

He Has Served Me in the Gospel
Philippians 2:19-30
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Read Philippians 2:19-30

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

In 1965, a Hungarian couple, Laszlo and Klara Polgar, decided to test their ideas about hard work rather than innate talent being the key to success. They wanted to answer the age-old question of whether talent/genius are from nature or nurture, so they decided they would experiment with the lives of their children with chess. They would home-school their three daughters (which was rare at the time), surround them with chess boards and books, and encourage them to constantly play and join tournaments. So, like many kids forced to like something by their parents, the daughters ended up hating it and walking away from chess, right? Wrong. The oldest, Susan, was defeating adults by the age of five when she could barely reach the table. The second oldest, Sophia, was a world champion by age 14. And the youngest, Judit, was the best of all: at 12, she was the youngest player to ever be ranked in the top 100 in the world. She also became the youngest grandmaster of chess ever at age 15 and was ranked the #1 female player in the world for 27 years. In interviews, the sisters talked "about their childhood as entertaining rather than grueling. They loved playing chess. They couldn't get enough of it. In their world, an obsession with chess was normal."¹

That experiment proved that whatever habits and values are normal and honored in your culture are the ones that you adopt. For the most part, in life you become what you're surrounded by. Unless you are absolutely turned off to what you see in those around you, you consciously and subconsciously adopt the mannerisms, values, and behaviors of your family and friends. That's a good thing when you're surrounded by positive and productive people, but a terrible thing when you are surrounded by destructive or evil behavior. In today's passage, we find that Paul was surrounded by two godly men who encouraged him and helped him advance his mission. Furthermore, he was sending them back to one of his most supportive churches with strong endorsements of their godly influence on others. Jesus had transformed these two men into selfless, sacrificial, compassionate servants that Paul commended the Philippians to receive, honor, and pattern their lives after. We'll see that we can pattern our lives after men like these as well.

The first six verses describe his plan and his relationship with

I. My Son in the Faith, Timothy (vv. 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.* 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.*

We first meet Timothy in the New Testament in Acts 16:1-3 says, "Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his

¹ James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Avery, 2018), pp. 113-4.

father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.” So Paul met this teenager who was the product of a mixed marriage of a Jew to a Gentile. He saw that Timothy had great gifts for ministry, so he arranged to take him with him on his missionary journeys, but first he had to circumcise him. Even though Paul was adamant that circumcision was not necessary for Christian faith, out of respect and cultural sensitivity, for the sake of the mission, he had it done.

We know that Christian faith ran in his family from 2 Timothy 1:5 – *“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.”* 2 Timothy 3:15 adds that, *“from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* Timothy had grown up a Christian and now was being mentored by the apostle Paul himself. We know from 1 Corinthians 4 and 1 Thessalonians 3 that Paul often used Timothy as his representative to churches that he couldn’t visit himself. In Acts 16, Timothy was part of the team that came to Philippi when the gospel was first brought to the town. After Paul and Silas were put in jail and then asked to leave, Timothy is not mentioned as leaving with him, so we can assume that Timothy spent time building up the church there.

The biggest thing that Paul said about Timothy was that he was like a son to him; the book of 1 Timothy begins with, *“to Timothy, my true child in the faith”* (1:2a). That’s the easiest way to understand their deep bond. Even today, if someone says that “he was like a son to me” or “he was like a father to me,” we know that there is a very deep connection. Obviously, Timothy had a biological father and God was his heavenly Father, but Paul was instrumental in Timothy’s faith and discipleship. And Timothy was loyal, respectful and grew immensely under Paul’s guidance. It’s a model that we can easily put into practice today, as each generation mentors the next; older believers discipling the younger. Not just men, obviously, as Titus 2 gives directions for the older women to teach the younger women how to be godly.

Can you imagine being the man that Paul trusted the most, as verses 20-21 of our passage say? Timothy was the best person for Paul to send because he was unselfish and had his priorities and focus on the right things: he loved Jesus, he loved Paul, and he loved the Philippians. He was both *“genuinely concerned for”* their welfare and seeking the interests of Jesus. That’s a powerful combination – caring for God’s people deeply while seeking to advance the kingdom and the name of Jesus among them. In contrast, Paul’s description of these “others” in verse 21 – *“they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ”* – should connect with what we’ve already seen in this letter. Paul mentioned in chapter 1 (verse 15) that there were some believers who *“preach Christ from envy and rivalry,”* and then he commanded them in 2:4 – *“let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* Paul was saying that a lot of believers that he should have been able to trust couldn’t be trusted because of their selfish agendas.

But in Timothy, he had a young man who sought the interests of others because of his dedication to the mission of Jesus. Verse 22 says that they *“know Timothy’s proven worth.”* The picture here is that Timothy had been tested by difficult circumstances and been proven to be true. It’s like when metal is put in a furnace to test whether it was genuine or a false alloy, and to burn off any impurities. There was an old Vineyard worship song we used to sing in the 90s – *“Purify my heart, let me be as gold and precious silver / Refiners fire, my heart’s one desire / is to be holy, set apart for you, Lord.”* Easy to sing, a lot harder to live out. Being refined through the fire means you get attacked, you deal with difficult people, you are put through painful ordeals, you make sacrifices

that no one sees except the Lord. As Romans 5:3-4 says, “*suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*” God puts us through the furnace of trials and shapes us to be more Christlike, but we would avoid them if we could. Timothy had been tested in the furnace of life’s difficulties and the battlefield of ministry and had been shown to be true and trustworthy.

Verses 23-24 talk about Timothy preparing to travel to see the Philippians and the possibility of Paul doing so also someday. Let’s not forget that Rome and Philippi were 800 miles apart! Which I looked up online: today you could take a train or a bus between the two cities and it would take just over 30 hours, you could drive a car in just over 20 hours, or you could fly in under 7 hours.² No big deal, right? But back then 800 miles it could take your whole summer! The next three verses introduce the second man, whom Paul was also getting ready to send that great distance:

II. My Brother in the Faith, Epaphroditus (vv. 25-30)

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.

Who was Epaphroditus? Apparently, his name was derived from Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty, love, and fertility. Many commentators think that means that his family were pagan Gentiles who worshiped that goddess, but now he was worshipping the one true God. We need to skip ahead in Philippians to understand who he was in Paul’s story – turn to chapter 4, the end of verse 15, then verse 18 – “*...no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only... I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.*” So the church at Philippi was Paul’s main supporting church, at least for a time. And they sent Epaphroditus with a monetary gift to deliver to Paul in person. No Venmo, no wiring money or electronic bank transfer back then, so they sent this godly man to travel the 800 miles to hand it to Paul in person.

So what can we learn from this man, Epaphroditus? Steven Lawson claims that, “there is not another verse in the Bible in which one person receives so many accolades as we see here.”³ Paul calls him five things: brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, minister. Those of you who are really into baseball know that they call someone who is an all-around great baseball player a “Five Tool Player,” which means that he is great in five areas: speed, arm strength, fielding ability, hitting for average, and hitting for power. It’s extremely rare, guys like Willie Mays and Ken Griffey Jr. We could call Epaphroditus a Five Tool Christian, great in so many areas. Which makes him sound extra-special, but is there anything in the description of him that you couldn’t do or be? Could you run errands for a ministry? Could you deliver a check to a missionary or church planter? Could you visit someone in prison? Could you get sick and almost die? Could you be a beloved brother or sister in Christ to other believers? Could you minister to other people in a way that meets their needs? Could you be considered a warrior and hard worker at whatever you set your mind to? The answer to every one of these questions is “Yes.” Every time you clean the church, run the next fellowship lunch, host people in your house for a meal, pack a box for a needy child or

² <https://www.rome2rio.com/s/Rome-Airport-FCO/Philippi-Greece>

³ Lawson, p. 128.

family, give someone a ride to an appointment, write a check for a kid's mission trip, or visit someone in the hospital, you carry on Epaphroditus' legacy.

And while Epaphroditus was spending time with Paul, he became deathly sick, long enough that word got back to Philippi about it. This guy was so selfless that Paul says that he felt distress that he was causing others to worry. He wasn't distressed that he was on death's door, that he was risking his life. He was distressed that word had gotten back to his home church and he didn't want them to worry. Paul was vouching for him and telling them to honor him in case they were upset that they had sent the wrong guy, that he had somehow "failed" them in his mission. Paul says that the Philippians should honor a man like Epaphroditus because he risked his life for the Lord. We should honor every other believer, but there is a special honor that comes with those who risk their lives. But more than, he was a man who was willing to be humbled and submit himself to the Lord's plans. And all who humble themselves will be what? Exalted! We tend to honor the guy who is the keynote speaker, who meets with VIPs, who gets buildings named after him, who collects honorary titles, the big man, the "important guy." But it's the servants who deserve honor. Epaphroditus, like Timothy, was a real Christian who put his money where their mouth was. They walked the talk and didn't just appear to be real Christians, but then backed off as soon as things got hard. As Paul had commanded back in chapter 1 (verse 27), they let their *"manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."* And they lived out 1 Timothy 4:12: *"set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."*

Some of you are tired of me talking about the Eagles, so I'm not going to talk about them. I'm going to talk about a Steeler, Troy Polamalu. Most people know him as the long-haired guy on the shampoo commercials who hit really hard as a safety. But many people don't know that he is a deeply committed Christian. He taught himself Greek so that he could understand the New Testament in its original language. That alone doesn't make him a Christian, but he has been open about following Jesus. Here's what another Steelers player, Mike Logan, said about Troy: "I saw that his faith was a high priority on his list, and I said I have to structure myself a little bit. I have to change. And I really re-dedicated myself to my faith and started reading my Bible again and started getting involved in some of my church ministries. That was like a light for me. One of the Scriptures that I kind of had taken from my times and observation of Troy was Psalm 1:1, 'Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.' I thought, OK, maybe I need to change my environment."⁴ Troy set an example in speech, in conduct, in faith that convicted people around him. If he could do that in the NFL, you and I can be living witnesses where we live as well.

Conclusion

I have two great quotes about serving, one from a 20th century minister and one from a 19th century minister. The first one is from Martin Luther King, Jr:

"Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."⁵

The second one is from Charles Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers": "If God has called you to be his servant, why stoop to be a king?"⁶

⁴ Jim Wexell, *Polamalu* (Wisconsin: Worzalla, 2020), p. 137.

⁵ Coretta Scott King, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Newmarket, 1996), p. 17.

⁶ Lawson, p. 130.

Servanthood is not a celebrated character quality in America today, especially for men. Can you think of a male equivalent of Mother Theresa? We celebrate the Dwayne Johnson manly men, the Kevin Hart funny men, or the Timothee Chalomet cool guys. But men who serve those around them? Not so much. That's not to say that men are designed by God to be submissive; we are designed to lead and build and compete and conquer. This is not a sermon about authentic manhood, so I don't want to get into this too much. But my point is that the gospel holds up servanthood as the way that we lead, and as a way to reflect Jesus. All Christian men and women need to figure out how to incorporate that into their lives, work, and relationships.

I'm going to give you two examples of how you love and serve people, and reflect Jesus. One is a big, extreme example that probably none of us will do, and the other is really easy, a low bar that all of us can do:

1) John Dober and David Nitschman were men in their early twenties in Copenhagen, Denmark in the early 1700s. They were followers of Jesus who heard about an island in the West Indies where England had relocated about 3,000 African slaves, and they had forbidden missionaries to visit the island. They were grieved that 3,000 men were enslaved and had no chance to hear the Gospel. They knew that they had to do something, so they decided to sell themselves into slavery in order to be among the slaves and share the Gospel with them. There was no deal with the British that they would be released from their slavery after a time, they made a decision that doomed them to live on an island enslaved for the rest of their lives. As they boarded the ship to be taken to the island their family and friends gathered to waved goodbye. Their final words were, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering!"⁷

2) I have a friend named Ben Robertson, who is an RUF campus minister at William & Mary in Virginia. He tells the story of a woman, Mary Edna Anders, who went to the church that he grew up in. She contracted polio as a kid before there was a vaccine and went through most of her life as an unmarried atheist, but then came to faith in Jesus in her 70s. She didn't know how to love other people, but she wanted to learn how, even at that age. So she started talking to the kids in the church and following what was happening in their lives. Ben said that she would send him a card on his birthday, or if he scored a few points in a basketball game or won a prize in a science fair. When she died, her funeral was packed. When the pastor said, "Raise your hand if you ever got a card from Miss Anders" every hand in the room went up. Ben says, "She made a huge difference in my life and in hundreds of others through small, simple acts of love."⁸

Live for Christ and die for Christ. Honor Him in the big things and in the small things. Be willing to do whatever He asks of you, be willing to sacrifice your own desires and plans for your life. Because ultimately, we have a Savior who gave up everything for us. He was the fulfillment and the embodiment of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:5-6, 10-11, who "*was wounded for our transgression; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all... it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt... by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.*" It was Jesus' willingness to make Himself nothing and give Himself up to the Father's plan to die in our place that saves us. That is the foundation of the Christian faith: that God has the right to judge and punish each one of us for our sins, but that Jesus died to take our punishment instead and give us eternal life.

⁷ Matt Boswell, *Doxology & Theology: How The Gospel Forms the Worship Leader* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), pp. 90-91.

⁸ Doug Serven & Bobby Griffith, *Philippians: Birth of Joy* (Oklahoma City: White Blackbird Books, 2017), pp. 80-81.

As our new song we learned today says: *“Death was once my great opponent / Fear once had a hold on me / But the Son who died to save us / Rose that we would be free indeed / Now the curse it has been broken / Jesus paid the price for me / Full the pardon He has offered / Great the welcome that I receive.”*⁹ Beloved you are free and forgiven in Christ. As we accept His love and His death on our behalf, we, like Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul, can live out and show the world what Christian servanthood and sacrifice looks like. Amen.

Benediction

Romans 15:5,6 – *“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

⁹ “It Was Finished Upon That Cross” written by Rich Thompson, Jonny Robinson, Nigel Ian Hendroff, 2021.