

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.

Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity.

And when he had come as a man,

he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.

For this reason God highly exalted him

and gave him the name that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—

in heaven and on earth and under the earth—

and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:3-11)

Long before Paul wrote those words to the Philippian church, he lived out those words in the presence of the Philippians. What does that mindset look like when a Christ-follower adopts it and lives it out? We get a chance to see that this morning in Luke's account in Acts 16.

**The first character we encounter is a slave girl possessed by a spirit that enables her to predict the future.** That ability provided a lucrative opportunity by which her owners became wealthy. Day after day, she follows Paul and friends, crying out, "**These men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God.**"

"The Most High God," which is a title for the Lord, may also refer to Zeus, who inhabited the highest mountain. Her words read literally say that they are proclaiming "a way of salvation." The demon may be attempting to confuse people into thinking they proclaim one way of salvation among many. Regardless of the demon's intent, at some point, Paul has had enough of it. He commands the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. The demon leaves her immediately.

The girl's owners become understandably upset that their wealth-building means were gone. So, they grabbed Paul and Silas (who were likely seen as leaders), dragged them before the local authorities, and made charges against them. Their main charge is that Paul and Silas are "seriously disturbing our city." Romans prided themselves on the peace and order that their way of life brought. The civil disorder was quickly thwarted. They continue, "**They are Jews and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice.**"

We're given no details about these disturbing "customs" (Judaism was legal in the Roman Empire). What is clear is that the men want to make an issue of citizenship. It is "these Jews" versus "us as Romans." Philippi was the site of the last battle between the murderers of Julius Caesar and those seeking to avenge his death. Philippi was very proud of its significance and status in the Roman Empire. Jews, with their insistence on monotheism and the rightness of their religion, threatened a key aspect of the Roman way of life.

**Where does Paul fit in this tension surrounding citizenship?** He and Silas are identified as "Jews," which is accurate. Paul is a Jewish citizen by birth, descending from a distinguished line. But they, like the slave girl, seem to imply that Paul is preaching Judaism, which is not true.

Paul *is* preaching the Jewish Messiah—but he is not preaching Judaism, as such. He is proclaiming the arrival of a New Covenant, established through the death and resurrection of the Messiah. In fact, he is seeking to convince Jews of their need to enter this new kingdom through repentance and faith in Jesus. There is a tension around Paul's citizenship that these men cannot understand—he is *both* a citizen of Israel *and* a citizen of the Kingdom of Christ.

**Later in the story, we learn Paul is also a Roman citizen. So, now we understand that Paul is living in the tension of *three* citizenships—Jewish, Roman, and the Kingdom of Christ.** Roman citizenship came with certain rights—pertinent to our story, Roman citizens could not be punished without due process, and they could not be interrogated by beating or imprisonment; they were exempt from certain punishments (such as crucifixion). That is what makes what happens next so strange and significant to the meaning of this passage.

As the charges are made, the crowd joins in with the accusers. Likely seeking to get to the bottom of it, the chief magistrates interrogate them through beating, flogging, and imprisonment—all of which were illegal to do to an uncondemned Roman citizen.

**Paul could have prevented or ended the beatings and imprisonment at any moment by simply saying, “We’re Roman citizens.”** For example, in Acts 22, Paul is brought into the barracks for interrogation by scourging. Luke writes, "As they stretched him out for the lash, Paul said to the centurion standing by, ‘Is it legal for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and is uncondemned?’" As a result, Paul is brought out, he eventually receives Roman military protection, and by appealing to Caesar, receives a government-funded trip to Rome. Paul’s revelation of his Roman citizenship not only spares him a lashing (and death by assassination), it provides him safe travel in the direction he hopes to go with the gospel.

**So, why didn’t he do that here?** There are several possible reasons, which all boil down to what is best for spreading the gospel.<sup>i</sup> (1) Paul saw the great commission as urgent work. An appeal to Roman citizenship would involve complicated legal proceedings that could eat up days or weeks. (2) Paul longed to see his fellow Jews come to Christ. An immediate appeal to Roman citizenship may have communicated that he viewed it as better than Jewish citizenship, an impression that would jeopardize his relationship with the synagogue. (3) Finally, an immediate appeal to Roman citizenship might imply strong endorsement of the Roman preservation of civil order and put the proclamation of the gospel at risk. **Paul determines whether to forfeit his rights or insist on them by what’s most advantageous for the cause of Christ and the gospel.**

It was common for jailers (likely city-owned slaves and not Roman citizens) to cram all the prisoners into the inner (and most secure) cell to prevent escapes. In this cramped, dark, unsanitary room, suffering unjustly, we find Paul and Silas singing and praying with the prisoners, all listening. Their citizenship was not on earth but in heaven. No earthly injustice could ever threaten their citizenship in Christ’s Kingdom—and so they can sing and pray in the worst of it.

Then, suddenly, a violent earthquake shook the foundations of the jail, opened the doors, and loosed everyone’s chains. Awakened by the earthquake, the jailer sees the prison doors are open, but he cannot see inside the innermost cell. He assumes the prisoners all escaped. The jailer would face death for allowing escape and, since he was likely not Roman, that might mean crucifixion. So, he assumes his only option is suicide. But his assumption is wrong—he failed to take Jesus into account.

Seeing what's about to happen, Paul shouts for him not to harm himself, as no prisoner left. Getting lights, the jailer rushes in, falls at their feet, and then escorts them outside. He begs to know what he must do to be saved.

Paul answers, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.**" Then, Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house." "Word of the Lord" is shorthand for the gospel message. The man and his entire family come to faith in Christ and are baptized in response.

Notice the jailer's actions here: He immediately washes their wounds. He is baptized with all his family. Finally, he brings the prisoners into his house and feeds them, visibly rejoicing that he and all his household believed the gospel. All of this is both public and dangerous. Such very public displays of compassion and hospitality for his own prisoners—fraternizing with them—was grounds for punishment, which could include execution.

Only minutes earlier, the prisoner thought that the only way to escape the certainty of earthly suffering was by ending his life. But now, he is *willing* to suffer punishment and execution by identifying with Christ. **The jailer has had a change in perspective about citizenship and status.** His status as a non-Roman slave offered him no hope in life or death. But now that he has hope in Jesus, he is willing to be mistreated and killed to identify with and serve Christ's people. Earthly citizenship has taken a back seat to citizenship in the Kingdom of Christ.

Obviously, the whole city would know about such a violent earthquake—particularly government officials. Assuming the earthquake was a sign from God, the city officials simply want to get rid of them (lest any other, more violent, signs from God arrive!). So, the jail reported the orders to Paul. Given Paul's response, it appears that this release came with conditions—namely, they were to leave the city without attracting attention. (Such conditions were also illegal, as Roman citizens could not be expelled apart from conviction through due process.)

But Paul refuses to leave: "**They beat us in public without a trial, although we are Roman citizens, and threw us in jail. And now are they going to send us away secretly? Certainly not! On the contrary, let them come themselves and escort us out.**" Why does Paul choose this moment to stand on his rights a Roman citizen, when he didn't bring it up before? Paul is not standing on his rights as a matter of principle—"the government wronged me. Now they have to vindicate me!" Paul would have appealed to his citizenship much earlier if it were a matter of principle. So, what gives?

**What's at risk here if Paul and Silas quietly leave town? First**, the magistrates will likely lie about them, saying they escaped during the earthquake. That sets up the risk of them being captured or killed. **Second**, their quiet departure could support the idea that Christians are the kind of people who seek to overthrow the government and cause civil unrest. That impression creates the risk of persecution for the young church in Philippi. But suppose the magistrates come to the prison and escort them out. In that case, it will publicly vindicate Paul and Silas, establishing their innocence and protecting the local believer from 'guilt by association.' So, after being escorted from prison and urged to leave, they stop by the church in Lydia's house to provide encouragement before leaving town.

**Notice how Paul is using (or forfeiting) his rights and citizenship.** Earlier in the story, Paul forfeits his rights, keeping secret his Roman citizenship, and endures beating and

imprisonment, likely because insisting on his rights would slow his work, burn bridges with the Jews, and bring persecution to local believers. But, now, he insists on his rights to advance the gospel's spread and protect the local believers. This is just like we saw in Acts 22, where appealing to his rights as a Roman citizen saved Paul from death and served to advance his missionary work and spread the gospel.

So, in both situations, we see Paul exercising or forfeiting his rights according to what is best for the gospel (not for himself). His earthly citizenship is not something he will leverage to make himself comfortable and wealthy. **For Paul, earthly citizenship is nothing more than a tool that he will use or set aside depending on how it will help or hurt the spread of the Kingdom of Christ. For the spread of the gospel and the establishment of the young church, Paul is willing to endure unjust treatment at the hands of the state.**

Paul had zero interest in subverting or reforming the Roman Empire. **This is likely one reason Luke chose to include this story in his writing to the “honorable Theophilus.”** He’s reminding this man of high standing, likely a governmental authority, of a few things. **First, this account will be helpful to assure Theophilus’ peers in positions of authority that the gospel is not about overthrowing the government.** Paul respects and obeys authority—unless it contradicts the gospel. Earthly governments will be subverted when Christ the King returns!

**Second, his position in an earthly empire pales compared to his citizenship in Christ's Kingdom**—a kingdom consisting of converted slave-jailers and wealthy women like Lydia. Their citizenship in heaven (not on earth) is what unites and binds them. Only the Kingdom of Christ will last forever. **Third, his position as a citizen or an authority in an earthly nation is nothing more than a mere tool to be used or forfeited for the love of God and neighbor.**

**Where did Paul get this way of living? What shaped his thoughts?** The answer, of course, is Jesus. Throughout the life of Jesus, and particularly in his death, we see him forfeiting rights and accepting mistreatment for the sake of his gospel work and the good of his people.

The gospel message is that Jesus Christ forfeited his rights, accepting shameful and cruel treatment in an illegal trial and execution so that he could atone for our sins and purchase our redemption. His death and glorious resurrection not only secure our eternal redemption, but they also put to us some challenging questions.

How are you thinking about your rights, value, earning potential, property, privileges, status, office, citizenship, and the like? Do these things occupy most of your thoughts, control your emotions, and dictate your behavior? If so, why?

Think about your family, community, school, workplace, neighborhood, and your local or federal government? What decisions are you wrestling with? How might surrendering your rights for the sake of the gospel and a local church serve to advance the gospel?

What is making your blood boil? What annoys you about your neighbor? What conflicts are you in? What situations are tempting you to be angry or selfish, to stir up arguments and create factions, to hatred and strife, to jealousy and anger, to be immoral or impure, to get high or drunk, or to anything similar? Paul says that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God! But you have inherited the kingdom of God! How does that citizenship counter down those sinful desires and produce the fruit of the Spirit?

If our hope, inheritance, standing, comfort, and approval are secure and certain in Jesus Christ, then why do we cling to our rights in passing earthly kingdoms? Are we not now free to

use our rights, freedom, and privileges as tools to advance the gospel? To serve others and not ourselves?

Are we willing to join Paul and millennia of Christians, being willing to surrender and forfeit those rights, freedoms, and privileges when that helps us advance the gospel and love our neighbors? Are we willing to follow in the footsteps of the King, who came not to fight for his rights but to surrender them by becoming a slave to all?

Christ's kingdom arrives by the sword of the Spirit, not the sword of steel or the sword of the State. This is why Jesus taught:

You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. As for the one who wants to sue you and take away your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.<sup>ii</sup>

No one can serve two kingdoms—you will either hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. This is why Jesus tells us, "But seek his kingdom, and these things will be provided for you. Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom."<sup>iii</sup>

This is why Jesus told Peter, "Put your sword back in its place because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword."<sup>iv</sup>

"My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Expanded Digital Edition., Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 5:38-42 (CSB)

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 12:31-32 (CSB)

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 26:52 (CSB)

<sup>v</sup> John 18:36 (CSB)