

IX. Lesson 9 Good News, Bad News/The Risk-Taker – Phil. 2:19-30

January 17/18, 2007

Aim: To study examples of true Christian character and to imitate them.

At first sight this new section seems to pick up the apostle's account of his missionary work and the personnel who shared in it with him, particularly Timothy and Epaphroditus, the two men best known to the church at Philippi. He had begun to digress from that in 1:26. Now in 2:19-24 he seems to return to it and gives a brief report on Timothy and in verses 25-30 a similar report on Epaphroditus.

Having sent Epaphroditus to Paul, the Philippians may have been hoping that Timothy would be free to come, not only to bring news of Paul but also to minister to them. Instead, Paul was sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi. That required an explanation, lest the Philippians thought their messenger had somehow failed either them or Paul, or perhaps even both.

But the reference to Timothy and Epaphroditus is particularly appropriate at this juncture for another reason. It completes the pattern of teaching in chapter two. Paul has urged the Philippians to be humble (vv. 1-4); he has expounded that pattern from the example of Christ Himself (vv. 5-11), and drawn out its implications and the motivations which should encourage it (vv. 12-18). Now he is saying, albeit by means of gentle hints: here are two men who illustrate the very qualities you are to imitate. Salvation has been worked out into their characters – look at them and you will know exactly what I mean!

A. Good News, Bad News (Phil. 2:19-24)

1. Reliability (2:19)

The apostle has already referred to his unavoidable absence which was caused by his enforced captivity. But he is concerned about the Philippians' welfare and wants to be 'encouraged' (*eupsycho*) by receiving news of them. So he will send Timothy, who was his companion at this time (1:1), as his envoy and representative. The mission of Timothy will therefore be a powerful follow-up to the appeals of unity and steadfastness which are the burden of his letter. Thus, two journeys are in view here in one sentence: Timothy's to Philippi and his reporting back to Paul's prison.

Timothy was the ideal person for Paul to send. He was a comparatively young man who was well fitted for the task. He had been one of Paul's companions on the missionary journey during which the church in Philippi was founded (Acts 16:1-3, 11-40; 1 Th. 2:2) and he had returned to the church several times since (Acts 19:21-22; 20:3-6; 2 Cor. 1:1). Timothy obviously prayed for them and encouraged them in their spiritual growth, and now he was keen to visit them again.

Paul's hopes are governed by the Lord's will for his situation, and equally that his plans do not rest on a human calculation of release and freedom. In stating his desire, the apostle was registering his conviction that human plans are always subject to the sovereign will of the Lord. Man proposes but God disposes.

Paul had come to feel his younger friend was absolutely reliable. No one else with him exhibited that quality to the same extent (v. 20). For this reason he seems to have used him regularly as his apostolic deputy to other congregations. That was true here; it was also true of the less mature

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congregation at Thessalonica (1 Th. 3:2-6), and of the difficult congregation at Corinth where Paul's advance notice of his coming contains a none-too-gentle hint that Timothy is to receive their full respect (1 Cor. 16:10-11)!

2. Self-Giving (2:20-21)

Timothy's value as a trusted colleague is commended. 'I have no one else like him' (literally, 'of equal soul,' *isopsychos*) is a tribute of high praise from the apostle, and puts Timothy in a very honored position as a key man on whom Paul depended. Paul has no one of the same spirit as Timothy and this fact makes him Paul's right-hand man for the Philippians' situation. The token of this painstaking interest in them is seen in Paul's choice of him when someone was required to undertake the journey. 'My concern for all the churches' was shared by both men. There is no contradiction here with 4:6. What is forbidden there is anxious care for one's self and one's own interests. Timothy's 'anxiety' was for the spiritual welfare of others.

Here was a man whom an apostle could trust. That was the quality that stuck out. You knew where you were with Timothy; his word was his bond; his actions were consistent. We know from other passages that Paul had other faithful helpers while in Rome, such as Luke and Aristarchus, but it seems that of those who were available at this time, Timothy was the only one prepared to go to Philippi on Paul's behalf. This was the good news: there was no one else like him. Sadly, that was also bad news.

The sad words of 2:21 make us wonder about the situation in which Paul found himself. Were Christians in Rome so lacking in spirituality that he could find absolutely no one but Timothy to undertake a mission that required the ability to discern and encourage? Or was Paul's focus more narrow? Was he only saying that out of the handful of men who were available to him for this assignment only Timothy had the credentials? Paul may mean that of all the Christians around him, there was no one to whom he can entrust so important a mission. There may have been good and loyal persons within call but Paul had not asked them to be his ambassadors to Philippi because they lacked the right qualities and disposition.

Alternatively, we may interpret the sentence as really being an aside. That is, it says nothing about his fellow-Christians; but it is rather his solemn reflection when he remembers that, in a world of selfishness and self-seeking, it is such a rare thing to find a man like Timothy who is really anxious to promote the welfare of other people, and to give himself to a fatiguing journey and to the resolving of personal quarrels in the Philippian church. His readiness to help, then, supremely exemplifies a selfless, altruistic spirit unlike that described in 2:1-4.

The words of 2:20-21 deliberately echo verses 3 and 4 in which Paul had urged the Philippians to look out not only for their own interests, but for each other's. It was in that context that he had introduced the 'mind' of the Son of God (v. 5). He, supremely, had been concerned for others' interests, not for His own. He 'did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped' (2:6). That pattern Paul saw repeated in his spiritual son, Timothy, who was 'genuinely' (*gnesios*) concerned for the Philippians. The lesson is obvious. The best friends are those who imitate our Lord Jesus in looking out for the interests, needs, and concerns of others.

Many of us know there is very little of Christ in much of so-called Christendom. Someone has observed that our churches are filled with commotion and emotion, but there is little devotion, that is, devotion to Christ. It is impossible for those who are looking out for their own interests to have the same attitude as Christ when He made Himself nothing and took the very nature of a

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servant (2:7; *cp.* 1 Cor. 3:3-4). Paul's sad words about living for self rather than for Christ should drive all of us to examine ourselves. Warren Wiersbe observes: 'In a very real sense, all of us live either in Philippians 1:21 or Philippians 2:21.'

3. Proven Service (2:22-24)

There was a reason for *not* sending Timothy at the moment: his proven service. As far as he could read the providence of God in his life, Paul expected that he would be released. But he could not yet be certain what the verdict of Rome would be. Until that was known much remained uncertain. He himself needed fellowship. In addition, if things were to go contrary to his expectations and execution awaited him, there might be much to do and say which would make Timothy's presence essential (as was true later, 2 Tim. 4:9).

'You know that Timothy has proved himself' really means, 'You know how he has stood the test and shown himself to be a man of sound character and worthiness.' 'Proved' is really a noun (*dokime*) and is related to the verb 'approve' in 1:10. Timothy had been tested and approved.

The words 'as a son with a father' gives us a clue to the relationship between Paul and his friend. It was more than formal; it was instinctive. In the apostle, Jesus Christ had given Timothy not only a mentor but, undoubtedly, his closest and dearest friend (see 2 Tim. 1:3-4). In turn, Timothy was in a special sense Paul's spiritual son (see 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2). Paul was his father in the gospel, leading him to Christ and fostering him in the things of the Lord (Acts 16:1-3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). He and Paul had worked together just as though they were father and son. That means that they had mutual love and respect for each other. At such a critical time he needed him, as he would again later in his life (2 Tim. 4:9). This kind of relationship is a common pattern in Scripture (Moses has Joshua; Elijah has Elisha; Peter has Mark).

The fact that Timothy took an interest in the welfare of the Philippians was not his only qualification for this task. He was someone who was prepared to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty in the cause of Christ. Timothy had often worked alongside of Paul. He knew what it was to work as a member of a team. Timothy was qualified for this task because he was a man who knew what it was to serve. He gladly obeyed the call of Paul and traveled to Philippi to please the apostle.

The verb 'has served' (*edouleusen*) literally means 'served as a slave.' But Paul does not actually say that Timothy served him as a slave. Rather he skillfully turns the sentence in another direction as he was probably arrested by the thought that he, no less than Timothy, was a slave of Jesus Christ (1:1). He writes, then, 'he served *with* me as a slave for the extension of the gospel.' Paul and Timothy are yoked together in common service for a single cause, 'the gospel' (*evangelion*). Leaders must prove themselves by serving with others first. It is thus that they learn not only how to lead, but what it is like to be led!

The outcome of Paul's incarceration is uncertain (1:22-23) so what he hopes for is prefaced by the knowledge that it is only 'in the Lord' that he can look ahead with confidence (*pepoitha*). The situation, then, is this: Paul awaits the judges' verdict. When that is known he will commission Timothy to make the journey to Philippi. If the verdict goes against him, Timothy as Paul's envoy will act in the apostle's name as one sent 'in the Lord Jesus' (v. 19). If, however, it is a favorable decision and brings release from his chains Paul will follow 'shortly,' *i.e.*, soon after Timothy.

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B. The Risk-Taker (Phil. 2:25-30)

The Philippians had heard that Paul was in prison and they wanted to help him as much as they could. It was impossible for all of them to visit the apostle, so they sent a representative from their congregation. He was not one of the elders or leaders; he was a loving, hard-working brother who offered to go to see Paul on their behalf. Epaphroditus, whose name means ‘charming’ was the messenger the Philippians had sent to Paul bearing both material gifts and personal encouragement for the apostle (4:18). He had come to minister to Paul’s needs (2:25). He was to be Paul’s servant and companion in his imprisonment. Epaphroditus proved to be just what Paul needed to help him in his captivity. The apostle obviously grew very fond of him.

The Philippians were probably hoping, even expecting to see Timothy arrive with news from Paul; the sight of Epaphroditus would in some ways be a disappointment to them. Did Paul suspect that some Philippians might feel that Epaphroditus was a spiritual failure? Paul counters all potential doubt about the quality of his friend’s life and service with a glowing report about him. It is full of generous praise; no doubt this modest man blushed with embarrassment when the letter was read out to the gathered congregation! Paul’s words are a beautiful reminder of the gratitude and admiration we should have for the graces and gifts of the Spirit in the lives of our fellow-Christians.

1. Quality Control (2:25)

Epaphroditus was a Christian of sterling quality as the fourfold description of him in verse 25 makes clear. In the fellowship of the apostolic band he had proved to be Paul’s *brother (adelphos)*. In him the family likeness to Christ could be seen. This term is a testimony to Paul’s affection for this man, but it is also a testimony to the marvel of God’s grace. Paul and Epaphroditus were very different by nature, the former being a Jew and the latter a Greek. But the grace of God had made them part of the same family, the family of God.

Furthermore, his commitment to the advance of the gospel was evident; he was a *fellow worker (synergos)*, prepared to take his share of the burdens of Christian service. The labor of Paul and Epaphroditus reminds us that God has called all his people to industrious effort on behalf of his kingdom. It is a privilege to be a laborer for God.

Epaphroditus is also dignified by the title of *fellow soldier (sustratiotes)*, a term that recalls the sense of camaraderie which bound the two men in spiritual conflict. Epaphroditus understood that the Christian life is a spiritual war in which believers need to wear the whole armor of God if they are to last through the heat of the battle (Eph. 6:10-20). Epaphroditus was not one to shrink from standing for Christ and the truth.

Paul knew that this Philippian Christian could be relied on at such times, just as his own congregation had relied on him to be their faithful *messenger* (literally ‘apostle,’ *apostolos*) to Paul. Epaphroditus had come in the name of the church of Philippi, bringing a money gift as the expression of its partnership in the gospel (1:5). It seems clear that it was the intention of the Philippians (and his own, too) that Epaphroditus should stay indefinitely as the companion of Paul. The language of verses 25 and 28 use the verb to ‘send,’ not ‘send back.’ He had come with Paul to remain with him.

Having handed over the gift to Paul, Epaphroditus stayed on and assisted Paul as a minister (*leitourgos*) or ‘servant.’ This Greek word conveys associations of sacred and solemn work undertaken for religious purposes (see Rom. 15:16, 27; 2 Cor. 9:12). Such service is thus

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invested with an aura of special solemnity, and Paul views it as rendered to the Lord, as well as to himself.

Here, then, was a Christian to be emulated. When we see that the Christian life is fellowship, hard work, spiritual conflict, and service of our fellow-believers, then we are more likely to ‘do all things without grumbling or questioning’ (2:14).

2. Burdened (2:26-27)

Epaphroditus accepted the onerous task of making what was probably a lengthy journey to visit Paul (assuming the apostle was in Rome, it would have taken him several weeks). But he shared the burden of concern which the Philippian church had for their founding apostle (v. 30). En route he had taken *ill*, and was *near to death* (v. 27). His burden for Paul then became Paul’s burden for him. In turn, Epaphroditus had a burdened spirit (v. 26). Here is the measure of the man: while he is so seriously ill, his thoughts are not for himself but rather for his dear brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi.

Somehow the news of this sickness had traveled to Philippi, and from there a report had come back to Paul that the Philippians were concerned about him. This in turn reacted upon Epaphroditus who was in great distress, which is marked by two strong terms: ‘longs for all of you’ (*epipothon*) and ‘is distressed’ (*ademonon*). The first word is used in 1:8 of Paul’s ardent desire to see the Philippians once more. The second term is used to describe the Lord’s agony in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:37; Mk. 14:33), and denotes great mental and spiritual perturbation.

Paul writes to reassure his readers that Epaphroditus’ sickness is now over and, by the mercy of God, their delegate has recovered. Both the sick Philippian and the concerned apostle have known the gracious work of God in their lives.

Why did Paul not heal Epaphroditus? Although Paul was on occasion used by God to heal certain people in specific circumstances, this gift of healing was in the sovereign hands of God. Paul could not heal Epaphroditus (much as he would have longed to do so) even though the sick man was near to death’s door. Nor could he heal Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23), Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), or even himself (Gal. 4:13-14). But although Paul could not heal Epaphroditus, God could. It is God alone who brings healing. This is why we cry out to him in prayer.

This is what we may experience when we take up the cross and follow Christ. Our tendency is to say ‘If it hurts it cannot be truly spiritual.’ But Paul’s tendency is to remind us that if it is spiritual it may well hurt – someone, somewhere, sometime. No pains, no gains.

3. Taking Risks (2:28-30)

Epaphroditus had *risks his life* in order to serve Christ by serving Paul and the Philippians (2:30). The verb Paul uses (*parabouleusamenos*) is a gambling term. It is related to the word for the money which someone in a civil law suit was required to deposit when bringing legal action against another party. It was put up as a ‘stake.’ If the case was lost their money was forfeited. It says a great deal about the apostle that people felt it was worth putting their lives at stake for him in this way. Epaphroditus staked his life for the service of Christ, in the interest of the apostle and on behalf of the Philippian community whose lack of help was unavoidable since they were miles away.

Paul sent Epaphroditus back to Philippi. It was Paul’s own decision to return him. That was not because Epaphroditus could not stand the rigors of life in Rome, but because the apostle wanted

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the Philippians to be spared anxiety about their mutual friend (v. 28). There was no shame in his return, as there had been when Mark had deserted Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia (Acts 15:38).

His return to Philippi is to be attended by joy on the part of the brethren there. This unexpected turn may have caused great disappointment in the church, and have led some to conclude that his mission had failed, and that Paul had been bereft of sympathetic human friendship at an hour when he needed it most (see 2:20-21). Paul would answer that criticism in advance by a glowing appraisal of the worth of their leader, and a record of the circumstances which led to his departure homeward. Our attitude to fellow-Christians, especially when the tendency to misunderstand their motives and to malign their actions has to be resisted, should be the attitude of the Lord Himself to us. He has received us in love; and love is ‘always eager to believe the best’ (1 Cor. 13:7).

Paul wants them to esteem Epaphroditus because of his spirit—the spirit of laying aside his own comfort and convenience for the cause of Christ (v. 30). The Philippians were to use Epaphroditus as an example of those who care passionately for the needs of the saints. Epaphroditus serves, therefore, as another example of one who was seized by the mind of Christ.

Epaphroditus teaches us that there is no such thing as a risk-free life of faith. Of course one thing is certain – Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It is no gamble to rest our hopes on him.

C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *Paul described his relationship with Timothy as ‘a son with a father.’ In the light of this passage and 2 Tim. 1:1-7 and 3:10-17, what seem to have been the chief features of this ‘discipling relationship’?*
- *In what ways do Paul’s words in 2:21 have relevance to us today?*
- *The model disciple is ‘delivered from the bondage of self-obsession ... free to live in self-forgetfulness ... delighting to be the servants of others.’ How are such qualities developed?*
- *What applications can be made from thinking about Epaphroditus as a missionary returned home?*
- *Is it true that there is ‘all too little generosity of heart in our praise of other Christians’? How can we develop gratitude and admiration for the gifts and graces of others?*
- *Have you ever come across the view of Christian life and service, ‘if it takes effort it cannot be the fruit of the Spirit’s presence’? How do you respond to it?*
- *Epaphroditus had risked his life and had nearly died. How do we strike a balance between wisdom and risk-taking for Christ? Are there principles in Scripture to guide us? Do we have a tendency to avoid pain under the pretence of ‘the balanced Christian life’?*
- *Think of two other Christians, from history, or who you have known and admired. What aspects of their Christian lives impressed you and why? In what ways can you emulate them?*

For next time: Read Philippians 3:1-11 and Ferguson chapters 17-19.