

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

TWO MEN WORTH IMITATING

Philippians 2:19-30

By

Steven J. Cole

August 6, 1995

Copyright, 1995

August 6, 1995
Philippians Lesson 15

Two Men Worth Imitating
Philippians 2:19-30

At St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Santa Fe, New Mexico, there is only one door into the sanctuary. Over that door is a hand-lettered sign that reads, "Servant's Entrance." There isn't any way in or out of that church except through the servant's entrance! That's not a bad reminder of the fact that every believer is called to serve our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Unlike most sports teams, the Lord's team does not have any bench warmers. Every Christian is given a first-string spot on the team, with a vital role to fulfill. A non-serving Christian is a contradiction in terms.

After the doctrinal high water mark of this letter, where Paul speaks of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ who left the glory of heaven to take on the form of a servant and to become obedient to death on the cross for our sakes (2:5-11), Paul turns to some seemingly mundane matters about sending Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippian church, and about his hope of coming personally if he is released from prison. This is one of those sections of Scripture that, at first glance, you may wonder why God took up the pages of the Bible with the travel schedules of these three men. But as we examine it, I hope you will see that the Holy Spirit uses it in a marvelous way to illustrate for us the truths that Paul has been presenting in this entire chapter. These choice men whom Paul commends to the Philippian church, Timothy and Epaphroditus, are two men worth imitating as we seek to serve our Lord. Along with Paul himself, they have much to teach us about Christian servanthood. They show us that ...

If we cultivate a servant's heart and endure a servant's hardships, we will receive a servant's honor.

1. We must cultivate a servant's heart.

Our Savior did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Every Christian is the blood-bought servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Being a servant

of Christ is not an option if you want to be more dedicated; it is the calling of every believer. If you are not a servant of Christ, you cannot rightly call yourself a Christian. But, because we all are self-ish by nature, we must cultivate the heart of a servant as we grow in Christ. Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus illustrate men who had servant's hearts, as seen in two dimensions:

- A. A servant's heart is centered on the things of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul was a man whose focus was on the Lord Jesus Christ. In 2:19 he says, "But I hope *in the Lord Jesus* to send Timothy to you shortly." In 2:24 he says, "I trust *in the Lord* that I myself also shall be coming shortly." It is Paul's way of saying, "If it be the Lord's will." It shows that he did not make decisions based simply on common sense or on what he thought was best, but he submitted everything to the Lord and His will. When he mentions how Epaphroditus got well from his illness, he doesn't say, "Thank goodness he got better!" but rather, "*God* had mercy on him, and not on him only, but also on me." When he instructs the church to welcome Epaphroditus, he tells them to "receive him *in the Lord* with all joy." Clearly, the Lord was the focal point of Paul's life and ministry.

Timothy's focus was also on the Lord. Paul states that, unlike many others, Timothy was not seeking after his own interests instead of those of Jesus Christ (2:21). Timothy served with Paul in the furtherance of the gospel (2:22). Christ and the gospel were at the center of Timothy's life.

Epaphroditus also was a faithful servant whose focus was on the things of Christ. He had pushed himself almost to the point of death to bring the gift to Paul from the Philippian church. Maybe he grew ill on the six-week journey and pushed himself almost beyond his limits in an effort to get to the apostle's side. Or, perhaps after arriving he contracted some illness, but he kept pushing himself in his service to Paul in the cause of the gospel. His longing and concern for the church back in Philippi also reveal his servant's heart for the things of Christ.

Paul calls Epaphroditus a "minister to my need" and states that he had completed by his presence what the Philippians could

not do in their absence in service to Paul (2:25, 30). The word translated “minister” and “service” comes from a Greek word from which we get our word “liturgy.” In secular Greek, the word was used of a man who, out of love for his city and the gods, would finance a great drama or outfit a battleship. It has the flavor of sacred service, or worship. Every servant of Jesus Christ does what he does, whether giving or helping or speaking, as an offering to the Lord Jesus. A servant’s heart is centered on the Lord Jesus Christ and His work.

This focus on Christ and His work should not just be true of those who earn their living from the gospel. Every Christian, however you earn your living, should live every day in fellowship with the Lord, in submission to His will, in obedience to His Word, available to do His work. Christian servants will be eager to talk about the great truths of the Bible with fellow Christians. They will be ready to tell lost people about the Savior and His work on the cross. They watch for opportunities to please Him by helpful deeds toward others. Three attitudes mark servants who are focused on the Lord Jesus Christ:

(1) *They are willing to be sent anywhere.* It wouldn’t have been easy for Timothy to leave the side of his beloved father in the faith in order to go to Philippi, but he was willing to go if that was God’s will. It hadn’t been easy for Epaphroditus to leave the comforts of home and journey to Rome, but he had done it. Now, it also would be difficult for him to leave Paul and return home, but he was willing to go where the Lord wanted him.

Have you told the Lord, “I’m willing to go anywhere You want me to go”? I remember as a teenager being hesitant to do that, because I was afraid He might say, “Go to Africa as a missionary,” and I didn’t want to do that! But then I reasoned, “God is a loving Father who knows what is best for me. If it’s best for me to serve Him in Africa, I’d be stupid to stay in the United States.” So I surrendered to Him on that matter. Then, after seminary, an opportunity came up to pastor a church in northeastern Indiana. I can think of few places in this country I’d rather not be more than northeastern Indiana! But Marla and I knelt down and reaffirmed our submission to His will. The packet of material from that church never arrived in the mail, and the Lord soon opened up the

church in the mountains of Southern California, where I served for 15 years.

(2) *They are willing to serve anyone.* Timothy served Paul, but he was willing to go and serve the Philippian church. Epaphroditus served the Philippian church, but he was willing to go and serve Paul. He reminds me of Philip, who was being used by God to reach great multitudes in Samaria, but who was willing to go to a deserted road where the Lord used him to reach the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:5-8, 26-40). A servant of Christ isn't out to make a name for himself by speaking to large crowds only. He's available to his Lord to serve anyone the Lord directs him to serve.

(3) *They are willing to sacrifice anything.* Timothy had given up his own interests to become a servant of Christ. Epaphroditus almost lost his life in his service for the Lord. To the Ephesian elders, Paul said of his own ministry, "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). Have you told the Lord, "I'll give up everything--my desires, my ambitions, my comforts, my time, my money--to serve You"?

I have emphasized this point at length, that a servant's heart is centered on the things of Jesus Christ, because if you have any other motive or reason for Christian service, you will eventually burn out or bomb out. You'll get angry and be hurt because of the way people treat you; you'll be frustrated and grow weary of the hardships you have to endure; you'll quit in disgust or disappointment--if you're serving for any reason other than love for the Lord Jesus who gave Himself for your sins. A servant's heart must be constantly captivated with Christ.

B. A servant's heart puts others ahead of himself for the sake of Christ.

The Apostle Paul was in prison facing possible execution. Timothy was his right hand man, a faithful man who had served with Paul as a child serving his father (2:22). It would have been understandable if Paul, thinking of his circumstances, had said, "I can't spare Timothy at this time. He must stay here with me." But, instead, he was willing to send Timothy for the sake of the Philip-

pian church. The Philippians had been willing to serve Paul by giving monetarily and by sending Epaphroditus, who himself had been willing to serve to the brink of death on Paul's behalf.

Of Timothy, Paul says, "I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus" (2:20, 21). These are hard words to understand, because you would think that out of all the faithful Christians in Rome (Paul wrote Romans 16 about five years prior to this, where he greets many faithful believers in Rome), he could have found some who were not living for themselves! And, what about Luke, Titus, Aristarchus, Trophimus, and Epaphroditus? Paul must have meant that of those available to him at that time as messengers, Timothy was the only one he knew of who would genuinely seek after the interests of others instead of their own.

There are at least three ways you can tell if you're putting others ahead of yourself:

(1) *You will have heartfelt love*--These verses are oozing with Paul's heartfelt love for Timothy, Epaphroditus, and for the Philippians. Also notice how Epaphroditus longed for the Philippians and was distressed (the word is used of Jesus' distress in the garden) because they had heard that he was sick (2:26). There are some super-spiritual Christians who try to remove all emotion from the Christian life. They think that spiritual maturity means being stoical, not showing any grief or anxiety or tenderness or tears. But Paul here says how if Epaphroditus would have died, he would have been overwhelmed with grief at the loss of this dear servant of God. Paul knew Romans 8:28--he wrote the verse! He also knew Philippians 4:6-7, about not being anxious. Yet he didn't chide Epaphroditus because he was distressed over how the Philippian church felt about his sickness (2:26). Paul wasn't afraid to be human and to express his deep feelings for others.

(2) *You will show genuine concern*--This spills over with heartfelt love, but here I am especially focusing on Timothy's genuine concern for these people, that he was not seeking his own interests, but the welfare of the church (2:20-21). Sad to say, many who serve the Lord, including some in full-time ministry, do it with mixed motives. They're out for the strokes others can give them. They

like being in the limelight. They're manipulative in using people for their own advancement or gain.

I knew a pastor in California who was outwardly very friendly. He seemed loving and caring. But when you got to know him you could see that he had an inordinate need to be liked. He would tell people what he thought they wanted to hear so they would like him, even though sometimes it was not the truth. He was really seeking his own interests, not the welfare of the church.

(3) *You can work cooperatively with others*--Timothy served with Paul like a child his father (2:22). Paul and Epaphroditus worked together harmoniously in the gospel cause. To do that, you've got to die to self and put others ahead of yourself for the sake of the work. Some people are not team players, unless they are the boss. Even though Paul was clearly the leader among these men, and was about 25 years older than Timothy (we don't know how old Epaphroditus was), he didn't lord it over them. He humbly calls Epaphroditus his brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier. He deflects any glory from himself and lifts up these two faithful servants.

So we must cultivate a servant's heart, centered on the things of Jesus Christ, putting others ahead of ourselves for the sake of the gospel.

2. We must endure a servant's hardships.

Serving Christ is not easy. The term fellow soldier implies warfare. It brings us under the withering attacks of the enemy, who wants to hinder the cause of Christ. Just as soldiers must go through boot camp so that they can learn to endure the hardships they will encounter on the battlefield, so the Lord's servants must be tested. Paul mentions Timothy's "proven worth" (2:22). The word means "approved by testing." It is the same word used in Romans 5:3, 4, where Paul says that tribulation brings about perseverance and perseverance brings proven character. A product that has been approved by testing is a reliable product. Either the manufacturer or a consumer advocate has submitted the product to severe conditions to see if it holds up. You can know that the product won't give out just when you need it most. Timothy had

endured enough testing that Paul knew he was faithful. Testing or hardship in Christian service can come from many sources:

- A. The hardship of persecution both from without and within.

Paul was in prison due to persecution from without. But also he was under attack from those who preached the gospel from envy and selfish ambition (1:15, 17). Perhaps they are the ones he refers to in 2:21. They claimed to be serving Christ, but in reality they were serving themselves. Alexander Maclaren wrote, "Many a professing Christian life has a veneer of godliness nailed thinly over a solid bulk of selfishness" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], "Philippians," p. 284). Paul knew the keen disappointment of professing Christians who were not faithful because they were living for themselves. It's often more difficult to bear the attacks from those within the flock than from those outside, because you expect the world to be against you, but not fellow Christians.

- B. The hardship of the work itself.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, Paul catalogues the hardships he experienced as a servant of Christ: persecutions, physical hardships, dangers that brought him to the brink of death, and, on top of everything else, intense concern for all the churches. In our text, he mentions his concern for the Philippian church (2:28). He mentions Epaphroditus' risking his life (it's a gambling term, "to throw the dice"), as well as his concern about the church. So the work of the gospel involves both physical and emotional hardships that can wear us down. We must be prepared for hardships in serving the Lord and rely on His sustaining grace, not on our own strength or resources.

I would encourage you to read the biographies of the great saints who have gone before us. One of the best is Ruth Tucker's *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* [Zondervan], which is a biographical history of the missions movement. It will move you to tears as you read of the incredible hardships that God's people have gone through to take the gospel to the unreached parts of the earth. In the early years of missionary work in Africa, only one out of four missionaries survived the first term of service (p. 155)! They were plagued by disease, by hostile people, by tribal warfare, by govern-

ment hindrances. Yet they kept going. Our hardships are nothing in comparison with theirs!

Why go through such hardship? If we cultivate a servant's heart and endure a servant's hardship, ...

3. We will receive a servant's honor.

We don't seek the honor for ourselves, but for our Lord who alone is worthy. But He promises, "Those who honor Me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). He will reward every faithful servant with the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8). Any hardship we suffer now in serving Christ will be well worth it when we see His face and hear from Him, "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21).

Paul here honors Timothy by sending him as his own representative. He honors Epaphroditus by his commendation and tells the church to "hold men like him in high regard" (2:29). As Calvin points out, the devil is intent on undermining the authority of godly pastors, and so the church must hold such men in high regard (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "Philippians," p. 84).

Conclusion

Did you notice how these seemingly mundane words about the travel schedules of these men illustrate what Paul has been saying throughout chapter 2? He has told us that we should do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind to regard others more highly than we do ourselves; not looking out for our own interests, but for the interests of others (2:3-4). Then he gave us the great example of our Lord, who laid aside His rights, took on the form of a servant, and became obedient to death on the cross. Therefore, God highly exalted Him (2:5-11). Jesus had a servant's heart; He endured a servant's hardships; He received a servant's honor. That's the pattern for all who serve Him. Let's all strive to become imitators of Timothy and Epaphroditus; but not only of them, but of the Apostle Paul; and, beyond him, of our Lord Jesus Himself. There should be only one entrance to the church: the servant's entrance!

Discussion Questions

1. Interact with the comment, "A non-serving Christian is a contradiction in terms." How are you serving Christ?
2. Must every Christian be willing to be sent anywhere? Is the missionary calling something every Christian must consider?
3. What's the difference between genuine concern for others, which is good, and worry, which is wrong?
4. How do we draw the line between accepting the criticism of other Christians versus ignoring it as being wrongly motivated?

Copyright 1995, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.