

## Philippians 2:25-30

### Epaphroditus

*Hold such in reputation... - v. 29*

We saw in our last study that Paul wanted to send Timothy to the Philippians to check up on them – and for good reason. Timothy was a man that was likeminded with Paul. Timothy was so close to Christ that being spiritual came naturally to him. *I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state* Paul writes in v. 20. And besides these things the Christians at Philippi knew the proof of Timothy. *Ye know the proof of him*, Paul writes in v. 22 *that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in the gospel.*

As much, then, as Paul desired to send Timothy to them we go on to read of another pressing matter that was upon Paul's heart – a matter that so concerned him that he would postpone his plan to send Timothy to them but would send someone else instead. That someone else was a man by the name of Epaphroditus. We read of him in v. 25 *Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus.*

All that we know of Epaphroditus is given to us in this epistle to the Philippians. He's mentioned in these last verses in chp. 2 and he's also mentioned later in chp. 4. In chp. 4 we see that Epaphroditus was from Philippi and that he had been chosen by the saints there to execute the task of taking a donation from the Philippians to Paul during Paul's imprisonment at Rome. Listen to the words of Phil. 4:18 *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.*

Now the reason for this change of plan that would lead Paul to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi instead of Timothy becomes evident in v. 26 *For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick.* There's really something very remarkable in this statement that magnifies the kind of Christian character that we find in this man Epaphroditus. Usually the way things work is that when you learn that someone is very sick you desire to go to them and to minister to them. This was the positive quality initially in Job's friends. They heard that Job was sick and they adjusted their schedules and coordinated their plans so that they could go to see Job.

In the case before us it's Epaphroditus that was sick, indeed he had been very sick to the point that he had nearly died. But in God's merciful providence his life was spared and we see from v. 26 that even though he had been very sick it was his desire to return to Philippi because of his concern for them. He knew that they would have been concerned for him and this knowledge pressed upon him a heavy burden for them. He simply wanted to return to them in order to assure them that God had been merciful to him and that he was well.

I can't deny that as I thought on the physical sickness of Epaphroditus I couldn't help but think that this would be a timely study given how many of our own people have been struggling with strong hitting colds and flues. We feel the burden for them and hopefully it

will be their desire to return to us in order to comfort us with the knowledge that they've recovered from their sicknesses. So Paul's plan to send Timothy was postponed in order that Paul might send Epaphroditus back to his home church at Philippi. The thing I want to draw your attention to this morning is the charge that Paul gives to the Philippians regarding Epaphroditus in v. 29. Notice what it says there: *Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation.*

Other versions translate the charge this way: *So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men* (ESV); Even more to the point I want to focus on is this translation from the NAS: *Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard.* Each of these translations bring out an important lesson and the lesson is that not only is Epaphroditus himself to be received gladly and honored and esteemed but Paul is making the point that the Philippians should do the same for all such men that are like Epaphroditus. *Receive him* Paul writes but *hold such* or *hold men like him in reputation* or *with honor or high regard.* Not just Epaphroditus himself but all men like him should be held in high regard.

Let me ask you a question this morning that is important for us all but is especially important for our children to consider. What kind of men do you consider to be heroes? A hero is someone that you respect and admire. A hero is a person that demonstrates certain character traits that lead you to say – *I want to be just like that man.* I have a book written by Iain Murray that is entitled *Heroes.* In this book Iain Murray gives biographical sketches of seven characters that are rightly esteemed to be heroes in the faith.

Unfortunately in our day heroes are kind of hard to come by. There are those, to be sure, that have their sports heroes but it seems these days that sports heroes have an increasing tendency to disappoint you. Some of you thought, perhaps, that you had a sports hero in Lance Armstrong. Armstrong was a cancer survivor who went on to win the tour de France bicycle race a number of times in a row. But in recent days he's admitted to the use of illegal muscle enhancing drugs which gave him an unfair advantage. His awards have been revoked and he's been disgraced.

I had not followed college football closely enough to know the name Manti T'eo. Manti T'eo was a linebacker who played for Notre Dame and was the runner up nominee for the Heisman trophy this last year. It seems that he had a girl friend that was dying of cancer and that this girl friend encouraged him to keep playing even though she was dying. This story evidently added a very dramatic dimension to the coverage of Notre Dame football until it was revealed that the whole thing was a hoax.

Manti T'eo's dying girl friend was a digital creation that he had not ever actually met in person. And yet he played the part of someone who was in a close relationship with a dying but non-existent person. Many sports fans are now scratching their heads and wondering if this episode was invented to try to give the football player a dramatic edge for the Heisman trophy or if the young man was, as he now claims, duped by someone playing a prolonged and cruel joke on him.

I only reference him now as an example of a hero in some young people's eyes but a hero who let people down. We can certainly do better and should do better than choosing sports figures or Hollywood actors to be our heroes. Paul presents to us the kind of person we should admire and respect and imitate in the person of Epaphroditus. Here was and is a true hero indeed – one who hazarded his life in order to serve Christ and not to serve Christ in some grand way that would bring him fame. No he was willing to serve Christ in a way that would be inconspicuous in the eyes of other men.

He would simply perform an errand for his church. He would travel to Rome to bring some material things to Paul that would help Paul be more comfortable in his imprisonment. But he would be faithful in this task and would see it through even when he would become so sick that it would appear that he would die. Here is a man to admire and imitate. Here indeed is a man that shows us what it means to have the mind of Christ and what it means to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

I want to take a closer look at this man, Epaphroditus, today. And the question I want to raise and endeavor to answer is simply this:

### Why Should Such Men be Gladly Received and Highly Regarded?

Consider with me first of all that such men should be highly regarded:

#### I. Because of Our Relationship with Them

Look again at v. 25 where Paul writes *Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother.*

I listened to a sermon on this character Epaphroditus this past week that was preached by Al Martin. In his message he goes into some detail about the meaning of the name Epaphroditus. Needless to say it's not a Jewish name. It's a definite Gentile name which means according to one dictionary *belonging to Aphrodite or Venus*. And so the pagan heritage of this man is at once evident in his name. He evidently came from a family that saw fit to name him after the false gods that they undoubtedly worshipped.

This is not the kind of person, therefore, that would be well received in Jewish circles. And when the Apostle Paul still went by the name Saul of Tarsus the last thing you would ever hear Saul of Tarsus call a Gentile would be a brother *my brother*. This perhaps more than anything else is what caused the Jews to hate Paul.

Here you had a Jewish missionary with a Jewish Bible teaching about a Jewish Messiah going to the Gentiles and telling them that they were joint-heirs with Christ and therefore brothers with Paul in the faith. You remember the scene in Acts 22 when Paul addressed the Jewish mob that had apprehended him and were about to kill him making it necessary for the Romans to rescue him. Paul was given permission to address that crowd and initially they were quiet and attentive especially since Paul was speaking to them in the Hebrew tongue rather than Greek or Aramaic. They listened patiently to Paul until he mentioned

the word *Gentile* and once that word was mentioned they were provoked again to anger and rage and it took the Roman soldiers protection and custody of Paul to save his life from such a mob that was ready to tear him to pieces at the mere mention of the term *Gentile*.

But now in v. 25 of Phil. 2 we find Paul referring to Epaphroditus as a brother and not just any brother but *my brother* Paul calls him. And so it is that Christ himself is happy for his followers to refer to each other as brethren. Mt 23:8 *But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, [even] Christ; and all ye are brethren.* This is not to deny that there are authority structures among Christians. Paul certainly did not hesitate to assert his apostolic authority when the situation called for it.

But apostolic authority notwithstanding there is the recognition in this term, brother, that we all share much in common. We are all sinners by nature. We are all in need of having our sins forgiven. We are all in need of having Christ's righteousness imputed to us. And on account of Christ's life and death we share the blessings of sins forgiven and righteousness imputed to us.

And while Christians perform different functions and may have different titles in terms of their calling we all share a common salvation. We all share a common righteousness and it's a perfect righteousness. The Apostle Paul was certainly gifted in ways that few if any have been. He preached with power, he saw many souls converted, he established churches, he wrote much of the New Testament but notwithstanding his accomplishments the righteousness he possesses is no different than the righteousness you and I possess as followers of Christ. We all possess a righteousness that cannot be improved upon because it's a perfect righteousness.

So we are brothers in the faith. We are brothers in the acknowledgment of our sin and our reception of Christ. We share a common privilege of calling God *Our Father which art in heaven*. We share the common privileges of being adopted into the family of God and being referred to as the sons of God. And because we are in the family of God we do well to receive each other gladly and to hold each other in high regard.

This seems like a very simple precept based on the most basic truth of the gospel and yet how often it is that within the kingdom of Christ some of the most venomous thoughts and words are hurled toward those that we're going to spend eternity with in the presence of Christ. I'll grant you that Christians can do very foolish things and there are times when separation must be applied to disobedient brethren. Paul says as much in his second epistle to the Thessalonians. *And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed* (2Thess 3:14).

This is a sad and tragic situation that Paul describes in 2Thessalonians. And separation was called for with a very definite aim in view – that the erring brother might be ashamed and then repent of his disorderliness. The thing that is often lost sight of, however, is that even when such separation is called for Paul goes on to say in v. 15 *Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.* To treat a brother as an enemy is to engage in

the same kind of disorderliness that the erring brother is engaged in. The fact that as Christians we're brothers means then that we should receive each other gladly and hold each other in high esteem. We are related to each other. But would you consider with me next that we should receive each other gladly and esteem each other highly:

## II. Because of Our Companionship

If the term *brother* makes reference to our relationship with other Christians then the term *companion* makes reference to common activity. Notice again the words of v. 25 *Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour.*

Whenever you think of the advancement of the early church it's hard to envision anyone who labored more zealously or more constantly than the Apostle Paul. It would be a very matter of fact statement for Paul to make when he would write to the Corinthians in 1Co 15:10 *But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which [was bestowed] upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

Such a statement exemplifies for us Paul's earlier exhortation in this chapter that we're to *work out our own salvation with fear and trembling*. In issuing such a command Paul is not calling upon the Philippians or upon us centuries later to do anything that he himself was not doing. Indeed, if in fact it was not Paul but the grace of God that was with him compelling him to serve Christ, motivating him to labor for Christ then we can certainly affirm that the same grace that compelled Paul will compel every believer to do whatsoever he does to the glory of God.

Epaphroditus was certainly that kind of Christian so that Paul could refer to him as a companion in labor. This is not to suggest that Epaphroditus did everything that Paul did or that he did everything to the same degree. We have no record of Epaphroditus starting churches or preaching to multitudes. We have no record of any missionary journeys that this man travelled.

What does become very apparent in Philippians, however, is that this man was willing to serve Christ in whatever capacity he could. Some have suggested that he was an elder in the church at Philippi. He is after all referred to in v. 25 as *your messenger*. Perhaps he was a preacher but perhaps he was a layman. He may have had an occupation in what we sometimes mistakenly refer to as secular work. We can only speculate as to whether or not he was an officer in the church but this much we do know – he was willing to perform a very important labor for the church.

He was willing to travel to Rome. He was willing to bear whatever reproach had to be borne in order to serve the Apostle Paul. Like Onesimus, the runaway slave that Paul refers to in his epistle to Philemon, it could be said of Epaphroditus that he was not ashamed of Paul's chain (2Tim. 1:16). I think it's reasonable to surmise that Epaphroditus sought to communicate the gospel through every opportunity the Lord gave him.

Picture this servant of Christ visiting Paul while Paul was in the custody of a Roman guard. It's not hard to envision him vindicating before that Roman guard the message that Paul preached. You might well envision him addressing Paul's guard, sharing with that guard his own experience of the joy of sins forgiven and the blessing of eternal life.

We've been focusing for some time in our afternoon services on the theme of evangelizing. One very effective way to evangelize is for Christians to engage each other in holy conversation while unsaved sinners are near at hand. You don't have to address them directly. Perhaps that would be difficult and even seem inappropriate. What an effective way to sow gospel seeds by engaging other Christians in holy conversation and telling them in the hearing of others of the power of God's grace.

In this way Epaphroditus would be a companion with Paul in his labors. He would also be a companion in Paul's labors by remembering Paul and remembering the cause of Christ in the place of prayer. Prayer you know is labor – it's work. It's work that requires concentration and effort. This is why, perhaps, there are so many prayerless Christians in our land today. There just aren't that many that will devote themselves to the work of prayer.

And yet how often do you find Paul soliciting the prayers of others – desiring that others would become companions with him in the work of prayer. *Brethren, pray for us* was his request of the Thessalonians. *Withal praying also for us, that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds* (Col 4:3).

It is in connection with prayer especially and with the work of being co-laborers in prayers that the next designation that Paul assigns to Epaphroditus comes in to play. In close connection with being a companion in labor would be the fact that Epaphroditus was also *a fellow soldier* with Paul – *my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier* (v. 25).

A fellow soldier is one who is engaged in the same cause, one who faces the same spiritual foes, one who seeks to advance the kingdom of Christ against the forces of spiritual darkness. He is one that is willing to take to himself the whole armour of God – having his loins girt about with truth, having the breastplate of righteousness and his feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. He is one that takes the shield of faith and wears the helmet of salvation. And the thing to note in that passage that describes the Christian's armour in Eph. 6 is that after Paul describes that armour he then goes on to say in Eph.6:18,19 *Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel.*

Can you not see in these verses a dependence on Christ? Paul could accomplish nothing in his own strength and power. Paul could not advance the gospel in the strength of his own intellect. It takes a power beyond any man to see the light of the gospel dispel the darkness. This is why we must be companions in labor and fellow soldiers in the

advancement of Christ's kingdom. This is also why companions in labor and fellow soldiers in the cause of Christ should be received gladly and held in very high regard. They should be honored because of their relationship and companionship. And then let me mention finally that they should be received gladly and regarded highly:

### III. Because of the Way They Receive and Honor Us

The thing that comes across so clearly in these verses is the mutual love and respect and service between Epaphroditus and Paul as well as Epaphroditus and the saints at Philippi. *He longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick* (v. 26).

What affection and esteem between Epaphroditus and his brothers and sisters in Christ back home. And what affection and esteem between Epaphroditus and the Apostle Paul. *For indeed he was sick, nigh unto death* v. 27. *Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me* (v. 30).

What a testimony to the love of Christ that works in us and flows through us and leads us to such sacrificial service. Do you remember how this second chapter in Philippians began? It begins with the exhortation of Paul that nothing be done through strife or vain glory. It begins with Paul's stated desire that each esteem others more highly than themselves and that each look not only to his own things but also on the things of others.

I know that the chapter divisions in the New Testament are man-made divisions but I can't help but marvel at what a tight unit this second chapter of Philippians is. There's a sense in which the example of Epaphroditus brings us full circle. Here is a man, a Christian, a brother, a fellow soldier and servant of Christ that shows you that it is possible to overcome strife and vainglory. It is possible to get over yourself and get beyond yourself.

When you look out to a world that is engulfed in a culture of pleasure crazed selfish narcissism it can lead you to wonder if the things that Paul talks about in this chapter are character ideals that are nice but are quite beyond us. Epaphroditus and the church at Philippi show us that there is real power in the gospel – power that comes from faith in Christ who perfectly exemplifies Paul's exhortations and who truly looked to the needs of others and sacrificed himself to meet our deepest needs.

It would be wrong to read more into any Bible character than we should. I don't believe Paul is simply using hyperbole when he writes to Timothy and says to him *this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief* – literally *foremost of all*.

These saints in the New Testament were not perfect men. When you note the many and deep and serious issues that Paul must confront in his epistles then you certainly come to know that these were not perfect men or perfect churches except in the sense that they had faith in a perfect Savior. And it was faith in Christ that compelled them to serve each other. It was faith in Christ's love that gave them the capacity to love and to serve each

other based on that love. It was faith in Christ that enabled them to get over themselves and get beyond themselves and to serve others in such a way that it defied their carnal natures.

These are the kind of people that should be received gladly. These are the kind of people that should be honored and regarded very highly. They're not noted for their fame or fortunes. They're not famous because they're star athletes or glamorous movie stars or country pop artists. But they're way better than that. In many respects they're quite ordinary. They face challenges and temptations and go through high periods and low periods in their lives but the thing that makes them noteworthy and worthy of a glad reception and high regard is the fact that they are Christians.

May the Lord help us, then, to be Christians – Christians like Paul and Timothy and now Epaphroditus – Christians who recognize each other as brothers who labor together for Christ's cause and who esteem each other better than themselves – Christians who out of love for Christ will go so far as to nearly die in order to sacrificially serve each other.