

PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30

HONOUR SUCH PEOPLE

“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, 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. 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 honour such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”¹

Two years ago this past Saturday, four members of the RCMP were murdered near the community of Mayerthorpe, Alberta. Assisting in the seizure of stolen auto parts as ordered by the courts, these men were shot from ambush. The nation was shocked at the news of these murders. It was a reminder of the danger attached to policing. In May of 2006, two paramedics serving in the B.C. Ambulance Service were overcome by carbon dioxide at a mine in Kimberly, British Columbia. They had been dispatched to attend a man reported to be down at the mine site. The month that just passed saw the death of two firefighters in Winnipeg. Attending a blaze in a city residence, these fire service veterans died in what is known as flashover as they were engaged in a search and rescue operation on the second floor of the home.

Though society appears to have grown increasingly cynical during the past three decades, most Canadians admire the qualities expressed by the selfless individual. That person who serves others voluntarily and not through coercion is esteemed and respected. In the text before us, a man named Epaphroditus is presented as worthy of honour by the Philippian Christians. Then, the Apostle says all such people should be honoured because of their selfless service on behalf of others.

It is appropriate for churches to give recognition for those who give of themselves selflessly in service to others. According to the Word of God, elders who labour in preaching and teaching are to be considered worthy of double honour [1 TIMOTHY 5:17]. This is consistent with the instruction provided in 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12, 13. “Respect those who labour among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” The Word also urges Christians to give recognition to those who refresh the spirit of the saints [1 CORINTHIANS 16:18]. Christ our Lord has taught us to seek and to value the servant’s heart, and especially when such service is offered selflessly.

In the message prepared for this day, we are looking at the life of a man who is named in only one of the letters Paul wrote. However, that man made a difference in the advance of the Gospel through his selfless attitude, his courage and his determination to make a difference. Paul encourages the Church in Philippi to “honour such men.” Certainly, that should be our goal as well.

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A STRANGE NAME FOR A GREAT MAN — The name “Epaphroditus” sounds strange to our ears. His is a Greek name. It has been suggested that Epaphroditus had been converted out of paganism, partly because his parents named him after the goddess Aphrodite. His name could be translated into English as “charming,” or perhaps “lovely.” Since he is a man, it is more likely that his name connoted pleasantness.

Some scholars have speculated that he was one of the elders of the Church in Philippi. If so, then he may have been converted under Paul’s ministry in Philippi, though the fact that Paul does not acknowledge that particular acquaintance would indicate to me that he became a Christian sometime after Paul’s ministry in Philippi.

When the Philippians heard that Paul was in prison, they were moved to action. They sent Epaphroditus with a monetary gift for the Apostle’s use. Not only did they intend Epaphroditus to be the bearer of their gift, they also appointed him to stay in Rome to serve as Paul’s personal servant and attendant. So, the church not only collected a generous gift for Paul, but they commissioned Epaphroditus to remain with Paul as their emissary, ministering to his needs during his imprisonment.

For a moment, think of how dangerous this assignment would have been for this man. To attach himself to a prisoner charged with a capital crime would mean that he would be seen as one equally suspect. If Paul, restrained by the presence of four Roman soldiers at any time, was charged with such a serious crime as sedition and lèse majesté, then merely associating with the Apostle would expose Epaphroditus to the same suspicion. Nevertheless, he willingly accepted the risk. In truth, Epaphroditus risked his life to serve Paul.

According to the letter, while in Rome, or during his trip to Rome, Epaphroditus fell ill, perhaps with the notorious “Roman fever,” a particularly virulent form of malaria that sometimes swept the city like a scourge. His illness brought him near to death. Three times in our text, the Apostle stresses that this messenger of the Church in Philippi was sick, even “near to death” [verses 26, 27, 30].

Doctor Luke perhaps treated the sick man, and Paul undoubtedly prayed for him, perhaps even laying hands on him. However, according to the Apostle, it was God’s direct intervention that delivered Epaphroditus. This is the meaning of Paul’s words in verse 27: “He was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him.” In some way, God directly intervened and restored Epaphroditus to health.

Perhaps we read that clause concerning God’s mercy much too nonchalantly. We enjoy the benefit of modern medical science, with trained physicians and surgeons, skilled therapists and diagnostic tools that were unimaginable scant years past; and we often take for granted that we will be cured when we are ill. However, Paul indicates that it was only through direct intervention by God that Epaphroditus survived.

I cannot say with certainty how the Philippians learned of their emissary’s illness. Since Epaphroditus was carrying a large sum of money for Paul, it is natural to assume that other members of the congregation accompanied him on this journey. If so, when he became ill, they, or at least some of those who accompanied him, may well have returned to Philippi, delivering the news of his sickness. However the news was brought to the Philippian Church, the congregation was concerned. Epaphroditus knew they had heard of his infirmity. The result was that he was distressed that the knowledge of his illness worried his church. His distress increased the stress arising from his physical condition.

Perhaps you think it strange that this good man worried about the impact of his illness on those at home, since some translations state that he was homesick. Indeed, a surprising number of commentators make light of what they consider to be homesickness. However, a letter written by a soldier in the second century clarifies the issue. This letter was written by a soldier to his mother, who had somehow learned that he was sick. The soldier's words parallel the idea expressed by Paul in this letter. "Do not grieve about me. I was much grieved to hear that you had heard about me, for I was not seriously ill."²

Because he was returning home, although the need to assist Paul in his imprisonment continued, Paul felt constrained to explain his own concern for Epaphroditus. Paul knew that it was time that Epaphroditus went back home, and in all probability, the man who had been near death from his illness was the bearer of this letter. Paul did make some comments that are revealing about this good man. Paul speaks of Epaphroditus as "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier," acknowledging that he is also the "messenger and minister" of the Philippians.

Let's examine these comments more closely. When Paul speaks of Epaphroditus as his "brother," he uses the term that has become common for those who share the Faith. However, it seems that he is indicating that Epaphroditus shares a close personal relationship that has grown out of having stood together in a common cause to advance the Gospel of Christ the Lord. This is evident from the other terms that Paul uses.

When he speaks of Epaphroditus as his "fellow worker," Paul uses a term that is not used of believers in general. In 1 CORINTHIANS 3:9, Paul speaks of himself and Apollos as God's "fellow workers." In 2 CORINTHIANS 1:24, he speaks of himself and Timothy as "fellow workers" [Greek, *sunergoi*]. Likewise, in 2 CORINTHIANS 8:23, he speaks of Titus as his "fellow worker." In each of these instances, the people of whom Paul speaks (Apollos, Timothy and Titus, as well as Paul) are distinguished from the congregation. This title is likewise conferred on Prisca and Aquilla [ROMANS 16:3], and on Urbanus [ROMANS 16:9]. The term, therefore, is used of those engaged in particular service before the Lord and in ministry for a congregation.

Paul also refers to Epaphroditus as a "fellow soldier." This word was originally a military term used to describe those who fight side-by-side. Here, Paul uses it to speak of one who stood with him to face conflicts, perhaps even adversaries, much as he conveyed through his words in PHILIPPIANS 1:27, 28. "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are *standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents*. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God."

One must appreciate the commentary Vernon McGee provides on this appellation. He writes, Epaphroditus "is my fellowsoldier—he fights with me. He doesn't stick a knife in my back when I'm away. He doesn't side with my enemies. He stands shoulder to shoulder with me for the faith."³ There is trust because they have shared hardship contending for the Faith. Each knows that the other can be depended upon in the fight.

² Cited from J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, **The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament** (Hodder, London, England, 1930), in Ralph P. Martin, **Philippians: Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 43** (Word, Dallas, TX 2004) 164

³ J. Vernon McGee, **Thru the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians through Revelation, vol. V** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 1983) 308

Paul's designation leads me to believe that Epaphroditus experienced persecution and trial together with Paul. Possibly, he endured imprisonment because of his association with the Gospel and with Paul. Certainly, the term indicates that together with Paul he had worked in missionary labours. Epaphroditus shared not only in the work of the Gospel, but also in the sufferings that accompany the work of the ministry. Paul also applies this term [*sustratiótes*] to Archippus of Colossae [PHILEMON 2], and sometimes speaks of his ministry as a military campaign [2 CORINTHIANS 10:4].

Bishop Lightfoot rightly notes that Epaphroditus was one with the Apostle in "common sympathy, common work, and common danger and toil and suffering."⁴ Undoubtedly, you will agree that this is a wonderful commendation of this good man. However, Paul is not finished commending his admirable qualities as he turns his attention to the aspects that the Philippians had already discovered before they entrusted Epaphroditus to carry their gift to the Apostle.

Paul speaks of Epaphroditus as the "messenger" and the "minister" of the Philippians. These terms speak of his special responsibilities to the Philippians. Epaphroditus is called the "messenger" of the Philippians. The word translates the Greek term *apóstolon*. This word is usually translated "apostle." Certainly, the term is used of the Twelve [e.g., MARK 3:14], and of Matthias, who was selected by the Apostles to replace Judas [ACTS 1:26]. Paul frequently identifies himself in his letters as an apostle of Jesus Christ [e.g., ROMANS 1:1; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1]. Paul also refers to those whom the churches in Macedonia designated to carry the collection for the suffering believers in Jerusalem as "apostles" [2 CORINTHIANS 2:23]. And Doctor Luke speaks of Barnabas, together with Paul, as an "apostle" [ACTS 14:4, 14].

Therefore, the term is used in a non-technical manner to describe those appointed to act on behalf of the churches in some specific capacity, usually in a ministry removed from the immediate location of the congregation. Today, we would probably use the term "missionary" instead of "messenger" or "apostle," but the concept is similar, if not identical. Epaphroditus was appointed as an envoy for the Church in Philippi, acting as a missionary to deliver the moneys collected and to serve Paul's needs on behalf of the congregation.

He is also identified as a "minister" for the Philippians. The term that is translated "minister" in our New Testament is frequently the same term that could be translated "deacon," but in this instance, the word is *leitourgôn*. We obtain our English term "liturgy" from this Greek term. In the Greek world, the word was used of those who served in a public capacity, much as those who serve in Canadian government are often designated as "ministers."

Though some have opined that the word conveys the concept of priestly service, the term carried no connotation of priestly service in the language of the New Testament. With the death of Christ, there is no longer need for a priestly class. According to the Word of God, we who are Christians now constitute a "holy priesthood" [1 PETER 2:5] and a "royal priesthood" [1 PETER 2:9]. We bear this holy office because Jesus, our High Priest is "holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily ... since he did this once for all when he offered up himself" [HEBREWS 7:26, 27].

⁴ Joseph Barber Lightfoot, **Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians** (McMillan and co., ltd., London, England, 1913) 123

Peter O'Brien observes that "apart from **HEBREWS 8:2** where [the term] is applied to Christ as the high priest who serves in the true tabernacle set up by God, the term is found on only four other occasions in the New Testament: of secular rulers [**ROMANS 13:6**], of angels as servants of God [**HEBREWS 1:7**], of Paul as the minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles who discharges a priestly service by proclaiming the Gospel [**ROMANS 15:16**], and of Epaphroditus."⁵

What we can gain from this perspective is that Epaphroditus was a man of character. He was beloved by the Apostle for sharing in the hardships of the Gospel. Paul had urged Timothy to manfully "share in suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" [**2 TIMOTHY 2:3**], and we could imagine that he would have been able to point to Epaphroditus as an example.

Warren Wiersbe argues that Epaphroditus was a "balanced Christian." He writes, "Balance is important in the Christian life. Some people emphasise 'fellowship' so much that they forget the furtherance of the Gospel. Others are so involved in defending the 'faith of the Gospel' that they neglect to build fellowship with other believers. Epaphroditus did not fall into either of these traps. He was like Nehemiah, the man who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem with his sword in one hand and his trowel in the other [**NEHEMIAH 4:17**]. You cannot build with a sword nor battle with a trowel! It takes both to get the Lord's work accomplished."⁶

Wiersbe continues by citing the masterful expositor, Harry Ironside, who used to "tell about a group of believers who thought only of 'fellowship.' They had little concern for reaching the lost or for defending the faith against its enemies. In front of their meeting place they hung a sign: JESUS ONLY. But the wind blew away some of the letters, and the sign read—US ONLY. It was a perfect description of a group of people who were not balanced Christians."⁷

RISKING ALL FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS — Defending Epaphroditus' return to the Philippians before his labours were complete, Paul informs the church that this valiant man of God "nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me" [verse 30]. This sentence is highly informative, permitting us to look into an aspect of the early churches that is forgotten, though still respected.

The Greeks played a game very similar to mumblety-peg. The contestants threw a sharpened stake from various positions as they attempted to make it fall upright, sticking in the ground. The word Paul uses of Epaphroditus actually refers to this game, meaning literally "to throw the stake."⁸ When Paul states that Epaphroditus had been "risking his life," he uses the word *paraboleúomai*. The word could be used of a gambler, for it did speak of staking everything on the throw of a dice. Certainly, it had the connotation of being rash or reckless; but there is another side to the term that is important for Christians. As is true of many New Testament words, Christians gave new meaning to common terms. Those who risked their lives were not reckless. Rather, they were committed to the work of Christ, seeking what was best for others.

⁵ Peter T. O'Brien, **The Epistle to the Philippians: The New International Greek Testament Commentary** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1991) 332

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, **The Bible Exposition Commentary, volume 2** (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL 1989) 82

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, **The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1973) 120

Among the early churches were societies of men and women who called themselves “the parabolani,” that is, the “risk takers. These people were not enamoured of death, but they were willing to minister to the sick and the imprisoned in the Name of the Saviour. They saw to it that, if at all possible, martyrs, and sometimes even enemies, would receive an honourable burial.

Several commentators have spoken of Cyprian. For instance, Hendriksen states, “in the city of Carthage during the great pestilence of A.D. 252 Cyprian, the bishop, showed remarkable courage. In self-sacrificing fidelity to his flock, and love even for his enemies, he took upon himself the care of the sick, and bade his congregation nurse them and bury the dead. What a contrast with the practice of the heathen who were throwing the corpses out of the plague-stricken city and were running away in terror!”⁹

This devotion to the cause of Christ, even while disregarding personal safety and welfare, is the same overriding concern Paul exhibited when he spoke to the elders from Ephesus. “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” [ACTS 20:24]. When the saints in Caesarea reacted in shock to the prophecy of Agabus that Paul would be imprisoned for the cause of Christ, he responded, “I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the Name of the Lord Jesus” [ACTS 21:14].

One cannot read the account of the early Christians provided by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, without realising that this band of risk-takers was greater than we might imagine. In that letter, in the great Faith chapter, we read, “What more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” [HEBREWS 11:32-40].

The words echo the encouragement the same author offered in the previous chapter of the letter. “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” [HEBREWS 10:32-36].

⁹ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary* (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1962) 144-5

There is a fellowship that only those who have shared danger can understand. Those who have shared risks, those who have shared hardship, form a brotherhood. Soldiers who have shared combat know the camaraderie that grows out of shared danger. People who have experienced a great threat to life experience a special bond that others can only observe at a distance. Firemen, sharing the danger of fighting fires and rescuing those who might be trapped in burning buildings, form a brotherhood that has grown out of their shared work in dangerous conditions. Police enjoy a select fellowship that grows out of their shared danger. When an officer is downed in the line of duty, all alike feel the pain of that loss. Likewise, they share a common respect for those who have shared the hardship of doing a necessary task that is underappreciated.

I don't want to imply that one can never know such fellowship if he or she is not a police officer, a firefighter, or a soldier. There is a brotherhood of love that has always marked the true church of our Lord Jesus. That fellowship will always be found among a people who know the presence of the Lord. These people have a fellowship with Him who conquered death, and they know that they are "regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" [ROMANS 8:36]. As Christians who have shared life, they share the love of Christ, and they "love one another earnestly from a pure heart" [1 PETER 1:22].

If a true friend finds you are in need, he or she will find a way to help. That friend will not ask, "How great is the risk?" The question that a friend asks is always, "When do you need me?"

This is the response of members of this church when needs arise in the congregation. Illness that fells a family or surgery that removes a member of the family from the home brings an immediate response as people provide meals and care for such everyday needs as cleaning a house or performing other tasks that might otherwise be neglected. When there is a death in the family, the congregation asks how they can help. Some provide food to feed the family members and friends who come from out of town to attend the funeral. Some simply provide a sympathetic ear for those who grieve.

To preach the Gospel is the "work of Christ," certainly; to introduce Jesus Christ to a people who have never heard of Him is the "work of Christ," most assuredly. However, it is as much the "work of Christ" to cook a meal and take it to a shut-in. Visiting the sick and taking time to listen to those who hurt is every bit as much the "work of Christ" as is preaching to a multitude. Visiting those who are in prison is the "work of Christ." This is what Epaphroditus did, and Paul does not distinguish between his own work and that which Epaphroditus performed. They were both performing the "work of Christ."

To serve in some unnoticed, unrecognised capacity in the church is as much the "work of Christ" as the ministry of the pulpit. They are two parts of the work, but one is as essential as the other. Epaphroditus held himself responsible before God for the same standard of faithfulness as Paul does in his role as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

For Epaphroditus, the cost of performing "the work of Christ" on behalf of his congregation was sickness. The construction of the sentence in verse 30 indicates a causal connection between the illness that very nearly took the life of Epaphroditus and the ministry that he accepted from the Philippians. What is less apparent to us from a superficial reading of the letter is the concern that the congregation might have if their envoy were to return before completing his mission. This is the reason Paul writes as he does, commending Epaphroditus and conveying his gratitude to the church.

The congregation loved Epaphroditus, and Paul did not want them to think less of him because he did not fulfil their desires. There had been a good relationship between this gracious minister and the congregation among whom he served. Vernon McGee observes, “In my conference ministry I speak in many churches, and I have learned that I can judge a church by its attitude toward a pastor who preaches and teaches the Word of God. When a deacon takes me aside and says, ‘Dr. McGee, we have a fine young pastor, and he is preaching the Word of God,’ this rejoices my heart. But sometimes a deacon takes me aside and says, ‘Say, how do we get rid of a pastor like we have? He is too opinionated, too dogmatic, and he wants to run things.’ I ask him, ‘Is he teaching and preaching the Word?’ When the deacon’s answer is, ‘Oh, yes, but we have had that all along,’ I can see that the Word has had no effect upon that man. If his feeling is shared by the church in general, that church is doomed. The rejection of a Bible-teaching preacher is the death knell of many churches across this land of ours. You see, the Devil has been very clever. He has shifted his attack from the Word of God itself to the man who teaches the Word of God. I find this is true across the length and breadth of our nation. The real test of a church is its attitude toward its pastor.

“Epaphroditus was greatly loved by his church, and that speaks well for the church in Philippi.”¹⁰

OUR CHRISTIAN HERITAGE — The Faith of Christ the Lord once permeated our nation. Today, we are living on the dividends paid out by the investment of our forebears’ faith. The ideal represented among those who fight fires, not regarding their own lives for the sake of others, is based primarily upon the Christian ideals that once marked us as a nation. The voluntary risks that police take for people that often do not appreciate the risks inherent in their work, and who sometimes do not deserve that measure of respect, is in part a demonstration of the faith of Christ that once pervaded society.

When Thomas Aquinas wrote the masterful treatise, *Summa Theologiae*, he placed the idea of government wielding the sword under the heading of “Love.” He did that because he understood that being willing to defend innocent civilians is an act of Christian charity. The job of government biblically is to wield the sword to preserve order and protect life. A policeman in the middle of a gun battle that starts during a robbery cannot just walk away when the shooting gets too heavy. It is his duty as a magistrate to stay and restore peace.

What is the purpose of the message, then? First, just as Paul urged the Philippians to honour such men who willingly risked their lives for selfless ideals, so all who are Christians are urged to honour those who live lives characterised as selfless and honourable. If a fellow Christian is willing to speak the truth in love, willing to demand the very best from you, honour that one. Give thanks to God that you know such a person and seek to encourage that one to continue contending for the Faith.

Again, it does no disservice to the text to apply this teaching to all who serve selflessly. If you know a firefighter, give thanks to God that that individual is willing to serve selflessly. Pray that God will protect that one and ask the Master to bless him or her. If you know a police officer, give God thanks that they willingly serve in what must at times be a thankless job. Pray for divine protection so that God will be honoured and so that the individual may continue to serve honourably.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

The greatest encouragement any of us can give to those who act selflessly for our benefit—whether they should be engaged in Christian work or whether they are engaged in fulfilling civic responsibilities—is to aspire and to endeavour to act courageously and honourably ourselves. This is the way to glorify Christ the Lord and this is the way to fulfil the instruction of the Word.

We must not permit ourselves to live as though the worst thing that could happen to us is to be made uncomfortable, or to be disappointed in our desires. These are not the worst things that can happen to us; the worst thing that can happen is for us to sacrifice our integrity. Danger and risk don't threaten true friendship; they strengthen it. Friends that share the risk of threats to our own lives are modern-day members of the *parabolani*, that reckless band of friends who love their brothers and sister more than they love ease of life. Each one deserves our respect. When we need them, they are there. I have a few in that category. Hopefully, you do too.