

Paul's Letter to the Philippians

Session Seven May 6, 2020

Philippians 2:19-30

Paul commended the ministry of Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippians, identifying them as models of the Messianic mindset that he was challenging the Philippian Christians to embrace.

Paul would be sending these two men, Epaphroditus as the deliverer of the Philippian letter and Timothy later with news of how the trial outcome, prior to the hopeful return of Paul to the church at Philippi.

Opening Question...

(1) Who is someone in your life that you fully trust? Why do you trust him or her? What are characteristics of their personality that contribute to this trust?

Last week we finished the third prong in the key pieces of the Messianic mindset for Paul – unity, Christ-centric theology, and holiness. Paul believes that each Christian – and each church – should strive to follow these three components daily to spread the gospel message. He realized that this would not be easy, especially living in a counter cultural world like the Roman Empire. He encouraged the Philippian church to build each other up, and not be afraid to go against the flow and “shine a light into the world”. Paul recognized that people would be watching and that the Spirit would be working through the Philippians, just as the Spirit was working through him sitting in a prison cell whether in Rome or Ephesus – wherever he was located.

In our passage tonight, we see a shift in Paul's writing from a theological framework to more of a practical approach. Or is it? In Philippians 2:19-30, Paul commends two fellow workers/servants he will be sending to Philippi – Timothy and Epaphroditus. What may initially seem as a logistical note in the midst of his letter, may actually be more theological than first appears...

Timothy and Epaphroditus...

Working Models of the Messianic Mindset

In the early Christian churches, missionaries would travel around and teach from house church to house church. The only credentials that these traveling missionaries had were commendations from fellow missionaries or other house churches speaking on their behalf. These missionaries would carry these letters with them and present them as “proof” that they were legitimate. Paul is essentially writing a commendation letter on behalf of Timothy (even though Timothy had been with Paul in Philippi before) in this letter, just in case they had forgotten about Timothy’s credentials. The church already knew about Epaphroditus since he was a member of the church and traveled to deliver the monetary gift the church sent to Paul in prison. Most of the time this commendation took place at the beginning or the very end of the given letter. So why here in the letter to the Philippians?

Two possibilities: (1) Maybe Paul originally intended for the letter to end here. He was forced to end his writing. Then later came back to add to the letter afterwards before he sent the letter on its way. (2) Timothy and Epaphroditus serve as two perfect examples and models of what true Messianic living looks like. Paul had just described what the three pieces of this Christian faith were – unity, Christ-centric focus, holiness. Now, standing before him were two living examples that he was about to send to Philippi. What better way and timing to introduce them and recommend them then now in the letter? So maybe there was a little more theology taking place in this “practical” section of Paul’s letter.

Commendation of Timothy

2:19 – Timothy is coming soon, but not yet

Paul was waiting to send Timothy once the trial had concluded. Paul’s plan was to send Timothy, not just to Philippi, but to make the circuit to many of the churches he founded – Ephesus, Galatia, Corinth, etc. Timothy was not just to deliver the news, but to receive news on how they are doing – Paul used this news to stay encouraged while he was in prison.

2:20 – Timothy – “Best of the Best”

Paul sings high praise of Timothy! He calls Timothy a “kindred spirit” – basically says no one else he trusts as much as he trusts him. (That does not say much for the rest of his traveling companions!) He praises

Timothy for his pastoral care – his care for the local church. (We see this in his later letters to Timothy.)

2:21 – Paul brings up “Selfishness” again...

Paul comes back to the issue of selfishness that he addresses in the beginning of Chapter 2. He praises Timothy for his Christ-centric focus, rather than his self-interest. Paul sees a lot of himself in the ministry of Timothy. The Gospel first, that is what matters.

2:22 – The Apprenticeship of Timothy

Paul recounts the work that Timothy has done with him at Philippi, and this should prove his worth to the church. However, his worth goes much deeper to Paul. Apprenticeship was a common trade back in biblical times. Paul brings this up in talking about Timothy and his service, but he also recognizes that their apprenticeship is to the HEAVENLY FATHER. Paul reminds Philippi that Timothy’s proven worth is because he has been tested, tried, challenged – and he has passed the test.

2:23-24 – Coming Soon and Shortly After

Paul is encouraged that the trial will end soon and Timothy will be sent immediately. Paul also trusts that that news will be good and that he will be following Timothy not far behind.

Epaphroditus – Healthy, Deliverer of the Letter, Faithful

2:25 – Epaphroditus, FAITHFUL!

Epaphroditus was sent by the Philippian church to deliver the monetary gift to Paul in prison. Whether on the way, while there, or on the way back, he gets extremely sick and almost dies. This delays his return to Philippi. Paul is concerned that rumors may swirl that Epaphroditus may have skipped town with the money rather than delivering it to Paul. Whether these rumors are happening, we do not know. Just in case, Paul is insuring that the church understands the situation and that Epaphroditus has been a faithful servant for the church and to Paul. In this one verse, Paul calls him my brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, your messenger, and your minister.

One interesting note here, Paul uses many different social classes in these designations. One specifically – “fellow soldier” – jumps out. There

were not many “social groups” that could be understood or cross-planted from one city to another. Each city was unique with a different culture and a different social class. One of the only uniform groups would have been the Roman military or soldiers. For Paul to say Epaphroditus was his “fellow soldier” was a jump in thinking, recognizing that the work being done by Christians in one community was the same and connected to the work being done in another community and so on and so on. Today, this makes complete sense. Back then, this was new thinking.

2:26-27 – How sick was he?

Epaphroditus was sick to the point of death. This is why he was delayed so long. Paul is saying if you heard he was sick, it is true. Only because of God’s mercy did he survive – but not just mercy on him, but Paul too. Paul is expressing deep anxiety and sorrow about this sickness – vulnerability. It took time for both Epaphroditus and Paul too get over. It is okay to grieve...

2:28-30 – Epaphroditus has been a Model of Service

Paul is sending him back to Philippi, even though he would like to keep him there with him. He is eager to return home to report on these things – to finish his mission. Paul, being Paul, says I am sending him so I may be less concerned “about you” (maybe concerned that the rumors may start or continue). Paul encouraged the church to receive him with JOY and hold him in high regard. He risked his life to do his duty for Jesus Christ. Epaphroditus completed the work you asked him to do, the work you could not because of distance, he did it admirably, and he honored Jesus Christ every step of the way.

Paul had the ability to tie up some loose ends, but at the same time bring it all together. He used this transition point in his letter to the Philippians to both recommend Timothy to Philippi (again) and uphold Epaphroditus for his faithful service to his home congregation, while at the same time using them as models of service for this Messianic Mindset for individual Christians and the Philippian Church.

Follow Up Questions...

Are you being nurtured in your faith by someone? Are you nurturing anyone personally? Why or why not?

Where do you need to experience God's mercy?

God is calling for allegiance in every area of our lives. What do you need to surrender to him?