

Philippians 2:19–30 Models for Service

You may have a friend or two similar to mine. No matter what kind of compliment you give them, delicate or blunt, they almost immediately deflect it. Most of the time they receive those compliments well, but there's still almost an instinctive, maybe even an acquired skill in play—whatever it is, they have the knack for deflecting those compliments. And instead of lingering over the compliment, like you might want them to, their deflection acts as a quick gust of wind to the aroma of honor you want to convey. They don't want it, so they turn the conversation another direction, or even back in your direction, as they obey Romans 12:10 with thoroughgoing precision "*outdo one another in honor.*" Those friendships and moments, regardless of my subtle sarcasm, are special and worthy of our thanksgiving. Friendships become stagnant and die where the current of pride is strong. In our text this morning we note some friendships, we see gospel partnerships and the same kind of humility represented in those couple of friends of mine.

We see this first and best in the great apostle Paul, who gave up his status and wealth while at the top of his religious profession of Judaism; who met Jesus face to face on the road to Damascus; after being changed by the Holy Spirit and adopted into God's family through the gospel, Christ vested in him apostolic powers to even raise the dead, apostolic authority to oversee churches all over Asia and Europe and to pen most of the New Testament. He went on to become the only one we know of that was ever taken up into the third heaven, only to return and be commanded to say nothing of that experience.¹ This man, Paul of Tarsus, the apostle to the Gentiles, has set about in our passage to pour out honor on others. To commend other men in the same line of work. You see, Philippians 2:5-11 was not just thick doctrine to be esteemed, believed and preached. It was and still functions as the paradigm for why any human washed by God's Spirit can think with any measure of humility at all!

So two helpful questions this morning are this: 1. What's the connection between what we've covered so far in Philippians and our passage? How do we make sense of this slight shift going on? 2. If this man, used of the LORD maybe more than anyone else for the spread of the gospel to the nations, if he needed others to minister to him, how much more do we need the ministry we find in a local church? From those overseeing your souls and from others within the body of Christ?

And there is a certainly a shift here in Philippians, a sort of a Pauline pause in his exhortations for the Philippians, which find their roots in the person and the work of Christ. He's been seesawing back on forth with what he's communicating to the church at Philippi. On one hand he's setting their minds at ease in reporting on himself and on these individual in our text. On the other hand, he can't stop peppering his situation and setting with Christ's power (He will carry your salvation to completion), with Christ's purposes (this imprisonment has served to advance the gospel), and even with Christ's joy filling him as he's under a less than desirable circumstance. He's in prison. He might be on the verge of deeper trouble, death even. But his communication with them is full of hope and life, as he keeps painting Christ before the canvas of their eyes. He's showing them Christ's character textures and colors and challenging them to aim for the same.

¹ Ligon Duncan, <https://www.fpcjackson.org>

Thus the break is simply less propositional and more along the lines of a common thing Paul does in some of his writings—he’s filling in the travelogue, giving them details of who and where. There was no FaceTime, and the details of who was coming where and when were simply a matter of care and courtesy. But again, this is not lifeless information, but details that abound with life and honor.

Undoubtedly we’ve just considered some mammoth doctrines, as Matt skillfully handled Paul’s Christology in a way that was powerful and clear and in a way that prodded us on towards Christ-likeness. Now Paul sets out to give us flesh and bone examples of those doctrines. He moves from instructions and imperatives to illustrations.² Here’s where we’re going: *As Timothy and Epaphroditus have clearly modeled the example of Christ, they become fixed examples before us in the Word, that we might do the same.*

I. Timothy—a selfless servant

We’ve come up from the depths of Philippians 2:1-11, the place where we saw a beauty and wisdom that the world counts as homely and foolish—the giving up of the life of the God-man as the very point of a sovereign, reigning God’s exaltation. What seems to be the very epitome of a sham and great shame has become, for all time, the highest act that a human being has ever embarked upon. And that is seen by who commended that act—*“and God highly exalted Him,”* and what the fruit of that act is and one day will be—*“at the name of Jesus every knee will bow.”* Not some, every. His report card with the Father was flawless, and His learning obedience through what He suffered obtained for Him a church, a people. A people who follow Him. A people who are acquainted with the weight of cross-carrying. A people who are being sanctified, not all at once, but little by little. Jesus bought a people that must learn their ongoing neediness and where to turn to find what He alone can supply. Paul, in our text, is affirming two men who the LORD is using to carry on His mission and strengthen His people. The first of these is Timothy.

As you are well aware, if you read your Bible, two letters are devoted to Timothy. The significance of this man in the life of the early church and in the life of Paul himself is seen in that fact alone. In Ephesus, Timothy had gifts to fan into action, potential leadership to help sift, false teaching to address and a host of other issues to wade thru (widows, slaves, greediness, modesty, etc.). God had called him and equipped him for the work of ministry. We see that calling in the way Paul describes him here, and as such, Timothy is a character-trait exhibit of the risen Christ.

a. *Genuine concern for the saints*

Apparently, Timothy has excelled in the area of loving those in Ephesus with sincerity. Without a 21st century communication framework, how did Timothy gain this status? Without texting and email!? Yes. We imagine him making house calls, sending carriers with hand-written messages, spending long hours with other brothers and sisters in conversation and study and prayer. Working less on his abs at the local gym in Ephesus and more on engaging others with the strength of truth. Maybe he had a man-cave where he crashed with Ephesian dart boards and the latest and greatest Asian cornhole set, but to be skilled at the welfare of others, time is what is often offered on the relationship altar. Paul commended him for this. But not everyone in ministry-work deserved

² Tony Merida and Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians*, 117.

commendation. *For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.* Of course he doesn't mean all, or Timothy would be among that number, thus contradicting himself. There were obviously some, maybe in Ephesus, maybe in Philippi, maybe in every place, who failed the welfare test. They were placing their plans, maybe their families and careers, above the cause of the gospel. In 1:15 we've already noted that some were in the ministry because it helped them posture better and to give them a sense of importance—maybe Paul has them in mind. But those leading in the church and everyone else for that matter are to seek what concerns Jesus above all else. This statement should make us wriggle in our Wranglers. In the end, we should emulate Timothy. He is a model of growing in concern for others.

b. Proven worth in the work

The phrase “*proven worth*” is in reference to a specific test that Timothy has undergone with an eye to what resulted from such a test. Up to this point, Timothy had been in ministry 10+ years, traveling with Paul, taking it on the chin regarding whatever reputation he had before life with Paul. Timothy's name is pinned up all over Paul's writings—1 & 2 Thessalonians, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians. So Timothy would have undergone some of the hardships of traveling and persecution with Paul. Most likely, that was the point of his proven worth—that he endured what needed to be endured for the sake of the good of the church, even to his own health and peril.

This analogy of Timothy as a son working alongside his father in the faith, Paul, was based on the ancient model of a son learning a trade from his father.³ As we entered the industrial age and now are headlong into the digital one, a son watching a father work is not a common occurrence. In Paul's day many dads and moms were able to do skilled labor from home. With this there was also the intention, from an early age in a boy's life especially, that little Johnny would just fall in line, learning dad's trade. Timothy has sat at Paul's feet for at least a decade, learning contentment, learning prayer, learning patience, learning sound teaching, learning how to read and apply the law of God, learning people, learning how to navigate false teachers, Judaizers, lawless Gentiles and philosophical Athenians. And contrary to what some might think, a person can't simply sit with his Bible and pray down the Holy Spirit and expect to be skilled in all those areas I just mentioned. The LORD is calling all of us to see this body of believers as a room full of people that can teach one another! And please don't take this as self-serving, but He's calling you to see those in leadership as men that have the training to lead and help you think and grow and serve and flourish under Him. As we're pastoring, we're pastoring one another and never stop learning from the insights and lives of this congregation.

Timothy, a selfless servant worth imitating. And so is Epaphroditus.

II. Epaphroditus—a suffering servant

a. His labors expounded

Epaphroditus was from Philippi. This makes sense when Paul speaks of him as their messenger, and it makes sense in light of Epaphroditus' longing and concern for them expressed in the next verse, verse 26. It's most likely that Epaphroditus is older and that Paul views him as a colleague

³ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: A Study in Philippians*, 92.

rather than a son in the faith, like Timothy. However Paul views him, he has much to commend him on.

Paul describes Epaphroditus as a...

1. *Brother.* They were in the same family and had the same family resemblance when it came to who they were at their core. God was their Father and Jesus their Elder Brother. The man Paul once considered a “Gentile dog” was now a brother that he loved deeply.⁴
2. *Fellow worker.* Paul viewed them as working alongside each other, not Paul out front and Epaphroditus lagging timidly behind. They loved the same gospel, shared the same basic approach to reaching the nations. The same cause for Christ burned in them. Though Paul was considered the leader no doubt, here we see that Epaphroditus gained Paul’s respect by using this phrase.
3. *Fellow soldier.* That respect is teased out even more with calling Epaphroditus this. He heads to the battlefield, knowing that the Christian life and cause are not a stroll in the park, but grunt work in life’s trenches. More about that later.
4. *Your messenger and minister to my need.* Epaphroditus traveled from Philippi carrying both news of the church and a financial gift from the church to help Paul, for which Paul praises them in chapter 4. Epaphroditus was the vehicle through which his partnership with the Philippians flourished. And Paul is grateful for this.

Paul expounded on Epaphroditus’ labors, but he also applauds him for expressing compassion. The tables have turned and now Paul is being the messenger back to the Philippians for Epaphroditus.

b. His compassion expressed

Some of this is really quite comical outside of the moment. There was nothing comical about the suffering of Epaphroditus, but the way Paul unfolds the distresses is uncanny. It kind of reminds me of the Who’s on 1st skit by Abbot and Costello. He’s saying that Epaphroditus is distressed that the Philippians are distressed over hearing of his physical condition, of which now he is healed by God’s *mercy*. The Philippians probably don’t know that at this point he’s much better, but then Paul writes that *he* was saved from being distressed because of the healing. The Philippians are distressed, Epaphroditus is distressed at their distress, and Paul is on the verge of being distressed but spared from it. Aren’t you distressed thinking about who is distressed and who is not distressed! But what this unveils to us is a concern that is rare in our day. Heaping compassion on one another, each one desiring each other’s well-being and joy. But is this not the kind of spiritual climate that the gospel creates? Ray Ortland expressed it so well some years back,

“Faithfulness to the gospel requires more than doctrinal purity in our churches. It also requires relational beauty in our churches. But it is possible to sincerely preach true doctrine while, at the same time, utterly deny that doctrine by an ugly anti-gospel culture. Every church culture is communicating something. If a church is not positively communicating the gospel both by what it says and by what it is, then that church risks unsaying by its reality what it is saying by its theory.”⁵

⁴ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, 141.

⁵ Ray Ortland, Jr. *How to Build a Gospel Culture in Your Church*. This particular quote was pulled from a talk he did at The Gospel Coalition gathering four years ago. The notes are found here: <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/ray-ortlund/files/2015/07/Paper.pdf>

Though compassion displayed in a church is not the end-all⁶, practiced faithfully, it does often show that many hearts have been steeped in the presence of Christ, believing that latching on to Him by faith is life itself.⁷ Epaphroditus stands as a model of compassion for us all.

But he did more than feel for the Philippians. Paul also features with honor the sacrifice that Epaphroditus displayed in service to the gospel. And Paul doesn't downplay his condition in the least with his correspondence to the Philippian brothers and sisters.

c. *His sacrifice exalted*

The wording here makes an astounding connection to chapter 2:8, where we read, “*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*” “*To the point of death*” is the same phrase we find in verse 27, “*Indeed he was ill, near to death.*” Same Greek phrasing. This is the relational beauty Ortland conveyed earlier, and he uses the word beauty rightly because what was more beautiful in power and in majesty than the work of Christ for us? Epaphroditus put on this unthinkable love of Christ by the manner of his selfless living.

ILL: The Last Samurai, the last scene

However you slice it, this was an expression of honor, explaining Epaphroditus' daily walk and habits. And that's where Paul heads as well. **[29] So receive [Epaphroditus] in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men.** Paul may have been thinking that some in Philippi were slightly ashamed at Epaphroditus. “We sent one of our best and he gets sick and falls useless while there.” Or it may have been that the Philippian church had other expectations which were unfulfilled in some way. They loved Paul and in sending Epaphroditus to care for him and stay near him, his sickness shortened their “care package” of physical presence. Paul's words are strong though. A modest Shepherding Group luncheon and a quick nod would fall short of Paul's command here. Receive Epaphroditus with all joy and hold him up in honor. A church-wide banquet, a lengthy standing ovation, and a lifelong respect for this man are getting closer to the level of honor Paul's talking about here.

Conclusion

Timothy and Epaphroditus—these were faithful men. Their ministries, on paper, though Paul has much to commend them on, they don't look electrifying. Serving others selflessly, often without being noticed, fighting for faith and joy and unity with people that are so different from you, and called to suffer as you do all this—if these were recruiting slogans, there wouldn't be long lines for signing up. I know many of you would say along with me that most of the time living faithfully as a Christian doesn't have the feel of an adventurous Samaria warrior facing down wicked emperors. But our culture feeds the dramatic, doesn't it?

⁶ Many churches that we would consider merely heretical social gatherings display a measure of compassion within their congregations and to those in the world. Yet, spiritual fruits without gospel roots are bland to say the least and poisonous at most. Christ is not building His church on mere expressions of common grace, but through a people who have been supernaturally endowed by the Spirit to joyfully, energetically, faithfully, sacrificially give themselves over to one another, and as a witness to the Risen Christ, the culture they've been sovereignly situation within.

⁷ Philippians 1:21

ILL: Drink offering. This is how most of our lives pan out, and for that we would do well to confess, “Lord, that’s sufficient.”⁸

To live selfless is our call here this morning. To mimic other godly people and to model godliness for others. This is a community of participation—sidelines shouldn’t exist at all here. We have two basic ministries here that are going on at all times—that of giving and that of receiving. If we’re all giving and no receiving, the perilous ditch on that one side becomes a moat of pride, a slippery embankment of burnout and exhaustion that leads to a cesspool of a thousand frustrations and disappointments. If we’re only receiving and not giving, then we create those frustrations in others, slipping headlong into the ditch of self-absorption, convinced that my needs and problems far surpass all others. Let that be a challenge to each of us this morning, to be careful to receive and give within this body.

Even in saying that, I don’t just know a few men around here like Timothy and Epaphroditus...I know a mess of people around here like them. Yet, we’re still growing. He’s arrested us with His glory to develop us in the grind.⁹ He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion—so as the divine motor-strength underpins your locked arms and knees, your grip on the ropes of sanctification, let us take note that Christ lives in each of us. And if we are living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, then let us copy the grace and disciplines and attitudes we see in each other. Paul will reiterate the same in Philippians 3:17, “*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*”

I realize that I kept saying Timothy and Epaphroditus are worth emulating, and that we should view each other in the same light, but I trust that you’ll see clear enough through their examples to know that their need was just as deep as ours is today. As we look at each other and see the grace God has poured out, and as we see the distance we still must go in our sanctification, we look with keener eyes upon our eternal, perfect mentor from Philippians 2. He never failed the concerned-for-your-welfare test; He always endured what needed to be endured for the sake of the good of the church, even to his own peril; He’s a soldier who fought victoriously for us and arms us for the fight of faith this very day; and being the messenger from heaven and the minister of our every need, He longs for our everlasting good and His sacrifice for our every sin is worthy of everlasting honor. We’ve all been mentored and schooled by others. Praise the LORD that He gifts His church so that genuine emulation can happen. The men of our text were chips off the ancient Cornerstone, no doubt, but they still had sharp edges that needed to be smoothed out. And so do we. In the final analysis, I know why you are godly, and if there’s any measure of that in me, you know why—because the death of God the Son for us opened the way for the life of God the Son to be formed in us. May it be.

⁸ The idea for this illustration is most likely found in a sermon by Fred Craddock, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denominational leader, pastor, professor Emeritus at Emory University. It’s an excerpt from one of his sermons, of which I could not locate the original online or otherwise. May be a lack of digital skill in play here. It’s quoted in Christ-Centered Exposition by Merida and Chan with the note, “Quoted by Darryl Bell, ‘Practical Implications for Consecration.’”

⁹ Arrested Development! Ha! (Some of you will understand. If not, just ask me)