

The Christian's Contentment

Timothy and Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:19-30

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Timothy and Epaphroditus

Scripture

We are in a sermon series on Paul's letter to the Philippians that I am calling, "The Christian's Contentment."

After the opening greeting, Paul's thanksgiving, and prayer, he wanted the Philippians to know that despite his imprisonment, the gospel was still advancing. Then, he urged them to live for Christ. However, like every church in every age the Philippian Church faced the danger of discord and disunity. So, Paul encouraged the believers to strive for spiritual unity, which was based on Christ's example of humility. And, with Christ as the example, Paul urged believers to live as lights in the world. Then Paul wrote about Timothy and Epaphroditus, two men who followed the example of Christ and were worthy of imitation.

Let's read about Timothy and Epaphroditus in Philippians 2:19-30:

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. 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.

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, 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. (Philippians 2:19-30)

Introduction

My New Testament professor, D. A. Carson wrote:

When I was an undergraduate at McGill University thirty years ago, studying chemistry and mathematics, another Christian student and I began an evangelistic Bible study in the men's dorm where we were living. We were both a little nervous and didn't want to be outnumbered, so we invited only three unbelievers, expecting that not more than one or two would show up. It was rather distressing when all three put in an appearance. I had never done anything like this before. Within a few weeks, sixteen students squeezed into my little dorm room, and still only two of us were believers. Doubtless some Christian observers thought it was going exceedingly well; as for me, I was exceedingly frightened. The Bible study engendered all kinds of private discussions, and I soon discovered that I was out of my depth.

Mercifully, there was a chap on campus called Dave, a rather brusque graduate student who was known to be wonderfully effective in talking to students about his faith and about elementary biblical Christianity. I was not the only one who on occasion brought friends and contacts for a little chat with Dave.

On the particular occasion I have in mind, I brought two of the undergraduates from the Bible study down the mountain to Dave's rooms. He was pressed for time and, as usual, a bit abrupt, but he offered us coffee and promptly turned to the first student.

"Why have you come to see me?" he asked.

The student replied along these lines: "Well, you know, I've been going to this Bible study and I realize I should probably learn a bit more about Christianity. I'd also like to learn something of Buddhism, Islam, and other world religions. I'm sure I should

The Christian's Contentment

broaden my perspectives, and this period while I am a university student seems like a good time to explore religion a little. If you can help me with some of it, I'd be grateful."

Dave stared at him for a few seconds and then said, "I'm sorry, I don't have time for you."

My jaw dropped. The student thus addressed was equally nonplussed and blurted out, "I beg your pardon?"

Dave replied, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but I only have so much time. I'm a graduate student with a heavy program myself. If you have a dilettante's interest in Christianity, I'm sure there are people around who could spend a lot of time and energy showing you the ropes. I can introduce you to some of them and give you some books. When you're really interested in Christ, come and see me again. But under the present circumstances, I don't have time."

He turned to the second student. "Why did you come?"

After listening to the rebuff administered to the first student, the second may have been a bit cowed. But gamely he plowed on. "I come from what you people would call a liberal home. We don't believe the way you do. But it's a good home, a happy home. My parents loved their children; disciplined us; set a good example; and encouraged us to be courteous, honorable, and hardworking. And for the life of me I can't see that you people who think of yourselves as Christians are any better. Apart from a whole lot of abstract theology, what have you got that I haven't?"

This time I held my breath to see what Dave would say. Once again, he stared at his interlocutor for a few seconds, and then he simply said, "Watch me."

I suppose my mouth dropped open again. The student, whose name was Rick, said something like, "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Dave answered, "Watch me. Come and live with me for a month, if you like. Be my guest. Watch what I do when I get up, what I do when I'm on my own, how I work, how I use my time, how I talk with people, and what my values are. Come with me wherever I go. And at the end of the month, you tell me if there is any difference."

Rick did not take Dave up on his invitation, at least not in exactly those terms. But he did get to know Dave better; and in due course Rick became a Christian, married a Christian woman, and the two of them—becoming medical doctors—practiced medicine and lived out their faith both in Canada and overseas.

“Watch me.” At the time I worried about the sheer arrogance that such an invitation seemed to capture. At the same time, my mind recalled the words of the apostle Paul: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Sober observation and reflection assure us that much Christian character is as much caught as taught—that is, it is picked up by constant association with mature Christians.¹

I was struck when I first read this illustration. It was so challenging. And yet, we find that call to imitate worthy believers in the pages of Scripture. In fact, the Paul urges the Philippians—and us—to imitate the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Lesson

Philippians 2:19-30 teaches us to imitate worthy Christians.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. Imitate Those Who Serve Others (2:19-24)
2. Imitate Those Who Suffer Hardship (2:25-30)

I. Imitate Those Who Serve Others (2:19-24)

First, imitate those who serve others.

The first example of a worthy Christian that Paul sets before us is that of Timothy. Paul draws attention to two major qualities of those who serve others that should be imitated.

¹ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 67–69.

The Christian's Contentment

A. *They Have a Caring Heart (2:19-21)*

First, those who serve others have a caring heart.

Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He was awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar. He could receive visitors, but he was not free to leave his house. He wrote in verse 19, **“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you.”** Timothy was a young pastor, and Paul was going to send him to Philippi so that he would receive news about how the Philippian Christians were doing.

The reason Paul wanted to send Timothy to Philippi is because Timothy had a caring heart, as Paul wrote in verses 20-21, **“For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”** Timothy really cared about the welfare of God’s people. Apparently, others that Paul knew were concerned about their **own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.**

This is a sobering statement to me. Far too often I find myself seeking my own interests rather than those of Jesus Christ and the people of God. Oh, may God help me to have a caring heart for others. Jesus did, and if I am to follow Christ, and I need to have a caring heart for others too.

B. *They Have an Excellent Character (2:22-24)*

And second, those who serve others have an excellent character.

Paul wrote to the Philippians in verse 22, **“But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.”** Over the course of time, Timothy had proven himself faithful in his service to Christ and the people of God. Paul viewed Timothy with great affection, as a father viewed his son, and commented that Timothy had **served**

with Paul in the advancement of **the gospel**. Don't miss Paul's own humility here; Timothy was the junior apprentice, but Paul notes how Timothy served alongside—**with**—Paul **in the gospel**. Others had come and gone, but Timothy's character was proven by his faithful service in advancing the gospel.

So, Paul said in verses 23-24, **“I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.”** He was hoping to send Timothy soon, and Paul himself was hoping to come to the Philippians as soon as his legal case was resolved.

Timothy was a pastor with an excellent character. He had, in the words of Paul, **“proven worth.”**

We grow in Christlikeness when we imitate worthy Christians. Let us imitate those who serve others. Let us imitate those who have a caring heart and have an excellent character.

II. Imitate Those Who Suffer Hardship (2:25-30)

And second, imitate those who suffer hardship.

The second example of a worthy Christian that Paul sets before us is that of Epaphroditus. We know very little about Epaphroditus. He was not a pastor or an elder or a deacon. He was a communicant member of the Philippian Church. Paul draws attention to two major facets of those who suffer hardship that should be imitated.

A. They Have a Proven Résumé (2:25-28)

First, those who suffer hardship have a proven résumé.

A résumé is “a document used and created by a person to present their background, skills, and accomplishments.”² Those who suffer hardship for the sake of Christ have a proven résumé.

² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Résumé>.

The Christian's Contentment

1. They Serve in Various Ways (2:25)

First, their résumé shows that they serve in various ways.

Paul wrote to the Philippians in verse 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.”** Epaphroditus served Paul in several different ways. He was no couch potato.

I remember a man in the first church I served who wanted to become a ruling elder in the church. One problem was that he was not active in any meaningful way in the life of the church. He wanted a title, but he really was not serving the body of Christ.

To Paul, Epaphroditus was a **brother**, a **fellow worker**, a **fellow soldier**, a **messenger**, and a **minister to his need**. In other words, Epaphroditus was engaged in advancing the gospel.

2. They Show Concern for Others (2:26)

Second, their résumé shows their concern for others.

Paul went on to say about Epaphroditus in verse 26, **“...for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.”** I mentioned earlier that Epaphroditus was a member of the Philippian Church, which explains why **he has been longing for them all**. However, at the time Paul wrote this letter, Epaphroditus was **ill**, although we don't know exactly what ailed him. Nevertheless, what is so interesting is not that he was distressed over his own illness. No, what is fascinating is that Epaphroditus was **distressed because** the Philippians had **heard that he was ill**. In other words, he was concerned about their concern for him!

Let us be people who are concerned about the welfare and wellbeing of others.

3. They Suffer for the Gospel (2:27-28)

And third, their résumé shows that they suffer for the gospel.

Paul said of Epaphroditus in verse 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.”** Apparently, Epaphroditus became ill on the journey from Philippi to Rome. Some commentators think he may have contracted malaria, which was common in the terrain over which he would have travelled. In any event, it was an 800-mile journey that would have taken many weeks of difficult travel, without the blessings of modern medicine. Whatever Epaphroditus’ illness, he was **near to death. But God had mercy on him**, and he did not die.

Keep in mind that Epaphroditus was not an ordained officer in the church. He was a communicant member who was eager to serve Christ and his gospel. So, Paul told the Philippians in verse 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.”**

So, those who suffer hardship have a proven résumé. They serve Christ and his gospel in various ways. They show a real concern for the wellbeing of others. And they are willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

B. They Have a Deserved Honor (2:29-30)

And second, those who suffer hardship have a deserved honor.

It seems that Paul was concerned that when Epaphroditus arrived back in Philippi, the Philippian Christians would not really acknowledge and thank him for his service to Christ and the gospel. So, to make sure that the Philippian Christians properly honored Epaphroditus, he wrote in verses 29-30, **“So receive him in**

the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”

Those who serve in the advancement of the gospel, and especially those who suffer hardship in the advancement of the gospel deserve honor. That is why I am so glad that Todd and Melissa Bayley have organized for the past few years an evening to thank and honor those who have served in the advancement of the gospel. I don't do a very good job at it, but we do want to recognize those who serve in the advancement of the gospel, and especially those who suffer hardship for Christ and his gospel.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the concept of imitation in Philippians 2:19-30, let us keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example of Christ.

Atul Gawande, a distinguished Harvard surgeon and author, argues that everyone needs a coach. After working eight years as a surgeon, he realized that his operating room success had slowly reached a plateau. Soon after that realization, he attended a medical meeting and had an afternoon free, and tried to track down someone to play in a game of tennis. Finally, he went to the local tennis club and was told that he could practice his ground strokes only if he paid for a lesson and hit with the club pro.

Gawande writes what happened next:

He was in his early twenties, a recent graduate who'd played on his college team. We hit back and forth for a while. He went easy on me at first, and then started running me around. I served a few points, and the tennis coach in him came out. "You know," he said, "you could get more power from your serve." I was dubious. My serve had always been the best part of my game. But I listened. He had me pay attention to my feet as I served, and I

gradually recognized that my legs weren't really underneath me when I swung my racquet up into the air.

My right leg dragged a few inches behind my body.... With a few minutes of tinkering, he'd added at least ten miles an hour to my serve.

Not long afterward, Gawande was watching tennis star Rafael Nadal playing a tournament match on TV. He writes:

The camera flashed to his coach, and the obvious struck me as interesting: even Rafael Nadal has a coach. Nearly every elite tennis player in the world does.... But doctors don't. I'd paid to have a kid just out of college look at my serve. So why did I find it inconceivable to pay someone to come into my operating room and coach me on my surgical technique?

Coaching operates from the premise that “no matter how well-prepared people are in their formative years, few can achieve and maintain their best performance on their own.”³

The Apostle Paul knew that we need coaches as we live our Christian lives. That is why he wrote to the Corinthians and said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). He gave the Philippians two further worthy Christians to imitate: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

When Eileen and I were newlyweds, I asked my senior pastor for a mature married couple who could mentor and coach us. Frank and Gladys Wilson were faithful Christians who followed hard after Christ. They were a great help to me, and I believe to Eileen too! (She did not need as much help as I did!)

Friends, let us keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example of Christ. Amen.

³ See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/november/1110711.html>.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons.
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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org