

Paul sends Timothy and Epaphroditus to foster unity

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] Listening to what I've been saying over the past few weeks, you'll understand that this pattern of sowing the seed and then seeing the plant is repeated over and over again. That Paul sows an introduction into something, then he addresses it, and then he gives you an example.

So what we have in the opening chapters, or the opening chapter, is essentially Paul's greeting to the church where he is sowing the seeds of what a true servant looks like.

And then he takes his life as an example of one who's in prison, and then of course most importantly he goes to Jesus Christ, the example that we should all follow.

But in that framework of the church, here we have people who look out for their own interests rather than the interests of Jesus Christ. And now Paul gives two further examples.

And the examples is not in terms of teaching, it is in terms of people. Timothy and Epaphroditus. What type of people are they, and why is it necessary that we learn what type of people they are, and why are they likely to make a difference in a church that struggles with disunity?

[1 : 14] Or rather, it has no problem with disunity, it struggles with unity, and therefore disunity is the result. A church that struggles with unity has disunity.

And the disunity in this church here is caused by people serving their own interests. And so it's not a conflict between people that's causing this disunity, where people are necessarily at each other and arguing over core or secondary issues.

That doesn't seem to be the case at all. Rather, the issue and cause and center of the disunity in this church is related to how many people are seeking their own interests.

And that has come up time and time again in these last few verses. And in many ways, this sort of follows on from the study we had on Wednesday evening, that a true community, from 2 Peter chapter 1, that a true community must be partakers of the divine nature.

And when we have become partakers of the divine nature, we are to add to our faith these godly virtues, because they are necessary for community, that is, biblical community, biblical fellowship, to be present within God's church.

[2 : 41] And so the church depends upon people sharing the same nature in order for it to grow together. A side note to that would be the parable of the wheat and the tares that Jesus speaks about, which is a clear indication, as J.C. Ryle once put it, that you'll never have a pure church.

The wheat and the tares always grow side by side, and so there's always going to be moments of tension. But the true community within that field are those who share the same nature.

Wheat is wheat. Tares are tares. They do not share each other's nature. They have distinct natures. And the tension between the wheat and the tares is one that we can expect.

There should not, however, be any tension between the wheat. Those that are partakers of the divine nature, those who share the same kind of nature as each other.

And so as Paul provides answers to this church here to deal with their problem with unity and the issue of disunity, he recognizes that some people are very good at commenting on the problems.

[3 : 59] They're very good at identifying problems. But these are not the people that we should be listening to. The people that we should be listening to are those who can give us the answers. And I'm not a big fan of Margaret Thatcher.

In fact, I'm probably not a fan at all. But she did get a few things right. Socialism. At some point, you'll run out of somebody else's money. That was true. And the other thing she got right was when she used to tell her cabinet, don't bring me problems, bring me answers.

Anybody can bring me problems. So, you know, we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Not everyone is bad entirely. Not everyone gets everything wrong. You know, we make a distinction, don't we, between the meat and the bones, the baby and the bathwater, as God tells us to in his word.

And so some people who we think are wrong on quite a lot of issues can actually be right every now and then. Well, I think that's a good thing to be right on. Don't bring me problems, bring me answers.

Well, Paul brings answers to this church. And the answers are two people. He doesn't tell them to do something. He doesn't tell them to believe something. He's been saying that.

[5 : 05] He's been exhorting them how to believe and what to do. But now the answer comes in form of two people that he hopes to send. Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Who have proven themselves as two men who will not serve their own interests, but will serve the interests of Christ. These are the type of people, Paul was saying, you need in your church.

Those who will serve the interests of Christ. And so by placing these examples within the church, it doesn't mean, of course, that people will follow the example. have often said that Christ is the supreme and best example to follow and people still turn away from him in the church as one to follow. And so the partnership that Paul spoke about in the beginning of the letter is sort of amplified, amplified rather, in his relationship with Timothy and Epaphroditus. This is what true gospel partnership looks like. It looks like working alongside people who are not concerned with their own interests but rather the interests of Jesus Christ. And the relationship that Paul has with Timothy and Timothy has with Paul and Epaphroditus and you know that that triangular relationship is one that should be seen throughout the church as a whole. These men serve Christ. This is your answer. You need to be and have these type of people within your fellowship. And so Paul hopes to send Timothy and then he says it is necessary that I send Epaphroditus and then he even says I'm even hoping to come but Paul can't go because

Paul's in prison. So Paul can't go so he hopes to send Timothy and Epaphroditus but they all want to come to the church. So let's just look at this as a summary to understand what it is that Paul is saying to the church and what God is saying to us as a church. The reason why Timothy verse 19 is a suitable person to be sent back to this church is because he is genuinely concerned for the welfare of the people of God in the church. He is concerned for their true interests which may not marry with their interests but he will serve their true interests. Look at verse 20 and 21. What Paul is doing here with Timothy is that he is contrasting the way Timothy lives with those who live in the church who seek only their own interests. And those who only seek their own interests do not, are not the type of people that actually add to the unity of the church. That they find it hard to fit in. They come and they go but there's no, you don't have any sense of fellowship with them apart from perhaps a small group of people that they are friends with. The church is not really a community where that equality is praised and highlighted but then no one's grabbing for that equality because we all want to serve as

Christ served. You know all of this seems to be missing because the church is marked by those who serve their own interests. And so contrast to these type of people I'm sending you a person that's not like that. I'm going to send you Timothy who is not concerned with his own interest by implication but who is concerned only with the interests of Jesus Christ. And therefore Timothy is the very answer you need to a church dealing with disunity. Do you remember one of the questions that I was asked on the Monday night that I sat here, Graham Brown sat here, and the congregation sat there. It was before I was appointed. And one of the questions I was asked was about the church and unity and singing and what do I like, what I don't like, and a number of other things. You know, what do you expect to do in five years time and that. And I said well if nothing changes the next five years will just look like the last five years because that's the way it works. You can't do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result. It doesn't work like that. If you want to see different things in the future, you have to do different things now. But one of the questions I was asked was concerning unity. And do you remember my phrase? The church needs to be like a bunch of grapes and not like a bag of marbles. Do you remember that? Have I always said that? Yes, I'm liking this participation. Why is that necessary? Because there is a distinction between the two, a clear distinction.

[9 : 59] One is naturally together, united with a common vine. They are found together. They are independent. They are uniquely different. But they are all grapes. They are all connected to each other because they are all connected to the vine. A bag of marbles, however, are just together. They're in a bag.

And so when you spill both, one stays together and the other is dispersed. And so Timothy, coming to this church, is going to teach the church what it is to be a bunch of grapes rather than a bag of marbles.

What true unity looks like. And the thing is, you can achieve it by doing things. You have to achieve it by becoming like Christ. So you cannot manufacture unity by ministries or models or methods. You can only achieve it through becoming more and more like Christ. I'm the vine, you're the branches. Do you remember John 15? It's all coming back to you in a flush. Well, there you have it. So Timothy is well qualified.

And he's well qualified for one reason and one reason alone. He will look out for your true interests. Now that may not be the same as what you're interested in. But it will be your true interests understood by Christ for you as a church. This is the type of people we need.

Then Paul addresses why it is necessary to send Epaphroditus back to them. And there's a few issues here that I think are quite unique. First of all, Epaphroditus, like Timothy, seems to share the same characteristics. Paul calls him a fellow worker, a fellow soldier. He's also, verse 25, seems to be a messenger that was sent from Philippi to Paul so that he could help Paul in his ministry, so that he could, as it says in verse 30, complete what was lacking in your service. So Epaphroditus came from the church at Philippi, sort of like a missionary being sent out to go and help Paul.

[12:14] And as he's sent out in serving Christ in this way, he becomes ill. And Paul is concerned for Epaphroditus that he dies, not just because he's a helpful hand, but because he actually says that he thanks that God is merciful to Epaphroditus, lest he be, you know, sparing Paul from the sorrow he would have felt after losing a fellow worker in the gospel. Now you know what that's like, to actually lose someone. Now imagine losing someone that is actually advancing the gospel with you.

Now imagine the ordinary loss, you know, relational loss where you lose someone that you love. That's painful enough as it is. But now imagine losing someone where the work is dependent on that other half. And then they go and suddenly this affects the work. This actually affects the work going forward because the Epaphroditus needs to be alive to do it. And by God's mercy, he kept Epaphroditus alive.

And this stopped Paul going into a condition of absolute loss over his friend. But then he doesn't want to rob the Philippian church of the joy of receiving Epaphroditus back, that they ought to share in the joy that Epaphroditus is still alive. And so it is necessary that I send him back to you so that you can see him one more time. He's ill before he passes away. Now some missionaries leave the country and they die on the mission field and you never see them again. But Paul here, where there's an opportunity to send Epaphroditus back, he sends him back or he wants to send him back so that they can have joy in seeing the minister that they sent out to help Paul. That they can see him come back and see that he's well. Such is their love for him or Paul assumes they have love for him. And so receive him in the Lord, verse 29, and receive him with joy. Verse 30, for he nearly died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to complete, Paul says, what was lacking in your service for those, lacking in your service. And he's saying this to those that he was writing to. I have many theological journals at home of men I agree with, men I disagree with, and I have them all and I read them all. In one journal, John Wesley's first journal, there's a letter. And it's a letter that he has to write to a mum because the mum has sent her son off to aid John Wesley in the work of the gospel. And he died. And John Wesley, you've got a copy of this letter in his journal, and he writes this letter to the mother. And he says, I'm sorry that

I might have overworked your son in the ministry of the gospel, and he has died. Can you imagine writing a letter like that? However much he may have died for a good cause, he still died. And the mother no doubt willingly gave her son to engage in that type of ministry. But imagine writing that letter as someone who has actually died, not just died, but died in the active work that you were called to undertake. So let's look at the hope and the reason. The hope and the reason is that Paul hopes to send Timothy, and the reason is that you need him. Timothy is a faithful servant. He has proved to be faithful. He will encourage unity where there is disunity, but it will not be peace at any price.

There's a difference, of course, between being a peacemaker and a peacekeeper. A peacekeeper is one that will cut corners, put stuff under the carpet, roll over on certain issues, turn a blind eye, try to avoid any kind of disruption as possible. A peacemaker understands that that's not possible.

[16:27] To actually really get to the position of peace, you need to eradicate anything that can disrupt that peace going forward. And sometimes you have to grab the nettle, and sometimes it stings.

And this is the way that God has always sort of dealt with his people, that every now and then God will judge them to sort them out, to address the issues as it were.

And so Paul wants to send Timothy not to cause further disunity, but if you remember, I don't want to keep going back to the four sermons as if they are landmark sermons, but they were really important, especially for this church to hear. The first sermon in those four sermons preached three years ago was that in a church, when you're in the position where you are caught between a rock and a hard place, the minister can sometimes be in a position along with the elders, along with the congregation, where you can either have the disunity you have currently by not doing anything, or you can create further disunity by trying to address it. So you can either have disunity by trying to move forward, or you can be left with the disunity that you have by doing nothing. Either way, you have disunity. And that rock and the hard place is an incredibly difficult place to move from, and this is why over time many churches just do not change at the core. And they don't change at the core because most ministers recognize that there are only two outcomes and both of them are bad.

I have disunity if I do something, because not everyone's going to agree, and I have disunity if I don't do anything, because that's where we are currently. So what do you expect you to do?

And so now this is where the patience comes in, and prayer, and you have to ask God to literally bring in Timothys and Epaphroditises, because people will tip the balance of unity. It is people who will tip the balance. How often have I said, I've said this to the elders for 10 years in the outership court. And I said, this church needs to have a working document. It needs to understand what it believes and why it believes it. And the reason it needs to have that is so that you don't have a minister coming along preaching something contrary to what you've heard to the last 10 years, which is free to do. It's common sense to me. When you get married, we agree to these things.

[19 : 08] We agree to these things because those things will shape the future of their marriage. And so it's absolutely crucial that a church understands what actually makes unity.

And it makes people who will not serve their own interests, but actually the interests of Christ. So you realize it's a real struggle, a real struggle to get there. And this is why, to put it in a slightly different way, in 2 Peter 1, when Peter says, add your faith these godly virtues, what he's actually saying is none of it's automatic. In other words, Timothy is not automatically like this.

Timothy had to become this type of person. And if Timothy can become this type of person who does not look out for his own interests, but the true interests of Christ within the church, then this is the type of person that you must become.

And of course, that therefore raises the question, what are you becoming? What are you becoming in light of the interests that you have?

And this is why Paul spent time on his example. Then he gave us the supreme example of Jesus Christ. Then he now gives us Timothy's example. And now he moves on to Epaphroditus' example.

[20 : 33] All of these people, the Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus reflect Christ in the church. And they're not born that way. They have to become that way.

They have to become a people who learn self-denial and to reject their own interests for the interests of Christ, becoming less and less concerned with what they want to do and more and more concerned with what Christ wants in his church.

And so within this implied statement here is the question, what are you becoming? Because no one can be this from the get-go.

You can't be born again and immediately have no problem with self-interest. You must become like Christ. God is working in you that you may work out what God is working in you so that you can become like him.

People who will not grab for equality with the people that they are next to. Just like Christ did not grab for equality that he had with God but became a servant.

[21 : 42] And we, therefore, are not to grab for the equality that we have for each other but we are to become servants. We're serving the true interests of Christ within the church. And so we're becoming more and more like Christ Jesus.

So none of us are like this automatically. And this is the difficulty of maturity because, as I said on Wednesday evening, your strength could be my weakness. And, therefore, it is entirely possible for you to get incredibly frustrated with me because I cannot do what you can do easily.

I just cannot do what you... What you find easy, I find incredibly difficult. It could be. And it could be more than one thing. It could be many things. But it could also be possible, couldn't it, that my strength is your weakness.

And what I find easy, you find very difficult. But what we mustn't do is we mustn't say that we mustn't make the distinction in the wrong place.

It is true that God gives us different gifts and, therefore, some people are gifted in ways that others aren't because God has gifted us that way. But we are all to become like Christ regardless. We are all to become like Christ.

[22 : 58] So though our gifts may differ, the fact that we are all being called to become like Christ is the same. So the necessary part. Why is it necessary for Epaphras to be sent?

Is it just because he is ill? Well, I think so. That would be a necessary argument enough. But I also think that it would add the strength to the church of a good example and witness of someone who looks and has followed Christ.

Paul experienced the mercy of God in that Epaphras experienced the mercy of God by not dying. And, therefore, since Paul was not robbed or had Epaphras taken from him, neither will he rob the church of the opportunity to see Epaphras one more time.

And so Epaphras' life mirrors the life of Christ in part, you'll notice, in that he nearly died. Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

And Paul says of Epaphras that he nearly died in the work of God, that he nearly died in the work of Christ. In other words, we know that we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

[24 : 10] We should also know that self-denial does not diminish the value of you as a person. Self-denial does not take anything away from you that doesn't need to be taken away from you.

Self-denial is not robbing you of anything that God thinks you ought to keep. Self-denial is trying to get rid of those things that are really no good for you. And so deny yourself, then take up your cross, and follow Christ.

In other words, our life should be shaped by the cross. And James Denny said it the best, and so I'm going to repeat what James Denny said. I'm going to paraphrase.

Now, James Denny wrote some tremendous books, wrote a brilliant commentary on 2 Corinthians. Jesus in the gospel is what I'm going to quote from now.

He wrote books on the death of Christ, which is a fantastic book. And he was a minister just down at Queen's Ferry and over in Glasgow and a number of other places. He's a clever guy, a super clever, you know, back in the day.

[25 : 14] He's gone to glory a long time ago. But this is what he says, and the distinction he makes is the difference between pain and suffering and pain and suffering linked to the work of God.

Okay? Pain and suffering, and then pain and suffering linked to the work of God. There is a distinction. This is what he says. The habit of generalizing the idea of the cross and applying it to any difficulty or pain that comes in the way of duty blinds many to the extraordinary force of those words, deny yourself and take up your cross.

The cross was the instrument of execution. And the condemned criminal, as we see from the case of Jesus himself, had to carry it to the place of punishment.

The English equivalent of the words in Matthew 10, 38, also found in Mark 8, deny yourself, take up the cross, is that no one is worthy of Jesus who does not follow him, as it were, with a rope around his neck.

You're not worthy to follow Jesus unless you do so with a rope around your neck. Ready to die the most terrible death rather than prove untrue.

[26 : 29] His point is fairly simple. It is not the case that every pain and sorrow is you bearing your cross.

It isn't. Not every pain and sorrow you go through is a form of cross-bearing. It's painful, and it can be deeply sorrowful, but it may have nothing to do with the fact that you are a Christian.

Because the world is full of pain and sorrow. And you can share in that same type of pain and sorrow that others share in that has really nothing to do with you being a Christian.

However, there is a distinct pain and sorrow that comes with being a Christian. And carrying your cross. And you really are bearing your cross.

As Epaphras says, or it's said of Epaphras, nearly died for the work of Christ. There's the difference. He nearly died for the work of Christ.

[27 : 35] Many people can nearly die for many other reasons. But Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ. And that speaks to how he was using his life.

Not just the pain and the sorrow, but how he was using his life and what caused the pain and the sorrow. Wait, let me close the exhortation.

It seems to me that as I read the book of Philippians over and over again, that Paul seems to be addressing just one issue. And that is be like Jesus. Jesus. Just be like Jesus.

Now he does do this from multi-dimensions and multi-perspectives, multi-angles. So that you would actually understand what it means to become like Christ.

But within all of that, the argument is not, this is what you should do. It's rather, what are you becoming? Or rather, who are you becoming?

[28 : 34] Are you becoming more like Christ, who did not grasp or guard the equality that he had with God, but became a servant?

Or are you creating disunity in the church, not through argument, but through seeking your own interests? And therefore, the community of the church can never really be the bunch of grapes.

It will only ever be the bag of marbles at best. Because you just so happen to come together on the same day of the week to sing and to pray, to worship the Lord your God.

It all depends on who we are becoming. And so that's the challenge. Are we becoming more like Christ? Are we becoming more like Christ by having the interests of Christ?

Is the fellowship going to be shaped by the true interests of Christ? Or will the fellowship be shaped by personal interests? And so at the end of the day, what we're actually saying is after whose image and likeness is the church?

[29 : 42] Christ's or our own? That's the power of what the message is bringing here. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.