

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Models of the Gospel**

Philippians 2:19-30

Today we come to the fifth sermon in our series on Paul's letter to the Philippians. During the first four messages, we've gotten a growing sense of the relationship between Paul and this particular community of Christians. In the process, we've been listening for how God is speaking to us, individually and together, especially as we move further into this season of transition in our congregation's life.

So far we've witnessed Paul's gratitude and prayerfulness for the Christians in Philippi. We've noted their shared confidence in God's faithfulness to complete the work of salvation that he has begun among them through the gospel. This gospel, the good news that Jesus is Lord, is progressing in their lives and in the world, often in spite of, and actually through, Paul and the Philippians' mutual suffering and hardships. With Christ as their main subject, the Philippians are called to practice their loyalty to Jesus in the midst of resistance and opposition, living in unity with one another by exhibiting humility. Last Sunday, we saw that this humility comes through having the "mind of Christ," the primary exemplar whose self-emptying and exaltation was described in the Christ hymn, the story that defines our church and its purpose, and holds us together. This inward unity that comes from having the mind of Christ then strengthens us in our outward witness in the world.

Today, we move into the last section of chapter 2. After leading us to join in the rhythm and majesty of the Christ hymn, and drawing out its implications for being a source of light in a darkened world, Paul returns to a discussion of his own situation. Though he's constantly engaging with heavy theological concepts and deep spiritual themes, Paul always has his feet on the ground, where the lives of real believers in real Christian communities are unfolding. Paul is always thinking theologically, but he never allows himself to drift off into a realm of abstractions and ideas, disconnected from the experiences of the congregations that he nurtures and serves.

Remember that one of the primary reasons Paul communicates by letter is because he can't be there face to face with the people in his churches. His letters are a substitute for his own personal presence, or in some respects a form of his presence. We've noted this dynamic here in Philippians, where the presence/absence theme weaves its way through Paul's communication. It reappears at the opening of today's text, where Paul talks about travel plans for himself and two of his associates.

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you" (v. 19). Recall that Paul is in prison for his loyalty to Christ and his proclamation of the gospel. He's facing trial and possibly execution. Though he's at peace with the possibility that he may be sentenced to death, for the sake of the Philippians he would rather live and resume his ministry with them. For now, between the sending of this letter and his own arrival, Paul plans to send Timothy, one of his closest co-workers in the gospel. When Paul says he hopes to send Timothy "soon," he probably doesn't mean immediately. Paul would rather wait until the verdict is pronounced on himself, then send

Timothy, so the Philippians can have the latest news on Paul's circumstances. Timothy can then stay with the Philippians for a while and eventually return to Paul with news about the church.

Now to us, accustomed as we are to instantaneous communication, this back and forth across hundreds of miles, with parchment or papyrus in hand, seems incredibly slow. If only Paul had the option of doing a virtual visit with the Philippians from his jail cell. But in this case, instead of a digitized image on a screen, the church gets a flesh and blood messenger called Timothy. Though the Philippians already know Timothy, it's important that Paul commends him to them. "I have no one else like him," says Paul (v. 20). The term Paul uses means "of like soul" or "like-minded." Both Paul and Timothy share a commitment to ministry and a devotion to the spiritual well-being of the congregation. Timothy, says Paul, is someone "who takes a genuine interest in your welfare" (v. 20). Timothy may very well be a solid teacher, and no doubt a devout and holy person, but Paul's accent is on how Timothy genuinely cares for the community of believers. His attentiveness to the congregation and his sheer unselfish love for the people is what stands out.

According to Paul, this type of ministry stands in stark contrast to some other unnamed individuals whom Paul criticizes for "seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (v. 21). They proclaim Christ, but their concerns and conduct are actually self-serving. Notice how Paul is still at work trying to form the "mind of Christ" in the Philippians. By employing the Christ hymn, he held up our Lord himself as the chief example of humility and self-emptying. Now he brings Timothy into the conversation as another model of the self-giving attitude that needs to take shape in the congregation. Timothy, who has been like a "child" to Paul (v. 22), has proven his value and his character as someone who not only speaks the gospel but shows it in the way he loves and cares for the church.

So far in this series of sermons, I hope you've gotten a sense of the affection and devotion, the spiritual bond, that exists between Paul and this particular congregation. This letter is more than just a container of theological ideas that we can dig into to form our concepts of God and the gospel. It's a living witness to the power of the gospel to shape and form individual lives and the life of a community believers. One of the benefits of today's text is that the letter's theological themes start to take on even more flesh as we hear the names of specific individuals who participate in the work of the gospel.

Almost 24 and a half years ago, in one of my first sermons as your pastor, I highlighted my gratitude for your patience as I was beginning to learn your names. I recall standing at the sanctuary doors during those first few Sundays, as people left the worship service, shaking hands, offering hugs, and testing my memory to make sure I had the right name with the right face. No doubt there were times when I got it wrong. Thank God for church pictorial directories. There were still some copies of a 1992 edition. Though it was nine years old by that point, it was still a great help in learning who was who at Grace Baptist Church.

Open up a copy of the pictorial directory for the church in Philippi, and Timothy's photo is one of the first you see. Though he's affiliated with numerous congregations, in this case he's pictured standing with the church's deacons, whom he has helped teach and train. His capabilities, and above all his Christlike example, have been essential in creating the fellowship in that community of believers. Recall that Paul had included Timothy as a co-sender in the opening sentence of Philippians, but now, in today's text, the name gets filled with content. We get a more three-dimensional sense of who Timothy is and what he's like.

No church is just an anonymous set of faces sitting in the pews. Those who confess Jesus as Lord have names, experiences, struggles, hopes, and perspectives. They each have a life story, a story that gets woven into the greater story of Christ. Each is made in God's image and redeemed in Christ. Each needs to be seen, heard, known, forgiven, and loved. So as our church goes forward into this season of change, one of the keys to our internal cohesion and our external witness will be our continued focus on people, and the dignity of personhood that we each have in Christ. Yes, we'll have programs, projects, and plans. We'll have strategies and structure. But more than anything, we'll need to persevere in being the kind of congregation where each person feels welcomed and known and valued, because of what God has done for us through Christ. A gospel about a God who comes to us in the form of a person calls for a church where the good news takes on flesh and blood.

Timothy wasn't the only one who embodied the gospel. So did Epaphroditus. We meet him in the remainder of this morning's text. Though Paul hopes to send Timothy soon, he wants to send Epaphroditus immediately. And just the mention of Epaphroditus's name causes Paul to burst into accolades. He's "my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs" (v. 25). The church in Philippi had sent Epaphroditus as their official messenger, to minister to Paul during his imprisonment. Prisoners were generally not cared for by the state, but relied on friends and relatives for food and other necessities. The Philippians had reached out to Paul with compassion and care, particularly through a financial gift that Paul could use to buy food and meet basic needs.

During his time of ministry to Paul, Epaphroditus had become gravely ill, and word of this had reached the church in Philippi. Part of the purpose of Paul's letter is to relieve their anxiety and worry. Yes, Epaphroditus was at death's door, but by God's mercy he has now recovered. Even so, Epaphroditus is concerned for the folks back home. As one commentator has put it, "he was worried sick that they were worried sick about his sickness!"<sup>1</sup> But that's just who Epaphroditus is. His selfless regard for others, especially in the midst of his own suffering, is an example of how he demonstrates the mind of Christ, and thus strengthens the unity of the church.

Now that Epaphroditus has been restored to health, Paul is eager to send him back to Philippi. This will give the church there an opportunity to renew their fellowship with Epaphroditus in person and to rejoice in the midst of their own afflictions. Plus it will give Paul some relief from his own anxieties. If his dear brother in the Lord had died, that would have been just one more sorrow piled on top of others. But now, Paul and the Philippians can rejoice and give thanks, together, for whether sorrows or joys, he and they will share them. That's how close they are to one another in Christ. They belong to the Lord and to each other.

At the end of his paragraph on Epaphroditus, Paul tells the Philippians, "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). Remember that one of Paul's reasons for commending Timothy and Epaphroditus is to give the Philippians living, flesh and blood examples of what it means to have the mind of Christ. So here at the conclusion of this passage, Paul uses language that echoes what he has already said about Christ's self-giving and dying for the sake of others. In this way, the Philippians can see how Timothy and Epaphroditus are what one person has called "examples of the Exemplar."<sup>2</sup>

Every congregation needs individuals who can be held up as models of the gospel. True, all of us Christ followers are supposed to be formed into his likeness. But making progress in

discipleship requires having people around us whose lives embody the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection. We need our own Timothys and Epaphrodituses whose attitudes and actions reflect a deep commitment to Christ and to the welfare of fellow believers. While this is true at all times in a congregation's life, it's especially important during a season of change. One of the keys to journeying faithfully into and through the upcoming transition in our church is the way that you display the way of Christ, the mind of Christ, to one another. If you want to help serve and strengthen our congregation in the days and weeks ahead, then do as the old hymn says, "Let others see Jesus in you / Keep telling the story, be faithful and true, / Let others see Jesus in you."

This exhortation takes on even greater significance for our church's leaders. Those of you who head up our congregation's programs, projects, committees, and ministries will need to keep telling the story of Christ, with your lips and your lives. In particular, our deacons, who will be at the forefront of our transition process, will need to lead in a way that shows what partnership in the gospel looks like. Pray for our deacons and other leaders who are entrusted with great responsibilities for the well-being of our church at all times, including this season of change.

And remember that whether your place and your part in the life of our congregation is more prominent or less visible, we remain a community of real persons, all of us, human beings with names and lives and stories and room for continued growth in Christlikeness. In the days ahead, continue to focus on one another as people, made by God and redeemed in Christ, men and women, boys and girls, in whom the saving power of God is at work. Recall Timothy and Epaphroditus. There's so much about them that we don't know. But among the few things that we do know, this much stands out, namely, a genuine care for others, an unselfish love for others, a self-sacrificing pursuit of what's good for others, especially the well-being of the church. And all this enabled and inspired by a deep bond with Christ. This spirit of sacrificial Christian service is the main reason that individuals whose lives might otherwise have been unknown to us still bear witness to us. So then, and now, we need to see, and we need to be, models of the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011) 84.

<sup>2</sup> Still, *Philippians and Philemon*, 87.