

Sermon Summary #12

Behold! An Ordinary Man of God Philippians 2:19-30

Some of you may not like the title to my message this morning. You may think it lacks *political correctness* and that instead of referring to an ordinary “Man” of God I should have said an ordinary “Person” or “Human,” and in that way I would have included both genders, male and female. But the fact is that I have in view “men” particularly and not “women.” That isn’t to say women can’t benefit from what I want to say. I’ll explain how they can in just a moment. But the focus of my message today, indeed the focus of Paul’s comments in Philippians 2:19-30, is the Christian male. *So I want to talk about what every ordinary man who knows and loves God ought to be like.*

I don’t particularly enjoy targeting a specific segment of an audience like this, but I have no choice. Ladies, you shouldn’t be offended. After all, I devoted an entire sermon last Mother’s Day to the woman of Proverbs 31 and I’m sure that most of the guys here had a hard time connecting with that one too. But let me explain myself. Here in Philippians 2:19-30 Paul turns his attention to two men, two of his closest friends and companions: **Timothy** and **Epaphroditus**. He does this to accomplish two goals.

First, he is giving all of us, women included, two illustrations of what it means to be humble and to love and serve other Christians. I hope you haven’t forgotten how Paul opened chapter two. He began with an exhortation to all of us to put aside rivalry and conceit and to humbly serve others and look first and foremost to their interests and needs. He then gave us the preeminent example of what this looks like. Jesus Christ gave up his rights and the glory that he shared with the Father and the Spirit and became a human, indeed a slave, and served us even unto death on a cross. Paul now directs our attention to these two men who likewise embody and illustrate what it means to humbly serve others in the cause of the gospel.

So, women as well as men can learn a lot from the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus. Regardless of one’s gender, this is what it looks like to love others in the body of Christ. This is what it looks like to put aside concern for self and to serve those in need.

Second, in addition to this, Paul is also telling us men what it looks like to be a real man. Never in human history has the notion of being male, of being a man, of being masculine, been as distorted and warped as it is today. We need to re-learn what an ordinary man of God looks like. By the way, women you can still learn a great deal from this as well. If you are single, you can learn what kind of man you should pray for and seek as a husband. If you are a mother, you can learn what kind of man you should pray that your own sons might become. You can also learn what your husband needs most, and thus pray for him appropriately. So, don’t check out on me, ladies. You need to hear this as much as the men do.

You do realize, I trust, that Paul in a sense took a huge risk in citing Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of what a true man of God should be. We would never do this today. In our world, if you want to sell a product or project an image of masculinity you mention a star in the NFL or some Hollywood hunk or perhaps one of those men who recently made the Forbes list of the world’s wealthiest individuals.

Christians aren’t immune to this. Even now when we want to illustrate what biblical “success” means we point to Abraham or David or Moses or Daniel or John or Elijah. But Paul goes out on a limb and talks about people like Onesiphorous (in 2 Timothy) and Archippus (in Philemon), or Barnabas (in Acts). *Paul likes to draw attention to the fingers and toes and knuckles and elbows of the body of Christ, those parts of the body that rarely draw attention to themselves, that rarely stand out and gain notice, but without which the body couldn’t function at all.*

So here’s what I propose to do. First, I want to *introduce* to you Timothy and Epaphroditus and their role in this book and in relation to the Philippians. Then, second, I want to identify the *characteristics* of what a true man of God really looks like. The description I give you won’t help much if you’re expecting a physical description. I have

no idea whether Timothy and Epaphroditus were tall or short, handsome or homely. Neither would have worn a clerical collar or responded to the name Reverend. Today you can quickly spot a devotee of Krishna. He's the bald-headed fellow in long flowing white robes playing the tambourine. The Amish man is known for his unique facial hair, clothing, and horse-drawn buggy. The Mormon missionary is especially easy to spot: dark slacks, white dress shirt, riding a bicycle.

But no one would have taken a second look had they run across Timothy or Epaphroditus. So what made these ordinary, average men so extraordinary and special and deserving of mention in a NT epistle? Let's see.

Timothy (vv. 19-24)

Paul tells us in v. 19 that his purpose for sending Timothy to Philippi was two-fold: (1) so that the Philippians might be encouraged from hearing good news of how Paul was getting along, and also, and especially, (2) so that Paul himself might find joy in hearing about the Philippians.

Timothy is first mentioned in the NT in Acts 16:1. From that text we can infer that he was from Lystra and was the son of a mixed marriage: his father was a Greek pagan and his mother, whose name was Eunice, was a devout Jew. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy that the young boy was raised on the Scriptures by his mother and his grandmother, Lois. Most believe that Paul led Timothy to saving faith in Christ during his first missionary journey in 47 a.d. (see 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2). In about 51 a.d. he joins Paul and travels extensively with him on the apostle's missionary journeys. He eventually settles in Ephesus, most likely as an Elder and Pastor in that city.

In vv. 20-24 Paul mentions ***three reasons*** why he sent Timothy to Philippi rather than someone else.

(1) The first reason is that Paul says ***he has "no one like him" (v. 20a)*** or more literally, no one "of equal soul." In other words, whatever Timothy does or says when he arrives, the Philippians may rest assured that it is what Paul himself would have said and done. Timothy knows the heart and mind of Paul better than anyone else.

(2) Secondly, ***no one else "will be genuinely concerned for your welfare" (v. 20b)***. In point of fact, "they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (v. 21). This is a remarkable statement. Look closely at the contrast. Paul sets before us Timothy's love and concern for the ***Philippians*** versus everyone else's lack of concern for ***Christ***.

That doesn't seem to make sense. It seems rather that Paul should have written this: "They seek their own interests, not those of you Philippians." In other words, shouldn't he have said, "Timothy is concerned for *you* but the others are concerned only for *themselves*"? But note what Paul actually says: ***"Timothy is concerned for you but they lack concern for Christ!"***

I think what Paul is saying is that ***to be concerned for other Christians, as Timothy was for the Philippians, is to be concerned for Christ***. To love other Christians is to love Christ. These other people don't love you, says Paul, because they don't love Christ. If they were concerned for the interests of Christ they would be concerned for your welfare also! Consider these similar statements:

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him" (1 John 5:1).

"For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do" (Hebrews 6:10).

So how does Paul know that Timothy has the interests of Jesus Christ and the glory of Jesus Christ uppermost in his heart and affections? He knows it because he knows how much Timothy loves and is concerned for the welfare of Christ's people, the Philippians.

You may wish you could affirm the Christian faith and reject Christians, but you can't. You may wish you could love Jesus but ignore and even despise his people, but you can't. The Bible simply won't let you get away with it.

(3) The third reason Paul is sending Timothy is because he has a remarkable reputation. We see this in v. 22 – **“But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.”** Timothy understands the gospel, has sacrificed greatly for the sake of the gospel, and has diligently served alongside Paul in proclaiming the gospel. You can count on him, says Paul.

We turn next to Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus (vv. 25-30)

A-who-da-what-us? No, Epaphroditus! Yes, it’s an unusual name, to say the least. It comes from the name of *Aphrodite*, the Greek goddess of love. Some have suggested that the parents of Epaphroditus were pagan devotees of the goddess, but that’s merely speculation. Aphrodite was also the goddess of gamblers. The custom in those days was to throw the dice and shout, “*Epaphroditos!*” or, “favored by Aphrodite!” Our Epaphroditus was himself a gambler of sorts: he risked his life for the sake of the gospel!

So who was this man and what had he done? Evidently he had served as ***an emissary or envoy*** on behalf of the church at Philippi. They had taken up a collection for Paul and entrusted it to Epaphroditus, who carried this monetary gift to the apostle in prison (see 4:14-19). Epaphroditus then remained in Rome (or Caesarea) with Paul and ministered to Paul as his personal aide. During the course of his time with the apostle he had fallen ill, almost died, was eventually healed, and is now being sent back to Philippi carrying this very epistle that you and I are now studying together.

There is a story that dates from the 4th century a.d., concerning the difficulty that some inexperienced demons were having in their efforts to tempt what appeared to be a godly man. They used everything at their disposal, but to no avail. They returned to Satan and told him of their difficulty. Satan responded by saying that they had been ***too hard*** on the man. “Send him a message,” said Satan, “that his brother has just been made bishop of Antioch. Bring him ***good news***.” The demons returned and dutifully reported the wonderful news to the man. And immediately, he fell into deep, wicked jealousy! (The story is told by Kent Hughes in his book, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987], p. 100.)

But as you can see, ***neither Epaphroditus nor Paul suffered from this sort of professional jealousy***. It would have been easy for Paul to look down his apostolic nose on someone like Epaphroditus, or for Epaphroditus to ache with envy as he reflected on the success of Paul’s ministry. But we see nothing of the sort in either man.

Paul, without question the most brilliant biblical scholar of his day, gifted and powerful, ***looked on Epaphroditus, a previously unknown “nobody,” and called him “my brother” and my “fellow worker and fellow soldier”*** (v. 25). Many of us resent the gifts of others, perhaps being threatened by their success or fearful of our own loss of prestige. But Paul and Epaphroditus knew nothing of the sort.

It’s important to note the word translated ***“minister”*** in v. 25b. It comes from a Greek word from which we get our term *liturgy*. It was often used in the OT (LXX) to refer to the priestly and sacrificial duties of those who administer sacred rites of the Levitical order. When Epaphroditus cared for me, says Paul, he was rendering ***a distinctly spiritual and priestly service***. He was my minister!

In any case, Paul felt obligated to send him back to the Philippians, as he describes in vv. 26-30. Clearly, ***Epaphroditus was homesick. More than that, he was just plain sick!*** But notice carefully what Paul says. It reveals a great deal about why this man was great. It wasn’t the case that Epaphroditus took advantage of his own sickness to obsess over his own welfare. Strange as it may sound, ***his concern was for their concern for him! He cared so deeply for the Philippians back home that he was less concerned for his own physical health than he was for their emotional health once they learned of his affliction.***

Most of us exploit personal illness to indulge in a bit of self-pity. We don’t enjoy the physical discomfort, but we can’t keep ourselves from taking selfish satisfaction in the special attention others show us in our hour of need. But look at Epaphroditus! ***Here is a man who probably prayed more to God concerning the grief his friends experienced because of his illness than he prayed to God for his own physical welfare!***

Paul says he was “distressed” (v. 26) when he discovered that the Christians in his home church had received news of his illness. He couldn’t bear the thought of being a burden to them, even if only in their minds. Far from feeling gratified that he was the object of so much conversation and prayerful concern back home, ***Epaphroditus was driven to emotional torment by the realization that he, though by no fault of his own, had become a source of sorrow to them!***

Neither the nature nor cause of his illness is specified, but Paul does tell us that it came about when he “risked” his life “for the work of Christ” (v. 30). ***Epaphroditus was no coward. He was a courageous man who took no concern for his own welfare when it came to making Jesus known.***

Epaphroditus wasn’t the sort of man to win the MVP in this year’s Super Bowl. He probably wouldn’t qualify as the sort you’d want to advertise your product on TV. I doubt if he would be asked to share his testimony on TBN or the 700 Club. He is hardly anyone’s idea of a celebrity. But Paul says: “receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men” (v. 29).

A Man of God

So what does the true man of God really look like?

(1) The real man of God is perfectly content with being perfectly ordinary. There was nothing about either Timothy or Epaphroditus that set them apart in a crowd. Nothing is said here about their spiritual gifts or their speaking skills or their powers of persuasion. *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7).* Epaphroditus was a clay jar. Thank God for your ordinariness. Don’t resent it. Don’t think that God has left you deficient or that he must have loved others more than you or that you cannot achieve great things in the church and for the glory of Christ.

(2) The real man of God is unafraid to experience and express his love for other Christians. So many so-called “men” today are terrified of feeling deeply. They suppress their emotions, worried that others might think them weak for actually having intense affections and feelings for others. You never see them cry. You rarely hear them express their devotion to or delight in another believer. If Timothy had been this sort of so-called “man” I doubt if Paul would ever have entrusted him with this task. Timothy was dispatched to Philippi precisely because Paul knew of his deeply affectionate and loving concern for the welfare of the Christians in Philippi.

Consider the dynamics of Christian love as seen in Philippians:

- Christ loved the Philippians so much he emptied himself and became a slave to the point of death (2:6-8).
- The Apostle Paul loved the Philippians so much he endured a cruel beating and unjust imprisonment to bring them the gospel (Acts 16).
- The Philippians loved Paul so much that they generously gave of their financial resources to support him in his missionary endeavors (1:5; 4:14-19).
- Epaphroditus loved Paul so much that he risked his life in ministering to his every need (2:25, 30).
- The Philippians loved Epaphroditus so much that they grieved upon receiving news of his illness (2:26).
- Epaphroditus loved the Philippians so much that he grieved upon receiving news of their receiving news of his illness (2:26).
- Finally, Paul loved Epaphroditus so much that had he died from this illness, Paul would have experienced “sorrow upon sorrow” (v. 27).

(3) The real man of God sacrifices everything for the sake of the gospel. We saw this in Timothy in v. 22 and in Epaphroditus in v. 30. “Men” today sacrifice everything for the sake of their favorite sports team. They risk it all to gain great wealth. They risk it all to preserve and promote their own reputation. But how many hold the gospel in such high regard that nothing could stand in their way to make it known?

(4) The real man of God is never spiritually competitive. He is never envious or resentful of another believer’s gifts and achievements. Epaphroditus didn’t seek to replace Paul but to serve him. He wasn’t Paul’s rival but his

“brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier” (v. 25). This is simply another way of saying that a man of God is humble and not given to entitlement.

(5) *The real man of God is never self-absorbed but thinks more of the welfare of others than of himself.* Epaphroditus was more worried about the Philippians’ being worried about him than he was worried about his own physical condition (v. 26).

(6) *The real man of God is courageous and takes no thought for his own safety, but willingly risks all for the sake of the ministry and the gospel* (v. 30). It doesn’t matter if it’s physical safety, money, personal comfort, or whatever; the real man of God holds everything in an open hand for the sake of making Christ known.

(7) *The real man of God does not suffer from false humility but is able to receive praise without being inflated with a sense of his own importance* (v. 29). Most NT scholars concur that Epaphroditus was probably present when Paul dictated this letter to the Philippians. He heard Paul issue the exhortation in v. 29. Thus he was fully aware not only that Paul had written to the Philippians but that they should joyfully “honor” him. Let’s also not forget that Epaphroditus is carrying this letter back to the church in Philippi. He never sought out honor for himself. He never carried favor with the apostle. He never lobbied for praise from men. But when Paul declared that men like him should be honored, Epaphroditus in effect said, “Well, o.k. If you insist. But let’s not make too big a deal of it!”

Conclusion

Men, what keeps you from being a Timothy or an Epaphroditus? What obstacles do you encounter in your own soul to cultivating these sorts of qualities? Are you prepared today to tackle them head on? Allow me to identify several potential problems.

First, the single greatest threat to your becoming a man like Timothy or Epaphroditus is your failure to understand and apply the gospel to your own heart. Your fear of being “ordinary” or of honestly expressing your feelings of love, as well as your tendency always to compare yourself with others ultimately comes from a failure to embrace the truth that God loves you in Christ with no strings attached. The gospel declares that ***your value is in your relationship to Christ***, not in your bank account or your status in the community or your grade point average or your reputation or the size of your home or your competency on the athletic field.

You are a child of God by grace alone. Your worth as a man is determined by your Creator, not by the opinions of a co-worker. You are righteous by faith, not by your annual sales record or the size of your 401(k) or by how well you’ve done in comparison with others in your field of endeavor. Knowing and growing and resting in that truth will alone liberate your heart to love others as Timothy and Epaphroditus did.

Second, give up your determination to remain “safe” and “secure”. Trust God alone to protect you and ultimately vindicate you. The only thing that matters is what God thinks of you, not what others may surmise or say. Trust the gospel when it tells you that what you fear they might do to you, they can’t. Only God can, and he has promised *never* to harm you or to leave you or by any means, for any reason, to forsake you.

Third, acknowledge and deal with your unbelief. Your *fear* that your boss or your wife or your co-worker will not respect your competency as a man and husband and father is greater than your *faith* that God will sustain and support you no matter what.

Fourth, crucify (put to death) your sinful commitment to uphold your image at the cost of serving and supporting others. It isn’t important that you *look good*, but only that you *love good* (forgive the grammar!).

Fifth, and finally, acknowledge and then repent of the fact that the underlying problem in your failure (refusal!) to serve and love others is selfishness. It’s not the lack of opportunity or education or experience or the absence of a spiritual gift you think you need. **The problem is selfishness!** And what is the antidote for this spiritual disease? Read and heed, believe and obey, trust and treasure the truth of what Paul said (Philippians 2:5-11) that Christ has done for you. May the power of his humble love and painful sacrifice on your behalf pierce the otherwise calloused and seemingly impenetrable walls of your self-protection and selfish ambition.

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