

A shared concern

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[0 : 0 0] Today's reading is from Philippians chapter 2 verses 19 to 30, found on page 1180 in the Church Bibles.

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.

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 with 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 to you, Ephroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and a minister to my need.

[1 : 0 5] 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, and that I may be less anxious.

So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honour such men. For he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Let me pray as we begin. The Apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica. And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this enormous privilege, like no other, to gather together to hear your word.

[2 : 2 4] And we pray therefore this morning, please would you help us to accept your word as it really is, as the word of God. And we pray that your word would indeed be at work in us.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now this is going to be a supremely practical and down-to-earth sermon.

If you've been following the series in Philippians, then you'll know that this letter written by the Apostle Paul, you'll know the key verse is chapter 1, verse 27.

I was rather amused, just my particular church Bible. Someone has even underlined chapter 1, verse 27. So that's very encouraging for the preacher they've been listening. Let me read it for us.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[3 : 3 0] That's the big picture of this book. That's what the risen Lord Jesus wants us to be as a church. And today we're going to see in very concrete terms what that looks like.

And that is because in our passage, in chapter 2, verses 19 to 30, we are given two models to follow. Role models are very powerful, aren't they? They're the people we look up to, the people we learn from.

Maybe, you know, a sports player, perhaps someone from your own background, and they've inspired you. They've shaped your life. Or perhaps at work, there's a podcast you listen to that shape your approach to your work.

Or perhaps your role models are on, I don't know, reality TV or the latest YouTube phenomena, whoever it is. And they've been an inspiration to you as you have listened to them and watched them.

I guess the point of a good role model is they do two things, don't they? Firstly, they move us from theory to practice, what it kind of looks like in concrete terms.

[4 : 37] They also inspire us as we look at them and we think, do you know what, I really want to be like that. I really want to follow their example.

And Philippians, although the big picture is about having the right mindset as citizens of heaven, standing firm, side by side together, as a church for the message of Jesus, it's also full of role models to inspire us and help us to see what this looks like in practice.

So flip back a page to chapter 1, verse 12, for example. We had the example of the Apostle Paul. Chapter 1, verse 12, I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

In other words, he evaluates the events and circumstances of his life, not by his own personal comfort, he wasn't comfortable, he was in prison, but instead by what happens to the gospel.

We've seen too the example of the Lord Jesus. Chapter 2, verse 5, Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, his taking the form of a servant, his humbling, his luring of himself, even to the point of death on a cross.

[5 : 58] All for the salvation of others. And now, chapter 2, verses 19 to 30, two more role models of what it looks like in very concrete, down-to-earth terms to have the mindset of heaven, the mindset that God delights in.

And if you've seen the outline, then you'll see that each one, each of these two men, Timothy and Epaphroditus, each one begs us a question. Firstly, are you willing to serve Jesus like Timothy?

Are you willing to serve Jesus like Timothy? Verse 19, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you.

Paul is planning to send Timothy back to Philippi to find out how things are going, and to encourage them to keep striving together as followers of Jesus. But what I want us to notice is that what we have here is far more than kind of travel itinerary.

Just look at how he is described in verses 20 to 22. 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.

[7 : 19] But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. Notice Paul is deliberately echoing ideas that we've seen previously in the letter.

In verse 20, that phrase, like him, is the same word that's used in chapter 2, verse 2, and is translated same minds, complete my joy by being of the same minds.

The word repeated describing Timothy because presumably Timothy's mindset actually describes the mindset of Jesus as well.

Similarly, in verse 21, we're told Timothy looks out not for his own interests, but the interests of Jesus. An echo of chapter 2, verse 4, where Paul told the Philippians, let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

And again, when Paul says in verse 22 that Timothy has served with him as a son with a father, again, to do so, that servant nature is to have the very mindset of Christ who, in chapter 2, verse 7, made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.

[8 : 43] In other words, Timothy, yes, it's travel itinerary, but it's so much more than that. He is being held up for us as someone with a servant-like, selfless mindset, a mindset which reflects the mindset of the Lord Jesus.

He puts the interests of Jesus first. In other words, when he's faced with a choice between serving his own interests and serving the interests of Jesus, it's a no-brainer.

He'll serve the interests of Jesus. Seems to me we need to ask that question of ourselves. Does this same mindset describe us this morning if we are followers of Jesus Christ?

Do his interests come first? first? Or do our own interests come first? Yes, it's true if we're Christians already, but it's true as well if we are not yet followers of Jesus.

Because the decision about whether or not to follow Jesus is above all a decision about who is going to be first in my life. Am I going to be first in my life?

[10 : 00] or actually is Jesus going to be first in my life? Now for those who do belong to Jesus when we wake up in the morning, I wonder what we say to ourselves.

Perhaps we can learn from Timothy that whatever circumstances I face today, the interests of Jesus are going to come first above my own interests.

In other words, it's not that serving Jesus is simply one of a number of things that I'm trying to juggle in my life. You know, there's work, school, family, sport, fitness, my social life, and then kind of somehow trying to fit serving Jesus in there as well.

Now that's not putting the interests of Jesus first, is it? That is trying to fit him in. Rather, we are to make sure that serving Christ is the overriding priority that shapes everything else we do in life.

I don't know about you, but I think this is tremendously challenging. Yes, encouraging to see the role model, but tremendously challenging. Well, you say, what does this look like?

[11 : 23] Well, Paul makes it clear, doesn't he? It's not something abstract. It's very concrete, verse 20, for I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

In other words, looking out for the interest of Jesus means serving others, taking a genuine interest in their welfare, above all, their eternal welfare, the eternal welfare of other Christians as well as those who are not yet Christians.

That's certainly been the challenge, I think, for me as I've prepared this talk, because it's one thing, isn't it, to say at a slightly theoretical level almost, well, of course, I'm committed to serving the Lord Jesus, but actually it gets rather more challenging, doesn't it, when we see in concrete terms what that actually looks like is about serving others for their eternal welfare.

Hence, I've expressed it in those two boxes on the outline. It's very simple, I'm sorry it's very noddy, but it is very simple. We serve Jesus by serving others for their eternal welfare, and as we serve others for their eternal welfare, we serve the Lord Jesus.

And all of a sudden, chapter 1, verse 27, it looks very down to earth indeed, very down to earth. And yet, it seems to me, it's very easy to miss this.

[12 : 51] In other words, Paul is saying the mark of Christian maturity is not just that I go to a good church, a church where I can hear the Bible being faithfully taught, but that as I do so, I come to serve.

And as I leave on a Sunday morning and head off into my week, my mindset is that of serving, serving the Lord Jesus. I must say, I do think we get this wrong.

I think perhaps we assume that if we are going to a good church where the Bible is faithfully taught, then all is well. But the question we need to ask is, are we serving?

Rachel pointed me to a lovely interview this morning, a written interview, with a couple of former students, they're now, I guess, by the look of them in their early 30s.

They used to go to a large student church in Cambridge called Stag, several years ago that was, and now they are serving at a church in Bradford. I just thought I would just read part of the interview to you, and it makes exactly this point that we see here from Timothy, and they say this, I think in many ways, when we were at Stag, we got hold of Jesus' generous invitation to involve us in the work he's doing in the world.

[14 : 19] We'd been following Jesus for several years before that, but our focus had really been on our own growth. It was during our time at Stag, and the opportunities to get involved in serving, that we became increasingly excited about using the gifts and resources God had given us to serve others.

Not just my own growth, but using the opportunities and resources God has given us to serve others. Why?

Because as we serve others, we serve Jesus. We serve Jesus by serving others for their eternal welfare. well, what might that mean for us?

Well, I guess it means we won't simply see Sunday as an opportunity to come to church for our own personal benefit, yet of course we'll want to come and hear God's word for ourselves, us. But our overriding concern will surely be to look out for the interests of others.

In other words, we won't only come when it's convenient, we'll make it a real priority. How can we look out for the interests of Jesus once we're here? Well, perhaps we might make a point each week of looking out for someone we don't know and talking to them and getting to know them.

[15 : 37] Or over coffee, making a point of discussing what we've heard from God's word with someone else and how it applies to them. It's all about taking decisions based not on self-interest, but the eternal welfare of others.

I guess it might be a decision to commit to our growth group, even when we're feeling tired and frazzled, as if it's the last thing we really want to do that evening, to encourage others.

It might be sitting down and beginning to think about and plan who are we going to invite to the wreath-making event or to our carol services. It seems, well, it's two months away, but it will get there very, very quickly.

And to do so for the eternal welfare of others. For those in paid employment, I guess it means not just keeping our heads down at work, but how can we best serve others at work for their eternal benefit, likewise at school, as well.

Are we willing to serve like Timothy? Or do we just serve Jesus at our own convenience? I don't know about you, I think this is so counter-cultural.

[16 : 52] Our culture is saying all the time, isn't it, number one needs to be the priority. It's all about self-gratification, serving myself, fulfilling your potential, putting your own interests first.

Now, are we willing to serve Jesus like Timothy? That's the first person we're thinking about and the first question that is begged of us.

Second question, are you willing to suffer for Jesus like Epaphroditus? Are you willing to suffer for Jesus like Epaphroditus?

Notice that like Timothy, his life mirrors that of the Lord Jesus. Back in chapter 2, verse 8, we're told of Jesus that being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, literally unto death.

And exactly the same phrase is now used of Epaphroditus in chapter 2, verse 27. Indeed, he was ill, near to death, literally he was almost unto death. And in chapter 2, verse 30, for he nearly died for the work of Christ.

[18 : 00] He was nearly unto death for the work of Christ. Well, we ask, why had he almost died? Well, the Philippians had sent him to help Paul, verse 25.

I've thought it necessary to send to you, Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need. Later in the letter we'll see that Epaphroditus had acted as a courier, bringing money from the Philippians to Paul, who is in prison in Rome.

And remember, in the first century, a prisoner had to live off what relatives and friends provided. And therefore, the Philippians, they collected this money for Paul's support so he could keep going with his ministry of writing and so on and speaking in prison so that he could be looked after.

Without the money, Paul's ministry of writing and communicating the gospel would have ground to a halt. In other words, at one level, Epaphroditus is doing something very ordinary.

He's just a courier. He's the Amazon guy. But actually, he's doing something of vital significance to advance the gospel, and he almost died doing it.

[19 : 20] Perhaps you can imagine the scene in the doctor's surgery as Epaphroditus was urged not to continue his journey to Rome, but he carried on because he knew that the advance of the gospel was at stake. Perhaps you could imagine the content of some of the messages on the family WhatsApp group as they urged him to take a slightly more balanced approach to his faith, but he carried on because he knew the advance of the gospel was at stake.

Or the well-meaning but misguided Christian friend saying, do you know what, I really think you're doing too much. So Paul is now sending him back to the Philippians, verse 28, 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 honour such men. Why should he be honoured? After all, he was only the courier. Well, verse 30, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

That is the point. He risked his life. Risk is a gambling word, isn't it? In other words, he weighed up the possible outcomes and he opted for the one that would best serve the gospel.

Now, it's not of course that we are to do deliberately seek to suffer or to get ill or to run ourselves into the ground. But the issue is, are we willing to risk hardship for the sake of the message of Jesus where necessary?

[21 : 08] Or does our service of Jesus always stop short of hardship? Now, it seems to me that as a church we need to think about that carefully.

because my hunch is that many of us are naturally risk-averse. And yet, of course, all of us will be familiar with men and women around us who are prepared to take big risks in order to pursue their own interests.

So, you know, think of the colleague who will take the most enormous risks in order to pursue their career or to do that deal, driven by a desire to get the work done to advance their career and even put their health on the line in doing so.

Or think of sportsmen and sportswomen who put their bodies through the most extraordinary training regimes. You know, again, think of those who are preparing to play in the football world cup in Qatar.

are. So why not if the message of Jesus is at stake? As I said, my hunch is that many of us are naturally risk averse, in which case we need to encourage each other and train ourselves to be willing to take risks for the gospel, both personally and as a church.

[22 : 36] give things a go. It may not work out, but on the other hand, it may work out. Imagine two high-powered doctors.

They're married, newly married, planning to have children. I wonder where you might think would be an appropriate kind of area for them to live. Well, some friends of ours facing that decision several years ago chose not to live in the area which family expectations would have taken them to, nor the sort of area that their colleagues might have lived in.

It certainly wasn't the neighborhood with the best schools. Instead, they chose to live in an area where there was a church which they had in mind.

It was a much less well-off area, but where they felt they could be really useful in serving that local church with their gifts and abilities, and where actually their gifts and abilities would be a kind of disproportionately high use, so to speak, compared with elsewhere.

And yes, it was a costly decision, but then Epaphroditus almost gave his life. I wonder if you have ever asked the question, is this part of London, this part of London, the best place for you to live?

[24 : 01] Is that a question you've asked? Yes, it's comfortable, but if you're a follower of Jesus, have you ever asked the question, where would the best place be to live in order to serve the gospel?

Not just where is a good church, but where can we best serve? You could move to a less well-resourced church, like our mission partner, Holy Redeemer Streatham.

Yes, it would be costly in many ways, but then, of course, Epaphroditus almost gave his life. Or perhaps at work, or perhaps at school, we're kind of reluctant to put our heads above the parapet, so to speak, as followers of Jesus, because we fear what the consequences would be at work for our career and reputation, at school, with our friendship group, and we say, well, this far, but actually no further.

Or with our friends in our social circle, we end up not living distinctively for the Lord Jesus, because we fear being excluded. We kind of fear being the kind of odd one out, this far, and no further.

I guess for some, the this far and no further factor may kick in when we think about full-time Christian ministry, or perhaps reducing our hours from a five-day week to a four-day week or a three-day week, and then using the rest of our week to be doing ministry of some sort.

[25 : 29] I mean, just think for a moment the enormous impact that could have on a local church like Grace Church, in fact, on any local church. And yet I guess that for many of us, the temptation really is not even to go there, because we're just conscious of what a costly thing that would be in terms of lifestyle and income and so on.

But that cannot be the right attitude, can it, what a man who's willing to give his life. Two men, both very ordinary, Timothy and Epaphroditus, they force us to ask the question, am I willing to serve the Lord Jesus, and am I willing to suffer for the Lord Jesus?

Both of them modeling themselves on him. And of course, the reason why the Apostle Paul spends so much time on them is not because they are superheroes, but because they are wonderful role models.

They show us precisely what chapter 1, verse 27 looks like in very concrete, down-to-earth terms, living a life that is worthy of the gospel.

But I guess some of us are asking, and I guess it's inevitable questions. I said, well, where on earth do I find the resources to live like that? Well, just look back to chapter 2, verses 12 and 13, which we saw last week.

[27 : 01] Because God never calls us to do anything without showing us how it's possible. Chapter 2, verse 12, Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. God is the one who provides us both with the means and the resources to live like this.

We may live 2,000 years later, but he hasn't changed. What was true of these two and the life that they lived as they sought to live for Jesus can be true for us.

Now, I guess many of us actually will be living like them already, in which case I hope that this morning's passage is the most enormous encouragement as we've heard God's word to continue to live like that.

But others won't be, in which case please don't wait for it to be convenient or for you to feel the time needs to be right before we start serving Jesus like this.

[28 : 23] All Christian ministry, all Christian service, is costly and sacrificial. Now, I suspect an earlier generation of Christians would not have been surprised to hear that.

But it comes as a surprise to us because our whole culture is so pleasure-focused and self-serving. You may know that this year the mission agency Crosslink celebrates its 100th anniversary.

One of its early missionaries was Alfred Buxton, who I was reading in 1929, travelled to a semi-desert region of Uganda to bring the gospel to a people group who had never heard it.

He moved around by donkey. He carried with him his camping equipment, cheese, tinned pineapple and a tea strainer.

So presumably he could brew up his afternoon cup of tea and his morning cup of tea every day. Well, 80 years later, that area of Uganda has two Anglican dioceses with 35 pastors who serve many more churches than that.

[29 : 36] Alfred Buxton, Timothy, Epaphroditus, the Apostle Paul. In our convenience culture, where everything is about serving ourselves, they are glorious, inspiring role models of what it looks like to live as citizens of heaven, of what it looks like to strive side by side for the faith of the gospel.

It's costly, and yet it's also the normal Christian life, because it's the life that the Lord Jesus lived. Indeed, it's the kind of life that God himself delights in, that he exalts, just as he has exalted the Lord Jesus to his right hand.

It begs the question, are we willing to serve Jesus like this, and are we willing to suffer for the Lord Jesus like this?

Let me lead us in prayer. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for these inspiring role models of what it looks like to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, to strive together for him as a local church.

[31 : 03] We're sorry, Heavenly Father, when self-interest trumps that in our own, in our own lives, and we do pray, please would you help us not to serve ourselves, but to serve the Lord Jesus each day as our first priority.

And we pray that we'd be willing to suffer for him as well. Please, would we be risk-takers, and we ask it for his name's sake. Amen.