

“The Joy of Friendship” (part 2)

Philippians 2:19-30

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Philippians chapter 2, where we will pick right back up in verse 19. Within these verses, the apostle Paul expressing his gratitude for two of his friends who had ministered to his needs while he was in prison. Their names are Timothy and Epaphroditus. What he says about them teaches us the value of friendship and the joy that it brings to our lives. Several years ago, Burger King ran an ad campaign where they said if you would “un-friend” 10 of your Facebook friends, they would send you a coupon for a free Whopper. And the way it was supposed to work was when you un-friended the person, Burger King would send them a notification that they had been un-friended all for a delicious hamburger, which was supposed to make you say, “Wow, this burger must be something.” Well, the NYT reported that the stunt worked too well, and within the first week 233,906 friendships were terminated and Burger King was obligated to give out 23K free Whoppers, and so they had to quickly discontinue the ad.

How valuable is friendship to you as a person? The word friendship has taken on a skewed meaning in our culture. I don’t know how many friends you have on Facebook, but I can guarantee most of them are not what the Bible would refer to as a “friend,” regardless if Mark Zuckerberg calls them one. Friendship is one of the most important, yet seldom emphasized subjects. There is a lot of talk in the church about community, and how the Christian life is not a solo venture. And rightfully so. But we often fail to define the goal of Christian community as 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.

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.”*

Paul ends this second chapter with some personal remarks that he writes about his friends. We’ve already considered what he has to say about his friend Timothy there in verses 19-24. For our time this morning, I want us to notice what he writes about his friend Epaphroditus from verses 25-30. He is an example of a friend who is willing to go the distance. (Read)

The world would be an extremely lonely place were it not for people. Time spent with people, friends and family we love, this is what makes up so much of the joy of life. I’ve never heard anyone on their death bed express the desire to be surrounded by wealth or possessions. However, I have heard them ask about their family, their children and grandchildren, or close personal friends. They want to be with people in their final moments. Or, imagine a place of worship such as this one. What is it that makes this place so very special? It isn’t the facilities or the room decor. It isn’t what happens on the platform. I’ve been in this big worship center when there is nobody here. In recent years, I’ve stood and preached to an empty sanctuary and looked out on row upon row of empty pews. And let me tell you right now, I don’t ever want to do that again.

Something is lacking in a sermon preached to an empty room. But there is something to be gained when people are present and all gathered together. It is the presence of people that makes up the church! To use another illustration, I think of a home without the people who live there. No matter how big or small, it won’t be long before it is rundown. A home is just a house apart from the people who live within its walls. I can’t stand it when Anita and the kids are gone and I’m

at home all by myself. And so you and I cannot overstate the importance of people in our lives.

People were very important to the apostle Paul. He valued people and made it his mission in life to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to people far and wide. The reason people mattered to Paul was because he understood that people are incredibly significant to God. That's why He sent His only begotten Son in the first place. Jesus died for people. There are only two things on this earth which are eternal—the souls of people and the Word of God. Everything else is temporal and will one day be burned up. But everyone who has ever drawn the breath of life will live on in one of two places for eternity to come. And since this is true, then people ought to be of utmost significance to me and you. Friendship isn't something that we can take or leave. It is woven into the very fabric of our humanity as people who have been made in the image of God. The Bible is the story of God and what He is doing with people. That's why you read about so many of them in the pages of His Word.

The Bible is made up of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament, covering thousands of years of history. As you well know, there are plenty of names of people that we come across in our reading of Scripture. According to the Encyclopedia of Bible Characters, there are **3,247** specific characters who are mentioned in the pages of the Bible. Scripture makes mention of hundreds of people in great detail, such as familiar biblical names like Abraham, Moses, David, or Paul. And then it gives others just a passing mention. Epaphroditus is one of those more obscure names. In fact, you may have never heard of him before. He's only mentioned here. Now, that's an unusual name. In fact, at first his name sounds like a certain type of disease—appendicitis or something. I have a bad case of a Ephaphroditus. But

Epaphroditus was not a disease. He was a cure! He was a dear friend to Paul, who we are introduced to here in this chapter. He's unknown to most of us, and that's because his name only shows up in this text. And yet the more that I have read about what Paul has to say of this friend, the more impressed I am with his life. He is an example of what it means to serve in the shadows out of the limelight. Yet he is just as valuable to the kingdom of God as anyone else. Were it not for him, Paul's ministry would not have been nearly as effective as it was. For it was Epaphroditus who carried this letter from the apostle to the Philippian church, which has now been handed down to us and all subsequent generations. From this passage, we can learn something about the responsibility, sensitivity, and availability that friendship requires.

1—The RESPONSIBILITY that friendship brings (2:25)

"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."

The name 'Epaphroditus' comes from a word that means to be lovely, charming, or handsome. And this is certainly the case with what little bit we know about his life. He is one of those beautiful pictures in the Bible of a consecrated life, of one who gave himself wholeheartedly to the service of the Lord Jesus and other people. So that his example lives on forever in the pages of Scripture because he was willing to lay it all on the line in faithful sacrifice for the Master. Now, he was not an apostle, and as far as we know, he was not a pastor or elder as was Timothy. There's no record of any outstanding work that he accomplished. Nothing is known about his family or personal background. Nothing is said about how long he had been a believer, or his specific role in the church at Philippi. And so more than likely, he is a simple servant from the Philippian church who had been sent to minister to Paul's needs while in prison. No doubt he had been

elected by the church to bring their gift to the apostle Paul, which means Epaphroditus was a trustworthy and dependable man. He is a responsible friend who can be relied upon.

Now, you and I know that all relationships bring with them a certain level of responsibility, whether it is the responsibility of a spouse, or the responsibility of a parent to children, or the responsibility of children to their parents. At the heart of every relationship is this serious business of friendship that wants the best for another person. The Golden Rule involves doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. That means we want for others what we would want for ourselves. It was their compassion that led the church at Philippi to send a relief offering to Paul, carried to him by the responsible and dependable hands of Epaphroditus. It reminds you and me that there is this level of responsibility which is always involved in friendship. Notice in verse 25 that Paul describes Epaphroditus in a number of ways:

Fellowship in the gospel—“My brother”

This expresses a deep comradely that was unknown in the first century world. The world was divided between Greeks and Romans, Jews and Gentiles. There were citizens, and there were slaves. There was the aristocracy, and there was the peasantry. In that world there was nothing even remotely close to brotherhood. Epaphroditus was a Gentile who would have been despised by Paul at an earlier time in his life, before he was saved. Now, this converted Jew refers to him as ‘my brother.’ Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can do a thing like that. The gospel can take two people who are opposites in every way, opposed to each other in every way, and transform their lives and turn them around and put them in a relationship as brothers. Paul is a converted Jew and now a

brother to a converted Gentile with a pagan past. But what brings them together is their shared life in Christ.

Furtherance of the gospel—“Fellow worker”

Paul doesn't simply refer to him as his brother, but notice he refers to Epaphroditus as a fellow worker. The word is 'sunergos' which gives us the word 'synergy' that speaks of combined action. So that the idea is they not only shared a common faith in Christ, but they also shared in a common mission. Epaphroditus was not simply bringing some relief offering to Paul, but was joining him in gospel ministry.

Stephen Davey — *“Paul loved using this word ‘sunergos’ to refer to partners in ministry. Of the 13 times it appears in the New Testament, all but one are found in Paul’s letters. This term has the idea of an affectionate partnership, not some impersonal, official relationship. In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul uses this word to describe Apollos and himself as ‘fellow workers’ working in synergy with God.”*

It is you and me working together in the Holy Spirit for a common mission, and that mission being reaching people for Christ. So here are two friends who are united under a common sense of purpose, a common sense of mission.

Fighting for the gospel—“Fellow soldier”

A third descriptor that Paul mentions about his friend is that he is a fellow soldier. He is a fellow comrade at arms who is standing with Paul for the faith of the gospel, fighting for the truth against the enemy's lies. He shares a common courage with Paul. Remember, Paul is in prison for his faith. And for Epaphroditus to come stand beside him is a reflection of the fact that he shares the same faith and is willing to go to prison himself. He's placing himself in the

line of fire with his friend. A friend is someone who's willing to go into battle with you, and that's something that Paul is commending him for. He saying, "I may be bound to these Roman soldiers by chains of iron, but I thank God that am also bound to a loyal soldier and faithful friend by chains of gospel grace!"

2—The SENSITIVITY that friendship shows (2:26-27)

"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."

Not only does friendship involve responsibility, but I want you to notice how it also involves sensitivity. And what I mean by that is this—friendship is aware of what another person brings to the table and it appreciates them for who they are. It values their contribution and sacrifice. Paul's words about Epaphroditus reflect the fact that he was more than a hired hand to the apostle. He was a personal friend. Though he had gone out of his way to minister to Paul in a time of need, he had some legitimate needs in his own life of which Paul was aware. Paul was not so preoccupied with his own situation that he failed to be sensitive to need that manifested itself in the life of his friend. Again, it was not a 'one-sided' relationship.

If you want to be a better friend who is sensitive to people in your life, pay attention to what Paul says here. Do what he does with Epaphroditus. In order for a friendship to go the distance, here are some things you can do:

Acknowledge their strengths

Look at what he says about Epaphroditus being a brother, a fellow worker, and a fellow soldier. The fact that he was a man who could sent out by the church

means he was a trusted individual, a man of character. He could be relied upon. All of those qualities were valuable strengths which Paul is fully aware of.

Do you acknowledge the strengths of other people? Other people are gifted in ways you are not. They know certain things that you don't know. In a healthy marriage, the Lord brings two people together who are alike in many ways, but also different in many ways. God formed Eve from Adam's side and she was everything that he was not, as well as vice versa. Anita is wired in ways that I am not, and she is good at things and gifted in areas that I struggle with. That is what makes relationships so wonderful. Think about the way that God does this within the church. Paul talks about the great diversity of gifts within the body of Christ, each part serving a vital role, while there is one Head over all.

1 Corinthians 12:12-“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

It is absolutely amazing what God can do when every one is serving out of their strengths and gifts in such a way that the whole body is being built up into Christ! God is glorified in the church where everybody is somebody and Jesus is Lord. You need the strengths that other people can bring into your life. To think that you can go at life alone is to be greatly mistaken, my friend.

Accept their shortcomings

Paul goes on to say about Epaphroditus in verse 26, “For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.”

Evidently, he came down with some kind of physical infirmity that nearly took his life. Verse 27, “Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.” And so here

is a portrait of a man who knew what it meant to struggle with weakness and illness, yet he loved and served God. Do not assume that the presence of suffering in your life is a sign that you've been abandoned by the Lord. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Regardless of what some prosperity teacher may claim, sickness in your life is not due to a lack of faith on your part. In reality, it may be a token sign of your value to the kingdom of God. Because those choice servants of God throughout the ages suffered immensely for His name's sake. Epaphroditus knew what it was to face illness in service to Christ. Others of us have our own weaknesses and shortcomings that prove we are not supermen.

A real friend is someone who loves you, not just for your strengths, but despite your weaknesses. And even when there have been shortcomings in their lives, failure to meet a certain expectation, or the imperfection that stands out at times.

Proverbs 17:17—“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

1 Peter 4:8—“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

Affirm their sacrifice

Down in verse 30, Paul calls on the Philippians to receive Epaphroditus in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ. It is his way of expressing deep appreciation for the sacrificial service of this loyal friend. He's affirming all that his friend did in the service of the Lord Jesus. Now, if I were to ask you how well you acknowledge the strengths of others, accept the shortcomings, and affirm the sacrifices of others, what would you say?

3—The AVAILABILITY that friendship offers (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. 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.”

Epaphroditus is a lesson in the responsibility of friendship and the sensitivity of friendship. And last, notice how he shows us something about the availability of friendship. He’s a man who made himself available to God and other people. He was willing to be sent. In fact, notice that the word ‘send’ occurs last least four times in this passage. It describes faith on the move, an active faith that is ready to put its boots on and roll up its sleeves.

I don’t believe for one split second that it is by coincidence that we have so much technology at our finger tips these days, but never have we been so lonely and isolated from other people. Though there is much good that has come from tools such as smart phones and social media, they have also become a very poor substitute for face to face interaction. I’m not talking about a FaceTime app, either. I’m talking about being in close, personal relationship with another person in the flesh. 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. He made Himself available. Matthew 11:19 says that He is the Friend of sinners.

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. Friendship is selfless, isn't it? We easily sacrifice for our friends and don't think twice about it.

I'm reminded of a skit from Sesame Street where Cookie Monster is standing beside his friend and a cookie jar. He turns the jar upside down, and one chocolate chip cookie drops onto the counter. He grabbed it and raised it toward his mouth, but then he glanced at his friend's longing eyes. So he paused to sing a song: "Sometimes me think, what is friend?" He explored the question in song, and came to his answer at the end: "Maybe friend is somebody you give up last cookie for." He does so and says, "Me feel strangely ok about this."

You may not have the opportunity to give your life for the people in your Life Group, or in your family, or in your church, but you will have the opportunity to spend your life loving those people just as Jesus has loved you. And it will require you to be selfless, to be sacrificial, and to live with the heartfelt belief that the needs of other people are more important than your own. Again, consider these words of Paul in Philippians 2:1-4...

Chris Martin — *"The great paradox of Christian friendship is that our best friends wound us when we need wounding and bind up our wounds when they need binding. It is a grave misunderstanding to think that our best friends are the ones who make us the most comfortable, ignore our shortcomings, and never spur us on to becoming more like Christ. Friends are not therapeutic drugs we use to feel better about ourselves. Friends are brothers and sisters in Christ who have*

permission to call us out when we aren't imaging our Savior, and who pick us up and dust us off when we've fallen in our lifelong walk of faithfulness to Him."

Proverbs 18:24 (NKJV)—“A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

Paul wants the church to rejoice at seeing Epaphroditus again. There is deep joy in the friendship that we have with one another. Satan wants to rob us of experiencing that joy. That's why he seeks to distract us and divide us in our relationships with one another. And he tries to do it any number of ways, not the least of which is unhealthy amount of time spent on our various devices. Dr. Kathy Koch is an accomplished author and speaker and has been featured on Focus On the Family. She wrote a great book a few years ago entitled, "Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids In a Wireless World." She often tells parents to set aside one day throughout the week, as well as one day on the weekend that are screen free. She tells a story in her book:

"About two weeks after recommending parents involve children in choosing one weekend day and one weekday to be screen-free, a ten year old boy walked up to me and directly asked, "Are you the lady?" I asked him to elaborate. He asked, "Are you the lady who told my parents we should turn everything off?" Not sure how he'd respond, I think I stepped back a bit before answering, "Yes, I'm Dr. Kathy." Then I noticed his parents standing against the wall behind him. While confidently maintaining eye contact with me, he responded, "Thank you. I got my daddy back."

That's not what she expected to hear at all, but it really is a powerful testimony to what it means to live face to face with someone else. Friendship flourishes when we talk together and spend time with one another face to face. One of the best

gifts that life offers us is unhurried conversation with close friends. We should be grateful for technology, but realize that it only is able to do so much. A text might help sustain a friendship, a call might move us even a bit closer because it allows for more personality, but best of all is face to face time with another. Some of you haven't been face to face with each other in very a long time. And yet each one of us will eventually step into our final week, our final days, and our final hours. Some of us will know when we do. If so, we will take a thoughtful glance backward. We won't wish we put in more hours at work. We won't wish we took more exotic vacations. We won't wish we spent more time in front of our screens. But we will wish we spent more time with people, with our friends and loved ones.