



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Serving the Interests of Jesus

Philippians 2.19–30

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Introduction

Imagine that as you enter the church building for a service, you see two sisters in the foyer engaged in a tense conversation. You're not surprised; the two have been at odds for months. Everyone's been waiting for their disagreement to reach critical mass. From what you see now, you suspect that's going to happen sooner rather than later.

"The situation is getting out of hand," you think. People are talking and some are taking sides. The tension is spilling over into other things. They've been vocal a while, but lately some who are quick to remind everyone how much they do to serve God have increased their volume. The group that insists God's way is stricter have become more assertive, too. Then there are those who are struggling with various problems and setbacks. Yes, things are tense at church. But it all seems to center in the fuss that's brewing in the foyer.¹

The situation just described is based on what we discern as we read Philippians. The Christian sisters named Euodia and Syntyche were at odds (Phil 4.2). That Paul singled them out and appealed to them by name indicates that their tension must have been serious.² That one event seems to have been hanging over the entire Philippian situation. It's probably the specific circumstance that motivated his urgent plea for unity in chapter 2.

But whether they were connected or not, it is apparent that the Philippian church was also dealing with other difficulties. People were suffering (1.29); Paul himself was writing from prison (1.12–14). Some were preaching the gospel for reasons of self-glory and rivalry (1:15–17). Apparently, the "circumcision party" was also stirring up trouble (3.2–4).

How would *you* handle the situation? Where would you begin teaching to counter the problems? What would you stress? What approach would you take? It's good to think about questions like these before looking further at the letter. But it's more important to see what Paul did to heal the rift between Euodia and Syntyche and help the church grow so the Lord's

work could continue.

Paul's Approach

Paul mentions the problem in 1.27 and begins confronting it in 2.1–4. Appealing to the noble goals of encouragement, love, fellowship, and sympathetic affection in verse 1, and then to their desire to see him experience joy in verse 2, he urges them to be of the same mind, have the same love, and be in full accord (v. 2). To do this, they would need to restrain their rivalry and conceit and intentionally look to the interests of others (vv. 3–4). To succeed, their actions had to be grounded “in Christ” (v. 1) on whose example he elaborates in verses 5–11. With Jesus as the focus of the discussion, he turns to what they needed to do to “work out their own salvation” (vv. 12–13).

It's not hard to imagine that they would have been skeptical about the process because we sometimes are. “Yes, *Jesus* did that. But he was *Christ*, the Son of God, faultless and blameless. He was *Lord*. He wasn't like us!” In what follows, it's almost as if Paul anticipated just such a response. Significantly, he points to some other examples for the Philippians to imitate.

Two Other Examples

In Philippians 2.19–24, he weaves his exhortation into his announcement that he will soon send Timothy to check on things and minister to them. F. F. Bruce reminds us that “Timothy was frequently sent by Paul as his messenger... He sent Timothy to Thessalonica from Athens (1 Thess. 3:1-5) and to Corinth from Ephesus (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10, 11)” (Bruce 1989, 91). Our text adds to our understanding of Timothy's special place in Paul's heart and ministry.

In fact, Timothy was just the man for the mission to the Philippians, not just because he was so close to Paul, but because he would look out for the interests of the Philippians as no one else would (Phil 2.20). The word translated, “I have no one like him” (ἰσόψυχος, *isopsychos*; v. 20) “is quite similar to that which he used in verse 2 when he urged his readers to be ‘one in soul’” [NIV; σύμψυχος, *sympsychos*] (Bruce 1989, 92). Where the interests of the Philippians were concerned, Timothy shared Paul's soul, unlike those who preached for personal glory (1.16–18) or the ones who were caught up in rivalry, quarrels, and disagreements (2.3, 14; 4.2). By stressing Timothy's interest in them in his announcement of his mission (2.21), Paul was showing them a Christ-like example who was the opposite of the self-seeking attitude he had told them to restrain (2.3–4).

Verses 25–30 add a second example, Epaphroditus, a believer who, when compared to Timothy, is relatively unknown (we see his name again only in Phil 4.18). Like Timothy, Epaphroditus had been given a special mission as a “messenger” (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos*; 2.25), probably to deliver the Philippians' financial support to Paul (Phil 4.16–18).

He completed his mission at great cost. Many scholars think that at some point during his 800-mile trip from Philippi to Rome, he became deathly ill (2.27). But, ill as he was, Paul says his concern was only with his mission and the welfare of the Philippians. Verse 26 reports that he “has been distressed because you heard that he was ill,” and verse 30 adds that he “nearly died for the work of Christ, risking [παραβολεύομαι, *paraboleuomai*; “venture, risk” (Haufe 1993,

15)] his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.” In other words, he was willing to do what Christ had done (vv. 6–8).

Serving the Interests of Jesus

Both to learn how to relieve problems like those experienced by the Philippians and for the sake of the cause of Christ generally, we need to reflect on some lessons from our text.

We think first of Timothy’s talent. He was not the only co-worker Paul had (cf. Col 4.10–14; Phlm 23–24; 2 Tim 4.10–12, 19–21), but he had certain abilities that made him well suited for the missions with which Paul entrusted him. Remember, Paul said, “I have no one like him” (Phil 2.20).

When we think about his role more, two things come to mind. First, Timothy’s unique role reminds us that we all have a place in the body and are expected to use our abilities. But his uniqueness also reminds us that we should guard against wrong attitudes and even behavior toward others that grow from a form of jealousy of their works. We need the balance spelled out in 1 Corinthians 12.12–19.

- There is only one body, but all of us are equally members of that body (v. 12).
- There are no unimportant body members; the entire body is needed to do the Lord’s work (vv. 14–16).
- Variety is inherent to being a body; the principle is diversity in unity (vv. 17, 19).
- God expects every member of the body to be active in service (v. 18).

We also learn from Epaphroditus’s limits. On the one hand, he also illustrates the importance of all members of the body using our abilities for the Lord’s glory. But he also reminds us that personal circumstances can change, requiring adjustments in how we serve and what we do. As in the case of Epaphroditus, our circumstances may change because of illness or other misfortune. We may be at different places in life; for example, a mother with a baby will not be able to do things she can do at other times. Aging is another factor.

The fact that circumstances can alter our ability to do different works of service suggests something that is not specifically found in his case: there may be times when we need to step back to concentrate on some other work. It may be another work that needs to be prioritized (cf. Acts 6.2–4). Or it may be that others can do the work or need to learn to do it; think how the special missions Timothy was given prepared him for Paul’s departure (cf. 1–2 Tim; especially 2 Tim 2.2).

More than anything, the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus teach us that, whatever our talents and circumstances are, we should live for Jesus, not ourselves. Philippians 2.21 states the point directly: “For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” Verse 25 shows it in a different way: Epaphroditus was not just the Philippians’ “messenger and minister” and Paul’s “brother,” he was also Paul’s “fellow worker and fellow soldier.” Both figures tell us that Christian service should be strenuous (Bruce 1989, 95). Recall that Epaphroditus had traveled 800 miles to be with Paul and that Timothy was tasked with a mission that would double that, a trip that would take forty days to go from Rome to Philippi

and another 40 days to return.

From another angle, notice in verse 30 that Epaphroditus “nearly died for the work of Christ.” Usually, when we read about early Christians dying for the cause, we think of persecution and martyrdom; since we don’t currently experience those things as they did, it’s easy to just pass over their examples and never internalize their significance. But Epaphroditus didn’t nearly die from persecution; he nearly died from pressing on in service.

Three phrases explain why: the interests of Jesus Christ (v. 20); the trust in the Lord shared by Paul and his co-workers (v. 24); and the expectation that the Philippians would receive Epaphroditus without hesitation because they shared a bond in the Lord (v. 29). Timothy and Epaphroditus stand out in this regard because then, as now, “there were too many who put their own interests before those of others, or were more concerned about their own interests than about those of Jesus Christ” (Bruce 1989, 92).

Conclusion

Mary Dagworthy James (1992, # 15) captured the idea perfectly in the hymn, “All for Jesus.”

All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being’s ransomed pow’rs;
All my thoughts and words and
doings,
All my days and all my hours.

Let my hands perform his bidding,
Let my feet run in His ways,
Let my eyes see Jesus only,
Let my lips speak forth his praise.

Since my eyes were fixed on Jesus
I’ve lost sight of all beside;
So enchained my spirit’s vision,
Looking at the Crucified.

O what wonder! How amazing!
Jesus glorious King of kings,
Deigns to call me His beloved,
Bids me rest beneath His wings.

“All for Jesus! All for Jesus!” Is that why and how you live?

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Works Cited

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Notes

¹ I’ve adapted and expanded the basic idea of an illustration by Bruce McLarty in his preaching Philippians classes at the 2007 sermon seminar at the Austin Graduate School of Theology.

² The text in verse 2 is emphatic. Although it is grammatically acceptable to use it once to appeal to both parties, Paul repeats the verb παρακαλῶ (*parakalō*), “to beseech, exhort, encourage or entreat.” “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.”