

Caring Church, Caring Leaders

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. Our sermon text today is Philippians chapter 2, verses 19 through 30. That's page 922 in the Pew Bible, if you want to follow along there. I believe we'll have it on the screens too as I read it the first time. Philippians chapter 2, verses 19 through 30. Let me pray, and then I'll read our text for us.

Father in heaven, you have, by your great grace, transferred us from death to life by the gospel of Jesus, the light of the world, who came down for us. And you are also, by your grace, transforming us into the image of your Son. So we pray as we come to your word today, your spirit would be at work, granting us eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts that receive wonderful things from your word to make us more like your Son as we live our lives together as your church in the midst of this time and this place. We pray this, Father, in the name of Jesus and by the power of your spirit.

Amen. All right, Philippians chapter 2, verses 19 through 30. Paul writes this. He says, 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. For 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 you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need. 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 again, and that I may be less anxious.

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

[2 : 3 6] Well, perhaps you've noticed it too, but for the last five years or so, there's been a growing body of literature, both popular and scholarly, about the pervasive rise of loneliness in our culture. People more and more are feeling alone. And even things like social media haven't seemed to help. Though we are more and more superficially aware of what other people are doing and thinking, we feel less and less that we are truly known and truly loved.

Earlier this summer, the graphic novelist Kristen Radke published a book called *Seek You, A Journey Through American Loneliness*. At one point she writes in this book, she says, loneliness is often exacerbated by a perception that one is lonely while everyone else is connected.

It's exaggerated by a sensation of being outside something that others seem to be in on, a family, a couple, a friendship, a joke. But then she says this, she says, perhaps now we can learn how flawed that kind of thinking is because loneliness is one of the most universal things any person can feel.

And as studies continue to report how such pervasive loneliness can cause not just mental, but even physical health problems, some countries like Japan have created governmental positions to try to help the problem. There's a minister of loneliness in Japan now. It's quite a title.

I don't know if anyone grows up wanting to be the minister of loneliness, but there you go. So what does God have to say about all this? Does God have a word of hope to us, adrift as we are in our sea of loneliness? Well, the good news is that he does.

[4 : 32] The passage before us at the end of Philippians chapter 2 gives us a snapshot of God's answer in action. What we see here in verses 19 through 30 are more than just the mundane details of the Apostle Paul's missionary logistics and travel plans. What we have here is a window into the life of a living church, a church that is alive with the life of Christ. I like how Bible scholar Morna Hooker put it. She says, this text provides a window into what it means for men and women to live in the Lord and therefore to work out in their daily lives how to share the attitude of Christ, being concerned for others rather than themselves. It's a window into what a living church looks like. In other words, what this passage is showing us is that a living church is by nature a caring church. And a caring church, this passage shows us, is led by caring leaders. In a sea of loneliness, God's answer is the new community that's brought into being by his word and his grace, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So first, we're going to look at what it means to be a caring church. And then second, we'll look at what it means to have caring leaders. That's where we're going this morning. So Philippians 2, 19 through 30 shows us that a living church is a caring church. Now, where do we see this in this text? Well, if you look at it right, we see it in almost every verse. Paul is concerned for the Philippians, eager to send them news about his situation in prison as soon as he finds out, and eager to hear word back from them about how they are doing. In fact, he hopes to visit in person as soon as he can. And then there's Timothy. Timothy is like a son to Paul. But more than that, he's genuinely concerned for the Philippians welfare, not just his own. And then there's Epaphroditus, Epaphroditus, who is willing to visit Paul in prison, traveling many miles to see him, and bring support from his home church in Philippi.

And then, of course, there's the Philippians themselves, sending aid to Paul, eagerly waiting how it's going with him, longing to see him again. And in all of this, we get the impression of a community that genuinely and honestly cares for each other. Isn't that what we're longing for? A place, a people where we're known and loved and thought of and cared for. Now, we have to be careful at this point.

We have to be careful not to over-idealize the church family or to make it out to be something that it's not. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about this in his classic book on the church called Life Together. He warns us that if we have some impossibly high ideal for what we think the church ought to be, how well it ought to be loving me and caring for me and meeting my needs, our own wish dream, as he calls it. If that's our idea of the church, then inevitably we will become disappointed and cynical.

And then he says what will happen is that our own idea of what the church should be will end up destroying the very reality of the church right before us. So we have to be real with the church and acknowledge that in this life it is not and it will not ever be a perfect church.

[8 : 01] However, if we are being real, then we can also see that a living church, though not perfect, is still and will be a genuinely caring body of believers.

But what is it? What is it that makes the church a caring place? A place where people are known and loved? And how does this care? What does it look like in practice? So let's take a minute and let's think about the principles that make a caring church and then the practices. Now as far as principles go, think about it. What was it that made the Philippian church such a community of genuine care for one another? Imagine walking into the church meeting at Philippi. You walk in and there's Lydia, the seller of purple dyes, the textile merchant, probably somewhat wealthy, upwardly mobile, put together.

Then you walk a little further down the row of chairs or whatever it is, and then there's the Philippian jailer. He's a kind of practical, no-nonsense sort of guy. He's retired Roman military with his wife and kids. And then you walk a little further in, and then there's the former fortune-telling slave girl. A big smile on her face, probably some cool tattoos on her arms, most likely poor now that she just lost her job, or at least on the lower socioeconomic end of things. And as you walk in and see such a diverse group of people, men and women, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, you have to wonder what in the world would make these people care about each other so much?

And it's the same for us today. We are here from all sorts of walks of life and backgrounds, and we actually care about each other. What are the principles underneath all that?

Well, as we take a wide view of the Bible, let's take a step back and just look at a wide view of what Scripture tells us. And as we do that, let me mention three things. First, we care about each other because we believe that absolutely every human being is created in God's image. And this is true no matter what. Every human being, every gender, race, class, ability, you name it, they are image bearers of the living God of infinite worth and value. C.S. Lewis, at the end of his famous essay, the way to glory said, there are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal.

[10 : 43] So we care for one another because we behold in each other the very image of God. And second, we care about each other because we believe that in Christ, we've all been made co-heirs, co-inheritors, co-participants in God's kingdom. Listen to what Paul will say in another letter, Galatians chapter 3. He says, for in Christ, you're all sons of God through faith.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There's neither Jew nor Greek. There's neither slave nor free. There's no male and female. For you're all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you're Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Now, what does that mean? Well, when Paul says that we're all sons in the ancient world, that meant to be a sort of adopted son. That meant you had been given all the rights and all the privileges of the true heir of the family. Now, you see how radical it is then when Paul says that everyone in Christ, everyone in Christ is made a son of God. That is a full inheritor, a full legal recipient of all the rights and privileges of God's kingdom. We are, all of us, co-heirs with Christ. And that's why we care for one another so radically. When we look at each other, we see ultimately a fellow member of the family of God, one with Christ. So we care because we believe in the image of God, and we care because we believe in the union we have in Christ. But the last principle, the thing that makes the church a caring church, and this would have been true in Philippi and in all the churches of the first century, and this is true all down history to today. The last principle, the thing that makes the church a caring church is the principle of grace. Grace.

Listen, at the very heartbeat of the church is the message of what God has done in Christ. The whole human story is the story of humanity trying to solve our cosmic aloneness, trying to find our home. Do you remember how the story begins? God created us to be at home with him and through him to be at home with one another. But when our relationship with God was broken because of sin, we lost that true home, and our fellowship with one another was lost as well. And humans have been on a journey of loneliness and alienation from the day we left the garden, friends. But God, in his infinite mercy, stepped in. When we deserved to be left alone by God in our sin and in our rebellion, God in Christ went out and he became truly alone on the cross. Jesus dies in the throes of loneliness saying, God, why have you forsaken me? So that you and I could come home again to God and know his fellowship again. He went out so that we could come in. And all of that is of grace.

And if the grace of the cross is what makes us who we are, if the Son of God was willing to be alone so that I could be welcomed, how could I not turn to my lonely brother or sister and welcome them the way that I've been welcomed? Right? It doesn't matter if they have it all together. I certainly didn't have it all together. And yet Christ did it for me. It doesn't matter if they don't look like me or talk like me. Look, I certainly didn't look like Christ. And I still don't. And yet Christ did it for me.

[14 : 44] And you know, we often think to ourselves, but you know, I'm not sure I have the time to care for others. I'm so busy. Friends, think about it. God was running the universe.

That's a pretty busy task, right? And yet he had time for me and for you. The infinite, eternal God slowed down long enough to enter time and to make time for us. When my time was almost up before the judgment seat of God, Jesus made time for me and he made time for you too.

And he did it for all who would turn from trying to run their life their own way and trust entirely in him. That's the call of the gospel, to turn from trusting ourselves and trust the one who's come and who's loved us and welcomed us and made time for us and to know the forgiveness of sins through what he's done. It's all of grace.

So this is what makes the living church a caring church. But what practically does it look like? Those are the principles. What does it look like in practice to be this kind of caring place?

Well, look again at our text and notice a couple of things. Notice that it's very personal. Paul knows people's names, right? There's Timothy and Epaphroditus and a little later in the letter, we'll hear about some other leaders in the church of Philippi, a couple of women named Euodia and Syntyche. And you read other of Paul's letters and you see he's just listing names of the people he knows and loves. Care in the church has to be personal. We have to know one another.

[16 : 28] And that's why things like small groups and ministry teams are so important. You know, that's why we do these things so that we can be known and so that we can be loved.

You know, if you only come to church at nine o'clock and then leave right away at 1030, right, you won't really experience the care that we see in these verses.

So why not sign up for a small group so you can get to know others personally? Or why not sign up for a ministry team at the second service, right, so you can get to know others personally?

Care is personal. Find other ways of getting to know one another. The practice of care has to be personal. But second, it's very practical. Paul's talking about a lot of practical things here, isn't he? I'm sending Timothy soon. I'm sending Epaphroditus now. And the Philippians were very practical in their care for Paul. We learned later in chapter four that Epaphroditus, the reason he came to Paul was with a gift, probably a financial gift, so that Paul could be cared for in prison.

So the Philippians sent this gift with Epaphroditus to care for Paul in prison, a very practical thing to do. So we have to ask, what concrete ways can I, can we care for those around us? And again, you probably won't know how to do that kind of practical care until you get personal. So these things hang together. It's personal, and then it can be actually really practical. Once we get to know each other, then we know how we can meet each other's needs. So it's personal and practical, and finally, it's providential. And what I mean by that is we have to care for who God actually puts in our lives. The needs that are providentially in God's good sovereignty right before us. You know, when we think about caring for one another, we can often skip right over, in our minds anyway, oh, I should be caring for one another. We often skip right over in our minds the very real people right in front of us. We hear Jesus say, love your neighbor as yourself. Care for the little ones. Care for the least of these. And we tend to skip right over our spouses, right? Or we skip right over our children, or we skip right over our roommates, or we skip right over the person who sits in the pew in front of you, or we skip right over the children who gather for children's ministry right down the hall.

[18 : 47] You know, we skip over all these like very real people in front of us, and we think of this sort of like imaginary person, this imaginary neighbor I should be loving, right? No! Care is providential.

Who is right in front of you? You know, we say that God loves the world, and we believe that, but we tend to, sometimes we tend to skip over the city that sits right here at our doorstep, right? Okay, love the world. Well, which part of the world should I be loving? We look at a map, you know? You don't need to look at a map. You just need to walk out your front door. There's the world that you should be loving.

This is where God has placed us, right here, right in this little sea of loneliness that is New Haven, and if you've lived here long enough, you know that's true. There are a lot of lonely people in this city, and he's calling us, Trinity, and the other churches of Jesus Christ in our city to be living churches, which means to be caring churches right here.

So a living church is a caring church, and if we're meant to be a caring church then, this brings us to the second big kind of idea of our passage. If we're meant to be a caring church, if that's part of what it means to be a living church, then that means we have to be led by caring leaders. This is the second thing we see in our passage. Through the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus, we are shown what sort of leaders we ought to recognize and honor and emulate. So first, this text helps us to recognize caring leaders. You know, too often the church has looked just like the world when it comes to those leaders in leadership in positions of responsibility. You know, we often seek the powerful, the productive, the flashy, the strong, the eloquent, the entertaining. You know, we sort of exalt those people, but those aren't actually the qualifications that God is looking for.

Leaders in the church are meant to have a deep grasp of biblical faith and doctrine, yes, but they're meant to have a deep grasp of the faith so deep that it melts their hearts and makes them love others like Christ has loved them. Look at what Paul says of Timothy. He says, 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. Or listen to what Paul says about Epaphroditus. Not only do we see in verse 26 that he had been longing, Epaphroditus had been longing for his spiritual family back at Philippi and distressed because they heard he was ill. He's very concerned and caring for them. But in verse 30, we learn that Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life, Paul says, to complete what was lacking in your service to me. So this is how we recognize godly leaders in the church, by the quality, not just of their doctrine, of their understanding of the biblical faith, but by the quality of their care.

[21 : 59] But this text helps us not just to recognize godly leaders, it also commands us to honor such leaders. In verse 29, Paul says to the Philippians about Epaphroditus, so receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men. Now think about who we typically honor.

Usually we honor those who achieve great accomplishments, right? We honor those who are healthy and wealthy and successful. But look at Epaphroditus in this passage. He gets sick, he falls ill, he's weak, and Paul has to send him home early, right? And look at Paul in this passage.

He admits weakness too. He says, I was worried about Epaphroditus when he got sick. We were on the brink of sorrow. I'm going to send him back to you so that my sorrow doesn't multiply. A little earlier in the service, we read a passage about Timothy from 2 Timothy. And what do we learn about Timothy in there? Timothy's the one who shed tears, probably when he and Paul were parted at some point in their ministry. Timothy was the one who needed to be reminded not to fear, but to be strong.

What sort of leadership team is this? Sick, sad, and afraid. Who wants to honor a bunch of people like that, right? But don't you see that illness, that sorrow, those tears? It was all evidence of deep love, of genuine care for the people of God. And that's who we must honor.

You know, practically speaking, right now as a church, we're kind of prayerfully in the process of nominating new elders and deacons. Elders and deacons are the officers that God's kind of instituted in the church, the sort of roles that God's instituted in the church to care and lead the life of the church. You see this in the very first verse of Philippians. Paul writes to the church of Philippi, but also to the overseers, the elders, and the deacons, right? And right now as a church, we're in the process of kind of prayerfully nominating new people for those offices. You know, and as members, let me say to you, as you think of who we might honor and call to these offices, yes, consider those who have a firm foundation in the faith. That is required. But along with that, there must be genuine care, genuine concern for the interests of others, a willingness to lay down our lives in order to love other people, in order to love the church. That's who we want to honor.

[24 : 45] But again, Paul says we don't just want to honor them. This text is also implying very strongly that we want to imitate them. So this text isn't just helping us recognize godly leaders and helping us to sort of commanding us to honor godly leaders. It's also inviting us to imitate leaders like this, to imitate them. Paul will say later in the book of Philippians, brothers and sisters, join in imitating me and keep your eye on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

You know, as I look around this room, I see men and women of the faith who, by God's grace, are worthy of imitating and emulating. I know at Trinity there are a lot of Timothys and a lot of Epaphroditus's and I see a lot of Lydia's and Euodia's and Syntyche's, men and women who Paul will call, and today Paul, people whom Paul would surely call his fellow laborers and fellow workers and fellow soldiers. So let me just say, if you're here and you are young in the faith, find one of these Epaphroditus's. Find one of these Euodia's and start to model your life after them.

Invite them to lunch and ask them questions about what it means to follow the Lord Jesus. Ask them to pray for you. You know, the world is going to put, the world is going to put a whole host of people before you and say, imitate them. And we're going to be bombarded by images and messages that say, imitate people like this, celebrities and influencers, the rich, the powerful, the stylish.

But friends, the end of those things isn't happiness, it's loneliness. Imitate the Timothys and the Syntyche's. The world might have no idea who they are, but that's okay.

Because the church is the lighthouse in the sea of loneliness, proclaiming a God of grace and embodying a culture of genuine care. And here's the thing. If you find those Timothys and Epaphroditus's, and if you find those Syntyche's and Euodia's, and if you read church history and find more godly examples to imitate and emulate, here's what you find.

[27 : 17] Here's the secret that empowers and sustains and shapes their life of love and genuine care. And at first, it might surprise you.

Because what you hear is that ultimately, at the end of the day, they don't love the church because the church is so lovely. And they don't serve and care and sacrifice and weep because they think it's such a great cause.

Or because they find the people so special or the work so engaging and fulfilling. Yes, at times, all those things will be true. But that's not ultimately why they do it.

That's not why they love and serve the church. That's not why they lay down their life to care for the people of God. So why do they do it? Well, to put it pretty bluntly, they don't do it for your sake.

They do it for Jesus' sake. Look again at Timothy in verse 21. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Look again at Epaphroditus, verse 30.

[28 : 28] For he nearly died for what? For the work of the church? No, for the work of Christ. Timothy and Epaphroditus did what they did because they had a king who loved them and gave himself for them.

And there was absolutely nothing that their king couldn't ask them in return that they wouldn't give. And if that meant, like Timothy, leaving their mentor behind in a prison and go serve a church in Philippi and help them sort out their squabbles and disagreements, then he'd go because of King Jesus.

And if it meant like Epaphroditus, if it meant leaving their home and carrying a gift a thousand miles to the other end of the empire and then getting sick and almost dying in the cell of a political prisoner, then he'd do it.

Why? Because of King Jesus. And why in this sea of loneliness that we call New Haven, this city that God loves so much, full of so many men and women of such beauty and brokenness, why are we called to be a community of care and love for one another even though we know it's so hard?

Even though it's hard to make time to care and serve. Even though it's costly to care and to serve. Why do we do it? Because the Lord Jesus calls us to do it.

[29 : 47] We do it ultimately for his sake. Because he bled for his church, and now he says, I want you to love what I love. And if we are a caring church led by caring leaders because of Jesus' sake, then friends, the light will shine forth from us.

It'll shine out into our sea of loneliness and the weary will come in and find the home that Christ purchased for you and for me and for them too.

That's our mission, church. May God grant us the grace to fulfill it and may we all be eager to find our place in it. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we ask for a fresh filling of your spirit today that we might know the love of Christ and how deep and how costly it was for us that we would know the love of Christ that it would humble us and empower us.

Would we see all the ways, God, in which your good providence supremely at the cross in your saving work all the ways in which you have cared for us and known us and loved us and in beholding you, God, would we then become a people that do the same?

[31 : 16] Fueled not by our own strength, fueled not by our own desire, but fueled by your very spirit. And Lord, make us a church where others can come and know the great care and the great love of God in Christ.

Oh God, would you bring others to sit at this table and dine on the great feast of your mercy, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.