

A PRICELESS PAIR
Philippians 2:19-30
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It was Sunday morning, just minutes before the beginning of worship. The little girl, seated next to the preacher, asked him a question. “Daddy, why do you always bow your head and close your eyes right before you get up to preach?” “Well,” said the preacher who was also the little girl’s father, “I say a prayer and ask God to give me a good sermon.” The little girl responded, “But daddy, why doesn’t God ever answer your prayer?”

Preacher jokes. They’re a dime a dozen. After all, a preacher is someone who takes a text and preaches from it—sometimes very far from it. Like the woman who remarked to her minister, “I love to hear you preach. You get so many things out of your text that aren’t really there.”

Some of my favorite quips about preachers are the following. “He had nothing to say and said it endlessly.” “He was a marvelous preacher. At the end of his sermons, there was always a great awakening.” “A sermon is like a good meal. It should end just before folks have had enough.” “A sermon, to be immortal, need not be eternal.” One final quip: “The most interesting point some preachers make is the stopping point.”

On a more serious note, listen to these powerful words from Martin Luther: “I preach as though Christ was crucified yesterday; rose again from the dead today; and is coming back to earth tomorrow.”

In our text for today, Phil 2:19-30, the Apostle Paul speaks of a priceless pair of preachers—Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul writes,

¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²²But Timothy’s worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me; ²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

²⁵Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus—my brother and co-

worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need; ²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another. ²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honor such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me (NRSV).

Paul turns from exhorting the Philippians to explaining to them some practical matters. Although he is some 800 miles from Philippi, imprisoned in Rome, Paul plans to stay in touch with the Christians in Philippi by sending Timothy and Epaphroditus to them. Paul commends Timothy and Epaphroditus, but neither of these commendations is really necessary. After all, Timothy was well known to the Philippians, and Epaphroditus came from Philippi. Nevertheless, Paul takes the opportunity to speak warmly of these two co-workers.

Paul plans to send Timothy to Philippi soon, but not immediately, so Timothy is not the bearer of the letter. Why the delay for Timothy's visit? Paul intends to send Timothy as soon as the outcome of Paul's trial is known. Paul probably also wants Timothy to find out whether or not this letter has done any good, but he doesn't want to imply that he is checking up on the Philippians. Paul expects to be released and expresses confidence that he will personally be able to visit the Philippians soon.

Once again, there is a reference to those who preach Christ with improper motives. Unlike them, Timothy is genuinely concerned for the welfare of others. Like Jesus Christ and like Paul, Timothy is concerned for others rather than for himself. *Would that all of us were like Timothy, making the interests of others a matter of first importance!*

Next, Paul speaks of Epaphroditus. He considers it necessary to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi, probably as the bearer of Paul's letter. Paul explains his reasons for sending Epaphroditus *now* and *not* waiting for the outcome of his imprisonment.

It is difficult for most of us to enter into the worldview of the first century, especially about matters like communication and medicine. By way of telephone, fax, or email, we can be in instant communication with people almost anywhere on the earth; and we are so accustomed to the results of medical science that such results now cease to amaze us. In our world, most folks expect to survive even the most dreaded of diseases. However, in

the Greco-Roman world people expected to die of disease or illness and were amazed by recovery; and the only way to find out about a friend who was far away was through a messenger—and then only if someone happened to be going that way. Having heard of Epaphroditus' illness, it is quite likely that the Philippians never expected to see him again. They knew nothing of his recovery, and that is why Paul thought it necessary to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi as soon as he was strong enough to travel.

If we are willing to take some educated guesses, the story of Epaphroditus probably goes something like this. Epaphroditus was carrying a considerable sum of money as a gift from the Philippians to Paul. In a culture where prisoners were not cared for by the state but had to depend on friends or relatives for food and other necessities, the Philippians' gift was indeed a lifesaver for Paul. Since Epaphroditus was the bearer of this sizeable gift, it is unlikely that he was traveling alone. On the way to Rome, Epaphroditus became sick, perhaps with the terrible Roman fever—malaria. One of his traveling companions returned to Philippi with the news of Epaphroditus' deadly illness (and that is how Epaphroditus knew that the Philippians knew about his illness). Epaphroditus, with perhaps other traveling companions, continued on his way to Rome. By pressing onward, he put his life at risk in order to complete his mission on behalf of the Philippian Christians. But, by the mercy of God, Epaphroditus did not die, although—as we would say—death came knocking at his door. However, the Philippians do not know of Epaphroditus' miraculous recovery. Therefore, he is understandably very anxious to return to Philippi so that the believers there will share in the joy of knowing that he is alive and well.

A priceless pair: Timothy and Epaphroditus. *Timothy models serving the gospel by caring for the needs of others; Epaphroditus models the suffering that accompanies serving the gospel.*

Although we may be tempted to skip over the text we have studied today, thinking that it is little more than Paul's travel plans, these practical arrangements provide us with valuable insights into Paul's theology. At a down-to-earth level, we see what it means for men and women to live "in the Lord" (2:19, 24, 29). At a down-to-earth level, we see how to work out in our daily lives the attitude of Jesus Christ, an attitude of being concerned for others rather than for ourselves. Paul's plans to send Timothy and

Epaphroditus to Philippi arise out of his concern for the Philippian church. Likewise, Timothy and Epaphroditus and the Philippians have demonstrated a Christlike attitude and Christlike actions. The beauty of this text, of what seems as nothing more than a travel itinerary, is that the primary characters—Paul, the Philippians, Timothy, and Epaphroditus—are all looking out for what is best for others. If we want to know how to love others as Jesus loves us, we should take a long, hard look at the story we have studied today.

Loving others as Jesus loves us—what does this mean in our day-to-day lives? It means being willing to risk our lives for the sake of others. It means being sensitive and responsive to the anxieties and afflictions of others. It means finding joy in the midst of all circumstances. It means thanking God for one another and thinking about the needs of one another. It means acting like Paul or Timothy or Epaphroditus or the Philippian church.

Loving others as Jesus loves us. That is what we preach, but is it what we practice? Do we practice what we preach? Not always. While we preach “loving others as Jesus loves us,” what we in fact often practice is “others loving Jesus as we love Jesus.” Too often, we expect others to love Jesus as we love Jesus rather than loving others as Jesus loves us.

If by “others” we mean non-Christians, then we must *not* think that they must become like us in order to become one of us. No, they must become like Christ in order to become one of us. The problem with expecting others to love Jesus as we love Jesus is that we make ourselves the standard of measurement rather than Jesus being the one and only standard. Our mission is *not* to convert people to the Church of Christ; it is to convert people to the Christ of the church. It is only when we follow the Christ of the church that we can call ourselves the Church of Christ. Loving others—non-Christians—as Jesus loves us means loving the unloving and the unlovely. It means learning to accept those who are very different from us.

If by “others” we mean one another, that is, brothers and sisters in Christ, then we must *not* think our fellow Christians must love Jesus as I love Jesus. Again, I am not the standard; Jesus Christ is. I often wonder what would become of all the talk about worship—what we can or cannot do, who can or cannot do it, how or how not to do what

we can or cannot do with who can or cannot do it—what would become of all the talk about worship preferences and practices if we stopped expecting others to love Jesus as we individually love Jesus? Why must others like to sing the songs I like or sing them like I like to sing them or clap or not clap or whatever else we want or do not want? Why must others worship the way I worship? Why do we say that worship is to please God and then become so upset when it displeases us? When will we learn that worship is not about getting what I want, but is about—for at least one hour in the week—*not* thinking about what I want? How can we say we love one another as Jesus loves us when we cannot even worship with one another the One we say we love? Loving others—loving one another—as Jesus loves us means valuing what others want above what I want.

Epaphroditus—he fascinates me. He shows me that loving others with the love of Jesus means risking my life for those for whom Jesus died. And Jesus died for everyone. *Therefore, whether we live or die, we are called to love everyone with the love of Jesus Christ.*

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