

THE JOYFUL COST OF BUILDING FAITH IN OTHERS

Philippians 2:17-30 - "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. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. [19] I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. [20] For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. [21] They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. [22] But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. [23] I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, [24] and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. [25] 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, [26] for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. [27] 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. [28] I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. [29] So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, [30] for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

There are two elements in this passage that make it a challenge to *teach* and a challenge to *hear*. In other words, it's hard for both speaker and listener. For the teacher it drops suddenly from the doctrinal heights of the previous verses. Suddenly we're left fumbling with Paul's desire to perhaps visit a local church and his plans to send someone else until he knows his own future. That's really about it.

For the *listener* (or *reader*) it's also a challenging text because few of us can easily relate to the emphasis Paul places on *commitment to mission and sacrifice* in Timothy and Epaphroditus. These men were both full-time missionary types who paid such a price for their calling, literally coming close to giving up their lives. Of course we *admire* them for this but we really can't quite *relate*. How do we - as Canadian citizens blessed with freedom, independence and prosperity - how do *we* trace our lives around the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus?

North American culture can't understand *any* commitment that isn't directly related to the fulfillment of *self*. Paul's praise for Timothy and Epaphroditus reads like Latin in our ears. The summons of every dominant cultural voice is the clarion call to be true to *self* - not true to *Christ*. There is nothing in our culture to reinforce the kind of character Paul not only *praises*, but calls the whole church to *imitate*. We'll come back to this in a minute.

The flow of the passage is involved enough that it might be wise to lay out a basic chronology of events. As we put the passage into motion it seems things went like this. Epaphroditus was sent out by the church at Philippi with a gift to bless and encourage Paul. On route to Paul Epaphroditus became very ill, almost to the point of death.

How the church back at Philippi *knew* about this is unclear, although probably Epaphroditus didn't travel alone. Someone accompanying him *returned* to Philippi with the news while Epaphroditus continued on to carry out his mission to Paul. This was the cause of the Philippians' worry for Epaphroditus (2:26).

Because Epaphroditus was distressed at the church's worry over him he longed to return to comfort them (26-28). Epaphroditus will return to Philippi right away (25). The significant detail in Epaphroditus' return is he will take Paul's letter (what we know as the book of Philippians) back to the church with him. Paul, of course, can't deliver the letter right now because he is in prison. And he doesn't want to send Timothy right now because he needs Timothy with him while his future is so uncertain (23-24).

But there's *another* reason Paul wants to send Timothy a bit later. He wants Timothy to be able to give him a *report* on how the church was receiving the instructions in the letter Epaphroditus delivered earlier. Paul wants to make sure these people are putting his directions into practice because he had given them much to do.

From 1:27 to 2:16 Paul had given some pretty pointed instructions on how these Christians were to make sure their "*manner of life*" was "*worthy of the gospel of Christ*" (1:27). He mildly chided them for "*seeking their own interests instead of others*" (2:4). He cautioned them about the importance of striving for a humble mind of Christ and renouncing patterns of "*grumbling and questioning*" (2:14-15). And he *twice* told them to make sure they put his instruction into practice even though he wasn't physically present with them (1:27, 2:12).

But will they listen to Paul? Will they take his letter to heart and heed the call of the Holy Spirit in Paul's words? Paul wants to know. And by **first** sending Epaphroditus with the letter and **then** sending Timothy later on, Paul can hear first hand how these Christians were **responding to his instructions** and fulfilling their mission in Philippi. In this way Timothy's visit to Philippi wouldn't just be a blessing to the church, but his **return** to Paul would also enable Paul to be **"cheered by news"** of them as well(2:19).

But in among all these travel details Paul attaches - like an attachment to an email - a precious spiritual lesson. He still has in mind the governing power of the **"mind of Christ"** in the believer - **"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." (2:5)**. This mind not only purifies and keeps the soul but fits disciples for fruitfulness in ministry.

The mind of Christ is the humility that **counts others more significant than ourselves (2:3)**. And no genuine ministry can happen in the body of Christ without this mind-set because taking Christ to people and building faith in people **always** happens with a huge price tag to self. Ministry is never easy and it is never convenient. You and I can never build Christ into others while catering to personal rights and schedules.

All through our text we see the cost of being used of God and we see that cost being paid with joy. You can spot this in the example of Paul himself - **"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"(2:17)**. We see it in the way Paul describes the character of Timothy - **"For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. [21] They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (2:20-21)**. And we see it again in the description of Epaphroditus - **"So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, [30] for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me" (2:29-30)**.

Paul **means** for us to notice this trait of dedication. He **intends** for us all to note the similarity between himself, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and the example fleshed out by Jesus who laid down His life to make Himself the Redeemer and Servant of sinners like us. If Christ is the pattern and if we have the mind of Christ there is no other way to treat our own rights than denying them. There is no other way to minister in His Name than laying down **our** lives as well.

The point I'm meant to see is Jesus could never have fulfilled His mission to reach me without totally dying to all that was rightly His. A **partial** commitment on the part of **Jesus** to Redeem me would have been totally useless. And a partial commitment on **my** part to reach others - to build Christ into their lives and take the gospel to those still lost - is totally useless as well.

This is so important. Everyone wants **fruitfulness in life and ministry**. We all want our lives to matter - to make a difference for Christ - to be of eternal substance. It's the **path** to such a life that is frequently missed. The life lesson attached to our text today is single and direct. **We exist to serve Christ and not self. And serving Christ costs everything.**

Look at all of the characters - all the **players** - in our study of Philippians so far - Jesus, Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. Not one of them was fruitful without laying down his life. This is not **coincidence**. It is **pattern**. We will not take this as seriously as we ought until we come to terms with the truth that our whole Canadian culture - and our whole **evangelical** Canadian and American culture - isn't training us to embrace this principle, or even really understand it.

Just consider the contemporary trend in corporate worship styles. Here we are, trying to train up a group of Christ-followers whose life-style demonstrates a death to self and self-interest resembling their Lord. And how do we train such followers? We offer everything from liturgical, classical, traditional, contemporary worship so no one will ever have to endure a moment that isn't catered to their personal tastes. And we slot worship at all sorts of different times so they can still have most of Sunday at their personal disposal.

I have three thoughts from our text that flesh out this single ministry principle:

1) **THE PRIMARY TRUTH OF ABIDING IN CHRIST AND PRODUCING LASTING KINGDOM FRUIT IS I CAN'T LIVE FOR MY OWN INTERESTS**

Perhaps that isn't saying it quite right. Perhaps I should have said I need to pray that Christ will **change** my highest interests into His. But this doesn't quite capture it either because Jesus doesn't just call me to **pray** about my naturally self-centered life. He tells me to **kill** it.

So perhaps it's best to say Jesus **rebuilds** my life as He establishes true, lasting joy on the foundation of my heart painfully

cleared of the self interests I took the steps in faith to deny and sacrifice. I think this is exactly the process Jesus described with the His famous words, **"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"**(Matthew 10:39).

Notice, there's a definite **sequence** to find the richness of life in Christ. Jesus' words indicate one doesn't discover kingdom blessedness **first**. The first step of discovery of life in Christ is defined by Jesus as denying all natural instincts for personal fulfillment. Denial first - discovery of joy in Christ second. This is by divine design. The pursuit of life in Christ is always and first a **faith** pursuit.

This seems to be the way Paul describes his own experience of both the **pain** of the cost of serving Christ and the **joy** flowing from it - **Philippians 2:17-18** - **"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. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me."**

Only a life poured out like a sacrifice - totally emptied on the altar - drained until there's nothing left over - finds the true excitement and joy of walking with Jesus. **"Poured out as a drink offering"** - an **irrevocable** commitment. I can pour out this cup of water on the carpet easily enough. But try to pick it back up again. This is Paul's reckoning of his life for Jesus. Remember it all your life - the higher the **cost** the deeper the **joy**. If you doubt this for one second just try to explain why the church is shrinking by every measurable statistic in North America and expanding so rapidly it can barely be counted in China. The most recent estimates are so shocking we find them hard to believe. There are at this moment more evangelical Christians in China than in North America. The fact is, if the church in China keeps expanding at present rates, in less than fifty years one in every four Chinese will be a born again, evangelical Christian. And all of this in a place where the price paid for devotion to Christ is high and painful.

Yet it would be a mistake of gigantic proportions to think the cost of following Christ is only high for apostolic types like Paul and those suffering persecution in China. If there is any area of practical theology where Jesus repeated Himself for emphasis it is on this very point. The kingdom of God demands total sacrifice of **all** who would enter it:

Luke 14:15-20 - **"When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, 'Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'" [16] But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. [17] And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' [18] But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' [19] And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' [20] And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come'"**

And then He continues in **23-27** - **"And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. [24] For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.' [25] Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, [26] 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."**

Verse 27 is the famous verse - **"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."** It is too bad we normally quote this verse **alone** - separated from the parable to which Jesus affixed it. The parable **defines** bearing our cross. The cross isn't my arthritis or blindness or singleness or marriedness or poverty.

The cross is the same for every one of us. Carrying it means living for Christ's agenda rather than my own. The cross is killing my schedule. The cross is defined by Jesus very clearly as **not** putting my **work**, my **wealth**, and yes, even my **family** ahead of my service to Jesus in this world - **"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' [19] And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' [20] And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come'"**(Luke 14:18-20).

The really striking part of this parable is how confronting it is to the way we all usually think of our **work**, our **wealth**, and our **families** as the **ways** in which we **do** serve Jesus, whereas Jesus paints all these things as potential **enemies** of serving Him. We are being forced to examine the simple blunt fact **Jesus saw these things differently than all the other characters in His parable.**

I have been thinking long and hard about this. I've come to the conclusion that while I certainly *can* and, in fact, *must* serve Jesus in my *work*, with my *wealth*, and in the way I care for my *family and home*, Jesus still sees that I am likely to so *prioritize* my life around these things that they come to be, not *avenues* for serving Him but *replacements* for serving Him with huge blocks of my time.

Very tellingly, in Jesus' forming of His parable, these things became *excuses* for *not* serving Jesus. And the *reason* Jesus frames His parable this way is He knows how commonly we all *use* these very precious and important commitments as *excuses* for *not* serving Him at the *cost* of any of these things. They are the *excuses of choice* in Jesus' parable because we all *tend* to use them because none of them is unrighteousness in itself. We use excuses that keep our sense of goodness and responsibility in tact and that's what Jesus is aiming at in His parable.

2) **IT IS AN UNSAFE PRACTICE TO VALIDATE MY OWN COMMITMENT TO JESUS BY THE COMMITMENT LEVEL OF MY PEERS**

Paul's words in describing Timothy are beautiful but also frightening:

Philippians 2:19-22 - "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. [20] For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. [21] They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. [22] But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel."

These words should haunt us like a ghost. The probing caution lies in the words "They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (21). This is not Paul's description of the *world*. It's his description of those who were in his own line of work. In other words, these were the people available to Paul as *options* to Timothy as emissaries to the church at Philippi. These were the people who *were* working for Jesus. These were the Christian people with Paul at Rome. And Paul says not *one* of them truly cared about the *interests of Christ*. In other words *not really caring about the interests of Christ was the normal state of many of the Christians Paul knew by name and experience*.

Something else. Notice the carefully worded distinction here. To miss it is to miss the heart of Paul's logic. These other disciples cared about *Christ* but not the *interests* of Christ. They cared about being saved. They wanted heaven over hell. They prayed. They worshiped. They were into the routines of Christian people. But they didn't care about the *interests* of Christ. They weren't as motivated about what *Jesus* wanted *done* as they were about what *they* wanted *done*. They didn't want to put *time* into the *work* Jesus gave His life for.

I still remember the last time I had lunch with missionary Steven Chaloner. The smile went out of his face as he described the coming prospect of saying good-bye to his children and heading back to Africa. Then he said, "That's part of the *call*. Most of us think of the call as serving Jesus in the things we already *like* to do and *are* doing. I've come to see the call of Jesus as it *cuts across* the things nearest and dearest to me."

One of the best things that happened to me this week was the discovery, after pouring through over 26 different commentaries on this passage in Philippians, of these brilliant words from another era. One hundred and seven years ago **Dr. Robert Rainy** penned these words on Paul's description of these people who sought their own interests rather than Christ's:

"You mistake if you suppose this faulty state implied, in all these people, is a deliberate, conscious preference of their own things above the supreme beauty and worth in the things of Christ. They might honestly judge that Christ had a supreme claim on their loyalty; and they might have a purpose to adhere to Christ and Christ's cause at great cost, if the cost must finally be borne. And yet meanwhile, in their common life, the other principle manifested itself far too victoriously."

"The place which their own things held - the degree in which their life was influenced by the bearing of things on themselves, was far from occupying that subordinate place which Christ has assigned to it. The things of Jesus Christ did not rise in their minds above other interests, but were jostled, and crowded, and thrust aside by a thousand things that were their own."

The money sentence is *"The things of Jesus Christ did not rise in their minds above other interests...."* You just can't say it better than that.

3) **IF YOU LONG FOR GREATER DEVOTION TO JESUS, SET YOUR ATTENTION AND ADMIRATION ON LARGE HEARTED CHRISTIANS**

Philippians 2:28-30 - "I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. [29] **So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men,** [30] for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

I close with this thought. If we don't admire the *right* people we will come to admire the *wrong* people. You can't miss this truth in today's world. Most of the *"people"* in *People Magazine* are noteworthy for partying all night without underwear. Most movies parade human ignorance and grossness in way designed to make us all laugh. And most Christians can't name *ten* famous Christians who have laid down their lives for Christ.

Let me urge a reform in our thinking. Let me plead with youth and young adults to find one person ***radically sacrificial in his commitment to Jesus and, if need be, leave all your other friends to latch on to that one. Pick godly examples, not just losers who are famous.***

Honoring the right people and ignoring the wrong ones is a huge part of authentic *worship*. This is true because your devotion to *God* can't rise above the *examples* you prize in this world. You can't divide your life around ***praising God in church*** and ***studying ungodliness in life***. Your soul won't long survive that kind of schizophrenia.

Paul *felt* the lack of Christ-centeredness in the majority of professing Christians around him - "**They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ**"(2:21). He was *aware* of the disconnect in their lives. He could *tell* when people weren't devoted to the interests of Christ. He felt the *loneliness* of that in his soul because he knew he wasn't *with* them in their empty professions. ***Do you feel that?*** Or are you perfectly at home with those who are devoted to their own interests above Christ's.

I pray God creates a holy unrest among the thoughtful today - young and old alike. Test your heart with this passage today. There's more here than first meets the eye.