

Phil 2:19-30 Faithful Co-laborers

In our Philippians series this month, we've been moved by the glorious Christ hymn, and we were exhorted to shine like stars in the world. We come today to the second half of Philippians Chapter 2. In these verses, the apostle Paul introduces us to two faithful co-workers: Timothy and Epaphroditus. This is not a deeply theological or doctrinal passage (thankfully!); it is simple and practical, and it presents to us models of faithful servants and co-laborers.

Ray Stedman used a wonderful poem to talk about how we view our co-laborers in Christ,

"To dwell above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory.

But to dwell below with saints we know, that's another story"¹.

How do you view the saints we know and serve with, and how do you think they view you? If you have served alongside someone in Sunday School, bible study, or a ministry in college, at work, in your community, how would you describe this co-laborer? What words would you use to introduce this person?

In our passage today, apostle Paul commends to the Philippians and to us two dear friends who had a great impact on his life. As we examine how Paul introduces them, I'd like us to consider how these faithful servants of Christ can be models for us as we serve those around us.

Let's begin with Paul's son in the faith, Timothy.

Timothy

First, let's review how Paul and Timothy met. Paul was on his second missionary trip about 50 A.D. In Lystra, he met Timothy, a young man whose father was a Gentile and mother and grandmother were Jewish (we read about that meeting in Acts 16, 2 Tim 1). Paul recognized the Holy Spirit working within Timothy and brought him along for the remainder of that missionary trip. They travelled through the rest of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) revisiting the churches that Paul started in his first missionary journey. At Troas, Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia entreating him to bring the Gospel to Europe. So they went to the city of Philippi and planted the first church in the European continent. As this was likely Timothy's first experience of planting a new church, I'm sure these first converts had a special place in his heart.

Timothy continued to serve Paul as a companion and apprentice. They travelled together along with Silas to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

Paul viewed Timothy as his protégé and referred to him lovingly in his epistles as "son in the Lord", "son in the faith", "my beloved child". In several NT letters Timothy is listed as a co-author: 2 Cor, 1 & 2 Thess, Colossians, and Philippians. Together they taught, evangelized, shared life. Read how Paul views this dear friend in his letter to Corinthians: (1 Cor 4: 17) *For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

¹ <https://www.raystedman.org/thematic-studies/body-life/not-union-unity>

Ten years after the Philippian church was planted, Paul writes to Philippians and commends Timothy as a follower of Jesus and a faithful friend. We pick up Paul's message to Philippians in chapter 2, verse 19:

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. Phil 2:19-24 (ESV)

First and foremost, Timothy, like Paul, was a bond-servant of Christ. We read in the first verse of this letter: "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants (*douloi*) of Christ Jesus." Being a "*doulos*" means that Timothy was a "slave" to Christ, completely under the authority and protection of his Master, serving Him with his whole heart and soul.

Second, Timothy was unique to Paul; "*I have no one like him*". The Greek word Paul used in verse 20 can be translated as "kindred spirit". They were like-minded, completely aligned in thinking, attitude, and action. That's how "kindred spirit" can be exhibited: to have shared goals, ministry, and experience. Paul became a spiritual father who encouraged and trained Timothy for a decade. And Timothy was glad to serve Paul, becoming a "son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2), learning from Paul's leadership and example. Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:10 "*You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings.*"

What a blessing to have such a relationship as the one between Paul and Timothy! Once, a fellow believer at a previous company asked me this thought-provoking question: "do you have a 'Timothy'?" This really got me thinking about the importance of discipleship, about building spiritual relationships that have long lasting impact. "Discipleship through relationships" is one of our values of PBCC. We encourage you to be in such a mentor-mentee relationship, to train the next generation of believers.

Would you like a Timothy in your life, someone into whom you can pour your wisdom and guidance as you serve Christ together? Conversely, how about a "Paul" in your life? Someone who can mentor you, shape your spiritual walk and point you to Christ with his or her own example? If you desire to have a Paul or Timothy in your life (or both), I invite you to pray about it. Maybe come up with one or two names. Be bold to begin or renew a relationship with your "Timothy" or your "Paul".

Another characteristic Paul lists is that Timothy has genuine concern for the welfare of the Philippians. As they were Timothy's first church plant, the Philippians were likely very special to him. Paul recognizes Timothy's compassion and concern and wants to send him to care for their spiritual needs as soon as possible.

Moreover, Timothy not only has concern for Philippians, he also seeks the interests of Christ, unlike other people. "*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.*" We do not know to whom Paul was referring in verse 21, "*they all seek their own*

interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” Perhaps there were believers who were distracted or were self-serving, perhaps they left their faith to pursue selfish paths. But not so Timothy. He was focused on the interests of Christ, has proven to be trustworthy and committed, and served with Paul in the gospel. So Timothy had genuine concern for others and sought after the interests of Christ.

The application of this passage to us is as follows. First, consider yourself a *doulos* - a bond-servant - of Christ and put His interests as your first priority.

Second, have the attitude of your Master, *“in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”* (Phil 2:5). Christ’s mindset was selfless obedience to God, humility and sacrifice. Then, aligned with Christ’s mindset, consider others’ interests above your own:

Phil 2:3-4 says: *“do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”* Joel taught this three weeks ago; what Paul exhorted us earlier in this chapter is made concrete in the example of Timothy.

Let’s bring it to practice in our lives. Is there someone in your life whom you can serve? Can you put others’ interests above your own and care for them selflessly? Someone in your family, friend or neighborhood circle who may be impacted by the COVID-19 shelter in place, or someone who is struggling with isolation that can really use a friendly chat or zoom call? Will you reach out to that person this week in the name Christ - humbly and genuinely concerned for them?

Now let’s turn to Paul’s second faithful co-laborer: Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus

Let’s revisit the history of how the Philippian church was started by Paul, Timothy, and Silas. We read in Acts Chapter 16 how, after they drove out a demon from a fortune-telling slave girl, Paul and Silas were beaten then thrown in prison. While they were in chains, they prayed and sang hymns at the top of their lungs, and God miraculously caused a great earthquake and freed them from their stocks. Having evangelized the jail warden and his household, they were freed by the authorities who apologized and escorted them out of Philippi. What a dramatic church plant! Talk about starting a church with a bang!

The Philippians loved their church planters and continued to support them during subsequent months. In Phil 4:14-16, Paul thanked them for supporting him when others failed or abandoned him. *“14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. 15 Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; 16 for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.”*

Fast forward some 10 years, Paul is now in Rome awaiting trial by Caesar, imprisoned in a rented house and chained to Roman guards. The church in Philippi again supported Paul with a gift of money and supplies, sent via a trusted messenger and representative. This was Epaphroditus. He left his home town and travelled to Rome to minister to Paul held in captivity. Paul continues in Phil 2:25-30:

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. Phil 2:25-30 (ESV)

Now, Epaphroditus apparently became gravely ill either during the trip to Rome or after he arrived and ministered to Paul. Being sick during that time was a dangerous affair; they didn't have vaccines, antibiotics or ventilators, so illness was often a death sentence. However, Epaphroditus recovered, and Paul recognized the hand of God in providing this miracle, sparing Epaphroditus' life and also merciful to Paul. Now Paul wishes to send Epaphroditus back home as his messenger, to bring encouragement and thanks to Philippians from a grateful bond-servant in chains for Christ. Epaphroditus was to carry the message of thanks - this letter of Philippians - as Paul's faithful co-laborer. Let's see how Paul describes Epaphroditus.

Paul uses three terms for Epaphroditus. He calls him "*my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier*". These describe the role Epaphroditus held in relation to Paul. "*My brother*" illustrates the intimacy Paul feels toward Epaphroditus. He considered him as dear as a brother, sharing a common Heavenly Father. "*Fellow worker*" shows that these two labored together, side-by-side, sharing the common goal of bringing Christ to others around them. This term is also used in Rom 16, 1 Cor 1, 1 Thess 3, where Paul referred to several other "co-laborers" in God's work. "*Fellow soldier*" means that Paul and Epaphroditus held the same loyalty to their commander - Jesus Christ, and they adhered to the same code of conduct, facing the same toils, hardships, and dangers. I can honestly look out to you and feel the same affection for you as Paul did; I consider you "*my brother (and sister) and fellow worker and fellow soldier*".

One preposition best describes this three-fold relationship: the prefix "co-" as in "co-worker" or "co-laborer". It means "with": Paul & Epaphroditus and Timothy worked **with** each other to serve a common interest: the cause of Christ. There is camaraderie, collaboration, and community. That is the most effective way to serve Him: to labor side-by-side with each other as a group, not a "lone ranger". This is how we accomplish His work at PBCC. In our church, we are a community which participates together in God's work. I see this collaborative team work each week as dozens of people put together the livestream service each Sunday and our deacons that help with needs of the body. We serve our communities together in Collins Elementary, in West Valley Community Services, serving in City Team or Teen Challenge, in Liberia, Romania, and Mumbai. **We participate in God's work as a team.** This is another one of the values we hold dearly here at PBCC.

The fourth and fifth terms are "*messenger*" and "*minister*". These two describe who Epaphroditus is in relation to the Philippians. "*Messenger*" is actually the same term as "apostle" which means "sent forth" to do God's work. It describes a representative of the community of believers, an ambassador. "*Minister*" means servant, especially in service of God,

essentially the same word for “priest” or a sacred servant. “Messenger” and “minister” are important roles and weighty responsibilities that Philippians entrusted to Epaphroditus. He wasn’t supposed to just drop off a care package, drink a glass of lemonade, then turn around and come home. His role really was to be an ambassador representing Philippians, as well as a servant of God by being a servant to Paul.

What can we discern about the character of Epaphroditus through Paul’s description? Two things: his Compassion and his Commitment.

First, Compassion. Look at Epaphroditus’ response to his own illness: *“he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.”* Rather than being worried for his own life, he was in anguish for his compatriots! He was so concerned for their welfare that him being an emotional burden for them caused his own mental anguish and torment. What a compassionate man who put the interests of others above his own! This example brings to my mind my own mother’s attitude for us her children. As she was dying of cancer, suffering the pain and agony during her final weeks, she was far more distressed about me worrying about her. She was more anguished for our worry, our mourning, than she feared for her own health and eventual death. That mother’s heart, that selflessness, that compassion to love others. This was how Epaphroditus was: compassionate for others.

Epaphroditus’ other characteristic was Commitment. His commitment to his responsibility and role were extraordinary, even extreme. He was willing to leave the comfort and safety of his home town to travel the perilous journey to Rome to serve Paul. He was committed even though it nearly cost him his life. It’s hard for us today to imagine this model of sacrificial living, being willing to suffer danger to serve others. Reflecting on that attitude of selfless service and commitment, I think right now of the thousands of healthcare workers and first responders who served their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are people who were willing to forsake their own safety, even their own lives, to serve the patients stricken by this virus. Indeed, some of them died in service of others. We owe them all our collective gratitude.

Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul are portraits of truly committed followers of Christ. Compassion and commitment, submission and sacrifice: these traits marked each one of them. They can be a model for us to imitate. More accurately, the one whom they imitated should be the model for us. Indeed, they imitated Christ, as Paul said in 1 Cor 11:1 *“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”*. If we imitate Paul, and Paul imitated Christ, then we ought to imitate Jesus as well. The model of Christ is exemplified in the Christ Hymn earlier in this chapter. Let us soak in that marvelous passage,

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:5-8)

Not only did they imitate the model of Christ, all three men shared the same priority in life. Their first and foremost priority is Jesus. They are bond-servants of Christ. They look to the interests of the Lord, seeking to accomplish His will and reflect His character. Jesus first.

Their second priority is others. They look to the interests of other people above themselves: the Philippians, the guards in prison, the unsaved, the marginalized, the lost and hopeless ones. Everyone else around them. Others second.

And finally, their own interests come last. They did not seek fame or recognition for themselves, they were willing to serve selflessly, even to give their own lives for Christ and for others.

These priorities mark the pattern of these model laborers for Christ, and it is a pattern for us to follow in our lives. What is this pattern? Jesus, Others, Yourself. J-O-Y. Joy is, of course, the theme of the letter. And JOY is our attitude and pattern of serving Christ and serving others. I hope this mnemonic of J-O-Y will remain with you long after today's message and will be formative in your life of serving Christ.

May we embrace the Joy of serving the Lord and serving others in this way: Jesus. Others. Then Yourself.