

Side By Side: Gospel Partnership in Philippians

Humility, Love, Sacrifice

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Philippians 2:14-30

Now if you would please take your copies of God's Word in your hands and turn with me to Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 2. Philippians chapter 2. We're going to read from the fourteenth verse. You'll find that on page 981 if you're using one of our church Bibles. Before we read the scriptures together would you bow your heads with me as we pray. Let's pray together.

O Lord, we believe that before us is Your holy and inerrant Word, authoritative life-giving truth. We also confess that we often misread it, distort it, misuse it, bend it to our own agendas. And so as we come to it now we would humble ourselves and plead with You that You would work by the Holy Spirit, that the truth of Holy Scripture would rule our hearts, that we would sit under the authority of Christ and that He would wound and heal us by His Word, that He would slay and subdue our sin and make us like Himself for His own glory. For we ask this in His name, amen.

Philippians chapter 2, reading from verse 14. This is the Word of Almighty God:

Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

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 to 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.

Amen and we give thanks to God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word.

Shepherding the Flock: The Qualifications for Biblical Elders

Today we begin the process of electing new Elders to their sacred office. It is not a political election at the end of a campaign. It's not a popularity contest. It's not a reward for service rendered. It's not even promotion from being a deacon. The eldership is a distinct calling issued by Jesus Christ, the King and Head of His church, to qualified men to take up the role of shepherd and teacher, pastor and leader under the governance of Holy Scripture for the good of Christ's precious flock. And it's one of the inviolable privileges that belong to members, communing members of the congregation, that they elect their own leaders. In 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus chapter 1 Paul gives to the church a set of criteria, a set of qualifications by which we may determine the suitability of candidates for the ministry of the eldership. And implied in those lists is the right of the church to evaluate potential candidates based on those qualifications and, therefore, to make a determination about who shall lead them. Christ alone qualifies men for office, but His call is confirmed and completed by the election of the congregation whose right and duty it is to discern those qualifying gifts and character traits in the men presented to them. That's why in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 5, Paul instructs Timothy to appoint elders. In Greek, the verb that he uses there, "to appoint elders," is the same verb used back in Acts chapter 6 where after the election of the congregation the original seven deacons were selected and there ordained to office by the Apostles. The same process is in mind likewise in Acts 14 at verse 23 we read Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church. This time the verb has the basic meaning, quote, "to stretch out the hand for the purpose of giving one's vote in the assembly."

They were appointed by means of the election of the congregation.

So what we're doing today is a weighty, sacred act. It is a process that derives as

warrant its authority, not from the secular political realm - this is not an ecclesiastical version of a political election. Neither does it derive its warrant from the best inventions of human ingenuity, a pragmatic solution - the best means to getting it done. Rather, what we're doing today derives its warrant and its authority from apostolic teaching and example as it comes to us from the pages of Holy Scripture. We're doing something holy and weighty, momentous, sacred and so we're to do it prayerfully, we're to do it with deliberation and careful reflection, and we're to do it seeking the will of God and the glory of the name of Christ.

The Humility and Holiness of Christ: A Model for Elders and for Every Christian

And in light of all of that in God's kind providence our text today, Philippians 2:19-30, focuses our attention on three models of faithful, pastoral leadership whose examples will help us as we prayerfully register our own choice of leaders for our congregation. Of course, these are models not just of what an elder ought to be; these are models of what a faithful Christian ought to be.

Elders are not called to a different standard of holiness than every other believer. They're called to the same standard, but they are called to exemplify that standard before the people of God. And so while these three examples will help us as we prayerfully choose our leaders, we also ought to remember that these are the very things to which we ourselves are being called as we seek to be faithful to the Lord Jesus.

Let's look at the text together, Philippians 2:19-30. You'll remember that Paul has been meditating on the example of selfless service, sacrifice, and humility set by the Lord Jesus.

He gives us that marvelous Christ hymn in verses 6 through 11. He's been preparing us for the implications of that in the opening five verses and he's been applying those implications in verses 12 through 18. And now, in a sense, he's continuing to apply the lessons that Christ's example teaches us only now by way of three concrete lived examples. And the first of them is the example of the mighty Apostle Paul himself. The dominant motif of Paul's self-description here is the motif of humility. Notice for example how in verse 19 and again in verse 25 Paul shines the spotlight not on his own work, but on the work of Timothy and on Epaphroditus.

They're the ones he plans to send back to Philippi from Rome and he wants the Philippians to know who they're getting in these two remarkable young Christian leaders.

I. The Example of Paul: Humility

And I think that tells us a good deal about the Apostle Paul, doesn't it? There is not the slightest trace here of self-promotion. Like the Lord Jesus whom he serves, Paul is not grasping after greatness. The Lord Jesus did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but in the absolute security of his union and equality with the Father and with the Holy Spirit in the bonds of the Holy Trinity, the Lord Jesus emptied Himself, He made Himself nothing. And so here now also is the Apostle Paul modeling that same attitude perhaps, here quite unselfconsciously.

The same virtue he's been commending in Christ we see now also in Paul. He's not insecure as he promotes someone else's ministry. He's not looking for the Philippians attention or for their praises. He is eagerly shining the spotlight on these other two brothers, commending them warmly and selflessly to the Philippians' affections. He's a model of humility.

Comes out in other ways in our passage, too, Paul's humility. It is clear, isn't it, that Paul is very eager to see the Philippians again. He plans to send Timothy to them so that his fears on their behalf might be allayed somewhat and he might be reassured concerning them. He even indicates that his real desire is somehow to make the journey himself and be with them face to face. But look how he expresses his intentions as he sends Timothy back and as he hopes to go back himself. Verse 19, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon." Verse 24, "I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. I trust in the Lord Jesus to do it; if it pleases the Lord Jesus, this is my plan." He's modeling James 4:13, isn't he? James 4:13 - "Come thou you who say today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit, yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'" That's the example of the Apostle Paul, the mighty apostle, selflessly holding others up and submitting his best plans meekly to the overarching will of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Trusting Submission to the Will of God

Of all the many trials through which our Savior passed before He came to the cross, undoubtedly the sorest was the temptation to assert His own will in contradiction rather than in humble submission to the will of God His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. And yet, still amidst the crushing weight of His sin-bearing work, seeing all that the cross would require of Him, all the horror and darkness and death of it, gazing, peering into the hell of Calvary, our Savior bows His head and still prays, "Abba, Father, not my will but Yours be done," that those whom He came to save might be pardoned and ransomed and redeemed. And now here, too, is His servant, the Apostle Paul, with the same attitude - "I trust in the Lord Jesus to come to you if I can. Let the Lord Jesus have His way. His will

not mine be done. He rules in my heart and over my life. My plans are the best I can make them, but His plans are what I desire above all. Not my will, but Yours be done.”

We’re being called by Paul’s example to submit our wills to the will of God for us in Christ. We’re being called to pray, aren’t we, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Every one of our plans are contingent upon the ultimate and eternal plan and purpose of Almighty God and to that plan we must cheerfully submit. Humility is the mark of the Apostle Paul placing his will under the will of the Lord Jesus, willing to see others made much of, not in any way insecure as he promotes the ministry of others, gladly surrendering his priorities that the priorities of Christ may loom largest of all. It is humble men that we are to look. It is for humble that we are to look as we seek to make choice of new leaders - men of humility, men who submit their will to the will of God in Jesus Christ; men who will make much of the ministry of others; men who practice servant-heartedness, modeled first by our Lord Jesus Christ.

II. The Example of Timothy: Love

And the second example in the text is the example of Paul’s young lieutenant, Timothy. If the dominant note struck by Paul’s example is humility, in Timothy’s case it is surely love. Look at verses 20 to 22. “I have,” Paul says, “no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. 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 me in the gospel.” Notice the opening words of verse 20. In our version it reads, “I have no one else like him.” It might be translated that way as Paul simply saying Timothy’s one of a kind. However, the similarity of the language of verse 20 to the language of verse 2 should make us come to a different conclusion. In verse 2 Paul urges the Philippians to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” And we can also translate verse 20, Paul saying of Timothy, “I have no one else like him.” That is, “We are of the same mind. There is no one else who is like-minded with me in the way that Timothy is. We’re on the same page. We think the same way. Our burdens and concerns are completely in alignment.”

Shared Concern

And notice the content of their shared concern and like-mindedness. “I have no one like-minded who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.” The great dominate pressing burden in Timothy’s life is the welfare of the Philippian believers. Apparently not everyone in the church at Rome felt that way. Verse 21, “They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”

There are some who did not live out, were not living out the injunction of verse 4, “to look out not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

They're all seeking themselves, their own agendas, not Christ's agenda. But not Timothy. Timothy is profoundly committed to the Philippian believers. He has them on his heart; he's concerned for them, burdened for them. And his concerns and burdens are not merely philanthropic and generally benevolent. His concerns and burdens, Paul says, are the concerns of Christ Jesus. He's concerned for more than their happiness and health. He is concerned supremely for their holiness, for their growth in grace, for their unity as a fellowship, for the quality of their witness in the world. He's concerned for the holiness of the Philippian believers. He has them on their heart. They burden him and the great burden is for their godliness and their likeness to Christ. Paul models to us humility, serving humbly the cause and concern of Christ.

Concern for the Church at Home and Around the World

Timothy models another trait of a faithful elder in the church of Jesus Christ. He is filled with loving concern for the church at home and the church around the world - both the believers in Rome and the believers in Philippi. He understands Biblical Presbyterianism at its simplest simply means the mutual support and involvement of congregations one for another as they work together for the furtherance of Christ's cause and Christ's kingdom. He's at Rome and he's anxious for the Philippians' welfare. That's what we need to be looking for today as we elect elders. Ask yourself, "Will this man look out only for his own interests or will he have the concerns of Christ and the interests of the flock of God at heart? Is he burdened for the people of God in this place and in sister congregations in our Presbytery and denomination and in our country and around the world? Does he have a vision for the welfare of the people of God here and elsewhere? Does he have them in his heart?"

Elders: Mentoring the Church and Modeling Christ

Just as an aside, do notice where Timothy got all of this from. Humanly speaking, he learns it from a mentor, doesn't he? Verse 22 - "His proven character, his pastoral competence are learned as a son with a father." Unlike today, in Paul's day most trades were learned and passed on by a son from their father. And so the son would hang out with dad and be given little tasks to do. And gradually, gradually his skill set would increase until he could inherit the family business or perhaps move out on his own. And well, Paul says "Timothy was just such a son to me. As we labored at the cold face of gospel ministry he began to develop a burden for the people of God, for the welfare of the flock of God, as together we have served and given our lives for their good." If we're going to look out not only for our interests but also for the interests of others, if we're going to care about Christ's agenda and not just our own concerns, if we're going to live the kind of selfless, sacrificial love for one another that we see in Jesus, then we too, we need mentors, don't we, just like Timothy was mentored by Paul. That is what we're looking for in elders, in elder candidate - men who will mentor and model, who will disciple in us a love for the people of God and a concern for the cause of

Christ.

There's a word and an exhortation here, too, for our existing officers. You are always modeling something. Your life is always teaching something. Are you teaching humility and love like Paul to Timothy for the flock of God and the cause of Jesus Christ? What does your life teach those who observe it? Are you being deliberate in your mentoring? Are you seeking to model humble, broken, contrite, believing love for your brothers and sisters, compassion for the weak and weary? Do you have a burden for other congregations, other ministries for the world church? Paul models humility - he submits his will to the will of Christ. Timothy models love - he cares deeply for the Philippians.

III. The Example of Epaphroditus: Sacrificial Service

And then thirdly, there's Epaphroditus. He models sacrificial service, doesn't he? Verses 25 to 30 - Epaphroditus had been sent from Philippi to Paul to minister to his needs on their behalf and while he was with Paul in Rome, verse 30, completing what was lacking in the Philippians' service to Paul, he became deeply ill. In fact, verse 27 tells us Epaphroditus almost died; but God had mercy on him. He's restored to health in due course. Now Paul is going to send him back to Philippi with high commendation. He calls him a fellow worker and a fellow soldier.

Epaphroditus, it seems, threw himself into the work of ministry alongside Paul in Rome among the brothers and sisters there. When he learned that the Philippians knew that he had been ill, he was distressed that they would be worrying about him. Now think of this - here is Epaphroditus; he's almost dead. He's laying his life down. He's sick almost to the point of death, and he's anxious and worried that the Philippians are needlessly concerned for him. What a selfless gospel servant this man was. And so in verse 29 Paul says to them, "Receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men for he nearly died for the work of Christ." Honor men like this - he's a model; he's an example. This is the kind of man you're looking for, who's willing to lay their lives down for the welfare of the people of God and the honor of the Lord Jesus. Here's an elder, a spiritual leader, who puts us in mind of Christ, doesn't he, who gives himself for the people of God, his life if need be. Look for men like this. Pray for the elders and deacons that you have that they might be men like this, and pray and plead with God for grace that we, all of us, might become more people like this who pour lives out that Christ might be made much of and the people of God strengthened and helped. So Paul models humility, Timothy love, Epaphroditus, sacrifice.

Captivated by Christ

And before we conclude I do want you to notice there is a persistent theme, a

golden thread that runs through these men's lives and ministries as Paul describes them here. When Paul talks about serving in the Gospel with Timothy, he's not just talking about serving others with the message of the Gospel. He's talking about the Gospel itself being the reason and the grounds and the passion and the power for their service and partnership together. When he says he trusts in the Lord to come to them soon, he's saying "Jesus, Jesus' agenda gets to rule my heart and my destiny, His plans more than my own." When he says Epaphroditus laid down his life for the work of Christ, he's saying, "For Epaphroditus, Jesus is worth it. He was willing to let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also because Christ is worth it. For the advancement of the praise of the name of Jesus he lays his life down."

These are men who are besotted with Jesus Christ, aren't they? They're besotted with Jesus Christ. They are captivated by Him; He's all in all to them. They submit to Him. They serve bound together by Him. They want His will for others to be done and His will for themselves to be done. They're prepared to die for His cause. These are Christ besotted men; these are Gospel men. And that really is the final lesson, the example, the three examples here can teach us as we think about electing our own leaders. Look more than anything else, look first and most deeply for Gospel men. Look for Gospel men. Look for men for whom Christ is most precious, for whom He is the pearl of great price. Look for Christ besotted men. There is no other way, you know, to produce humility and this kind of selfless love and this kind of sacrifice but by union and communion with Jesus Christ. And so if we're to begin to produce such fruit, it will be as we lean on and rest in and cling to Jesus that we will do it. These three men point us back to the Savior whose glory they serve and for whom they lay everything down. They call us to run back to Christ, and resting on Christ, the examples remind us we will begin to produce good fruit. We will begin to become like the Savior ourselves. So look for elders who will model a dependence on Jesus. Look for men, not perfect men, but men who cling to Christ in their weakness and sin and find mercy and grace to walk in new obedience from their Savior. Humility and love and sacrifice - all of them flowing from a delighted dependence on Jesus. May the Lord Jesus make us people like that, people marked by humility and love and sacrifice, and may the Lord give us leaders that exemplify and model those very same realities. And all for His own glory. Amen.

Will you pray with me?

Father, we thank You for Your Word. We confess how short we fall of the example even of these sinful, fallen men - Paul and Timothy and Epaphroditus. Give to us grace that we may begin to serve in humility, to honor one another in love, and to lay our lives down for the glory of Jesus in sacrifice. Make us for our part reflections of the character of Christ. Help us to shine as stars in the midst of a twisted and perverse generation. We ask this not for our own reputation's sake or our own glory, but for the honor of the name of our Savior in whose name we now pray. Amen.

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