

Philippians 2:19-30 “Timothy and Epaphroditus: or, Humility and Sacrificial Service” August 1, 2010
Read Philippians 2

In Philippians 1:26 Paul had told them that he wanted to come to see them –
but then he launched into his central concern for them,
which is that whether he can come see them or not,
“let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27)
or that you would hold “fast to the word of life” (2:16).
And all of this because you are to have the same mind –
which is the mind of Christ.

And the mind of Christ is an attitude, or disposition,
of humility and sacrificial service.

As we are starting our officer training class on Sunday evenings,
I cannot imagine a better passage to consider!
Because if the church of Jesus Christ is to have this one mind,
then there is no better way to get there,
but by having servant leaders who share this same mind!

And indeed, this is Paul’s point in verses 19-30.
Paul starts with an exhortation to the church – be of one mind (1:27-2:4)
because that who Christ is (and you have been united to him) (2:5-11)
then he returns to his exhortation (2:12-18)
before concluding this section with two examples (2:19-30)

Or to say in another way,
the center of Paul’s exhortation is Christ’s own humiliation and sacrificial service;
and this mind *is yours* in Christ Jesus (because of your union with Christ)
and so therefore you are to look like Jesus (as you imitate Christ)

And if you want to know what this looks like:
look at Timothy and Epaphroditus!

1. Timothy: an Example of Humility (2:19-24)

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20 For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. 21 For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

Let’s start by looking at Timothy.
Paul says two things about Timothy

First, he says that Timothy will be “genuinely concerned for your welfare.”
In other words, Timothy seeks the things of Christ, rather than his own interests.

This takes us back to v3:
“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit,
but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”
Paul says that Timothy is a model of humility.
He exemplifies v4:
“Let each of you look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others”
(remember that there is no “only” v4 –
the point is that as Christ did not seek his own interests,
neither should you!)
Paul wants the Philippians to know that Timothy concern for them is genuine.

Second, Paul says in verse 22 that *they know* Timothy’s proven worth.
It’s not clear why Paul is emphasizing this.
Some have thought that the Philippians had doubts about Timothy.
Others think that the Philippians had asked Paul to send Timothy to them,
and Paul is explaining why he cannot.

I prefer not to speculate about *why* – so I won’t!
Whatever additional reason Paul may have had for including this,
there is a very simple reason for saying this.
Paul wants them to think back to the time when Paul and Timothy were there.
Remember how “as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.”
Think about what this showed you of the mind of Christ.
Think of his humility.
You know what I am talking about.

I’m talking about Timothy.

This is what our internship program is all about.
We’ve done this with various seminarians in the past.
And it is what we want to do with our deacon and elder trainees from now on.

But in order for this to work,
we need to see the all-important preposition “with.”
Paul does not say that Timothy “served *me*” –
but rather, he served “*with me* in the gospel.”

It’s a worthy model for elders and deacons to consider as we train up future officers.
But it’s also a worthy model for parents to consider with your children.
Yes, as parents you have the authority to tell them what to do.
But how do you think about your children?
Do you think of them as serving “with you” in the gospel?
As you disciple your children –
as you prepare them for Christ’s service –
remember that your job is to bring them alongside you,
so that your child is your fellow-laborer.

And this is where the contrast between Timothy and “they all” is so striking.

Who are these “all” who seek their own interests?

These would be people in Paul’s circle –
probably the “most of the brothers” in verses 14-15
who are preaching boldly because of Paul’s imprisonment.

We need to stop here for a moment.

Too often we have this idyllic picture of the early church
as a time when the church was healthy and strong...

But “I have no one like Timothy, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.
For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”

Paul always traveled with a “traveling presbytery.”

He always had several fellow-workers, evangelists,
interns, students, or “team members.”

But as Paul looks around this circle –
as he considers the spiritual maturity and preparation of these men,
he tells the Philippians that those who are with him
are not yet what they should be.

(Now, part of this may be that Paul had a habit of sending out those who were fully trained –
and so he is constantly left with a half-trained bunch of interns
who have not yet really gotten the point!)

Even allowing for some hyperbole (what about Epaphroditus?!),
we need to recall that apostleship did not give Paul the ability to change hearts,
and that people in the first century were generally as Spirit-filled
as people in the twenty-first century.

The problem in Rome (or wherever Paul is)
is the same problem as the problem in Philippi:
each is seeking their own interests.

Everyone is too busy with their own affairs to be concerned for Philippi.

It may even be that everyone is too busy with “church affairs”!

It doesn’t mean that everyone around him is wicked and depraved.

It means that they do not yet have a clear vision of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Maybe they are young guys

who are preoccupied with their own preparation for the gospel ministry.

Maybe they are older men

who are focused on the needs of their own community.

Whatever the case is,

Paul sees that they do not have a big-picture approach to the kingdom.

They are allowing local interests to trump the interests of Christ.

Here you see something of a gap between Paul's vision of what is ours in Christ Jesus –
and our experience of that new reality!

Paul sees that the mind of Christ – that mindset of humility and sacrificial service –
is ours in Christ Jesus.

But he also understands that our knowledge of this mindset,
and our experience – our practice – of this mindset,
may fall short of the new reality!

What does this teach us?

Some might take from this that it is okay to have low expectations.
“I'm not what I should be – so what? Who is?”

Do you get that sense from Paul?
No!!!

Paul's exhortation to the Philippians is designed to call them to press on,
to leave all else behind,
in their pursuit of Christ.

And in this respect Paul is an incurable optimist.
He sees who Christ is.

And he sees who you are in Christ.

And so he says, “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you
will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (1:6)

He has *no one* around him who is “genuinely concerned” for the Philippians.
No one who is seeking the interests of Jesus Christ.

Except Timothy.

And yet, Paul has tremendous confidence that, in the end, they will all be
pure and blameless in the day of Christ.

Do you have any idea how *nuts* this looks?

We're about 30 years after the resurrection of Christ.

Christianity has taken root in some Jewish communities in Palestine,
Syria, Turkey, and Greece
and a handful of Gentiles have joined as well.

Amongst the millions of inhabitants of the Roman Empire,
there *might* be 50,000 at this time who believe in Jesus.

You could fit the entire Christian church in Paul's day
into Notre Dame's football stadium.

And most of that 50,000 is squabbling over the necessity of circumcision,
who gets to be the leaders of the movement,
and a hundred other matters.

Why is Paul so resolutely optimistic?

Because he understands that God has seated as his right hand.

All that God had promised to Israel has been given to Jesus.

And the Lord Jesus has poured out his Spirit upon the church
in order to accomplish his purposes.

And so Paul goes forth to preach and persuade and convince –
knowing that the power of his preaching,
the persuasion of his ministry,
is not himself, but the Spirit of God.

God has promised that he will put all things under Jesus' feet.

And Christ has called Paul to preach this good news.

I have to say that this is the only reason why I can be a cheerful pastor!

It's not my job to "change" you.

It's not my job to "make" you do anything!

That's the Holy Spirit's job!

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you

will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ!

All *I* have to do is be faithful to what God has put in front of me to do.

It would be far more enjoyable for me, and profitable for you,
if you turn out to be more like Timothy than "they all,"

but then again, I need to imitate Paul, as Paul imitated Christ!

Paul concludes this section by saying:

23 I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, 24 and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

Paul does not know how the Lord will dispose of matters.

He needs someone like Timothy for the moment –
but he will send him as soon as he can.

2. Epaphroditus: an Example of Sacrificial Service (2:25-30)

But Paul recognizes that he needs to send someone immediately.

25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need,

Paul referred to Timothy as his "child" –

but Epaphroditus as his "brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier."

This is the way that Paul refers to a fellow-minister in the gospel.

According to an early tradition, he is believed to be the first bishop of Philippi, and Paul's manner of speaking is consistent with this.

In verse 25, Epaphroditus is called your "messenger and minister" – the words here are *apostolos* and *leitourgos*.

The word "apostle" simply means "one who is sent" or "messenger" – and he is not referred to as an "apostle of Christ" – but an "apostle of the Philippians" –

so Paul is not saying that Epaphroditus is one of the 12 apostles.

But, his use of the word certainly suggests that he thinks very highly of Epaphroditus.

The word "*leitourgos*" is connected with what Paul says in verse 30,

and how Epaphroditus nearly died to complete what was lacking in your "liturgy" to me.

As you can tell, the word "*leitourgos*" and "*leiturgeia*"

do not mean what our English word "liturgy" has come to mean!

In Greek civic usage, a *leitourgos* was a public servant – often with financial resources – which fits neatly with the financial assistance that the Philippians had sent.

But if all you see is the public service aspect of this word,

then you would think of Epaphroditus solely in terms of mercy ministry – helping Paul in his need.

But Paul sees Epaphroditus's sacrificial service as having priestly overtones.

The words "*leitourgos*" and "*leiturgeia*" are used regularly in the OT to refer to specifically religious service.

In the LXX "*leiturgeia*" refers to the priestly service in the temple (18 usages in Numbers and 21 in Chronicles).

These words can be used to refer to household servants, but the NT regularly uses these "liturgy" words

with a similar sense of priestly or religious service.

And since Paul himself has just used the image of being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrificial service (the "sacrifice and *leiturgeia*") of your faith (v17),

we should not think that Paul leaves that aspect of the word totally aside only eight verses later.

So what is Paul saying here?

Think about the big picture of Paul's world.

In Paul's world, the idea of sacrifice included both a financial and a religious component.

First, It was an act of worship – that was also expensive.

A bull is not cheap.

Goats are more plentiful, but they are still costly.

To engage in worship is expensive.

If you think about the way the NT talks about this side of things,
in one sense, true worship is so expensive, that you can't afford it!
The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin.
Only the precious blood of Christ could make atonement for us.
But in another sense, because Christ has paid for our sins,
the sacrifice that God requires of us is simply ourselves:
that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

2nd, Religious sacrifices included provision for the priests.
The burnt offering was burnt whole,
but all the other offerings included portions for the priests.
Grain offerings, peace offerings, sin and guilt offerings –
all included portions for the priest.

(And tithes and firstfruits included provision for the priests and Levites as well)

While Paul does not think of the minister as a priest in the strict sense of the word,
he does argue that there is a parallel in 1 Corinthians 9:13 –
“Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service
get their food from the temple,
and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings?
In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel
should get their living by the gospel.”
And while Paul did not avail himself of that right –
when the Philippians send him financial gifts,
he uses the same sort of language to talk about it.

And you can see why based on the first point:
if we offer ourselves as living sacrifices,
then there is a part of “us” – a part of our sacrifice –
that should go for the maintenance of the ministry,
and the preaching of the gospel to the nations.

And if you look forward into Philippians,
you see the same connection between the financial and the priestly
in 4:18 –
*I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent,
a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*

I think part of the modern confusion is that we do not understand sacrificial terminology.
When we think of “sacrifices”
we tend to think of shedding blood for the forgiveness of sins.
We think of the concept of atonement.
But Paul here draws on a long-standing biblical tradition of the “pleasing” sacrifice,
that is not directly related to making atonement for sin.

And part of the *point* of the sacrificial system was to express wholehearted devotion to God.
It is expensive because it is designed to show that *all* that I have, and *all* that I am,
belong to God – and are devoted to his service.
And if you are not devoted to his service,
then your gifts are an abomination to him!

For example:

Psalm 51:16-17 *For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.*

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Proverbs 15:8 – *The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord,
but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.*

Jeremiah 6:20 *What use to me is frankincense that comes from Sheba,
or sweet cane from a distant land?*

*Your burnt offerings are not acceptable,
nor your sacrifices pleasing to me.*

There was nothing “magical” about sacrifices.
And the NT teaches the same basic point:

Or as Peter says in 1 Peter 2:5

*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house,
to be a holy priesthood,
to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

Or Hebrews 13:16

*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have,
for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

Notice that Christ’s once-for-all atoning sacrifice
does not result in the elimination of all sacrificial language
from Christian worship and ministry.

Rather, all sacrificial language becomes oriented around his once-for-all sacrifice.
Because he has offered the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sin,
therefore we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving,
we offer our selves as living sacrifices,
that all that we are and all that we have
is now devoted to Christ and his kingdom.

And this is true both for the church as a whole –
but also for her ordained ministry (in this case, Epaphroditus).

And you see this practically in how devoted Epaphroditus has been to his ministry:

26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. 29 So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, 30 for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Epaphroditus risked his life.

We don't know the whole story.

Since the Philippians had already heard what had happened,

Paul doesn't bother to explain the details!

And yes, I'm sure it would have made a great story –

but if we needed to know the details, Paul would have told us!

So in one sense, the *point* becomes that much clearer:

Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ.

In other words, Epaphroditus is one who understands that to live is Christ; to die is gain.

And the lesson for the Philippians (as for us) is that they should honor such men.

Perhaps the Philippians had some difficulty with their attitude toward those in authority.

Paul has warned them against grumbling and questioning (2:14),

he keeps bringing up these issues of honor and leadership (1:26, 2:12, 2:16),

and he addressed the bishops and deacons in the opening (1:1).

So perhaps Paul is holding Epaphroditus up as an example of sacrificial service

in order to gently exhort the Philippians towards greater fidelity

in honoring their leaders.

And notice also – once again – the theme of rejoicing!

He prays for them “with joy” (1:4)

He speaks of their progress and joy in the faith (1:25)

He urges them to complete his joy (2:2)

He rejoices in the midst of his trials (1:18)

He rejoices in the thought of his martyrdom (2:17)

and calls them to rejoice with him in this as well (2:18)

And so here he calls the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus in the Lord with all joy – that they may rejoice at seeing him again.