

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Live in the Lord

Philippians 2:19-30

I normally conclude our Sunday service by offering a prayer or pronouncing a benediction that basically says, in one way or another, that having worshiped God with our lips, we're now being sent forth to worship God with our lives. All our praising, praying, and preaching should have an effect beyond the time that we're in this sanctuary on the Lord's Day. It should feed into daily discipleship. It should form us into the kind of people who embody the gospel, individually and together. There's a story about a six-year-old boy who responded to his parents' assurance that he didn't need to be afraid of the dark because the Lord was with him. "I know God is with me," said the boy, "but sometimes I need Jesus with skin on him."

Whether we're gathered here for worship or scattered into the world for witness, we're supposed to be Jesus with skin on him. We should be able to sense the Lord's presence and see his character in one another. And as others watch our lives, they should be able to see the humility, faithfulness, and love of our Lord. We're supposed to model, for one another and for the world, the sacrificial way of Christ.

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul has already been urging them to follow the humble, sacrificial pattern of Jesus. As they do, they will be formed into a bona fide community in Christ, living in one accord, sharing the same purpose, and demonstrating Christ's love in the world. In one respect, it's not really that complicated, says Paul. It essentially comes down to this: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:3-4).

At first glance, that may sound like little more than Paul's tip of the day for creating healthier relationships. But Paul isn't just dispensing good advice on how to live a happier life. If he were, folks in the pews in Philippi might say, "Well, that sounds nice, Paul, but I can get that kind of wisdom and guidance by watching Dr. Phil, reading Oprah's magazine, or exploring someone's self-improvement blog. Why do I need to come to church?"

"Because church," says Paul, "is where we come to get more than just tidbits of truth. We come to church to get the mind of Christ." That's when Paul breaks into the lyrics of a popular hymn that the Philippians recognize from the opening praise segment of Sunday morning worship: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (2:6-7). The song goes on from there to describe Christ's descent all the way into the experience of death itself, and from there his exaltation and enthronement by God. So this Savior who lowered himself is now lifted up, and is Lord of all. You can't necessarily get that kind of news, and the life change that comes from it, through daytime television or nighttime web surfing.

Remember that Paul's desire is to get more of Christ's faithfulness into the Philippians. Or to put it another way, to get more of their lives into Christ's faithfulness, and his ongoing purposes. That's why, at the beginning of today's text, Paul speaks about the hope he has "in the Lord Jesus" (v. 19). In other words, he wants his plans and purposes to be in accord with the Lord's plans and purposes. And at this stage of things, one of Paul's plans is to send Timothy to the Philippians.

Not immediately, though. First, Paul wants to wait for further news about how his own circumstances will work out. Then he'll send Timothy to the Philippians. And when that happens, the Philippians can be assured that they're being visited by Paul's closest and most reliable coworker. In fact, this letter itself is coauthored by Timothy. That's a clear indication of the bond that Paul and Timothy have in the work of the gospel. Paul knows that he can count on Timothy to deliver accurate news to the Philippians about his own circumstances, and to bring him accurate news about the Philippians' circumstances.

Notice how Paul speaks glowingly of Timothy. For one thing, Timothy, like no one else, can faithfully reflect Paul's love and care for the Philippians. Secondly, Timothy himself is deeply devoted to the Philippians' well-being. "I have no one else like him," says Paul, "who takes a genuine interest in your welfare" (v. 20). Paul doesn't just say this because Timothy is good at creating and sustaining church health, though that's certainly true. Rather, Paul says this about Timothy because Timothy is a prime example of Jesus with skin on. Timothy consistently models the way of Christ, and exhibits the mind of Christ, that Paul has already spoken about. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (v. 4). That's Timothy. He's the embodiment of selfless service to others.

Selflessness for the sake of others, rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It's so basic and so familiar. Yet we need to be reminded of how essential it is in the life of the Christian and the life of Christ's church. We always need to have more of the mind of Christ in us.

Matt Woodley tells a story about Helen Roseveare, a medical missionary in Africa. She was the only doctor in a large hospital. According to Woodley,

There were constant interruptions and shortages, and she was becoming increasingly impatient and irritable with everyone around her. Finally, one of the African pastors insisted, "Helen, please come with me." He drove Helen to his humble house and told her that she was going to have a retreat—two days of silence and solitude. She was to pray until her attitude adjusted. All night and the next day she struggled; she prayed, but her prayers seemed to bounce off the ceiling. Late on Sunday night, she sat beside the pastor around a little campfire. Humbly, almost desperately, she confessed that she was stuck. With his bare toe, the pastor drew a long straight line on the dusty ground. "That is the problem, Helen: there is too much 'I' in your service." He gave her a suggestion: "I have noticed that quite often, you take a coffee break and hold the hot coffee in your hands waiting for it to cool." Then he drew another line across the first one. "Helen, from now on, as the coffee cools, ask God, 'Lord, cross out the 'I' and make me more like you.'" In the dust of that African ground, where a cross had formed, Helen Roseveare learned the master principle of Jesus: freedom comes through service, and service comes by releasing our ego.¹

One of the reasons Paul plans to send Timothy to the Philippians is because he knows that with Timothy, ego isn't a problem. Timothy isn't focused on what will benefit himself. He's focused on what will benefit the community of believers in Philippi. Timothy's interest in the spiritual health of the Philippians isn't contrived for selfish purposes. No, it's a deep, genuine, heart-felt concern for their progress in the gospel.

According to Paul, Timothy's authentic devotion to the Philippians' spiritual well-being stands in contrast to others who, as Paul puts it, "look out for their own interests, not the interests of Jesus Christ" (v. 21). Though it's hard to define exactly who these others are, they seem to be individuals who are preaching Christ, but are doing so, the way Paul sees it, for personal gain instead of the Philippians' gain. Rather than following the downward, self-giving way of Jesus, they're trying to travel the upward, self-centered way of this present world.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of how, years ago, when I was working in a bookstore, some members of our staff had sort of informally gathered around a manager and another employee who were having a conversation. I don't remember the subject of the conversation, but I do remember that at one point, the manager started walking in circles around the employee, over and over. "What are you doing?" asked the employee. The manager replied, "Oh, I'm just revolving around you, since you think you're the center of the universe."

Paul doesn't want to send the Philippians someone who thinks they're the center of the universe. Instead, he must dispatch someone who knows that God, in Christ, is at the center of the universe. Someone who has Christ at the center of their own world. And no one fits that bill better than Timothy.

But Epaphroditus is certainly right up there at the top of Paul's list too. In fact, Paul plans to send Epaphroditus to the Philippians immediately. And he can't say enough about what Epaphroditus has meant to him. He too has been one of Paul's closest missionaries and fellow laborers in Christ. In addition to being a messenger of the gospel to the Philippians, Epaphroditus is also the one who delivered their gifts to the imprisoned Paul. He himself suffered a debilitating illness that almost took his life. And yet, his primary concern was the health of the Philippian church. In fact, as one commentator has put it, Epaphroditus "was worried sick that they were worried sick about his sickness!"² This kind of selfless regard is what it means to have the mind of Christ and to be conformed to his likeness. No wonder Paul concludes today's text by saying, "Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me" (vv. 29-30).

A couple named Saul and Pilar Cruz launched a ministry in Mexico City by planting a church on the edge of a vast garbage dump. Among the challenges the infant congregation faced was learning to trust Saul's leadership. Though he's a gifted strategist, Saul often appeared aloof. By his own admission, he was unwilling to plunge into the pain and poverty of his people. But as one writer puts it,

. . . all of that changed one Sunday morning when someone burst into their worship service with a frantic need: the local sewage system had started leaking and then flooding the street. As the sewage continued to gush, the street was on the verge of collapse. The crisis also threatened to sweep away dozens of nearby homes. To make matters worse, the city wouldn't respond for at least three days.

Saul and a local engineer organized the onlookers and church members to stop traffic and make sandbags. After working frantically for nearly fifteen hours, by three o'clock the next morning they had finally stopped the flow of sewage. It was cold and drizzling, and Saul was shivering. Exhausted, covered with mud and sewage, Saul and his church members emerged from the pit and walked back to the church. Some of the women had heated water so the volunteers could wash off the filth.

As they gathered together, Saul started to cry. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I need to pray. I need to thank God, because he just saved us. He saved you. He saved me. Can we pray?" Then Saul put out his hands as they all held hands and knelt to pray. By the time they had finished praying, Saul had earned their trust, becoming their leader and their friend. Later on, Saul would comment, "People need to see you're for real—that you really care for them, that you're even ready to put your life on the edge for them."³

In today's Scripture passage, Paul places before the Philippians two examples of Christ with skin on him. Timothy and Epaphroditus—two individuals who were for real, who genuinely cared about them, and who were willing to go to sacrificial lengths to look out for the Philippians' interests, the interests of Jesus Christ. These are Christ followers who model what it means to live in the Lord.

Remember that this morning's text is no great theological treatise or doctrinal exposition. It's a glimpse at what it means for us to be people of Christ, having the mind of Christ, exhibiting the way of Christ, both when we're gathered and when we're scattered as the church in the world. This gospel pattern of Christ—indeed, Christ himself—takes shape in us as we turn from selfishness to selflessness, from self-promotion to sacrificial service, thereby showing that we care deeply and genuinely about the things of Christ and the lives of others.

¹ Matt Woodley, in the sermon, "Servant." PreachingToday website. Accessed March 16, 2017 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/february/4020209.html>>.

² Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 84.

³ *Leadership Journal*, "Dumping Ground: An Interview with Saul Cruz" (October 2007).