

Philippians 2:19-30 (PM)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 May 2022

Preacher: Rev. Joel Strecker

[0 : 00] So it seems to me these days that we are in a crisis of intimacy as a society. It's been going on for who knows how long, maybe COVID accelerated it.

More and more, even in the span of my fairly short life, I've seen interactions between people become less and less personal, more and more mediated by technology.

So here's an example. When I was a kid, around eight or nine, I did a road trip with my grandparents and my parents across Canada. It was very interesting. We piled into a motorhome. We saw all sorts of beautiful places, stopped in all sorts of little towns. Whenever we wanted to eat somewhere, we would just talk to someone at the gas station and say, where should we eat? And they'd give us a recommendation. It was a way to relate to others in that community. Fast forward 15 years. I'm in my 20s now. A friend and I, we go to the south, that's America, to eat a lot of smoked meat.

[1 : 05] Because we saw this show and we thought, that's the place for us. So we piled into an 83 Tercel and drove through the southern states eating barbecue. And it was delightful.

But the way we did it was by research through the internet. We didn't talk to anyone when we were looking for places. We just took the algorithms and the Google ratings, which came from people, in order to get information about how to do this.

And our experiences, as I was thinking about it, the experience of community between those two trips was very, very different. Here's another example. I have a friend who gave up his smartphone for various reasons.

After he'd done it, he said, it was very striking to see who still made an effort to get in touch with him, even though it was less convenient. Now, this isn't a sermon about technology, directly. But I'm bringing you my observations as a way of entry into a topic that this passage touches on. And that topic is friendship. We all want to have good friends.

[2 : 10] We all want to be good friends. We'd like to think we are good friends. But what does good friendship consist of? How do we know we're being good friends?

What do we do with people who don't seem to be good friends? What if you don't even have any good friends? Our passage for tonight, Philippians 2, 19 to 30, gives us a beautiful example of Christian friendship.

If you've got a pew Bible, it would be great to turn to it, so you can follow along with me. This is our seventh stop in nine weeks through the book of Philippians. Philippians was written by a man named Paul.

Well, he was in prison, probably in Rome, and he was preaching that Jesus Christ is Lord. And people hated him for it. There's a good chance he will be executed.

And in the midst of this, Paul takes the time to write a beautiful little letter to some friends of his who live in Philippi, a major Roman city in Asia Minor.

[3 : 12] Now, a lot of things are striking about this short little letter. One thing that has impressed many, myself included, especially when you compare it to Paul's other letters, is his joy.

Philippians is a surprisingly joyful letter, which is also something that seems to be in short supply these days. So you might well ask, then, why is Paul joyful here, and less visibly joyful, maybe even sometimes upset, in other letters that he's written?

He believes in the same Christ in all those letters? His ministry is the same? There are other letters that are written from prison? Or do we just get Paul on a really good day in this letter?

Now, these questions are a little bit speculative. But I think we can say with reasonable confidence that one of the reasons Philippians is so joyful is because Paul has made some good friends in his life, including those same Philippians.

And these two characters we meet, Timothy and Epaphroditus. And this friendship comes into the foreground in some very particular ways. So let's dive into it. If you like having a structure, this is a three-point sermon.

[4 : 28] Point number one, good friendship is not natural. Point number two, we learn to be friends in Christ. Point number three, the fruit of that friendship in Christ is service and suffering.

And that is very good news. So point number one, we're not good friends. Human beings are naturally selfish. We want what we want.

We go about trying to make it so. If you don't see this, you are deceiving yourself. This is natural desire. And it has a tendency to make all of our relationships transactional.

Even when those transactions can be complicated and multilayered and have a deep history. We express this tendency very starkly these days, for example, when we ghost others.

If you don't like someone, they can't give us what we want, or the cost of the relationship is just too high, you disappear. And because so much of our friendship is mediated by technology, it's very easy to do this.

[5 : 31] We just ignore someone electronically as if they don't exist. And we see this very same tendency towards selfishness demonstrated very nicely in this passage in verses 20 and 21.

Paul says it like this, in reference to Timothy, I have no one like him, that is Timothy, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare, for they all seek their own interests, not those of Christ. Now you might well wonder, who's the they Paul is referring to here? And the answer is other Christians in Rome.

Paul is thinking, who might I send on my behalf to look out for you? He's in contact with others. They all look out for their own interests, not those of Christ.

And the point Paul is making here, I think, is not to throw these other Christians in the mud. He intentionally does not name names. But he is here pointing out how exceptional Timothy's behavior is.

[6 : 34] Truth be told, most of us are the they that Paul is speaking about. It is unnatural, difficult, exhausting not to put our own interests first.

So how can this selfishness be overcome? That brings us to point number two. Now most friendships, most of the time, are based on shared interest.

And that makes friendship limited in scope. The degree to which we are able to give ourselves in friendship is bound up with the grounds of that friendship.

If you are interested in Japanese import cars or smoked meat or mid-century modern furniture or staying hydrated, pick a topic.

There is a community out there for you. Online even. And you can find friends about those things there. Shout out to hydro homies. But these special interest friends are friends in a very limited way.

[7 : 38] Because the friendship is only in service of that shared interest. The defining feature of the relationships we see in this passage, the shared interest, is Christ. Paul's friendship with Timothy, with Epaphroditus, the Philippians is in Christ.

It's the grounds and the motivation for all of their action. So Paul says, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send. Or there was no one like him because he has not the interests of himself, those of Christ at heart.

He has served with me in the gospel. Epaphroditus risked his life for the work of Christ. And this is precisely what transforms and grounds the friendship that all of these people have with each other in this passage.

Because their friendship is in service to Christ, and because Christ came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many, in Christ, Paul and Timothy and Epaphroditus and the Philippians are actually free to love each other without strings attached.

They can, in the words of Philippians 2 verse 4, look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. How can we be better friends?

[8 : 58] Left to our own devices, we can't. We are selfish. And even if we weren't, how on earth would we have the wisdom to know how to love someone well?

Apart from God, how can we even know what love is? And what the true best interests for another person actually are? It is only when we are in Christ, when our sins are atoned for, and we are living in relationship with God, that we can have a new mindset, a mindset which is ours in Christ.

And union with that Christ, having his mindset at work in us, means, in the words of Philippians 2 verse 12, working out our salvation together. Because it is the power of God at work in us, to will and work for his good pleasure.

The goal of friendship, of loving others, is not to have them like us, or get what we want out of them. It is to strive for what is best for them.

In the context of Christian friendship, it is to see Christ in a brother or sister. And it is to participate and contribute to their sanctification, to help them become who God wants them to be.

[10:22] To be a true friend is to have the mindset of a servant. To have the mindset we have in Christ. The one who, in the words of Philippians 2 verse 5, though in the form of God, did not connequally with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing.

John the Evangelist tells us this way, greater love has no one than this, that he laid down his life for his friends. Jesus, the risen Lord of the universe, laid his life down for you, for me, for all of us. He is the true friend. He is the one who calls us friend when we follow him. In him, by him, for him, we are free to become true friends.

In this way, and only in this way, can we ever overcome our selfishness. Now, when speaking about the mindset of true friendship, we start to draw near to what I personally think is the earth-shattering genius of this short little passage here in Philippians 19 to 30.

To boil it down, Paul is talking about travel plans. If we were to reduce these 12 verses to basic components, we could say, I'm going to send Timothy at some point so I can hear how you're doing.

[11:57] And I'm sending Epaphroditus with this letter because things didn't work out here for him. And at the very same time, in this passage, we see the mind which is ours in Christ being lived out simply and lovingly in everyday human relationship.

Paul is concerned for Epaphroditus' health, sees how he longs to be home, and sends him back. Paul is concerned for the Philippians, and so he plans to send his main man, Timothy, both to care for them and to hear directly how things are going in Philippi so that he might be, in the words of verse 19, cheered by news of you.

But there's another layer to this exchange, another layer to Paul's reason for including these two men, Timothy and Epaphroditus. Paul is not just talking about them, he's holding them up as examples.

Timothy is an example of the kind of selflessness Paul encouraged the Philippians 2 in chapter 2, verse 3, when he says, do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

Timothy is doing this. Of Timothy, Paul says, I have no one like him. He is genuinely concerned for your welfare. He is concerned about Jesus Christ.

[13:24] Epaphroditus is an example of the suffering which Paul reminded the Philippians of. That it, in fact, is a gift graciously given to us for the sake of Christ, not just to believe, but to suffer.

For his sake. Epaphroditus, in coming to serve in ministry with Paul, very nearly died. Epaphroditus is so exhausted, so homesick, Paul is sending him back.

In these two, we see that life in Christ is one of servant-hearted suffering. So, you might wonder, why on earth would you sign up for that?

Friendship is servanthood and suffering. Sounds great. Maybe that's all well and good for the saints in the Bible. I'm not Timothy, or Paul, or Epaphroditus.

What I really want is just a few dependable people that have my back. I can crack a beer with, share a laugh. But life is perilous.

[14:36] And light-hearted moments, if they do come, are a gift. But unless they are grounded in the sure, unbreakable love of Christ, those moments of happiness will wither away when difficulty comes, and no joy will remain.

And this brings us to a beautiful little gem hiding in the passage. And that gem is Epaphroditus. Timothy is revered in the church. He even got two books of the Bible addressed to him. He's the man. But Epaphroditus is a blip on the radar.

We don't get another mention of him outside of this passage here. And there are a few details about his life worth attending to that we can glean from this passage. First, we need to know that Epaphroditus was sent to Paul by the Philippians to minister with Paul in the long term.

We get this in verse 30, where Paul says that Epaphroditus risked his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. And that's kind of a funny way for Paul to say it.

[15:50] But basically, what it entails is that the Philippians were partners with Paul in the gospel. They knew that Paul was struggling, so they sent their best guy, Epaphroditus, to Rome to be with Paul so that they could serve together for the foreseeable future.

And the second thing we need to know that we learn from this passage is it doesn't go as planned. Epaphroditus gets ill, he's homesick, and though Paul doesn't get into reasons, somehow Epaphroditus has actually not measured up.

We see this most clearly in verses 28 and 29. Paul says, I am eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men.

Which is an interesting thing to say. And it hints at the fact that Epaphroditus is actually returning in shame earlier than expected. One way or another, he did not make the cut.

Epaphroditus' ministry with Paul ended up being a bit of a disappointment. And Paul cares deeply about his ministry, about his mission. But how does Paul speak of Epaphroditus?

[17:06] Verse 25, he is my brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need. On the one hand, we have a stalwart Timothy, glorious to behold.

On the other hand, we have a weakling, Epaphroditus. And both of them reflect Christ. Both are equally loved. Both live praiseworthy lives.

Both, says Paul, should be received with joy because of their work in Christ. In Christ, Paul is free not to put his own concerns for his ministry plans first, but rather to consider the needs of others in Christ.

He holds up Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples. He is boasting in them. How encouraging would it have been to be Epaphroditus returning to Philippi, tail between your legs, and have this letter read in the congregation about you?

In this truth, there is tremendous hope and tremendous freedom for every relationship we have. In Christ, we do not need others to further our own interests.

[18:25] Instead, we are freed to work with them and for them for their salvation, to help present them to God, as Paul says in Colossians, mature in Christ, to work out with them their salvation in Christ.

It is difficult, it is servant-hearted, but in this there is the greatest of joy. Now, all of us, I think, to varying degrees, and at different times, are lonely.

We all wish we had better friends or more friends. You know, we want to matter and to be in community, and people in our neighborhoods are just starved for friendship.

Friends, in Christ, we have a true friend, and his name is Jesus. And through his servant-hearted example, we are both saved from our selfishness and also invited into his life of friendship, joyfully giving ourselves in service.

It is not an easy road. It is not a glamorous road. Just look at Epaphroditus. But it is the road to salvation as we work out together what we have received in Christ.

[19:52] So receive this benediction also from Paul at the end of Romans, Romans 15. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such friendship with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. To him be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.