

Philippians 2.19-30 Sermon / COB / 11.20.16

Introduction

- † **[1. Title]** I told you last week that I used to try to be like my baseball hero, Tom Seaver. By God's design, I was never good enough to make baseball a career.
- I had a better chance to make it as a teacher. So I found opportunities in college and in graduate school to teach classes and provide tutoring. To get better at this, I watched my favorite teachers and analyzed what made them so good. I also critically analyzed the teachers who bored me, to figure out why that was so. As a result, when I taught economics, I used a lot of visuals, props, handouts, and thought provoking homework; I mixed in humor, stories, illustrations, outside facts, and as much as possible taught by asking questions instead of lecturing; and I made myself available for free tutoring to anyone who was interested, even if they were not my students. I have tried to bring all this into my ministry as well.
 - So finding people who inspired me has helped me become a better professional. But what about becoming a better Christian, or a better image bearer for God? Have you ever found people in life who inspired you with their character or with one specific trait, someone who so impressed you, that you thought, "I want to be like him/her!"? Anybody have an example of someone who really inspired you to change the way you live?
 - I had a spiritual mentor who epitomized the saying "do what is right and trust God with the results." I have seen him take great personal and career risks for God, because he was fiercely determined to do what was right no matter what it cost him and he always trusted that God would empower him to do whatever God had for him to do. So when I find myself wavering in my resolve to make the tough choice or wavering in my confidence to accomplish God's work, I think of him and that strengthens me.
 - This man mentored me. As we walked through life together, he also imparted to me his dependence on the Holy Spirit, his love for God's Word, his priority for evangelism and mentoring, and his heart for missions. God put this man in my life for just a brief time, at just the right time, to teach me the ways of Christ and help me get healthy enough to walk in them.
- † In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are up to an interesting passage, in which Paul talks about two other men who are doing ministry work. If you want to open your Bible, we are starting at Philippians 2.19.
- Paul's reason for talking about these men is to inspire the Philippians, by convincing them that these two men are examples of true followers of Christ, so that the Philippians will want to learn from these men and follow their example.

Timothy and Epaphroditus

[2. 2.19] Philippians 2.19 NET: Now I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be encouraged by hearing news about you.

- † You might recall that Timothy is the co-author of this letter with Paul. Most of the letter is written in first person, as we see here, in Paul's words – after all, it is he, Paul, who wants to send Timothy to

them – but at the start of the letter, they both were identified as the authors. Timothy also was co-author with Paul on other letters, including 2 Corinthians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

- Paul met Timothy on his second missionary trip, in Derbe [Δέρβη], in what is now Turkey. At that time, Paul recruited Timothy to join his ministry team. Timothy and Silas had many adventures as Paul's assistants on that trip; you can read about them in the book of Acts.
- On Paul's third missionary trip, Paul gave Timothy more responsibility, sending him and Erastus ahead to Greece, while Paul remained in Turkey. Later still, Paul would dispatch Timothy to the church in Corinth to remind them of the ways of Christ, and even later to the church in Ephesus to straighten out problems there.

† Paul, as he writes this, is in prison in Rome. He hopes to send Timothy to the Philippians soon, so Timothy can give Paul a report on them, a report which Paul is confident will encourage him.

- In other words, Paul expects to hear that they are indeed standing in unity for the true gospel and living up to that gospel in their lives, as he has exhorted them to do in this letter. Paul hopes his letter will encourage and strengthen them, and that he will be encouraged by hearing of their continued faith and obedience amidst their hardships.

[3. 2.19-21] Philippians 2.19-21 NET: Now I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be encouraged by hearing news about you. For there is no one here like him who will readily demonstrate his deep concern for you. Others are busy with their own concerns, not those of Jesus Christ.

† This is disturbing and maybe a little confusing. Paul already wrote in 1.14 that most of the believers in Rome were gaining confidence because of his example while imprisoned, such that they now more than ever dared to share the gospel fearlessly.

- And at the end of the letter, he will talk of having spiritual brothers with him and that there were many other saints, or true believers, in Rome. So we know there were many there who had set their hearts and minds on Christ and his gospel mission.
- But apparently Paul had few lieutenants available to send on such a sensitive mission. Timothy was a high caliber disciple by this time, and the concerns Paul had about the church in Philippi were serious in nature. Remember, they were not only facing pagan persecution, but also deceptive teachings from a cult that had come into town.
- Imagine how our former pastor, Andy, would feel if he heard the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons came into Parkesburg and started deceiving some of you away from the true gospel of Christ, such that the church was now arguing over what was the true gospel!
- Paul wanted to send someone who was spiritually mature and equipped to handle such a situation. But apparently many of his former lieutenants who were in the area had abandoned Paul and the gospel mission to seek their own interests. They were now self-interested, which was a characteristic Paul had warned the Philippians against.
- Timothy, however, had remained like-minded with Paul, thus like-minded with Christ, genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippians as part of the interests of Christ.

[4. 2.22-24] Philippians 2.22-24 NET: But you know his qualifications [literally, his evidences of character], **that like a son working with his father, he served with me in advancing the gospel. So I hope to send him as soon as I know more about my situation, though I am confident in the Lord that I too will be coming to see you soon.**

- † Paul says they know of Timothy's proven worth through his service for Paul and the gospel.
 - How did they know Timothy? Timothy was with Paul when he founded the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey, and Timothy went back ahead of Paul on the third missionary journey, so the Philippians were familiar with him and how he served them in the past.
 - What other evidences had Timothy given of his good character, his qualifications? Timothy had given up his secular life in his hometown of Derbe to become a missionary for Christ. He had continually put himself at risk as a missionary, and we learn in Hebrews that at one point he himself was jailed for the gospel.
 - Even while in Philippi that first time, as a fairly new member of the team, he did not flee when Paul and Silas were beaten and arrested, but stayed with the fledgling church to see them through that crisis.
 - In contrast to those who had turned away from the gospel mission, Timothy remained fully engaged in it, serving alongside Paul in Rome while Paul was imprisoned. In the letter to the Romans, Paul called him "my fellow worker," truly high praise from him!
- † And Timothy was like a son to Paul. Paul addressed Timothy in letters as "my dear child." Timothy was a spiritual son of Paul's, a disciple, who had worked alongside Paul and learned from him. And he lived like a true son, who serves his father, represents him, works alongside him, has his values.
 - The Jewish Babylonian Talmud says, "When a man teaches the son of another the Torah, the Scripture treats him as if he had begotten him" [O'Brien, 324]. Also, if a Jew won another to his faith, he had satisfied the obligation to be fruitful and multiply.
 - This is exactly the concept Christ gave to the church with the great commission. If we lead someone to faith in Christ and then help that person grow to become a mature disciple of Christ, we have reproduced God's image in that person.
 - That's why it is so important for our church to take seriously the gospel mission and the concept of multiplying discipleship. Paul invested heavily in Timothy, and now Timothy was mature and equipped to do the same for others, and even to lead churches in far flung cities. I am now investing in a few of you and helping those people invest in others. This is how we will build a strong church and how we will help each other become what God saved us to be!
- † In this letter to the Philippians, Paul just explained how Christ humbly, selflessly, sacrificially suffered for the gospel mission.
 - Scholar Philip Comfort suggests Paul is offering a parallel between Timothy and Christ. Just as Jesus chose to submit to God the Father, to be sent by him to sacrificially suffer for the sake of the gospel mission, so Timothy chose to submit to Paul and be sent by him to sacrificially suffer for the sake of the gospel mission. And so here in this passage, Paul exalts or praises Timothy, as God the Father exalted Christ to glory.

- Certainly, Paul is holding up Timothy as an example of a trusted and mature Christian leader. This was a man Paul trusted so Paul wanted to send him to help the Philippians. Paul wanted the Philippians to listen to Timothy when he arrived there.
- Timothy, who called himself a slave of Christ at the start of the letter, was an example of those who were truly following Christ. Paul was following Christ so Timothy was following Paul to learn how to follow Christ; now the Philippians could follow Timothy with the same purpose.
- Today, though we do not know Paul, we too follow Christ and pursue his gospel mission in partnership with Paul who is an apostle with authority even today through what he wrote in scripture. As a proven Christian leader, Timothy also is someone we can respect and even emulate, as we seek to follow Christ more effectively.

[5. 2.25] Philippians 2.25 NET: But for now I have considered it necessary to send Epaphroditus to you. For he is my brother, coworker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to me in my need.

† Who is this Epaphroditus, whom Paul is sending to them right now?

- He was someone the Philippian church had sent to minister to Paul. He was an envoy from the church out to the mission field, to help Paul in his time of need, while in prison. We learn later that Epaphroditus not only helped Paul by serving in the gospel mission in Rome, but also came bearing gifts of support from the Philippian church.
- It would be like if we sent someone to bring gifts and provide help to the Scheleens in Ireland or the Willoughbys in Uruguay. How loved they would feel!

† Paul gives Epaphroditus high praise here! He is not only their messenger and minister to his needs, but Paul's spiritual brother, his *fellow* worker, his *fellow* soldier.

- Perhaps Paul used this last term intentionally to speak to the Philippians in particular, since they were mostly families of former soldiers. They would understand this symbolism, that Paul and Epaphroditus were in unity of purpose and methods for the gospel, contending side by side for the true faith of Christ's gospel, just as Paul had instructed them to do earlier in this letter.
- It is important that they know Epaphroditus was in unity with Paul and Timothy. The Philippian church had sent Epaphroditus to Paul; but they were wavering about their unity with Paul, so Paul reminds them of his continued unity with Epaphroditus, one of their own respected spiritual leaders.

[6. 2.26-30] Philippians 2.26-30 NET: Indeed [this is why Paul is sending back Epaphroditus], he greatly missed all of you and was distressed because you heard that he had been ill. In fact he became so ill that he nearly died. But God showed mercy to him— and not to him only, but also to me— so that I would not have grief on top of grief. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you can rejoice and I can be free from anxiety. So welcome him in the Lord with great [the greatest] joy, and honor people like him, since it was because of the work of Christ that he almost died. He risked his life so that he could make up for your inability to serve me.

† Paul was going to send Timothy to them soon, but he was going to send Epaphroditus back to them now. This would help strengthen the Philippians and keep them aligned with the true gospel, but

the immediate reason for sending Epaphroditus home was that he wished to return to his church and prove he was well.

- Epaphroditus had been sick, almost dying, but God had mercy on him and spared Paul the grief of losing his dear friend and fellow minister. Therefore Paul has sent Epaphroditus even more eagerly so they may rejoice and Paul may be less concerned about what is happening there.
 - Epaphroditus was fulfilling the mission they had sent him on, doing what they could not do from so far away. Most likely, those who were wavering in the face of suffering would have looked at Epaphroditus' premature death as further evidence of the suspected curse against Paul and against them for supporting Paul. So Paul was all the more eager to send Epaphroditus home, to turn their anxiety into rejoicing and to strengthen their resolve and faith.
- † They were to receive Epaphroditus with the greatest joy. This letter emphasizes we can rejoice even while suffering and sacrificing.
- But Paul does admit to sorrow and grief. When we suffer, it hurts; when we sacrifice, it hurts; yet we can have a joy which transcends that. This is not happiness, as in the opposite of sadness; nor is it relief as in the opposite of hurt; it is God's joy and peace we experience because we know that our suffering and sacrifice is all temporary and our ultimate deliverance to Heaven and then resurrected life is assured.
- † Paul said they also were to hold people like Epaphroditus in high regard, to honor them, *because* Epaphroditus was willing to suffer and risk his life for the work of Christ and to support Paul on their behalf. As with Timothy, Epaphroditus deserved honor for proving himself to be a passionate follower of Christ, by selflessly and sacrificially suffering for the sake of the gospel mission.
- As Christ obeyed to the point of death, Epaphroditus was prepared to do the same. He did not make his own safety and security his priority, instead risking even his life to fulfill the gospel mission. Paul sees Epaphroditus as an example of someone following Christ, someone we should revere and emulate.

Conclusions

- † **[7. ladder]** That's our passage; why did Paul put it in this letter? Partly to historically tell the Philippians he was sending Epaphroditus now and Timothy later. But there is more to it, because Paul is trying to establish their credibility by showing how these men were following Christ.
- Timothy and Epaphroditus are examples of men who are following Christ by living up to the gospel, by even sacrificially suffering for the sake of the gospel. They are true spiritual leaders, whom the Philippians should follow and emulate.
 - Earlier in this letter, Paul already has held himself out as an example to the Philippians, as someone willing to live for Christ, even as Christ's slave, as someone willing to live by faith and obedience no matter what that costs him in this life. Then he offered Christ as the ultimate example of perfect humanity.
- † We said last week that we could think of the ceiling as representing the perfection of Christ, as the perfectly pure human being, the way God intended all of us to be, and when we are born again spiritually, we are just taking a tiny step off of the floor. So we need to grow spiritually to be more like Christ, which happens through renewal of our mind, which leads to transformation of our

character, which leads to change in our way of life. All this is a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in us, though we are responsible to do what God asks us to do, so as to experience this work of grace.

- If Christ in perfection is at the ceiling, Paul wants his readers to know that he is chasing after Christ. Later in this letter, he will admit that he has not already reached the goal, but he is pressing on to lay hold of it!
- Timothy and Epaphroditus, as disciples of Paul, were trying to learn from him, were following his good example of what it meant to be a Christ-follower. They were not as sanctified as Paul yet, perhaps, but they were chasing him as he chased Christ.
- Paul wants the Philippians to recognize this, so they can follow Timothy and Epaphroditus, spiritual leaders in their lives who are modeling for them what it means to be a true Christ-follower. As scholar Steven Runge points out, Paul's public praise of these men challenges us to be like them.

† We know we were created and saved to be image bearers of God. In scripture, God reveals a lot about how our lives would look were we doing that well. Still, we find it hard to imagine being God's image bearer, and we find that hard to accomplish.

- So we have Christ, God in the flesh, the perfect image bearer and the perfect person, the example we should follow and emulate. And if we struggle to imagine being quite as pure as Jesus, we can look at Paul or Timothy or Epaphroditus, to see examples of people trying to live up to the gospel, to become as righteous in life as they were declared to be by God's grace, to live by faith and obedience to God's revelation.
- We can make this even more concrete by thinking of people who inspire us in our own lives. We support missionaries, who are giving up so much for the cause and even risking their lives. Their willingness to sacrifice and even suffer for the gospel reveals they are quite sanctified too, so they should inspire us! As we read their updates, I marvel at how their entire lives are focused on the gospel mission, on helping people find and follow Jesus Christ!
- When I was at seminary, LeeAnn and I met so many families who were living on practically nothing, so one or both of the parents could attend classes to prepare them for ministry. We met students who had come from places like closed countries, communist countries, Islamic countries, so they could learn the Bible well and then go back into that repressive and dangerous environment, to plant churches and share the gospel with others.
- It should challenge us and inspire us that we know people so much more devoted and dependent on God than we are! We can sense that they are up here somewhere, while we are still down around knee or waist level: they challenge and inspire us to grow to become more like Christ, more committed to a life of purpose centered on the gospel.
- Our goal is to grow spiritually, to become more like the inspiring teachers and leaders who go before us, and ultimately to become more like Christ, our example of perfect humanity. We grow to be more like Christ by learning to follow the example of Christ, by following the example of those who are following Christ.

† We are all on this spiritual growth continuum. You should not feel bad if you realize you are closer to the floor than many other people you might know! Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, your pastors and elders, the missionaries you know, maybe even some of your friends, are all up higher than you on this scale, but that doesn't matter.

- **[8. upward line]** What matters is not your level of growth achieved [how high up the ladder you are so far], but your growth slope! Your slope, the derivative of your growth function for those of you who loved calculus, measures your rate of growth, especially whether you are going up or down. Are you going up to be more like Christ, or stagnating and drifting back into the flesh?
- **[9. plateaus]** One problem in many churches is that people think it's ok to plateau, to level off. At some churches, this plateau is at the pew sitter level: people come to church and think that's enough. At other churches, they get you not only to come to church, but also into a small group and on a service team, and that's the plateau. Some in our church might hit a plateau higher than many of us are even at yet, but the height of the plateau is not what matters: leveling off is always wrong; spiritual growth is supposed to be a life-long process.
- **[10. regressing]** Leveling off is wrong for two reasons: one, God does not desire us to level off, he wants us to keep growing into his image, into Christ-likeness, and we are never there in this lifetime; and two, you cannot really stay at any level; if you are not growing closer to Christ then you actually are stagnating and drifting back into the flesh, back into someone who is self-interested like those who had abandoned Paul and the gospel mission.
- You might deny that is happening to you, but you would be deceiving yourself! This happened to me in my twenties: I had grown a lot in high school, but in college I was content to stay where I was, and what happened was, throughout my twenties, I regressed right back into the fleshly, self-interested, lifestyle of a non-believer.
- **[11. upward line]** So, look at your slope! We are all below Paul and Christ in our sanctification level, we have them as our examples to follow. So don't despair about being immature in your faith, or if you have been stagnating in the past, just make sure you are growing now, that you are becoming more mature.
- You should be able to see discernable growth over any six month period in your life! If you want help with this, we offer not only the worship service, but Sunday school classes, small groups, personal mentoring, biblical counseling, devotions and other spiritual exercises, opportunities to serve and reach out, and more, and it is all free.
- So join us as we look to Christ, to Paul and the other apostles, to Timothy and Epaphroditus, and to people in our own lives, who exemplify the Christian life. Let us seek to be like them, to become all that we were saved to be! Let's pray . . .