

# HOW IS YOUR MINDSET?

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## Worthy: Living Your Best Life Now (Part 2) | Philippians 2:1-13

### There Are Competing Visions of the Good Life

The Bastille... The Gulag... Alcatraz... Guantanamo... In every era, there have been places where powerful empires have relegated people they aimed to be rid of. For the Roman Caesars, that place was a subterranean dungeon, two stories beneath the ground, in a converted cistern that came to be called the Mamertine Prison. To enter that space you would leave behind the sunlight and enter a building. You'd descend some steps into a chamber where armed guards kept a relentless watch over an iron grate, that covered a hole in the floor, that led to a further chamber below it. It was into that chamber that the Romans would lower the lowest of low-lives. It was there in this dank, dark, stinking hole that the writer of most of our New Testament and of the Letter we're studying in this series spent his final days – chained to a pillar you can still see today. This is his context when he writes to the Philippian Christians: **"I am in chains for Christ." (Phil 1:13)**

I've visited that cell and it is hard to do justice to the contrast between it and the world outside it. Above the ground, not far away, lies the Roman Forum. In Paul's day it was THE dream destination in the ancient world – a sprawling mall of shopping arcades and pillared avenues stretching all the way down to the spectacular Coliseum. On the Palatine Hill above the Forum stood the mansions of senators and military heroes. From their lavish gardens, they would gaze down on marble temples and magnificent monuments to the health and wealth of imperial Rome. I tell you, places like Bel Air and Monaco only *reach* for the worldly glory that once was Rome.

Last week, Tara Beth Leach described how every culture has some picture of what glory looks like. She quoted the observation of Calvin University professor, James K.A. Smith, that ***to be human is to be animated and oriented by some vision of the good life, some picture of what we think counts as flourishing.*** As Tara Beth said, in American culture today, the good life is pictured in terms of upward mobility, rising celebrity, the ladder of success. Flourishing is described in Instagram-able images of beautiful vistas and vacations and sparkling scenes and we're always being called to pursue this vision.

From the depths of the Mamertine Prison, Paul would have been very aware of that life. He would be able to smell the rich foods cooking there above. He would have heard the laughter of the rich and famous, the cries of the merchants, the roar of the Coliseum crowd. And it would be only human if Paul did not sometimes wonder: Did I choose the BEST LIFE? Did I make the right choice to follow Christ and exalt only him, instead of walking the path of self-exaltation traveled by all those people UP there?

## Each of Us Must Choose Our Focus

But, then, back in the days when Paul had been known as SAUL, he *had* traveled that path. As you may know, Saul was born in Tarsus, a prosperous city near the southern coast of what is modern-day Turkey. At that time, Tarsus was home to the most prestigious university in all the ancient world. By events unknown, Saul's father had been awarded a Roman citizenship -- a rare and coveted form of identity and clout that opened a lot of doors. Dad passed this credential to his eldest son, giving Saul a prestige that may have helped him get into law school under, Gamaliel, the most famous legal mind in the Jewish world.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, with an elite law degree in hand, Saul was a rising star within the Pharisee party. Renowned as a fierce prosecutor of the growing cult of the Nazarene, Saul's upward path seemed assured. Are you getting this picture? Saul must have believed he was living his best life now.

And then there came a turning point. I encourage you to read the story in Acts chapter 9. Suffice it to say that there comes a time in everyone's life when we must decide what our life rests upon and who or what will be exalted by it. Sometimes this turning happens in a very sudden and dramatic way, as it did for Saul on the road to Damascus. We're knocked off our horse. The lights go out or on. For others of us, it's more of a slow dawning of awareness, like a dimmer switch being gradually turned up to high. In either case, something in us fundamentally alters. Our understanding of what constitutes our BEST LIFE undergoes a transformation, an upgrade, a conversion.

I remember when it first started happening for me. I say, "started happening" because I think the process of conversion is still going on in me. But I recall the moment when I was a young adult and I started to see myself and this world in a different light. Up until that point, my vision of flourishing involved the focused pursuit of my personal rise. It was about the mansion on the hill, a position of prestige, the Roman Plan, as it were. And, then, I was introduced to the person of Jesus -- to the stunning beauty of his life and teaching, to the staggering wonder of his death for my sins, to the stunning reality of his victory over death and what that opens up for all of us.

And I made a turn on my path. My vision of flourishing became less about MY position or pleasure or fake perfection and more and more about knowing Jesus and being a part of his community and living for HIS glory and kingdom's values wherever I went. As Tara Beth observed last week, we see this change in vision in Paul's famous statement in Philippians chapter one: **I eagerly expect and hope that I will... have sufficient courage so that now -- even here in this prison hole -- as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil 1:20-21).**

If you've made that turn for yourself, or even started to, then you know how freeing it is. Something in you that has always been straining and striving begins to unclench and you start to rest in God -- in his forgiving grace, in his constant presence and daily

provision, in the fact that He has you in this life and secures you in the next. It gradually seeps in: "My identity isn't up for grabs. It isn't measured by what I have or don't have. It's not a function of my social location or net worth. It's not determined by whether I'm good looking or athletic or smart or even physically healthy. My identity comes not from what the world says to and about me but from what God says. And at the cross of Christ, God says: "I love you THIS much. Forever and always, you are MINE. And if you turn your sins and your gifts over to me, I will move in your life to lift you up and I will move through your life to lift up others." *Exalt Me – put me first, follow my example, point others to Me -- and you will live your best life, whether you are walking in the sunshine or down in some prison hole.*

This, in essence, is the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. This is the re-orientation of our lives that Paul is urging the Philippians toward when he says at the end of chapter one: **Conduct yourselves in a manner WORTHY of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:27)**. And then, through the rest of his Letter to the Philippians, Paul unpacks some of the particular ways we will conduct ourselves if we truly get this gospel.

### **Choosing to Follow Jesus Means Adopting His Mindset**

**Therefore**, he says at the start of chapter two, **if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion...** In other words, if who Jesus is and what he has done and said has impacted you at all... <sup>2</sup> **then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind...** Paul is saying that genuine followers of Jesus will be recognized by the fact that they live with the same mindset, love and spirit that Jesus modeled.

<sup>3</sup> **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,** <sup>4</sup> **not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.** Paul is recognizing that human nature and the world's value system will relentlessly seek to focus us on a I-Me-Mine mindset. But he's stressing here that conducting ourselves in a manner WORTHY of the gospel of Jesus Christ means turning away from that pull and adopting instead an unusual level of humility, an unusual valuation of other people, an unusual commitment to advancing the interests of your spouse, your kids, your siblings, the people sitting around you at school or church or in your workplace, the person who is waiting upon you.

<sup>5</sup> **In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:** <sup>6</sup> **Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;** Paul is saying: Jesus came from a place higher than that room above me, higher than that Roman Forum above that, higher than that mansion hill above that. Jesus was in very nature GOD. But he didn't

regard that place of infinite power, position and privilege as something to be used for his own flourishing but rather a capacity he could use for ours.

And so <sup>7</sup> **rather**, than simply sitting on his celestial throne saying, “Hey, look at Me... Aren’t I something?... **he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.** He who had been worshipped and served for eternity by angelic beings so pure and mighty we would be terrified by an encounter with one of them... HE became a servant to human beings. He hugged lepers. He stooped to play with children. He listened patiently to idiots. He washed the stinking feet of fishermen and people who would betray and abandon him.

<sup>8</sup> **And** as if this stunning downward mobility in the name of love was not enough... **being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death --** He who was the source and sustainer of all LIFE submitted himself to Death – the Sun became Snow, Glory bent to the Grave – to identify with you and me, to take the full weight of all our sins onto himself. To liberate us, Jesus was willing to endure death —**even death on a cross!** – the cruelest means of death of all.

<sup>9</sup> **Therefore God** – who esteems self-demoting love as the most beautiful of all qualities -- **exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,** <sup>10</sup> **that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,** <sup>11</sup> **and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

### **Your Mindset Will Show in Your Conduct**

At the end of the day, all of us have to answer: “Who will be exalted in and through my life and how will that show in my conduct?” When Pontius Pilate and the religious authorities gave the order in A.D. 33 to have Jesus crucified, they were giving their answer. When the Roman Emperor Nero gave the order in A.D. 66 to have the prisoner Paul beheaded, he was giving his answer. “I will be exalted. What interests or advantages ME will be served.”

But today, the Mamertine prison is empty, as is a tomb outside Jerusalem. Curiously, it isn’t the words of Roman Emperors but of Jesus and his followers that are being read across the world today. We name our dogs, Caesar and Nero, and our children, Mary, Peter and Paul. The mansions on the Palatine Hill and the Forum below now lie in ruins, while believers far more numerous and potent than all the legions of Rome gather today in cathedrals and caves, in homes and huts and heavenly realms to exalt the name of Jesus. Colleges and universities... hospitals and orphanages... massive libraries and humanitarian agencies... entire systems of law, justice, and economics... innumerable human stories... all stand as witnesses to the One who is still LORD.

The question remains, however: Where does all of this land in YOUR life and in mine? When someone cuts you off in traffic or butts into the line ahead of you this week... When some boring person insists on your attention for too long... When customer service is slow... When someone in your family or your workplace is not paying enough attention to your interests... When there is some menial task to be done or some painful trial to be endured... When you are invited to give more or surrender more of your position, power or privileges for the work of God's kingdom... When you find yourself on the down escalator instead of the upward one – or maybe in some dank, dark hole... what will be your attitude and the actions that flow from it?

Paul would say: **Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5). Conduct yourselves in a manner WORTHY of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:27).** Do this and you will be living your best life NOW.

Please pray with me...

*Great and glorious God, you know how seductive we find the pull of this world's picture of the good life. But you have shown us by your example the beautiful life, the best kind of life, the life that truly lasts. As we go forth this week, give us the courage and strength to humble ourselves... to look to the interests of others... to take the role of servants, even where there is some struggle or suffering involved. For you have promised and indeed shown us in the life of your Son that those who lay their lives down in obedience to your call shall be lifted up to the highest place. For it is in the name above all names that we pray, saying together, Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Easton Bible Dictionary.*