

Philippians 2:19-30

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[0 : 00] Well, it's great to see you. My name's David Short. I work here at St. John's, just in case you're wondering, because we've been having a lot of other terrific preachers up the front. This is the time in our service where we open our Bibles, and I encourage you to take the Bible in front of you and turn to the book of Philippians, chapter 2, page 981.

We're going to be flipping around Philippians, particularly in the second point. And if you're with us for the first time, we've been following this letter by the Apostle Paul, written in prison in Rome, to his dear friends in the church he planted in Philippi, which is 1,300 kilometres away. And from the start, he has taken us into high and holy ground, the joy of Christ in the face of life and death.

And then at the beginning of chapter 2, the exalted pinnacle of entering into the mind of Jesus Christ himself, emptying himself out of heaven into a human baby, humbling himself to death on a cross for us and for our salvation.

And God the Father, raising him to the highest glory and demanding that every knee and every tongue, every knee bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord.

[1 : 20] It's the stuff of worship and adoration. And our hearts would have to be pretty cold not to be set on fire by this. And at the same time, it's been piercingly practical.

Jesus emptied himself and humbled himself and gave away his glory to create communities in the world that are little supposed to be, little outposts of heaven, marked by the love of Christ and the mind of Christ in the way we treat each other.

Remember back in early chapter 2, we don't act out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, we treat others as more significant than ourselves, not looking only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Last week, as we shine as lights in the world, working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Then we come to our passage today, verses 19 to 30.

And Paul the Apostle speaks about Timothy and Epaphroditus and his travel plans. And it feels like a bit of a disappointment. But it's just so ordinary.

[2 : 33] A big come down from the cosmic glories of heaven and salvation. And I don't know if you felt that way when we read it, but if you did feel that way, you'd be in very good company.

Many Bible commentators are most disappointed with the Apostle Paul at this point. They feel he needs help writing his letters. And they pass over this section very quickly and they call it travelogue.

And they're embarrassed by its ordinariness. And they suggest it would be much better, in their opinion, if Paul relegated this travelogue as a sort of a PS at the end of the letter.

You know, by the way, here's the schedule for my itinerary for the next while. This is no place to put your travel plans in the middle of the letter. But this is not the Apostle Paul's first rodeo.

And under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he knows exactly what he is doing. And the question we have to ask ourselves is, why does he say this?

[3 : 37] And why does he say it here? And I think there are two primary reasons. And these are the two points today. The first is quite straightforward. This is an example of what the living out the faith in Christ looks like.

And the second is deeper and a little bit more searching. And we're going to have to look around at the context to see what it is. So the first reason Paul writes this here is the simple power of human example of other believers.

This is the reality of the gospel in concrete living role models, Timothy and Epaphroditus. From the moment we are born, we copy those around us.

I have two grandchildren and I can get them to do almost anything I want by them copying me. It's terrible really. And I'm sure the parents have to make up for it after I leave.

We're flooded by examples. We're flooded by good examples and bad examples. And at certain times in our lives, God gives us examples that inspire us and stir us.

[4 : 44] I was privileged to be raised in a Christian missionary home. And as a teen, after we had returned to Australia, Christian leaders from all over the world, when they were deigned to visit Australia, would come and stay with us.

And as a 15-year-old, I listened to Festo Kavengere, who was a black bishop from Uganda, who had just escaped on the very night when Idi Amin had tortured the lead bishop, Janani Lawum, to death.

His gentle joy in Christ was deeply affecting to me. The reality of the Lord Jesus Christ just shone through him and countless others who we had in our home.

And as we mature in the Christian faith, somewhere along the line, without realizing it, we become examples to others.

And that's not something we're so comfortable with. But the Apostle Paul embraces this as normal and an important part of growing as a Christian.

[5 : 51] He intentionally models the Christian life, and he sets before the Philippians Timothy and Titus as two different examples. You can see how deliberate he is about this. Just look on the next chapter down the bottom of the page, chapter 3, verse 17.

Brothers and sisters, he says, Join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. Now, I wonder if you've ever said that to someone. I think there probably is a right Christian reticence about putting ourselves forward as an example, because the more you grow in Christ, the more you're aware of your own weakness and failings and sins.

But the Apostle Paul is unembarrassed, and he's quite clear. He's just said in chapter 3, which we're going to look at next week, He's not perfect. He's not arrived.

He's much that he's had to turn away from in his life. But he has the same Lord, and he's on the same path. And his lack of embarrassment in saying, imitate me, comes from the grace of God.

[6 : 59] He says, my sins no longer define me. What defines me is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, that conquering power, that gift of righteousness in Christ, which has changed me and continues to change me, and I'm completely open about this.

And this is how grace is supposed to work, isn't it? Grace allows us to be honest about our weaknesses. Grace tells us that we are far worse than we think, and that God's kindness is far greater than we could hope or imagine.

It's grace that creates the image of Christ in us. It's grace that brings us humility and self-denial and self-giving. We don't work these things in our lives on our own part, apart from Christ.

It is God who works in us to will and to work for his good pleasure, as he said last week. So the Apostle Paul takes time to commend these two different examples of what the grace of God looks like in two different believers.

They're so different from each other. They're actively and in humility treating others better than themselves. They've been gripped by the gospel of grace, and both of them are known well to the Philippians.

[8 : 15] Timothy was a young pastor who traveled with Paul. We know Timothy well. And Epaphroditus was not a pastor. He was a member of the congregation at Philippi, and he stepped up to take the money that the Philippians had collected all the way to Rome to give to Paul, to sustain Paul, and to stay with him, to serve him.

And what Paul commends here is not their great intellect and good looks and personality and huge testimony, none of the stuff that you read about in obituaries. He commends their selfless love for one another and for the Christian believers, which comes out of their faith in Christ.

So let's look at these two guys very briefly. Verses 19 to 24, Timothy. He's with Paul in Rome, and Paul wants to send him over to Philippi to bring a report back on how they're going, but not yet, he says.

Because in verse 23, Paul doesn't know whether he's going to be executed or freed. And if he faces execution, I think there's nobody he wants more by his side to strengthen and encourage him right to the end than Timothy, young Timothy.

Verse 20, I have no one like him, literally no one equal in soul, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare, for they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 41] But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father, he has served with me in the gospel. The Philippians knew Timothy very well. He was there at the planting of the church in the book of Acts with Silas.

And he shows his devotion to Christ by genuine welfare for the Christians at Philippi. He seeks the interests of Christ. How does Paul know that?

In his prayers, in his conversation, in his willingness and in his commitments. He's a living example of Jesus Christ in chapter 2, verses 5 to 8. He too humbles himself to serve the needs of others, treating them as more significant than himself.

But it's Epaphroditus, in verses 25 to 30, that the Philippians know even better. Now, the only references we have to him in the New Testament are here and in chapter 4, where we learn that the Philippians supported Paul financially.

I mean, you know this, a prison in Rome was no holiday. The state did not feed you. You had to have other friends bring you food or else you'd starve to death.

[10 : 52] And the Philippians had joined in partnership with the apostle right from the start of their life together. And that partnership was collecting money and sending it to Paul.

And Epaphroditus, who's in the congregation at Philippi, steps up to the plate and he says, I will take that money to Paul. I will take on myself the 1,300-kilometer journey.

We don't know how he did it. And I will stay in Rome to care for Paul while he's in prison. Just keep your finger in chapter 2 and turn over to chapter 4, please.

Verse 15. You Philippians 4.15. You Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only.

He's talking about money. Verse 18. I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.

[11 : 56] And listen to how he calls the money a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And if you go back over the book of Philippians, most of the references to partnership are about money.

They gave, not like a tax, resentfully. Oh, Paul says, you owe it to me. You should feel guilty because I'm your apostle.

No, no. They gave with no strings attached and no tax deduction. Simply because it was a privilege to be involved in gospel ministry, a sacrifice pleasing to God.

And Epaphroditus leaves his family and he leaves his work and he travels to Rome. To help Paul not starve to death and commits to helping Paul while he's in Rome.

And here are these two guys. I mean, you think about it. Paul the apostle, who was an ex-Pharisee converted to Christ. Epaphroditus, a Gentile Greek, whose parents named him after the goddess of sex, Aphrodite.

[13 : 03] But look at their fellowship in verse 25. Paul describes him as my brother, my fellow worker, my fellow soldier. Lovely, isn't it?

There's nothing passive or aggressive about this. There's no holding back in affection. And since he calls him a fellow soldier, it's clear that Epaphroditus somehow shared in the suffering for the gospel in Rome.

Here is an example of someone actively and practically treating other believers as more significant than themselves. He's placed his gifts and even his life at the disposal of Christ.

This is lovely. He's never preached to thousands of people. He's never done any miracles that have been recorded. He just jumps into the work and does whatever he can.

In fact, he jumps in so far, he nearly dies. And Paul mentions this twice in verse 27 and 30. He's at death's door. He's closing in on the final curtain.

[14 : 05] And we don't know what it was. He might have caught COVID 50 AD and become fatally ill in the prison. We don't know. And somehow the news got back to Philippi and the news came back to Paul and Epaphroditus that they knew.

And as he recovered, Epaphroditus was more concerned about their anxiety in Philippi than his own brush with death. He risks his life for the sake of Paul.

And as he goes down, he's more concerned about the faith of his brothers and sisters in Philippi. It's just lovely. So Paul is sending him back with this letter in his hand.

He is an example of Christ's self-forgetful love. And he says, you need to honor guys like this. So that's the obvious reason why Paul puts this here.

He says, you know, after describing what Christ has done for us at the beginning of chapter 2 and how we are to work out our salvation, he now shows us two concrete examples for seeking the welfare of others in the lives of these two men.

[15:11] But there is a second reason why the apostle puts this here. You see, it's great to have concrete models, isn't it?

But the problem with examples, especially good examples, is that it's easy to feel like you can never measure up to them.

I have listened to many, many testimonies of other Christians and what they've done for Christ. And it's only served to depress me. Just showing me how far I still have to go.

And when you read the older Christian biographies, you get a sense that the person was almost sinless, a hero, just short of Jesus. I'm never going to match up to that. And that brings us to the second reason why the apostle Paul points out these two shining lights, Timothy and Epaphroditus. And the second reason is this, is to show how God gives us the power to live for others. How he pours out his glory and love into our lives.

[16:19] The second reason is about this dynamic of glory and honour. And without this second reason, his examples may impress us, but they can't change us.

Are you with me? Just nod. Thank you. Very good. See, on our own, we are empty of glory.

It's easy to miss this in our translation, which is a great translation, but it's not a good one. Look back at chapter 2, verse 3, please. In chapter 2, verse 3, in our version it says, Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

The word conceit is not the usual word for pride and superiority. It's a double word. It's a compound. It's literally empty glory. Do nothing from rivalry, from selfish ambition or empty glory.

Paul is saying we are empty of glory. As he says back in Romans, all have sinned and are empty of the glory of God. Now, why is this important?

[17:34] It's because if we're empty of glory, what we do is we try and fill up that deficit by doing things to acquire glory. And almost always we are wanting glory from each other.

So we act in such a way that we get the applause of others or the approval of others or glory from others. This is such a strong temptation in the ministry to use the role and privilege of preaching for personal approval.

But all of us do it. And the glory deficit, this emptiness of glory, is what lies underneath our narcissism and our selfish ambition. It's the glory deficit that ruins communities.

It leads to grumbling and disputing. It's what's behind disunity and division and seeing others who are there who are supposed to be serving me and not vice versa.

It's a glory deficit that makes me fragile in relationships. Because unless I'm receiving approval, I'm very easily manipulated by applause. This is what lies behind our current tribalism, our political polarization.

[18:47] It's about trying to fill the aching void left by the glory deficit. And the more I try and create my own glory and fill that deficit, the less able I am to receive the glory that God gives me in Jesus Christ.

This is amazing. Just turn over to chapter 4, verse 19 for a moment. Here's a verse most of us probably know. Chapter 4, verse 19.

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Do you know the word supply is not the word supply?

It's the word fill up. Literally, it reads, my God will fill up your entire need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

So this is not just a calendar text that you put on the refrigerator or on the wall. It's a promise that God has way more to give us than we could possibly imagine or need.

[19:54] And that he actively and constantly pours out the riches of his glory into our hearts, into our souls, into our lives. And not just in bits and pieces here and there, but to fill up our entire life to overflowing.

Isn't that amazing? I desperately need this. And so do you. If I don't get this, I'm not going to make it.

I can't live the Christian life without this. And I need to learn and we all need to learn that whenever I feel the emptiness of glory, instead of trying to fill it by doing things for the approval of others, I need to go to Christ and remember that he did not hold on to his glory, but poured out his very self to death so that God will fill us according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

It's out of the riches of his own glory that God is willing to fill our souls to overflowing so that we don't need the approval or the applause or the admiration if we look to it in Jesus Christ.

This week, I've been reading the biography of Jack Miller, a Presbyterian leader who died a few years ago. He writes this. A lot of people who pray the Lord's Prayer, your kingdom come, would be horrified if it happened.

[21 : 23] What we really want is, Lord, I want my agenda. I want to protect myself, defend myself, make excuses. And God says, I'm going to give you so much love, you won't need those other things.

That's the way Paul prays back in chapter 1. Just turn back to chapter 1 for a moment. You remember this prayer, verse 9. It's my prayer, where does he start?

That your love may abound more and more with knowledge and discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

We do not fill ourselves with the fruit of righteousness.

We do not fill ourselves with the fruit of righteousness. It comes through Jesus Christ to the glory, up to the glory and praise of God.

[22 : 21] And the sign of being filled this way through Jesus Christ is the simple growing in love with one another. It's looking out for the interests of others, not just our own.

It's treating others as more significant than ourselves. It's doing what we can for the spiritual good and growth of others. That's why Paul explains the gospel in the way that he does in chapter 2, verses 6 to 11.

And here I'm bouncing around Philippians. We're nearly back to our passage. Just remember that gospel. Jesus Christ was fully equal with God in all his glory and honour, yet for our sake, he emptied himself.

He humbled himself. He served us to death. This is not too far different than what the apostle wrote in 2 Corinthians. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

So in Philippians 2, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not just a fabulous example to inspire us to follow. It's an exchange of glory and honour for my shame and sin, so that he might fill my empty soul and your empty soul with his glory, not just once, but ongoingly.

[23 : 47] And God the Father pours his honour and glory out on Jesus Christ by raising him to the highest place, then pours out that life and glory of Jesus Christ into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And that is why Paul gives us these two concrete examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus at the end of chapter 2. We got there. So you just have a look at how it works with Timothy.

It works, in Timothy's case, in contrast. Look back at verse 20 with me just for a moment. I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

And then he talks about these Roman Christians. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth. You see, there were other believers, leaders, Christian leaders in Rome, who believed the same gospel and preached the same gospel as Paul and Timothy.

But they did it out of a deficit of glory. They did it to build up their own approval and audience. And they took every opportunity that they could to put the apostle Paul down.

[25 : 01] They were trying to create their own glory and fill up their own empty souls. If you want to chase that down back in chapter 1, verse 15, they preached Christ from envy and rivalry out of selfish ambition, not sincerely thinking to make me suffer in my imprisonment.

And here the apostle Paul is referring to them in chapter 2, verse 21. They put their own interests ahead of Jesus Christ's. And the way they show that is they don't have any real concern for the Christians in Philippi.

But Timothy, by contrast, has genuine concern for the Christians at Philippi, which shows he's put the interests of Christ first. This is wonderful and searching stuff.

You can be a biblically trained church member engaged for a lifetime and never learn to draw on the glory of Jesus Christ. You can act out of this sense of a glory deficit, trying to fill your soul with the approval of others.

But you see, what this is teaching us is that devotion to Christ is not in the emotion of our prayer or the volume of our singing or the accuracy of our theology.

[26 : 09] Even they're all good. It's this. It's seeking the welfare of others in church. The test of spiritual authenticity is the quality of our care for each other.

And that's why it's been so encouraging over the last couple of months to see so many people getting on with seeking the good of others. You know, the people who welcomed you this morning. They're not doing it for glory. The people who went away last weekend and cooked for the hundred kids on the island. Wonderful stuff. And that's why at the end of this passage, the Apostle Paul gives us only two commands.

They both have to do with Epaphroditus. They're both in one verse, verse 29. He says, Receive him in the Lord with all joy and give honour to such men.

Value these men as precious and valuable. Don't just be polite. This has to do with the overflow of glory to the Christians in Philippi, to those who are returning.

[27 : 17] And if the church in Philippi did this, what a community of contrast they would be, yeah? I mean, the way you got honour in the Roman Empire was you were either born into it, you brought your way into it, or you grounded out of others by violence.

But here is a community in Philippi which believes and tries to live out, my joy is sufficient for you. My joy is sufficient for you, and my glory is made perfect in your serving each other.

So let's kneel and pray that God would enable us to call on that glory in Christ Jesus. more than plant, poems from Philippi of the King Johannes that will be under with you that nowhere else is in the presence of God.

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