

Rejoicing in What Honors Christ
Deacon Installation/South Woods' 39th Anniversary
Philippians 2:25–30
April 19, 2026

I'm not going to ask you to raise your hands, but I wonder how many of you have heard the name Jony Ive? I don't think I've *ever* asked that question here, but I've asked it many, many times in various classes. And in my experience, 95% of people do *not* recognize that name.

After that question, I *then* ask, “Ok, but how many of you have an iPhone, a MacBook, or an iPad?” Of course, quite a few hands go up. And then I say, “Jony Ive was the chief designer on all three of those products.” He was Steve Jobs' #2. And almost no one knows his name.

Epaphroditus, anyone?

In our day, it's bride over bridesmaid. It's dunk rather than assist. No one aims for second fiddle. The world's after *glory*. And, in our day, honor comes to those in first, those that are visible, *and* those that let us know—visibly—that they *are* in first.

Of course, *we* didn't come up with that. Throughout history, in every age and in every place, the human heart has been quite consistent.

And that includes first-century Philippi. We discussed this a number of years ago when we were going through Philippians, but it's helpful to think of Philippi as a mini-Rome, that is, Rome in miniature.¹ That doesn't *merely* mean that it had a particular architecture or a particular kind of soldier; it also means the city had a distinctive Roman culture and ethos. I say that to say that in this culture, a Roman world *obsessed* with honor, males competed for acclaim² and vigorously pursued rank and titles, as “prizes to be competitively sought.”³

In fact, the victors would *display* their titles, “in ‘résumé form’ on inscriptions throughout the colony.”⁴ In Rome, *and* in Philippi, they hung their pedigree and degrees for all to see, *chiseling* them in the town square.⁵ In our terms, we might say that the Romans retweeted themselves, liked their own posts, and occasionally separated their shoulder patting themselves on the back.

In the middle of *that city*, and *that* self-exalting culture, God in Christ drew a people to Himself; He united them in a local church; and He taught them a different way to live.

And nowhere in the letter is that contrast more evident than in Philippians 2. Here, Paul makes clear that what the church honors is *not* necessarily what the world honors. Further, he goes on to say that what the church rejoices in is not necessarily what the world rejoices in. Because God's people honor, and they rejoice in, that which honors Christ.

In today's text, *that* particular emphasis is seen in the life of Epaphroditus.

1. Epaphroditus and Paul (2:25a)

Paul writes in verse 25: **But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker, and fellow soldier.**

Now, *we* don't know much about this guy, but the Philippians certainly did. As so did Paul. The balance of the passage will tell us a good bit more, but to begin, *here* are a few bare-bone details

¹ Alec Motyer, *Philippians*, BST, 15.

² Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT, 47

³ Hellerman, 11.

⁴ Hellerman, 4.

⁵ Archeologists have found many of these. See Hellerman, 107.

that help us understand what's going on. First, this letter is one of Paul's prison epistles. He's writing the Philippian church while bound in the city of Rome.⁶ And while it's *not* as scary as his second Roman imprisonment, he knows it's possible his persecution could escalate quickly.

The Philippian church knew that too. So, they sent Epaphroditus to minister to him, and to carry a gift from the church to the Apostle. Then, Paul sends him *back*, carrying the letter we're reading.

He, verse 25: **thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus**. Paul sends him back; but he does so with his commendation. He lists three descriptors of him. Note that the three build; and they move from general to specific.⁷ First, he calls Epaphroditus **my brother**. As we've said in the past, "brother" in that day was *not* a trite term, nor filler, as if Paul had a word count he needed to meet. The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes that God's people are a new family. To become a child of God meant one had a new Father. And to have a new Father also meant there were new brothers and sisters.⁸

Speaking of, the name Epaphroditus comes from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess that was worshipped *throughout* the Greco-Roman world.⁹ As you might guess, his name, in that place, makes it almost certain that Epaphroditus was a Gentile convert.¹⁰ Keep in mind Paul's background, as a Hebrew of Hebrews, a former Pharisee. These are not two men that would've naturally gravitated toward one another. Yet, Paul calls him "brother."

The first question of the deacon questionnaire we gave these men asked them to tell us how they came to faith. Here are a few excerpts: "my coming to Christ was made possible by God Himself." Another, "God used different men, in different ways, with His perfect timing, to convict me, to bring me to Himself, and to give me assurance in the salvation He provided me." One more, "I remember reading a children's book about Jesus dying on the cross. I realized for the first time that the two thieves have very different fates. One repented and was saved but the other, knowing who Christ was, rejected Him. In that moment my eyes were opened that I was that second thief." I could go on, but as I read each of those forms again this week, I was reminded that God Himself brought us together. Would all these guys have hung out in high school? Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know. It doesn't matter! No one unites like the Spirit of God.

But Paul has another descriptor, one that's a bit more specific. He calls Epaphroditus a **fellow worker**. Unlike "brother," this is *not* a term used of believers in general.¹¹ It's the Greek word *sunergos*. I bring this one up because for *years* South Woods brewed a coffee on Sundays called Sunergos. And I've said before, it's a *great* name for coffee. Because *sunergos* means "working with."¹² Or, as translated here, applied to a person, a **fellow worker**.

That's how Paul describes Epaphroditus, as someone that worked *alongside* him. Paul's not *above* him. They work *together*. Because gospel ministry is a shared labor. If we were to list *all* the co-workers Paul names in his letters, the number would almost *certainly* be larger than we think. Romans 16 *alone* has 25 names. *Unlike* the world around him, and maybe *unlike* the world around us, Paul didn't pride himself on not needing anyone else, stiffening his lip and getting after it solo.¹³

⁶ Peter O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC, 20; Moises Silva, *Philippians*, BEC, 7.

⁷ O'Brien, 329–333.

⁸ See Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family*, 77; 124. Paul wrote 13 letters and used this word 139 times.

⁹ Hellerman, 154–156.

¹⁰ O'Brien 329–333.

¹¹ O'Brien, 329–333.

¹² *-sun* means "with," like synergy or synagogue; *-ergos* means "work," like ergonomic.

¹³ His association with so many fellow workers was unparalleled in early Christian missionary activity, Hellerman, 157.

He had fellow workers. And on this I won't speak of the deacons being installed today. I will *eventually*, I'm confident. But today I can, and should, speak of the ones that *have* served this body for decades. They're brothers; *and* they're fellow workers.

And I'd apply the third descriptor of Epaphroditus to them as well. Paul calls his brother and fellow worker, also, a **fellow soldier**. This would've been a significant honor in Philippi, as Octavian founded the city as a Roman military colony.¹⁴ At various points since its beginning, rulers populated Philippi with Roman veterans from the war. The Philippian church knew what a soldier was. And Paul calls Epaphroditus that.

And it's a good descriptor for those that serve in ministry together. I'll be a little "on the nose." The past couple years have been marked by more ministry blessing than I should have received in my *entire* life. We're in a good season; thanks be to the Lord. But in 19 years here, the reality is that there have been tough seasons. And I think it's important, on a day like today, when we're *both* considering our 39th church anniversary and installing new deacons, that I say aloud: the men who've *been* in these roles—to a man—have been *with* me, as fellow workers and fellow soldiers. I have lots of pastor friends who feel alone, unsupported, as if they're climbing a hill on their own. I've *never* felt that way with my band of brothers. And both elders and deacons have given me scores of reasons *not* to feel that way—ever.

Paul affirms Epaphroditus before the church. And maybe we should consider the word, "fellow." Paul calls Epaphroditus a "fellow" worker and a "fellow" soldier. Paul's quite intentional—in this letter—not to elevate himself unduly. Look at the very first verse of the epistle: **Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus** (Phil. 1:1). Does he have more impressive titles he could've listed?¹⁵ Absolutely. But, again, the Philippian context to which Paul wrote *obsessed* over rank. In the first seven words of this letter, Paul introduces a major theme of his epistle, that of service.

It's something Paul embodied. And it's something Epaphroditus embodied, as he served Paul—and the Philippians.

2. Epaphroditus and the church at Philippi (2:25b–29)

The next two descriptors in verse 25 speak, *not* to Epaphroditus's relationship to Paul, but to his relationship to the local church he was a part of. Verse 25 goes on: **who is also your messenger and minister to my need.**

"Your messenger" is a good translation of that term. He's the one *they* sent—their envoy. Clearly the church at Philippi trusted him. This was no small task, to travel in that day, to give him charge over their funds, and send him to Paul.¹⁶

Because he was not *only* their messenger, Paul also said he was a **minister to my need**. "Minister" here is *not* the word *diakonos*, where we get our term "deacon." That'd be *entirely* too convenient. But it is a translation of a word that means, simply, to serve.¹⁷

On behalf of the Philippian church, as their commissioned representative, he served. Does that *merely* mean the gift he brought? Absolutely not. Epaphroditus wasn't to merely drop off the package like he worked for Fred Smith's company. Instead, it seems as if the church expected him to stay—and while staying nearby, do all he could to serve Paul. They couldn't *all* be there, so they sent

¹⁴ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 25.

¹⁵ In both Romans 1 and Titus 1, he includes "apostle" alongside "servant."

¹⁶ O'Brien, 329–333.

¹⁷ λειτουργος (*leitourgos*)

Epaphroditus as an expression of their common life. He showed up so that he might minister, on their behalf, to one they all loved.¹⁸

And while he did, something became quite clear to Paul, that is, Epaphroditus loved his church. In fact, Paul sends him *back*, in part, for this reason. Verse 26: **because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.** The language indicates that this was an ongoing longing—something he just couldn't shake—an *ongoing* concern Epaphroditus had in regard to the church at Philippi. People he cared for heard that he was quite sick. And he couldn't pick up the phone and alleviate their fears.

And this is *largely* why Paul sends him back. Paul's concern for Epaphroditus' concern regarding the Philippians' concern. Everyone's thinking of everyone else! This was no *mere* one-sided affection. Epaphroditus cared for his local church. And his local church cared for him.

Which is something the Lord's done here as well. Let me read a few excerpts from the huge stack of nomination forms we received. The Lord has been kind to send men that love this church, to grow them up in grace, and to give the body eyes to see that growth. Here are a few excerpts from your nominations:

“ _____ is sober-minded, quick to serve.”

“ _____ is faithful in several areas of service and not self-seeking.”

“ _____ is a serious-minded man of integrity. He does not say one thing and do another. His profession of faith in Christ is reflected in the way he lives.”

“ _____ exudes dignity and faithfulness.”

“ I perceive an eagerness in _____ to help others. He loves and serves, that is clear.”

“ _____ is a man of scriptural convictions. He loves his wife and kids.”

“ _____ has a servant heart and sound judgment of the word of God. The love of Christ radiates through him in conversations.”

“ _____ is one of the many men at South Woods that I look up to, as a leader, father, and husband. I hope to have the fortitude to serve others as _____ does.”

“ _____ takes on multiple roles to serve the church alongside the current deacons, such that naming them to the office would merely be granting a title to the substantive works they already do.”

I could go on, of course. There was one nomination form that was a beautifully handwritten five-paragraph essay with an introduction, something of a thesis, three points, and a conclusion.

Why say all that? Because it shows, not *only* the honor we'll consider in a moment, but the affection this body has for one another. And those forms are merely a thimbles-worth of what the Lord produces by grace in and among His people.

Epaphroditus cared so much about his local body, and their concern for him, that Paul sent him *back* to them. By the way, verse 26 says **he was longing for you all.** I bring that up because “you all” is *not* merely a plural pronoun. In the original, the word “all” is in there, alongside “you.” And that means he was longing for “*all* of you.” Paul described his affection as a care for each and every person.

I think on a day like this I'm supposed to exhort the deacon candidates. So, here's a challenge. Don't pick and choose. This is, of course, also a challenge to us all. Get to know someone you don't already know. Serve them. And see the manifold beauty of the body of Christ.

¹⁸ Don't forget that Paul brought the gospel to them!

Epaphroditus was sick to the point of death; but in the Lord's kindness he survived. Verse 27 goes on, describing it: **but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.**

I can't skip the phrase, "But God had mercy on him." I can't skip it because that's *all* of our story. But to be more specific, when Epaphroditus didn't succumb to his illness, Paul made sure to call it God's mercy. And not only on the messenger, but on him too. Paul wasn't a stoic. If his brother, his fellow worker, and his fellow soldier had died serving him, it would've *grieved* Paul. It would've been a heavy blow, **sorrow upon sorrow.**

There was mercy. And, after that mercy, Paul doesn't merely look out for his own interests (Phil. 2:3–4). Verse 28: **Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice.** Paul writes a letter *about* joy. He sends it *for* their joy. And he sends it through a mailman whose very presence was to bring about joy. It's joy upon joy upon joy.

In fact, that's what's commanded in verse 29: **Receive him then in the Lord with all joy.** He instructs them to do something they would've *likely* done anyways. But the Lord is always concerned about our affections—that we *love* the right things, *honor* the right things, and *rejoice* in the right things. And when Epaphroditus came, there was to be no particle of chagrin or resentment.¹⁹ With all joy means they were to receive him with a joy that's full—unmixed and unreserved.²⁰

And as verse 29 goes on, he instructs them to **hold men like him in high regard.** At this point, the right question would be, "Who are men *like* him? Who was Epaphroditus?"

That's *some* of why Paul's described him in such detail. He was a brother, a fellow worker, and a fellow soldier. It's *also* why Paul described, not only who he was, but what he did. Because what he *did* showed something of who he was. Epaphroditus gave *of* himself, even at great cost *to* himself. He served Paul's good above his own. He regarded the interests of the Philippians first.

With that in mind, we might ask ourselves, "What does it produce in our heart and mind when we're consistently putting ourselves in second place, doing things no one notices, and doing so for a long time?" Maybe your honest answer is "frustration." Of course, the biblical answer is, "humility."

Throughout Christian history, in much of the evangelical world today, Epaphroditus is a trivia question—nothing more. Little to no one talks about him. But Paul instructs the church to rejoice when they see him coming. In Philippi, a place where titles and accomplishments were etched into columns, the Philippian Christians were to honor a *different* kind of man.²¹

And they were to do so, not because of his intrinsic worth, but because he reflected *Another*. At this point, the question is not *merely* "Who is Epaphroditus?" but "Who does he look like?"

3. Epaphroditus and Christ (2:30)

To see this, we have to zoom out a bit here.

Though you're likely aware of what's been going on in Philippians 2, it needs to be said that the commendation of Epaphroditus *continues* a theme.²² The chapter *began* with the admonition to make Paul's joy complete **by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose** (Phil. 2:2). And then Paul's more specific about what would bring that about, instructing them to do what he'd already done, that is, *not* act out of selfishness, but with

¹⁹ O'Brien 340–341.

²⁰ O'Brien, 341.

²¹ O'Brien, 154–155, "Honor is awarded to citizens of God's countercultural commonwealth, for behavior that would have been seen as wholly dishonorable by the dominant culture"

²² O'Brien, 154–155.

humility of mind regard one another as more important; and to not merely look out for your own interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3–4).

And it's with *that* instruction in mind that we *then* read the well-known hymn about Christ. Because what Paul instructs the Philippians to do is *precisely* what Jesus of Nazareth had already done. He, the One who'd made all of humanity, the One to whom praise from every tongue was due, took the form of a servant. The One to whom all should bow in reverence and honor, the One the heavens glorify, bent and bowed Himself to scrub the grimy feet of men. He came not to be served, but to serve. Over and over again in the gospels, He “deacons.” Rather than exploit His people with His unparalleled power or advantage, He poured Himself out for their good.

If someone was reading Philippians 2, or hearing it, that's what was *just* read. And a few verses later, when speaking of Epaphroditus, Paul makes sure we don't miss the connection. The church at Philippi was to honor him, *not* because of him alone, but because of Who he mirrored—the One his deeds point to. Verse 30: **because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.**

There's a lot we could say, but let me point out two things in this verse. First, “for the work of Christ” is *emphasized* in the text.²³ Paul's saying that what Epaphroditus did was not *loosely* connected to what Christ was accomplishing in and for His people, but that their messenger had risked his life, and served him, for the very purpose of Christ's work.

But note secondly the phrase translated, “to death.” That important phrase signifies the idea, ‘to the point of’ and was *often* used to note the *degree* to which someone was willing to go.²⁴ And, quite significantly, the phrase occurs *only* here in verse 30 and back in Philippians 2:8, where Paul wrote of Christ **humbling Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.**²⁵ Again, that's *just* a few verses prior. And again, Paul does *not* use the language elsewhere. As one commentator puts it, “the echo is deliberate.”²⁶ Nothing's by chance.

And the picture is clear. Christ poured Himself out, in order to serve. Paul imitated Christ. And as *he* imitated Christ, Epaphroditus imitated Paul. Those kinds of men—**men like him**—are given for the joy of the church. And the church is instructed to honor men like that, to hold them in high regard.²⁷

Because God's people honor, and rejoice in, that which honors Christ.

Conclusion

No matter what the world does, constantly praising those who turn the camera on themselves, those that make sure to tell us—visibly—that *they* are in first.

In fact, the church exists, in part, to say out loud what the world will *never* say. That is, those who show up and give of themselves in quiet service for the sake of Christ's work—*those* are the ones worthy of honor. *Not* because of what they've done, but because of Who they look like—the One who came not to *be* served, but to serve.

²³ Hellerman, “The causal adverbial modifier *dia ton ergon Christou* (‘for the work of Christ’) is emphatically placed at the beginning of the clause,” 163-164.

²⁴ Hellerman, 163-164.

²⁵ The words, “to death,” are identical with “unto death” in 2:8, Motyer, 144.

²⁶ O'Brien, 343.

²⁷ I suspect the reward in heaven for faithful deacons will be great.