

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 15: Model Spiritual Servants

Philippians 2:17-30

“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

I have thought it necessary to send you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 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. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”

We all have those model spiritual servants in our lives. It’s the grace and beautiful design of God, that He would not only save us from His wrath, but transform us into new beings, with new hearts and holy desires. And then that He would design to collect us, and associate us together, for the strength and purity of His people, and the forward proclamation of His gospel. The Church of Christ is truly a miracle. There is no other man-made establishment like it! Where else can you find people of every skin color, language, and level of socio-economic status, laboring together in harmony for the cause of another? With joy!!!

God has been so gracious to you if you’re a Christian this morning! God has been so gracious to you, if you’re here this morning! Not so much to sit in this class, but to be able to love and encourage and toil with, sing with, read with, cry with, and pray for, or pray with one another! God has given us this building as a gift that we might meet together regularly, and **stir one another up to love and good works!** (Hebrews 10:24-25) The verb stir literally means ‘to agitate’ one another. It’s the idea of stirring up the pot of resting water, or of sparking life. It’s the idea of giving that encouraging push in the right direction.

We’ve all had, and still have, those model spiritual servants in our lives. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time at all, you ought to be a model spiritual servant to someone else, or I dare to say that you’re not a spiritual servant at all. This lesson will examine three spiritual servants that we would do well to pattern our lives after. The three are Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. As has been the case many times before, I will steal MacArthur’s outline for this lesson because I like it. We will look at each man in turn.

Paul: The Sacrificial Rejoicer (2:17-18)

Paul begins by referring to himself as being poured out as a drink offering. There has been quite a progression in his imagery from verse 16, which pictured two sufferings of extreme exertion. Paul was proud that he did not **‘run in vain’** or **‘labor in vain’**. You can picture the marathon runner, expending all of his energy to complete his race, running through the aches and pains. You can imagine a man working hard (not Abe Unger of course), but perhaps me, for example. In all seriousness, you can imagine a man working under the hot sun for his wages. This is the intensity of work that Paul had in his ministry. He used another analogy concerning the serious commitment to the gospel that he made in his

life, in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, **‘Do you not know that in a race all the runner run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.’** Paul labored with a fierce and calculated intensity. But Paul’s image of being poured out as a drink offering takes the imagery of his spiritual service to them to a new level. He’s not just running or working until exhaustion, he’s saying that he is more than willing, in fact he rejoiced, in his past and present suffering for the cause of Christ, for these believers.

Verse 17 begins, **‘Even if’**. Here is an example where some translation is lost between the Greek and English languages. ‘Even if’ in English sounds conditional, “I’ll do this, even if they do that.” But that is not the application in the Greek language. ‘Even if’ in Greek referred to something that you knew was true. A better translation in English is, “[Because] **I am poured out as a drink offering**”. This isn’t the only time that Paul has used ‘drink offering’ language. In 2 Timothy 4:6, Paul said, **“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.”** So Paul is stating that he in fact *is* being poured out as an offering to God. But what does he mean by using the language of a drink offering? Is he speaking of his martyrdom? That’s what some have concluded from this verse, since offerings in the OT involved the death of another. Based upon the unanimous conclusion from the research I have done, I do not believe that Paul is speaking at all of his martyrdom.

G. Walter Hansen gives us some helpful reasons from the text denouncing his martyrdom exclusively in the ‘drink offering’ language, *“(1) the present rather than the future tense of the verb (I am being poured out); (2) the evidence that this verb never denotes killing or pouring out of blood; (3) Paul’s confidence that he will visit Philippi soon (2:24); (4) the combination of this metaphor with the two previous metaphors in a way that makes all three pictures a dramatic presentation of Paul’s suffering in his ministry; and (5) the unlikely juxtaposition of martyrdom and rejoicing.”*⁷³

Based upon those reasons, I understand Paul to be referring to the whole of his life being offered up to God for these saints. Not that his death is entirely excluded from the ‘drink offering’ language. There is a striking resemblance between verses 17 and 7 on chapter 2, as Paul patterns his poured out life after Jesus who, **“emptied himself”**. Just as Christ emptied Himself which led to His death on the cross, that same possibility did lay before Paul.

But why does Paul use the language of a drink offering? What is the significance of that? It sounds strange to us, but it would have been commonly understood in that culture. In both the Jewish and Greek ceremonies of that day, a drink offering was poured directly onto the sacrifice on the altar. It was used widely in Greek literature to depict the common practice of pouring out wine at feasts and religious ceremonies as libations to Zeus and other Olympian deities. So, we start to understand that the drink offering not the entirety of the offering, but it was actually poured onto the offering itself. Our text says that his life “drink offering” was being poured **“upon the sacrificial offering of your faith.”**

This helps us to complete Paul’s picture. The Philippians that he has poured his life out for, are those who have given themselves up as the offering to God. They were his partners in the gospel as he wrote in chapter 1. They had been granted to suffer for his sake, and were engaged in the same conflicts as Paul. (1:29-30) IOW, they with Paul were a combined offering; Paul being poured out as a drink offering on the burning sacrifice of the Philippian church. Yet, in spite of the suffering that they were enduring, in spite of the prison cell that Paul wrote from, in spite of the fact that Paul faced potentially imminent death, he rejoiced! Verse 17 ends, **“I am glad and rejoice with you all.”** What a beautiful testimony to

⁷³ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 188)

of sacrificial rejoicing that we see in this Philippian church, of which Paul was a part of. And what a contrast of joy do we see in the church today!

MacArthur comments, *“Unfortunately, many believers experience joy in much the same way as the world does. When circumstances are favorable, they are happy; but when circumstances are unfavorable, they are sad and sometimes resentful. The only things that bring them joy are those that promote their own interests and welfare. But when believers seek to do the Father’s will and please Him, they view sacrifice for Him with joy. The reason many believers know little about Paul’s kind of joy is that they know little about his kind of suffering.”*⁷⁴

Paul’s joy, Paul’s crown, was the believers. These are whom he poured his life into. What brings us joy, and conversely what brings us sadness, is reflective upon what we cherish most in this life. Paul rejoiced every time he thought of the Philippians, yet many believers today can take or leave church attendance. Paul rejoiced that the circumstances of his life had led him to imprisonment, and that even there, he had taken the opportunity to spread the gospel amongst the guards. A life thus devoted to the cause of Christ, and the ministry to the saints is contagious. The Philippians were encouraged to speak even more boldly and without fear because of the example they saw in Paul. (1:14)

We have the example of the high priest, who rose up and arrested the apostles and put them in prison for teaching the name of Christ. The angel of the Lord opened the gates and ordered them to go and stand in the temple and speak the words of Life. (Acts 5:20) When the officers found them in the temple, they brought them before the council and questioned them. Peter and the apostles answered, **“We must obey God rather than men.”** (Acts 5:29) This enraged the council who finally sent them away after beating them, and warning them once again to never speak the name of Christ to anyone. We’d expect this to put such a fear into anyone that they would give up on their ministry, yet they **“left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.”** (Acts 5:41-42)

Persecution shouldn’t come as a shock to believers. Paul warned Timothy that **“indeed (definitive) all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”** (2 Tim. 3:12) This isn’t to say all believers will face the hardest, and most violent opposition, relentlessly throughout the entirety of their lives. But it does mean that all believers who manifest the fruit of the Spirit, and pour out their lives as drink offerings, *will* face persecution. And dare I say, if you’re hard pressed to find any persecution against you in recent memory, that you’re not living for Christ but yourself.

The greatest joy that will ever come in your life will be met at the point of your sacrifice to Christ, because serving God is the greatest, the most supreme, dare I say the *only* purpose of your existence. Paul had nothing else to live for, he said, **“but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** (Phil. 3:7-8; 1:21)

MacArthur again comments, *“Selfless service for Christ is a sacrifice only in the sense of being an offering to God. It is never a sacrifice in the sense of being a loss. A believer can sacrifice nothing for the Lord that is not replaced with something infinitely more valuable and gratifying.”*⁷⁵ **“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all**

⁷⁴ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 193)

⁷⁵ *IBID*, p. 194

comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

Verse 18 of our text this lesson reads, **“Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”** Paul wanted the Philippians to rejoice with him, he wasn’t looking for them to fall into a spiritual depression over his imprisonment, or their shared persecution. The text could lead some to a wrong conclusion. It sounds like Paul is asking them to put on a happy face while they are beaten for example. No one laughs through pain unless they are crazy. But there is a radical difference between feeling pain while trusting in Christ and living for His gospel, and feeling pain and giving up on Christ and His gospel. Paul is not asking them to feel an inappropriate emotion, he is asking them to keep their eyes fixed on Christ. Just four verses earlier he has told these Christian to ‘do all things without grumbling or disputing’, and now he has come full circle, to be glad and rejoice with Paul in living sacrificially to God in their lives through suffering.

Timothy: The Single-Minded Sympathizer (2:19-24)

The second model spiritual servant that we will consider this lesson is Timothy. Timothy has served to be an excellent example to all Christian over the centuries. The text in verse 19 reads, **“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you.”** The opening words ‘I hope’ once again are lost in translation in English. We would understand this to mean that Paul wished to send Timothy although he was uncertain, when the Greek text actually carries with it a high degree of certainty that Timothy would in fact be sent. Paul’s statement that his hope is ‘in the Lord’ to send Timothy indicated that his travel plans were always made under the direction of the Lord. Paul always submitted his plans to God in prayer, seeking His approval and will, and depending on Him to carry out his desired plans.

Paul’s desired to be ‘cheered by news of you’. This is the only instance in the NT that anyone has used this word we translate ‘cheered’. It literally means ‘to be heartened, be glad, have courage’. Paul hopes that the church will be cheered by the news of Paul’s progress and work in the faith, but he also writes here that he desires to be cheered by the news of their unity and progress of their work in the faith. As he commanded the church in 2:2, **“Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”**

What we know about Timothy

Timothy was a native of Lystra in the province of Galatia (part of modern Turkey). His mother, Eunice, was Jewish and his father was a Greek and probably a pagan. Paul led him to Christ, as he calls him his father in Christ Jesus through the gospel in 1 Corinthians 4:15. He probably led him to Christ during his first visit to Lystra on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:6-23). Both Timothy’s mother and grandmother, Lois, were believers (2 Tim. 1:5) and had instructed Timothy in the OT (2 Tim. 3:15). Timothy was not circumcised as a child, which suggests that his father had educated him in Greek learning and culture. This Jewish and Greek combined upbringing made Timothy uniquely qualified to minister the gospel with Paul to the Gentile world. In order to be a gospel witness to his Jewish lineage, Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). At this point and time in history, Timothy had been the constant companion of Paul for nearly ten years.

In verse 20 Paul writes, **“For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.”** Paul had no one *isopsychos*. He had no one of equal soul, no one else who shared this same mind, no one else who shared this same spirit with him. And since Timothy was in all sense considered to be his son, Paul encouraged the Philippians, that they might know that Timothy would love them, and treat them with the same care and concern as Paul himself would. Timothy was ‘genuinely concerned’

for them, IOW he sympathized for them. The verb used here is *merimnao*, and it speaks of having a deep concern for someone or something, literally to the point of worry. But the apparent paradox is that Paul used this verb to commend Timothy, while Jesus used this verb to condemn sin. Jesus said in Matthew 6:25-27, **“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about the body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet you heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”** Paul appears to commend what Jesus condemns...but wait a minute, Paul used *merimnao* as a condemnation too, in Philippians 4:6! **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** So, if Paul is in agreement with Christ as to the sin of anxiety, then how does he commend Timothy for his deep concern (same Greek word) for the saints at Philippi? Ralph P. Martin was helpful to me in sorting out this ‘paradox’,

*“In Christian experience it is remarkable how often these apparent contradictions go together, but in reverse. We find ourselves guilty of anxiety over our own interests to the exclusion of others’ wellbeing. One of the surest antidotes to personal ‘care’ is to widen our horizons and so enlarge our heart of sympathy that we share the burdens of other people. So 1 Corinthians 12:25 states our Christian responsibility for other believers, using the identical verb, merimnao.”*⁷⁶ **“That there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”** (1 Cor. 12:25-26)

Verse 21, **“For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”** Another element of the example of Timothy as a model spiritual servant is his single-minded devotion to Christ. Paul draws out this character trait by comparing him to everyone else, specifically other church leaders I believe, the same group that we read of in 1:15, 17, **“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry...The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.”** There’s a punch behind the verb ‘seek after’ that is lost in translation. A simple English reading gives us the notion that every church leader sought their own interest, but the frequency and degree of their self-seeking interests is left unknown. The Greek literally reads *‘For they always, constantly seek their own interests’*. Timothy, in contrast to these leaders, is our model, and the embodiment of 2:3-4, **“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”**

Timothy’s primary interest was serving Jesus Christ. John Calvin, though this quote is old, and the English a bit difficult to understand, has a powerful exhortation to all Christians regarding serving the interests of Christ, he wrote, *“For you must give up your own right if you would discharge your duty: a regard to your own interest must not be put in preference to Christ’s glory, or even placed upon a level with it. Whithersoever Christ calls you, you must go promptly, leaving off all other things. Your calling ought to be regarded by you in such a way, that you shall turn away all your powers of perception from everything that would impede you. It might be in your power to live elsewhere in greater opulence, but God has bound you to the Church, which affords you but a very moderate sustenance: you might elsewhere have more honour, but God has assigned you a situation, in which you live in a humble style: you might have elsewhere a more salubrious sky, or a more delightful region, but it is here that your station is appointed. You might wish to have to do with a more humane people: you feel offended with their ingratitude, or barbarity, or pride; in short, you have no sympathy with the disposition or the*

⁷⁶ Martin, Ralph P., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians* IVP, 1987 (p. 128)

*manners of the nation in which you are, but you must struggle with yourself, and do violence in a manner to opposing inclinations, that you may keep by the trade you have got; for you are not free, or at your own disposal. In fine, forget yourself, if you would serve God.”*⁷⁷

Timothy was also a consistent and faithful servant of Christ, his reputation preceded him. These saints at Philippi knew who he was, verse 22, **“But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with father he has served with me in the gospel.”** Paul speaks of Timothy’s ‘proven worth’, *dokimen*, which has the basic meaning of proof after testing. Paul has used *dokimen* many other times in the NT. Every month at communion Pastor Scott reads 1 Corinthians 11:28, **“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”** Similarly in 2 Corinthians 13:5, **“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?”** Paul was not an advocate of easy-believism. He didn’t teach the gospel in 3 easy steps. Rather, he taught the importance of taking a spiritual inventory regularly to see if our state matches our standing. But not only are we to test ourselves, we are to test others...yes, the Bible says to judge others. John tells us in 1 John 4:1, **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”** When Paul was giving the qualifications for Deacons, he asked the church to test them to find their proven worth, **“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”** (1 Tim. 3:8-10) Believers are to test everything that they see, hear, and read, **“Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.”** (1 Thess. 5:20-21)

Testing is a key theme in scripture, and Timothy’s life was no exception. The Philippians had known Timothy for years, and they had long before and many times over tested his life, and proven him to be a worthy servant. Paul may have written 2 Corinthians from Philippi, and in the introduction to that letter he sent greetings from **“Timothy our brother.”** So, these saints had an established relationship with him for quite some time, and would have been greatly blessed by him.

Timothy was a faithful servant of the Lord. He was sympathetic to the needs of the saints. His single-mindedness was apparent, he worked only for the Lord Jesus Christ, and he had done so for many years. All saw his service and knew him to be of proven worth. Timothy was also submissive. Again, in verse 22, Paul says that Timothy ‘served with’ him. Notice that Paul didn’t say that Timothy served him, but served with him. Timothy was completely submissive to Paul, as an apostle and a spiritual father. The first verse of this epistle says that they were **“servants of Christ Jesus.”**

Timothy was also willing to be sacrificial. Verse 22 says that he served, **“as a son with a father.”** In lockstep with the quote from Calvin last page, Timothy is our example of surrendering his personal agenda and following Christ. We see a similar example from Matthew, **“As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he rose and followed him.”** (Matt. 9:9) As Matthew abandoned his career, along with all of his earthly hopes and dreams, similarly, from the time Timothy heard the gospel, his life goals were radically changed to whatever the Lord had in store for him. Like Paul, as his son in the faith was willing to **“become a spectacle to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like**

⁷⁷ Calvin, John, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* Baker, Mid 16th Century (p. 78)

the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.” (1 Cor. 4:9-13) Timothy was with Paul when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, and wrote concerning the two of them, **“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake... We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the like of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”** (2 Cor. 4:5, 8-10)

What an example Timothy is! What an example of sacrificial love, and joyful, unconditional service he was! Here was a man who gave up his life for Christ. It was Jesus who said, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”** (Matt. 16:24-25) MacArthur said about Timothy, *“It must have been challenging for this intelligent, energetic, talented, and gifted young man to be constantly severing relationships with family, friends, and fellow workers. For most people, especially those with his capabilities, it would be all but unthinkable to be at someone’s beck and call. But Timothy was just that sort of willing, dependable, and joyful servant of Paul in their mutual service of Jesus Christ. He was ready to spend and be spent as seemed best to his beloved friend and apostle.”*⁷⁸

Epaphroditus: The Loving Gambler (2:25-30)

The third model of spiritual servanthood is Epaphroditus. I find that “E” doesn’t get as much love as the other guys do. I’ve heard many Christians over the years refer to Peter, and Paul, and James as being godly examples to them. But the Epaphroditus fanclub tends to go unnoticed. Perhaps part of the reason why is because we just don’t know much about Epaphroditus. (Who I prefer to be known as “E” because his name takes too long to type.) We do know that his parents didn’t like him. (Why else would you name your kid Epaphroditus!)

In all seriousness, we know nothing about his family. We know nothing about his occupation, or life history. We don’t know how he came to know the Lord, or when. We don’t know if he was a Pastor, or a Deacon, or an Elder, or a relatively new convert, we just don’t know. By deduction, because there is no evidence that could or should be attributed to his writings, or office held in any church, we must draw the conclusion that Epaphroditus was a common man who lived his life for Christ as we all ought to be. Therefore, his example ought to encourage those in the church who are called to serve in those areas of ministry that are not directly Pastoral, or teaching ministries, which is the vast majority of the elect.

This man, as common as his calling was, had a tremendous impact on the church then, and still does today. He was a man whom Paul referred to as, **“my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier.”** (2:25) He was a man who put his life on the line for the sake of his brothers and sisters in the faith. He already had an established relationship with the Philippians. They had even just sent him along with gifts, to Paul in prison (4:18), and now Paul is sending him back to them. Regardless of the possibility of him being an officer in the church, he was clearly a highly respected man whom they loved and trusted implicitly. He was a man who had such a strong trust in the Lord, that he risked his life for the sake of the gospel, and this is why we give him the title of “The Loving Gambler.”

But Paul had three titles of his own for Epaphroditus, listed in bold in the previous paragraph. Paul had a loving relationship with Epaphroditus, he was his brother. I love how God knits us together as a family in the church. These two men worked hard together, they prayed just as hard together (both for each other, and for the saints). They had a friendship that no doubt grew deeper and stronger as the seasons passed. So, it wasn’t that these two men knew each other as business partners, they were co-labourers with each

⁷⁸ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 200-201)

other. They affectionately served alongside each other, to meet the needs of the saints and advance the gospel.

I love how Paul calls him “my brother”. I can relate to that personal term “my”, and I hope you can too. Our God has brought men into my life whose friendships have become dearer to me than many blood relations that I have. In a myriad of ways, the brotherhood of fellowship that I have with many in this room runs so deep and strong. We will serve together in this life, and live to serve our God for all of eternity. Our God has adopted us into an eternal familial union. We are eternal brothers and sisters. Our relationships therefore have eternal value and ought to be developed richly.

So Epaphroditus was Paul’s brother, but more than that, he was his ‘fellow worker’. This is a term that some would like to de-emphasize perhaps. We’re in it for the brotherhood, but let the pro’s and super-faithful do the work!!! This is another reason why Epaphroditus is such a great example to the everyday Christian. He worked hard, and blessed many, including Paul. We ought to be a working people. Just as it is a sin for someone to sit on their butt and collect social services when they are fully capable of contributing to society, so it is sinful for Christians to sit and drink coffee with their ‘brothers’ while the work remains unfinished. We’re not resting yet. That’s what death and the rapture are for. There’s a reason why Revelation 5 doesn’t happen to you directly after the moment you are saved. It’s because you’re hear to labour alongside your brothers for the cause of Christ and His gospel. **“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Matt. 28:18-20) Let us be thankful for the example of Epaphroditus as a hard worker in the faith.

Paul also called Epaproditus a ‘fellow soldier’. I think we naturally understand and apply the metaphor that Paul is using here. He’s not saying that he and Ephaphroditus shared a common military connection as soldiers. Rather, he’s painting the picture of hardship and calamity and oppression and difficulty that they, and the rest of the Philippians, lived through. Carrying the image of Epaphroditus further than being a hard worker, he speaks of his courage, and endurance, and zeal for the truth.

In the second half of verse 25, Paul calls Epaphroditus **‘your messenger and minister to my need’**. The Greek word for messenger ‘apostolos’, can, and does here, refer to an ordinary messenger. Once again, we can be encouraged at the effective and blessed ministry of this ordinary Christian man. His character was such that he was entrusted to travel with not only the monetary gift for Paul, but also with the gift of his service and brotherhood. Paul is telling them that he is going to be sending this beloved man back to them. It must have been incredibly difficult for Paul to part ways with Epaphroditus. This self-giving, tireless, sacrificial, and humble servant was very dear to Paul. The Philippians sent him to Paul with the intention that he would stay with him. So for Paul to send him back, he wanted to clarify the blessing that Epaphroditus was, and give his reasons for sending him away. Paul closes chapter 2 with his reasons.

“For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 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. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.” (2:26-30)

Ralph Martin deepened my appreciation of the mind of Epaphroditus in his commentary. He wrote about the concern of Epaphroditus for the Philippians in verse 26, *“The fine plans of the Philippians in the visit and ministration of Epaphroditus had gone awry. Unhappily he had fallen ill either en route to see Paul*

(Caird, Bruce) or when he had arrived; somehow news of this sickness had travelled to Philippi, and from there a report had come back to Paul that the Philippians were concerned about him. We observe again the double journey involved. This, in turn, reacted upon Epaphroditus who was in great distress, which is marked by two strong terms, *longing (epipothon)* and *distressed (ademonom)*. The first word is seen in 1:8, where it is used of Paul's ardent desire to see the Philippians once more. The second term is used to describe the Lord's agony in Gethsemany (Mt. 26:37; Mk. 14:33), and denotes great mental and spiritual perturbation. It denotes a 'confused, restless, half-distracted state' (Lightfoot) for which 'very upset' is hardly adequate."⁷⁹

I think we would drawing an inappropriate connection if we put the distress of Epaphroditus on the same level of Christ in the garden. But I hope that we get the picture that he was in a state of real and deep anguish. His distress had such an impact of his life that Paul writes that he was ill. A further probing into the word 'ill' helps us to comprehend what was the matter with him. The word used is *astheneo*, which is a compound verb. *Stheneo* is the word for strength, and placing the *a* in front of the word gives it meaning of 'without strength'. So quite literally, Epaphroditus was weak. While the term meant physical weakness due to illness, it also could have referred to a state of mental breakdown, depression and lethargy, and in this case it could have been a package deal. Regardless of the nature of his illness, it had rendered his partnership with Paul less effective. He had been sick for quite awhile, some estimate over three months. That timeline is calculated by how long it would have taken the message of his illness to get to Philippi from Rome (800 miles) and back again.

This illness, although we don't know the details, was so serious that Paul says he was near to death. Knowing what we know about their friendship, we can relate to the emotional turmoil it is to care for such a dear person knowing that death may be imminent. And then Paul interrupts the narrative of the illness of Epaphroditus with the striking, and invasive words, "**But God!**" I love those words! In an Ephesians 2:4 kind of way, God moves in on Epaphroditus in his state of weakness and has mercy upon him. Contemplate if you could, the number of prayers offered up on his behalf by the saints over these months. And here, in an act of mercy, God has restored him to a level of service once again. This ought to encourage us to pray for those who are terminally ill, trusting in God's mercy on them if those prayer go unanswered, and giving Him all the praise if they are!

Paul writes that God had mercy on him also, '**lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow**'. Paul thanks God from the vantage point of his own personal sorrow. Had the Lord taken Epaphroditus, it would have crushed Paul emotionally, and that pain was spared Paul mercifully. With Epaphroditus strengthened enough to make the trip back to Philippi, Paul writes, "**I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.**"

We can infer by Paul's eagerness to send him home at this time, that this wasn't in the their plan at all. I believe that the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to stay with Paul indefinitely, or at least until Paul's imprisonment had ended. But I believe that this brush with death changed Paul's mind, and he now desired to send him home. There was a double blessing in sending him away. First, the saints would rejoice all the more in seeing him again, and second, Paul will be less anxious. The lexical definition of the term defines it as 'free from anxiety'. Piggy-backing off of the previous verse, if God's mercy saved Paul from having sorrow upon sorrow, knowing that Epaphroditus was safe and well cared for at home would give Paul even that much less to be concerned about.

Even though Paul rejoiced always, and commanded the believers to rejoice always, he still faced sorrow. Hansen writes, "*Although the joyful reunion of Epaphroditus with his home church will assuage his sorrow, he will still have sorrow. Paul does not disclose the cause of his continuing experience of*

⁷⁹ Martin, Ralph P., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians* IVP, 1987 (p. 134)

sorrow. *Paul's imprisonment, his adversaries, and his rivals are all candidates for the causes of his sorrowful condition. Whatever the reason for his sorrow may be, Paul still lives within the realm of sorrow. His prescription for joy does not include the removal of all sorrow but such a focus on presence of the Lord within the experience of sorrow that rejoicing in the Lord becomes the predominant theme of life.*"⁸⁰

Verse 29 can be taken the wrong way, and so I want to caution us against possibly interpreting it the wrong way. Some have taken Paul's instruction for the church to welcome Epaphroditus with joy and honor to mean that they might have been ready to receive him with harshness and judgment. I don't see that as a possibility. Surely, the intended purposes of their sending him to Paul weren't accomplished according to their plan, but it was accomplished according to God's. I think it severely underestimates that spiritual maturity of this congregation, to think of them as being a people who would turn on this godly man for his apparent 'failures' in ministry. I think what Paul is doing in this verse is trying to pump up this crowd to welcome him with even more joy than they already were planning too! He's saying, "You were going to have a bag lunch fellowship when he got there? NO WAY! I'm telling you to welcome this man with a feast as if the King were coming for dinner!" Paul wanted them to know the joy he took in Epaphroditus, and he wanted them to have joy in him too, and to honor this one who completed the mission set before him.

Verse 30, "**For he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.**" Paul says that Epaphroditus 'risked his life', which is why we call him 'the Loving Gambler'. He voluntarily laid aside his own health and safety and exposed himself to the danger of death. Martin comments again, "*Epaphroditus staked his life for the service of Christ, in the interest of the apostle and on behalf of the Philippians community whose lack of help was unavoidable since they were miles away. Such a word brings its own challenge and rebuke to an easy-going Christianity which makes no stern demands, and calls for no limits of self-denying, self-effacing sacrifice. Here is a man who gave little thought to personal comfort and safety in order to discharge his responsibility.*"⁸¹

Epaphroditus risked his life for something much greater than money. And while he risked his life, he was doing anything but gambling. When you gamble there is a great chance of losing everything, but there was no risk that Epaphroditus would lose anything, on the contrary, he had Christ to gain. He no doubt agreed with Paul who wrote, "**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.**" (3:7-8)

Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus were three very different individuals: Paul the bold, fearless leader; Timothy his quiet, devoted assistant; Epaphroditus a diligent, behind-the-scenes worker. Yet all three manifested the most important characteristic of a godly leader—a life worth imitating.

⁸⁰ Hansen, G. Walter, *The Letter to the Philippians* Eerdmans, 2009 (p. 207)

⁸¹ Martin, Ralph P., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Philippians* IVP, 1987 (p. 138)