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Philippians 2:19-30

Eighth Message

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## HONORING FAITHFUL SERVANTS

Senator Edward Kennedy died from brain cancer twelve days ago. There has been much media coverage of memorials, interviews with family and friends and documentaries recounting the history of the star-crossed Kennedy family's influence on the American landscape. No matter one's political leanings, or Kennedy's shortcomings, there have been many things shared about the senator, some of which were never known and some that have caused reflection, laughter, tears, and admiration. Our country has taken the time to honor a man and his work.

Just as the world honors famous and influential people, so the church is encouraged to honor faithful saints and hold them up as examples to follow. Returning to the book of Philippians we read about two such men, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul has just concluded a lengthy word of exhortation, delving into the deep mysteries of the incarnation and the resurrection. But before he launches into another theologically-packed exhortation in chapter 3, he pauses to say a note about the involvement of Timothy and Epaphroditus in his personal plans. One is tempted to read through this material quickly, anxious to get to the next challenging section, but if we do that we will miss some powerful principles regarding the church and ministry in the new covenant.

First, Paul's word about Timothy.

### I. Timothy

**But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly. (Phil 2:19-24 NASB)**

As the apostle turns now to personal matters we have opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with the context for Philippians. Paul is writing to the believers in Philippi from prison in Rome. These believers are facing both inside and outside pressures. On the one hand it appears there are some tensions among the leadership that may possibly result in discord and disharmony. Paul's encouragement in this letter is that they have the right mind-set, the mind-set of Christ, who did not regard equality with God as something to use for his own ad-

vantage, but rather humbled himself and regarded others as more important than himself.

On the other hand, the Philippians face pressure from their pagan neighbors, Roman citizens who proclaimed allegiance to Caesar as Lord. Believers were beginning to feel the heat of persecution. Paul's encouragement is stand firm in one Spirit, to follow the example of Christ, who suffered willingly and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Paul's concern is that the gospel would be hindered, either through the believers' lack of unity in Philippi or compromise in the face of suffering. He cares deeply about them and is anxious to hear how they are doing. But he can't do anything about it. He is chained to a soldier in the Praetorian Guard; there is no email or telephone. He plans to send Timothy to check on them so that he can be relieved of his concerns. The notion of sending Timothy to see them brackets these six verses.

Most of us know how it feels to wait for a phone call or email from someone we are concerned about. When my grandson Noah was born, my daughter and husband were missionaries in Ecuador. He was born jaundiced, due to competing blood types from his mother and father. His blood count dropped dramatically and he was on the verge of needing a transfusion. We were all very anxious about using the local blood supply, and I was ready to fly at a moment's notice to be a donor. When word arrived that everything was fine, we were relieved, to put it mildly. This is what Paul is hoping for by sending Timothy to Philippi.

Timothy is mentioned several times in the N.T. He probably came to Christ on Paul's first missionary visit to Lystra (Acts 14:6-23). His mother Eunice was Jewish and his father was Greek. Second Timothy 3:15 indicates that both his mother and grandmother Lois were believers.

Timothy had been a companion and close friend to Paul for many years. They enjoyed a special bond, like that of a father and son. Timothy's own father probably was not a believer, so Paul became a spiritual father to the young man. In four other places Paul describes him as his son or child. Timothy was his true, his genuine child in the faith. Prior to the industrial revolution it was customary for a father to train and teach his son in the family business or trade. Farmers trained their sons in the ways of farming; bakers trained their sons in the ways of baking. If I had been alive during that time I would have become a butcher, like my father. The son was an apprentice until such time as he would take over his father's work. This is

the kind of relationship that Paul and Timothy shared in the work of the gospel.

Paul could send Timothy to Philippi because he was qualified and he trusted him completely. The apostle says two things about Timothy as a way of commendation. First, he had Paul's mind-set; he was a kindred spirit. He would view the Philippians in the same manner as Paul, having the same concerns, with no personal interests.

“Kindred spirit” is a word play with the term for “encourage” in the previous verse. Both words contain the word *psuche*, the Greek word for soul. Paul will send Timothy who is “like-souled” so that he, Paul, can be “good-souled” or encouraged.

Timothy will care genuinely for the Philippians. The word for “concern” is usually used in a negative sense, such as, don't be anxious or worried, but here it has the positive idea of care. Timothy's care will be appropriate for, unlike many, he will not seek his own personal interests but those of Christ. This is Paul's word to the Philippians in 2:4: “do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” Timothy's care will be like that of Christ: love for God demonstrated in love for others. He stands in contrast to those who might have selfish ambition—perhaps a reference to chapter 1:15, 17, to those who are seeking to add to Paul's affliction by evangelizing out of envy and strife rather than good will.

The other thing that Paul says about Timothy is that he has “proven worth,” meaning, “to put to the test.” Timothy has been tested and found worthy, reliable, and authentic. In other words, he rings true; he is the real deal. He has served or “slaved” with Paul for the gospel—the verb form of the word Paul uses in the first verse of this letter to describe himself and Timothy as slaves of Christ. Verse 7 of this chapter says that Jesus became a slave when he became a man. Timothy had a servant's heart. Like Paul, his focus was on the gospel, the advance of God's kingdom.

So Paul hoped to send Timothy to Philippi because he would do what Paul would have done. We might note that Paul's hope is not a tentative “I hope so”; his hope is “in the Lord.” Timothy's departure though is not immediate. Paul will wait until he has an idea of what lies in the future and then send him. Following that, Paul is persuaded “in the Lord” that he will come shortly. As in chapter 1, we again see Paul's anticipation that he will be freed from prison.

This personal note about Timothy provides the church a couple of great principles for ministry. The first concerns the motivation for ministry. God calls us to minister and serve in one capacity or another, to be a servant of the Lord, a slave of Christ. He has gifted each of us for service. Some do this in formal ways while others serve with no title. Some do this as a profession, but most believers do so as volunteers. We are all called into ministry. However, we face danger if we become involved in ministry for the wrong reasons—things like selfish motivation, hoping to gain status or recognition, seeking ful-

fillment for what is lacking in our lives or to meet some deep emotional need by caring for others.

At times we can be unaware of these motivations. I recognize the tension they cause in my own life and ministry, both as a pastor and earlier that as a volunteer. The things that characterized Timothy can be a great encouragement to us and provide us with a measuring rod: genuine concern for others, proven character, slaves of Christ, focusing on the gospel, with no desire to get anything out of it for ourselves.

The second principle has to do with the pattern for maturity. The church is being built up to a mature man, to the fullness of God. We are to grow as a living organism, to be the hands and feet of Christ. This happens through discipleship, apprenticeship, and mentoring. Ministry is always relational.

Paul led Timothy to Christ and nurtured his faith. He took him on trips and gave him opportunities to serve. He trusted him and believed in him. We certainly grow from attending seminars, classes, and conferences. But the greatest influence comes from those we spend time with, those who direct our lives towards Jesus, encourage us when we feel inadequate, challenge us in our weaknesses, and stay with us in our failures and difficulties. Spiritual maturity doesn't come with a weekend workshop. It is the work of a lifetime, a “long obedience in the same direction.” For that we need mentors and friends who will give us spiritual direction.

Ray Stedman, the first pastor of Peninsula Bible Church, influenced many pastors and spiritual leaders, one of whom was Chuck Swindoll. One night Chuck and several pastors met with Ray, and Swindoll reflected on this time:

As we said good-bye to Ray, I walked a little slower. I thought about the things he had taught me without directly instructing me and about the courage he had given me without deliberately exhorting me. I wondered how it happened. I wondered why I had been so privileged to have my ‘face’ reflected in his ‘water’ or my ‘iron’ sharpened by his ‘iron’ . . . I found myself wanting to run back to his car and tell him how much I love and admire him. But it was late, and after all I'm a fifty-five-year-old man. A husband. A father. A grandfather. A pastor. . . . But as I stood there alone in the cold night air, I suddenly realized what I wanted to be most when I grow up.<sup>1</sup>

We all need mentors and we all need to be mentors. It doesn't matter how old we are or how much we think we have to offer. Unlike the world, as we grow older we have more to offer. We never grow obsolete. Who has God put in your life? What kind of relationships are you seeking and initiating? Are these focused on Jesus? Do you want people to ask you the tough questions or do you just want someone who will always agree with you? Don't put it off. Start today. Mentoring is the pattern for maturity. The church is all about being a team.

## II. Epaphroditus

Now Paul turns his attention to Epaphroditus:

**But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me. (2:25-30)**

We don't know anything else about Epaphroditus other than what is here, but it is clear as to what happened. He was part of the body of believers in Philippi. In fact, his nickname there was E-rod (at least that saves me saying his name 30 times.) E-rod was sent to Rome with a monetary gift for Paul while he was in prison. Prisoners were not cared for by the state but by friends and relatives who provided food and other necessities. Paul mentions his gratitude for this gift in chapter 4:18.

In the process, E-rod became seriously ill, probably due to some kind of travel bug, and for a while was at the point of death. Since he was carrying money, he probably was not alone. He continued on the journey to Rome, while others went back to Philippi and informed the brethren.

God had mercy on E-rod and he recovered. The Lord clearly had a direct hand on this healing, because very few people recovered from severe illness in those days. God also had mercy on Paul and saved him from grief and sorrow. Paul was not an ecclesiastical robot as some might suppose. Here we see his human side, his compassion for E-rod, and his affection for the Philippian believers. If E-rod had died, Paul would have grieved deeply, even though his grief would not have been like that of those who are without hope.

Paul sent E-rod back to Philippi for several reasons. Since the Philippians were aware of his sickness, E-rod was anxious and troubled for the Philippians to hear of his recovery. They would be relieved and joyful when they heard the news. Paul too would be relieved, since he knew that the Philippians were concerned about E-rod. Instead of sorrow, all parties involved would experience joy.

A couple of years ago, a team from our twenties group was winding up another ministry trip to the Yucatan. On the final night one of the men got sick. Many of you know Matt Wong (we call him M-rod). He was really sick. At one point he couldn't move, and an ambulance was called to take him to the hospital in Cancun. As the team gathered to pray, my heart ached. I hardly slept that night. I know exactly how Paul felt about E-rod. When we heard the next morning that Matt was all right, we rejoiced. The Lord saved us all from sorrow.

Paul uses five words to describe E-rod. The first three concern his relationship to Paul and the last two his relationship to the Philippians. First, he is Paul's brother in Christ. Second, he is Paul's fellow worker, Paul's term for those who have labored with him in the gospel. Third, he is Paul's fellow soldier, a military term not often seen in Paul's writings. This term might have been prompted by the presence of the Roman soldiers, or perhaps Paul may have viewed E-rod as a wounded soldier being sent back home for rest and recovery. Fourth, he is a messenger or apostle. He was sent to perform a specific task. Finally, he is a minister to Paul's need. The last description bears some comment.

The text breaks down neatly into two sections, verses 25-27 and 28-30. Both sections repeat three things: Paul having sent E-rod, E-rod's illness which brought him close to death, and the mention of E-rod as the Philippians minister to Paul's need. The phrase that states this in the second section is "risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me."

The word for minister and service are the same in Greek. It is used for the service of priests and Levites in the temple, i.e., cultic worship. A closely related word is used in Romans 12:1: "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship." In the new covenant, the service of priests in the temple now extends to every sphere for the believer in Christ and everything a believer does becomes worship to God.

When E-rod risked his life by going to Rome and doing what the Philippians did not have the opportunity to do, his service or ministry to Paul was worship. When we come to church on Sunday, we don't worship and then hear a message, as if hearing the message isn't worship. We don't come to church and worship for an hour and then not worship the rest of the week. Everything we do is worship, when we give everything, however trivial, to service of God—risking sickness by going on a missions trip, at work, cleaning the house or fixing a meal for a friend. If we are living holistically under the grace of God and are centered on him, then everything we do is moment-by-moment worship of God.

D. A. Carson writes: "What is remarkable about worship terminology under the new covenant is that it characteristically touches all of life... Worship is the consistent offering of all of one's life and time and energy and body and resources to God; it is profound God-centeredness."<sup>2</sup> This is how Paul and the early church viewed worship

Now listen to what Paul exhorts the Philippians to do: "receive him in the Lord with all joy (there's that phrase again, in the Lord), and hold ones like him in high regard," i.e., honor them, see them as valuable and precious. The word for honor here is a more intense form of the normal word for honor. Peter uses it twice in his first letter:

**And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER STONE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” (1 Pet 2.4-6)**

E-rod is simply an ordinary, faithful believer and yet he is as precious to God as Jesus. Why are men like E-rod, and by extension, Timothy, to be honored? Because they have acted out the pattern of Christ that Paul has detailed in verses 5-11 in this chapter. They have put their lives on the line in service and worship of God, giving no thought to personal gain.

Throughout church history men and women have soldiered for Christ, risked and laid down their lives for him. Some of these believers were well known, others served quietly and remained hidden to all but the Father. In the church we don't always honor the eloquent, articulate, charismatic person. As D.A. Carson says, we honor those “who have proved themselves in hardship, not the untested upstart and the self-preening peacock.”<sup>3</sup> What stands out in the life of Timothy and E-rod is not their personality, their gifts or accomplishments. In fact, Timothy was rather timid and sickly. The thing that stands out is their character and faith tested in the fire. We honor people like them. And not only do we honor such men and women, we emulate them. These are our models to follow, people who show us the pattern of Christ. They motivate, stimulate, and encourage us to go and do likewise.

Everyone gauges his or her life by watching others. We are a walking You Tube video to both Christians and non-Christians alike. One of the reasons people may not be attracted to Jesus is because they look at Christians and say, “I don't understand why I would want to be a Christian.” They don't see a huge difference between Christians and everyone else. We don't have to talk about God if we are living like Christ, because when someone sees the character of Christ, that changes everything.

I met my friend Steve when I was a sophomore in college. We were both engineering students and had a lot in common. After Steve became a Christian I watched him go through a horrible time. His long-time girlfriend broke up with him. She got caught up in drugs and got pregnant by another man. But Steve decided that he would marry her, and I was his best man. As I watched him I saw something in of him that I had never seen before: faith under fire, character in the midst of adversity, a light that continued to shine, the living Jesus. I didn't want theology, I wanted what Steve had and eventually that is what led me to Christ.

Steve and I have kept in touch over the years. He was a missionary in Japan for many years before moving back to the States. Eventually his wife left him, and he has since remarried. A couple of weeks ago I talked to him on the phone. He told me that five years ago he had started up a coffee house in Madison, Ohio, and that all kinds of people were coming to know Jesus in that place. He is just as excited about the gospel today as he was forty years ago. We are getting together in a few weeks just to reflect on the past forty years.

If I want to know what it looks like to follow the pattern of Jesus, I just watch people like Steve. I watch people like Timothy and E-rod. I watch Matt Wong, who has returned to the Yucatan twice since getting so sick there three years ago. I watch Ray Stedman, Bob Roe, and Bob Smith, who laid the foundation for the work here at PBC. What You Tube video are you watching? Who finds honor in your eyes? We hold in high regard people who follow the pattern of Christ so that we can be like them. We are a band of brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup> *Portrait of Integrity*, Mark Mitchell (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 77.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, 76.