questions. Keep looking deeper. And we will catch you next time.