

Joyful Partnership — Philippians 2:19-30¹
Five Points Community Church (12/4/16) Brett Toney

Becoming the Beheld

My mentor in seminary modified a phrase I think from scholar Greg Beale. It went, “You become what you behold, whether to restoration or to ruin.” It’s stuck with me and serves as a helpful guide for the kind of media I take in, the things I read, and the people I seek to emulate. It’s thoroughly biblical. In Isaiah’s commission in Isaiah 6, after the vision of the Holy of Holies, he’s sent to a people who are blind, deaf, and mute just like the idols they serve. Or Romans 1, in judgment God gives people over to their sin—they are beholden to impurity and immorality and they become thoroughly impure and immoral.

It works positively though, as well—2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image.” This dynamic is part of who we are. Humans are by nature imitators. Whether fashion trends, musical forms, or family behaviors, we imitate the things we are immersed in. This is why the Apostle Paul is talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Honor Such Men (v.29)

We’re used to seeing these kinds of commendations and travel plans at the end of New Testament letters. Why would he start talking about these guys right in the middle of the letter? Because Paul wants us to imitate them. He’s commending them as examples to follow of the kind of life in Christ he’s been describing. Let’s back up a little and see how Paul is arriving at this description of these two brothers.

¹ Resources consulted: Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, Eerdmans: 1991; Alistair Begg’s sermon “That’s What Friends Are”; D.A. Carson’s sermon “A Mature Man”

Back in 1:27, Paul calls us to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” We ought to live in such a way that is complementary to and commending of the gospel. We cannot profess with our mouth that God is sovereign, Jesus saves, and the Spirit sanctifies, and then live with unchecked anxiety, impurity, and worldliness. To help us see what a life worthy of the gospel looks like, at the beginning of chapter two, Paul gives the highest and best example: Jesus. A gospel-worthy life will be marked by considering others more significant than yourself, Philippians 2:3. Jesus is the one who has most clearly displayed humble self-deference in his death, resurrection, and ascension—that’s Paul’s point in 2:4-11.

And we may be quick to say, “Well, yeah, of course Jesus is. He’s the divine Son of God. Good Sunday School example, Paul.” But the Apostle keeps going, and that’s where our passage fits in. We need some more hands-on examples of gospel-worthy lives. We need help seeing how Jesus’ gospel work transforms people that we too might be transformed. So, Paul presents Timothy and Epaphroditus here in our passage, but he continues in chapter three to demonstrate the example of his own life. And all of this leads to his call in 3:17, “Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” Who is the “us”? Who are the exemplars? Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

Or to put it another way, v.29, “Honor such men.” We’ll look first at what is generally so honorable and commendable about these two men and then consider some specifics for each. I was really helped by a sermon by Alistair Begg in seeing some of these connections. In general, Timothy and Epaphroditus are valuable, willing, and available. Timothy is explicitly mentioned as being virtually indispensable to Paul. Epaphroditus has a string of commendable attributes. They aren’t busybodies. They aren’t “do-nothings.” They aren’t benchwarmers. Their service is greatly valuable.

But if they weren't willing, their value would be nothing. They go where the gospel ministry has need. There's no mention of Timothy's giftedness to serve specifically the needs of the Philippian church. There is nothing mentioned of Epaphroditus' internal desires to be a letter carrier or meet any of Paul's needs. They do what the ministry demands rather than demanding what the ministry will do. Their willingness though wouldn't mean anything if they weren't also available. They made themselves available to do what was necessary. They just go. They act. God will provide. They are committed to the Greatest Cause and free themselves of any hindrances to seeing to it that the gospel advances.

Now as we consider these exemplary men, we must not forget that they are just that: men. They too would be dead in sin apart from God's saving work in their lives. Even as redeemed, Spirit-filled men, they certainly faltered at times. So, they are commendable and worthy of honor only in so far as they point us to Jesus. That's Paul's primary objective here, not that we would fixate on these two, but that they would be lenses through which we would see Jesus. I think Paul wants us to see these men who are being conformed into the image of Christ that we would know what our conformation to that same image ought to look like.

This is why we are to imitate them. After all, if "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery" and flattery at its best is a way to honor, then it is right to do as they do as they live lives worthy of the gospel. And yet it is not just these two that we are to imitate. In 3:17, Paul anticipates the day when he, Timothy, and Epaphroditus are no longer present in this world and broadened the call to imitate any who walk according to their example. So, I must ask, is your life worthy of imitation? Could you humbly invite a younger brother or sister in the faith to come and watch your manner of life and do likewise? This is basic Christian discipleship. Live in Christ such that others behold him in you and become like him. Open the Word and your life that

others might meet our Savior. To what degree are you, Christian, valuable, willing, and available to advance the gospel? These are sobering questions to consider. If we say that no, we can't call others to imitate us, why do we continue to cling to the sin that would lead us to that conclusion?

Love Like Timothy (v.19-24)

Let's turn our focus now just to Timothy. Paul speaks of him in v.19-24 and would be especially desirous of us to love like Timothy. These brief sentences serve as a kind of recommendation letter for when he will, God willing, arrive in Philippi to be of help. Given how Timothy is described as being so instrumental to Paul, along with his unique standing as the only one at Paul's disposal with such care, we find he is the Apostle's top pastoral envoy. What especially sets him apart is his love, his genuine concern. He apparently had a deep and abiding affection for the Philippians.

Timothy points us to Jesus' perfectly selfless care not only in his gospel ministry but how he goes about it. In essence, Timothy's example says to the Philippians, "Know that you have a Savior who dearly loves you." When we express that kind of care for others, when we express that kind of consideration of their needs over our own, when we express that kind of selfless affection, we make Jesus look wonderful. Timothy embodies the love of God in Christ.

However, you cannot just *will* this kind of selfless love. You surely can find examples of non-Christians carrying out selfless acts of love, but the degree and longevity of that love will be severely tainted by sin apart from God's gracious work in your life. These men are exemplary because they have first been brought to their knees, confessing that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father (cf. 2:10-11). Flowing from that work of God in his life, Timothy loves. Flowing from that work of God in your life, you love. Connecting this call to love like Timothy with Pastor JJ's recent sermons on 2:14-16, a clear way to exemplify Timothy's love is to not grumble

about others. If you have a genuine concern with another's welfare, go and tell them the issue you have. You don't need to sin by including other people. Love that brother or sister by going to them readily.

Now note the caution in v.21. Timothy's love stands out because others—presumably the same individuals from 1:15 who preach Christ from envy and rivalry—do not love like this. Their motives are tainted. The caution is that we too need to be wary of our motives. Our hearts are deceitful and desperately sick (cf. Jeremiah 17:9). Who is it that we are truly loving by that action? Is it really about us and what we want or is it genuinely a concern for the other person?

The last thing to observe about Timothy's love is his relation to Paul and the ministry. Timothy is a son who slaves. He is devoted to Paul and carries out his work like a son does with his father. Yet he does not work as one having privilege or status. The word in the ESV describing Timothy and Paul's work as "serve" means to "serve as a slave." Even as the top pastoral aid to the Great Apostle to the Gentiles, Timothy considers others more significant than himself by slaving away out of love that more might repent and believe in Jesus. This way of conducting himself makes Timothy so indispensable. O that we would love like Timothy that we would be virtually indispensable to the ministry the Lord calls us to.

Serve Like Epaphroditus (v.25-30)

Now if Paul is eager for us to love like Timothy, then he wants us to serve like Epaphroditus. This guy was all in. He wasn't just a fellow Christian, nor just another disciple-maker; he was in the trenches striving side-by-side with Paul on the frontline. He presumably was the one sent by the Philippians to deliver the offering they collected for the Apostle and bring news of what was happening at the church. Though he clearly was not just an errand boy. It was a significant undertaking by a godly man. He had been sent out as a missionary to work with

Paul. And it was a risky venture worth taking though it brought him to death's door. I've mentioned already how Epaphroditus was willing and available, though consider how great a servant he was.

Even in the list of descriptors in v.25, service is the common thread. He was serving alongside Paul with synergy like a soldier. He was serving the Philippians as their representative. He was serving Paul himself perhaps with his needs in prison. Yet we see a further degree of his servant heart as Paul recounts Epaphroditus' deathbed experience. *He* was the one who nearly died, yet *he* was the one who was burdened because his church home was concerned about him. Is that not backwards to what we're naturally inclined towards? To what our society encourages? This guy is thinking of his home church more than himself even after facing death! He's on the mission field, wasting away but does not despair in his Christ-like drive to serve. It not only makes you wonder how your heart would respond, but even if what you're living for is worth dying for.

Tucked away between this account of his nearly fatal illness (v.26-27a) and Paul's eagerness to let Epaphroditus continue to serve by returning to Philippi (v.28) is this implicit affirmation of the sovereignty of God in v.27. *God* had mercy on this man. This was not some self-willed virus or merely an interesting case study for a medical journal. Just as sure as Jesus has been highly exalted and given the name above all names (2:9), so sure is it that he rules and reigns over even the smallest and deadliest of cells. Epaphroditus' suffering went to the very duration and extent decreed by God, and the same is true for you. Your experience of suffering will not last one breath longer nor feel one lumen darker than what God allows, so that when the suffering relents you might say, "*God* had mercy on me."

But maybe you're wondering with Calvin how this was mercy.² If Paul said it is far better to depart and be with Christ (1:23), how is it merciful of God to keep Epaphroditus in this world? Would it not have been more merciful, more benevolent, more loving of God to end his earthly life and bring him to Christ? We could certainly see that to be true, but evidently Epaphroditus' gospel service had not yet been rendered in full. Like Paul's conclusion to his wrestling with living and dying, to remain in the flesh was more necessary for Epaphroditus on account of Paul and the Philippians (cf. 1:24). For Paul says God showed mercy on him as well by not adding sorrow upon sorrow if his brother and coworker were to die on his watch. As you continue in your experience of suffering, may your soul wait for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning (cf. Psalm 130:6). You likely will not know now why it is more necessary to remain in the flesh, but the dawn is coming.

Verse 30, because Epaphroditus nearly died in the service of Christ, he and others like him ought to be received with joy and honor. It was his selfless service that truly filled up what was lacking in the Philippians' service to Paul. By this Paul does not mean that they had short-changed him somehow. The phrase may sound familiar. In Colossians 1:24 Paul wrote that he was "filling up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of [the church]." He certainly does not mean that Christ's atoning death was somehow deficient. He means it was distant. The Colossians were not witnesses of the crucifixion, but they could see how Paul suffered and be reminded in a more immediate way of how great Jesus suffered for their sin.

Similarly, Paul here is not criticizing the Philippians. What was lacking in their service to Paul was the service that could only be carried out in person. They could not minister to his needs in prison while still in Philippi. They could not get in the trenches of gospel ministry

² Cf. Calvin quote in O'Brien.

with him where he was. But Epaphroditus could, and he did. He embodied the whole church's joyful partnership with Paul. And for that service, Paul was ever grateful. It was for that kind of service that Paul commends us to serve like Epaphroditus.

Just like Timothy, Epaphroditus had been rescued from bondage to sin. He had been freed to serve with joy. Such service does not earn nor increase our standing before the Lord. You cannot imitate godly men and women nor be worthy of imitation *enough* to change how God regards you. The cross was enough for that. The divine Son of God became a servant by becoming a man, and he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus rose from the dead and has now been highly exalted and given the name above all names. And we all who have been united with him by faith have been called to live our lives in a manner worthy of this good news.

We love and serve like these men not because we're trying to impress the Lord but because we yearn to leave an impression of the Lord on those we love and serve. Take a moment to consider if you truly are valuable, willing, and available to press in wherever the Lord has need of you. Would you sell everything and go to Chad? Would you set your alarm early and go to the nursery? Would you put in for a transfer to Dubai that you might carry on your work among the unreached? Would you walk alongside post-abortive mothers? Maybe those all seem risky (yes, even the nursery). Good thing Jesus has all authority in Heaven and on Earth and will be with you to the very end of the age.

Another phrase I picked up in seminary was "Think big. Start small. Go deep." Think about those big suggestions but start small and go deep. Love another Christian newer to the faith by inviting them to watch your life and serve them by reading and applying the Word. Both

of you will become what you behold, whether to restoration or to ruin. Let's behold the Son of God together that we might be like him.