

“The Joy of Friendship” (part 1)

Philippians 2:19-30

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the little book of Philippians. If you are not sure where that is, you'll find it in the New Testament, right between the books of Ephesians and Colossians. We'll read in a minute from 2:19. Joy has been the frequent theme as we've been working our way through this little letter. Joy is the believer's happiness in Christ, a deep-seated contentment in Him that exceeds far beyond our circumstances. Our emotions tend to fluctuate given our circumstances, but our contentment level in life certainly doesn't have to. Why? The joy of the Lord is our strength, and this is what Philippians teaches. The central theme that runs through all four chapters of this letter the joy of knowing Jesus. The words 'joy' or 'rejoice' are used 14 times, while the name of Jesus shows up 40 times. So joy is the business of heaven, and yet we know that our joy can be seriously challenged at times. Whether it be issues like sickness and loss, or an unexpected turn of events that negatively impact us. And perhaps the greatest challenge to our joy comes from other people. That's the way it was with Paul. As he writes this letter, he is in prison. But if you remember, back in chapter 1, he spoke about those people who stirred up trouble and sought to make his chains even worse than it was.

However, the right kind of people can add to our joy. They can increase and contribute to our joy. Why is that? Well, they ease our burdens and take the grind out of life. We all should be grateful for the joy that these friends bring to our lives. The world would be a lonely place were it not for the presence of friends. That is something that Paul himself recognizes in this passage where he mentions the names of two friends who meant the world to him. They stood by him in his imprisonment and ministered to his needs. They were trustworthy and

dependable, the type of fellows you want in your corner when you find yourself in a tight spot. Their names are Timothy and Epaphroditus, and we should pay close attention to what Paul says about them. (Read)

As technology's influence increases in our world, and as personal touch decreases in our world, good friends are going to be in even greater demand. I would imagine that none of us appreciate being made to feel like we're just a number. Have you ever been made to feel that way? Bob Seger sang about it:

*I take my card and I stand in line
To make a buck I work overtime
Dear Sir letters keep coming in the mail
I work my back till it's racked with pain
The boss can't even recall my name
I show up late and I'm docked, it never fails*

Then he says something about feeling like just another spoke in a big wheel, like a tiny blade of grass in a great big field. I guarantee you feel that way if you've been to Wal-Mart recently, where there are 150 cash registers, no one working on one, and you have to stand in line at a self-checkout. You can't pump gas nowadays without a screen blaring at you. We now live in the 'digital age' with high-speed Internet and A.I. And while technology has been a helpful tool in many ways, in other ways it has become a surrogate for face to face interaction with other people. In spite of our high-tech world that values efficiency, may we never forget that people remain the essential ingredient of life. When we forget this, we always begin treating people like just a number, a nameless face, an inconvenience rather than the asset they are. People should matter to us simply because people matter to God.

Paul's words in this passage are deeply personal and are a reminder of the value of people and how the gospel brings us into close relationship with one another. Paul expresses appreciation for his friends. It might surprise us to learn the fact that even a man like the apostle Paul needed the help and encouragement of other people. And when you study Paul's letters, you will discover the names of people who were greatly used of God in his life. Consider that in the last chapter of Romans alone, he mentions the names of 28 people. Paul valued friendship. Friendship is one of the most important and yet least thought about aspects of life, one of those things that we tend to take for granted.

Augustine — *“Two things are essential in this world—life, and friendship. Both must be prized highly, and not under valued. They are [God’s] gifts. We were created by God that we might live; but if we are not to live solitarily, we must have friendship.”*

One of the greatest definitions I've found for 'friendship' is that it is an affectionate bond forged between two people as they journey through life with openness and trust. The fallen world in which we live relentlessly crushes everything in its path without pity, whether it be our dreams, our plans, or our relationships. Sin is ever present in our world, trying to drive a wedge between us and our most closely held relationships. Satan is our enemy who seeks to devour and destroy. And one of the ways he tries to do this is through isolation. This world would be a very lonely place if there were no friends with whom we can share our lives. When the world beats you down, God has a cure for that—godly friends. These friends are not God's backup plan, but are God's "Plan A" for your life. A godly friendship can change everything. The mathematics of friendship are such that it doubles our joy and divides our sorrow. We can enjoy life a whole lot more with other people.

J.C. Ryle—*“This world is full of sorrow because it is full of sin. It is a dark place. It is a lonely place. It is a disappointing place. The brightest sunbeam in it is a friend. Friendship divides our troubles in half, while it multiplies by two our joys.”*

Friendship is a central theme of Jesus’ life and teaching, for He tells His disciples to love one another. The world would know that they are His followers by the love they have for one another. He modeled true friendship for His disciples and gave them the instruction:

John 15:12-13—**“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”**

John 13:35—**“By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.”**

In verse 16, Paul calls on believers to hold fast to the word of life. That means we must hold fast to the truth in a world that denies it, we must hold fast to love in a world that does not know what it is, and we must hold fast to one another in the family of faith. It is very important that we live in close community with other believers because the Christian life is not a solo venture. The goal of Christian community is the cultivation of close friendships. Knowing Jesus Christ as the true Friend of sinners that He is, as well as walking with each other in true friendship, these are the two greatest joys in life. Friendship is truly one of life’s most enjoyable gifts from God.

The apostle Paul knew the value of having true friends who stuck with him during difficult times. Paul mentions two of those friends by name in this passage, and their names are Timothy and Epaphroditus. Together they stood by him through thick and thin. These two friends helped shoulder Paul’s burdens and brought him great joy. And there are some important truths about friendship that we can

learn from their fine example. To begin with, we will look at what Paul writes about Timothy in verses 19-24. And from his example, notice with me several lessons about the joy of friendship:

1—Friendship appreciates the IMPORTANCE of others (2:19)

“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon...”

The apostle Paul is the one writing these words, yet I want you to notice how he only mentions himself briefly. There are only two verses discussing his attitude while six verses apiece are focused on Timothy and Epaphroditus. He uses words such as ‘cheered’ and ‘rejoice’ to describe how much they meant to him. He uses tender words such as ‘son’ and ‘brother’ or ‘fellow worker’ and ‘fellow soldier’ to refer to them as equals. Therefore, Paul is practicing what he preaches back up in verse 3 where he writes, “In humility count others more significant than yourselves.” He’s not asking us to do something he doesn’t. Paul has nothing but kind and thoughtful words to speak of Timothy because he appreciates the value of his friend. And so notice how he is communicating that value through the words he uses.

His tenderness comes through as he expresses his desire to ‘send’ Timothy to the Philippians for a spiritual welfare check. It is selfless on his part. He’s the one in prison, yet he is thinking about the needs of others. It suggests his compassion and concern for them. They needed far more than a letter. They needed face to face interaction. Now, we all understand the importance of being face to face with another person. Ask me what’s best in life, and I’m going to give you names—not so much the names of places, things, or experiences—but the names of the people whom I greatly love. The greatest joys in life all involve friends. The greatest memories in my life have all been shared with the people

that God has placed in my life. I don't think I can ever remember a time of joy and celebration where it has not involved someone else. Even when we are alone on a hike, and we see a majestic sunset over the horizon as it splashes the mountains with shades of orange and purple, and we take a picture of it, we still feel compelled to share it with someone. I have videos clips of my children opening their presents on Christmas, faded photographs of a road trip that my dad and I took across the country. In my office, I have pictures from my wedding day, and they all have the people I love. When I think of the churches I have served, there are people whose faces immediately come to my mind. And it brings me such deep and abiding joy! Satan tries to rob us of experiencing that joy, whether he seeks to distract us with technology, or divide us in our relationships with one another.

The fact of the matter is that Paul has much to say to these believers, but he realizes that the medium of paper and ink only go so far. He wants to see them face to face. But he is in prison, separated from them by many miles, and so he determines to send Timothy and Epaphroditus. Friendship is more than words on a page. The apostle John says the same thing in 3 John 13, "I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink." I imagine that if he were writing to us today, he might say, "I have much to say to you, but I'd rather not send it in a text or an email." I'd much rather spend the time with you that a healthy and productive relationship requires. That is what it means to appreciate the importance of other people.

Now, I don't want to spend too much time on this, but there is only so much connectivity that technology affords. I find it ironic that we are more connected than we've ever been, but we're making fewer connections. We've traded in deep communion for digital communication. Cru recently did a study on

understanding today's college student, in which a student confessed that her generation "doesn't really know how to have a real conversation anymore."

Researchers have revealed that there is an epidemic of loneliness in our time in which 61% of young people today report feelings of serious loneliness. Listen to some of these findings from a Cigna health study:

- Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone (46%) or left out (47%)
- One in four Americans (27%) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them
- Two in five Americans sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful (43%) and that they are isolated from others
- One in five people report they rarely or never feel close to people (20%) or feel like there are people they can talk to (18%)
- Only around half of Americans (53%) have daily meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend or spending time with family
- Generation Z (adults ages 18 to 23) is the loneliest generation and claims to be in worse health than older generations

There was an article for the Atlantic a few years ago in which the author interviewed a 13 year old girl named Athena who told her she'd spent most of the summer hanging out alone in her room with her phone. She said, "That's just the way our generation is. We didn't have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."

The technology that has been useful and helpful has also been intrusive and even detrimental to our relationships with flesh and blood people. I found some research which claims we check our smartphones about 81,500 times each year, or once every 4.3 minutes of our waking lives. Which means that you will be tempted to check your phone eight times before I finish this sermon. We have so consolidated life that we now do everything on our phones. We use it to:

- manage our calendars
- check the weather
- return emails
- surf the internet
- take pictures
- get driving directions
- pay our bills

There are apps for anything you can imagine, and we do everything from track our workouts to type in our grocery store lists all on our smartphone. The GPS app on an iPhone possesses some 30,000 times the processing speed of the 70-lb onboard navigational computer that guided the Apollo 11 to the surface to the moon. With a device in your hand, you can now do just about anything and everything imaginable. But that doesn't mean it is always a good thing to have one in your hand. This is especially true for when it is used as a surrogate for the face to face relationships we have with people. Friendship appreciates the importance of other people. And then notice a second thing:

2—Friendship prioritizes the INTERESTS of others (2:20-21)

“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.”

A second lesson we learn from this text about friendship is that it prioritizes the interests of others. A friend is one who looks out for the interests of others, just as Paul says back up in verses 3-4, “In humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Friendship is not one-sided. One-sided relationships will not go very far. It is mighty flat pancake that only has one side! Friendship means we give while keeping the other person in mind, for any relationship to be healthy. The person who only thinks of himself will end up living on an island all by himself. I read somewhere that on average, people spend 60% of conversations talking about themselves, and that figure jumps to 80% when communicating via social media platforms. Researchers from Harvard brought in 195 participants to simply talk about a variety of subjects while researchers scanned their brain activity. The results of the study showed that talking about themselves lit up the parts of the brain associated with motivation and reward, the same parts of the brain associated with pleasure like food and even drugs like cocaine. The article summarized it this way: “Activation of this system when discussing the self suggests that self-disclosure may be inherently pleasurable and that people may be motivated to talk about themselves more than other topics no matter how interesting or important those non-self topics may be.” This author concluded, “You may like to talk about yourself simply because it feels good to do so.” Paul isn’t talking about himself in these verses.

Friendship recognizes the place which other people ought to have in our lives. It appreciates the unique contributions of others. It values other people above itself. And so Paul is a lesson for us on the responsibility of friendship among the believers. You and I have a responsibility to each other as friends in the family of God. We see Paul doing that here as he expresses his concern for them, and then he says that Timothy possesses that same level of concern.

Timothy's genuine concern

Paul says in verse 20, "For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare." One translation says, "I have no one else of kindred spirit." There is no one that Paul trusts more for this task than Timothy. Paul had spent years discipling Timothy in the faith. Over the course of time, he came to think like Paul, to relate to the believers like Paul, to trust God and pray like Paul. Timothy had learned ministry and leadership from Paul. Jesus said:

Matthew 10:25—“It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”

Paul is saying that Timothy is a man after his own heart, of kindred spirit. The word he uses means 'same souled.' He is saying that Timothy will show the same concern for the church that Paul himself has. They are like-minded, one-hearted, of kindred spirit.

Timothy is like-minded with Paul, and he will be genuinely concerned for the Philippians' welfare. That means he will seek their spiritual good. He doesn't have a superficial or artificial concern that merely gives the impression of care while lacking reality. He's not interested in whitewashed religion or pretended compassion. There's no putting on airs with Timothy. What you see is what you get. He's the real deal. He's same-souled with Paul, which means he is large-

hearted toward other people. He's the kind of man you want to have in your corner. Timothy is 'concerned' for other people. And the word used there indicates strong feelings toward another, conveying deep emotions. It is the same word that Paul will use a bit later in chapter 4, verse 6 where he says, "Be anxious for nothing." To be anxious is to be weighed down emotionally by something, burdened to the point of worry. And it is a negative thing when God is not at the forefront of our mind. But when He is front and center, it is positive concern when it is directed toward the welfare of another.

Now, let me tell you, that kind of character is rare to find in our world today. Ours is a time of selfish individualism in which people are nothing more than steps to getting what we want, or they're obstacles standing in our way. We may not come right out and say as much, but the way we treat other people often shows this to be true. We've long since forgotten the golden rule—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Timothy has genuine concern.

Timothy's spiritual commitment

The reason that Timothy is concerned for others is due to the fact that he seeks the interests of Jesus Christ above all else. Notice verse 21 says, "For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." Timothy is burdened over the welfare of the Philippians and will serve them all because he is committed to Christ. To love Jesus is to love His people. In a culture that is obsessed with itself, we are to prioritize others above ourselves. But that only happens as we seek the interests of Jesus Christ first. And what are the interests of Jesus? Think of the way that He ministered to other people in the gospel accounts.

As a faithful shepherd, He cares for others and seeks the lost and binds up the broken. Luke 19:10 says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the

lost.” He goes out of His way to talk with the Samaritan woman. When nobody else could do a thing with the Gadarene demoniac, Jesus sets Him free from bondage.

As a diligent farmer, He spreads the seed of the gospel and raises a spiritual harvest. His Word is what produces fruit and lasting change in our lives. Everywhere He went, He shared the truth of God’s Word. Peter said, “Lord, to whom else can we go? For You alone have the words of life!”

As a master potter, He turns broken lives into transformed vessels for His glory. He takes someone like Zacchaeus who had gotten ahead by cheating others, and turns his life around. He takes someone like Mary Magdalene who had been possessed and oppressed, and makes her the very first eyewitness of His resurrection. On and on we could go. Seeking and saving the lost, changing the lives of people, bringing glory to His Father—this is what the Bible describes as the interests of Jesus. And my friend, lest you should ever doubt that fact, He’s interested in you! That’s what the Scripture says in:

1 Peter 5:7—“Casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.

He’s the Friend that sticks closer than a brother. There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no not one! What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! There is one final thing that I want to mention:

3—Friendship welcomes the INVOLVEMENT of others (2:22-24)

“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.”

If Paul is an example of the responsibility of friendship, we also see how Timothy is an example of the dependability of friendship. Pay attention to the way Paul describes young Timothy as a faithful and dependable man, someone whom Paul was confident in to send to Philippi in his place. He says in verse 20, “For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.” Timothy was a very dependable and trustworthy person, a faithful pastor and shepherd of God’s flock. And notice how Paul welcomes Timothy’s involvement.

His proven character

Verse 22 says, “But you know Timothy’s proven worth.” That is, you know his track record of faithfulness. He has proven that he can be trusted. He’s gone out of his way to lend a helping hand. Paul could say this because Timothy had accompanied him whenever the Philippian church was established in Acts 16.

“Proven Worth”—*the word is ‘dokime’ and refers to the quality of being proven through testing*

It was used to describe metals that had been tested and been determined to be pure. The idea of ‘dokime’ is that when you put the metal through a fiery test, and if it comes out on the other side, you call the metal proven, authentic or genuine. All of the impurities have been burned up and it is been tested. That’s what Paul means about Timothy’s ‘proven’ character. He’s been tried and found genuine, the real thing. And it wasn’t so much big tests of endurance as much as it was a thousand different little ways.

Jerry Bridges told the story about how Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators, was visiting Taiwan on one of his overseas trips. During the visit, he hiked with a pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some believers. The trails were wet, and their shoes were muddy. Later, someone

asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation, the man responded, “He cleaned my shoes.” It surprised this humble pastor to get up early one morning and realize that the Christian leader from America had gotten up before him and cleaned the mud from his shoes.

A friend is someone who will ‘clean the shoes’ of another, who will roll up his sleeves and lend a helping hand. And our character is proven in the little tests of life that we face every day. That was the proven character of Timothy.

His important contribution

Paul says, “How as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.” Notice that Paul doesn’t say, “He served me.” Rather, he says, “He has served with me.” It means Paul valued his contribution. Even though he was the older and more seasoned man, he saw him as an equal. That is an important preposition. The people we lead are not there to serve us, but are there to serve with us. Timothy had proven to be a loyal friend to Paul. Therefore, he could be trusted to help the Philippian church in Paul’s absence, “I hope 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.”

Now, with all that being said, we should ask ourselves if we are that kind of dependable friend to others? When others are in a pinch, can we be trusted to have their back? That is what the church ought to be made up, beloved. Men and women who are there for one another, who look for ways to be a blessing to one another, a fellowship of friends. And it means that we’re on mission to a lost and lonely world all around us. People need Jesus, and they need the helpful presence of other people in their lives. It would be easy for us to study these verses where Paul writes about Timothy and Epaphroditus and say to ourselves,

“Yes, that’s what I need! I need a friend like that.” And while it may be true, it would be a whole lot better for us to say, “I want to be that kind of friend to someone else!” A friend is someone who walks in when the whole world walks out. The Bible says that Jesus is the Friend of sinners. And were that not true, there would be no hope for me and you. There is a reason that in His incarnation, the Son of God took on flesh and became one of us. He didn’t write us a letter, send us a text, or a friend request. He became one of us and walked among us. Matthew 11:19 says that He is the Friend of sinners. And Jesus said:

John 15:12-15—“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.”

According to Jesus, the greatest form of love is seen in the laying down of our lives for our friends. Few of us will likely be called to literally forfeit our lives so that our friends can keep theirs, yet all of us will be called to die to ourselves, to give up our comforts, preferences, resources, and time for the good of our friends. And there is a deep joy in that kind of selfless friendship.

William Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army. On one occasion when he was way up in years, there was a convocation ceremony and, due to his age, General Booth could not make it. And so they asked him to send a word of encouragement. If he would send it by telegram, they would read it to the assembly. When the telegram came, it had one word on it—others. Beloved, when we are caught up with ourselves, we will be miserable. But when our life is devoted to others, joy will be our experience. With such a humble selfless

mindset as Paul has been describing in this chapters, our church will be an outpost of heaven in a very selfish and lonely world. There is no life so empty as a self-centered life, and there is no life so centered as a self-emptied life. Which life will you choose?