

PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

RISK AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

“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. 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.

“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 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.”¹

Contemporary Christians often see the Faith as a safe refuge, until a Parabolanus appears. A Parabolanus? What is a Parabolanus? Do the churches of this day need Parabolani? The word may be unfamiliar, but the concept is essential to continued healthy growth of the Faith in this day so far removed from a day when the New Testament was new.

The ancient churches were blessed with saints sometimes identified as “Parabolani.” These individuals, moved by the Holy Spirit, proved themselves to be a blessing to all mankind. The term Parabolani was given to Christians who risked their lives as nurses to dying people during times of contagion that often swept ancient societies. Moved with the compassion of Christ, these saints voluntarily undertook the care of the sick and provided for the burial of the dead despite knowing that such service could cause their own death.² They were held in esteem by the populace and honoured among the churches as examples for Christian service.

Though the term Parabolani was later employed in reference to an order under direction of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the term originally allowed for no such organised political or ecclesiastical action groups among the churches. What should be seen by the service of these saints are individuals motivated by the Spirit of God to dream great dreams and to perform great tasks that glorified the Master through fulfilling His call to service in His Name.

The concept of such risk-taking for the cause of Christ is witnessed in the text before us today. A man named Epaphroditus is commended by the Apostle, especially because he was prepared to risk his life in order to serve the Master. Don’t attempt to turn Epaphroditus into some “super Christian” who is a cut above all other saints. Rather, see this godly man as one of the saints who saw a need and filled it to the glory of God. He was an insignificant Christian who risked everything for the cause; thus, he accomplished great things for Christ.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Parabolani (article), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parabalani>; “paraboloi, parabalanoi” (article), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11467a.htm>; “parabolanus” (dictionary entry), <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/parabolanus>

EPAPHRODITUS — All we know of Epaphroditus is revealed in the text chosen for today. However, the little we are able to learn from Paul's Letter to the Christians of Philippi reveals that Epaphroditus made a great impact for the cause of Christ. Some have imagined that Epaphroditus and Epaphras (named in **COLOSSIANS 1:7** and **4:12**, and in **PHILEMON 23**) are the same person. However, there is little reason to draw such a conclusion. In the first place, both the name Epaphroditus and the shortened form, Epaphras, were common in the ancient world. Moreover, the cities of Philippi and Colossae are not near enough to imagine that the churches interacted with one another all that much. Thus, there seems little likelihood that both churches employed the same messenger to communicate with the Apostle in his first imprisonment.

Later in this missive to the Philippians, Paul again speaks of Epaphroditus. Paul writes in **PHILIPPIANS 4:10-18**, "I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

"Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God."

We learn from this letter that Epaphroditus was a messenger of the Philippian congregation. Paul praises this man highly, calling him "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier." For Paul, Epaphroditus was one who stood with him in the difficult place, resisting the darkness and advancing the light of the knowledge of Christ the Lord. However, the ministry Epaphroditus performed was one focused on Paul's immediate and personal needs, for Paul speaks of him as a "messenger" of the church in Philippi.

Take a moment in order to reflect on the term "messenger." The Greek word underlying this term is *apóstolos*; you may recognise that we derive the title, "Apostle" from this term. Epaphroditus was not one of the Twelve. Neither should we attempt to create some new ecclesiastical order of "apostles." He was a messenger—this was the common meaning of the term in that ancient language. The term *apóstolos* would be applied to Paul and to the Twelve in a technical sense, but the term usually meant "messenger" as translated in this instance.

Epaphroditus is also identified as their "minister" [*leitourgós*, **PHILIPPIANS 2:25**]. Epaphroditus was one who performed work for the congregation. This should not be taken as meaning that he was an elder for the congregation; it should, however, be recognised that he willingly served the assembly in performing the tasks they assigned. In using the term *apóstolos* in this usual sense, the Word of God exalts what we might otherwise consider to be mundane, focusing attention on performing the hard tasks.

Epaphroditus was chosen by the congregation to take their gifts to Paul when he was in need. Moreover, they sent these gifts on multiple occasions, and Epaphroditus in each instance was entrusted with the gift by the assembly. In accepting the appointment of the church he became their servant, advancing the cause of Christ. In the same way, whenever we accept appointment to a task within the assembly we become a messenger and minister of the church.

The Church in Philippi was small and weak—it was a nascent church, after all. Nevertheless, despite the lack of size and strength in the estimate of the world, Paul says that they were the first congregation to enter into partnership [*koinōnéō*] with him through material support [see **PHILIPPIANS 4:15**]. There is a tenderness in his heart for the assembly, and for the one chosen to convey their gifts to the Apostle. In fact, Paul speaks of their “partnership” repeatedly in this missive.³ On several occasions this congregation had forwarded monetary support when the missionaries fled to Thessalonica [see **PHILIPPIANS 4:16**].

In his Second Letter to the saints in Corinth, the Apostle appears to refer to assistance given by the Philippians. He writes, “Did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God’s gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way” [**2 CORINTHIANS 11:7-9**].

I note that the fact that the congregation shared with the Apostle was as important, if not more important, than the size of the gift sent. Their generosity meant that he was in their heart and that they were praying with him for his labour to advance the cause of Christ. Thus, they joined in this work through the practical means of sending a gift!

From this summary, we can deduce that Epaphroditus was an honourable man recognised for his integrity. He was trusted with handling the gifts of the congregation. Unlike Judas Iscariot who was revealed to be a thief [see **JOHN 12:6**], Epaphroditus was true to his charge. Moreover, it is fair to say that he was courageous. Though travel was facilitated by the extensive Roman system of roads and by lively commercial sea traffic, it was fraught with danger. Elsewhere, the Apostle alludes to the dangers commonly faced during travel in the ancient world when he speaks of being “on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers,” “danger in the wilderness” and “danger at sea” [see **2 CORINTHIANS 11:26**]. Thus, the mere act of travelling exposed Epaphroditus to risk—risk compounded by the fact that on each trip he was carrying funds designated for the use of the Apostle, thus exposing him to the threat of robbery.

One danger that is not specifically named in Paul’s list of dangers he had faced, but a danger which would have assuredly been common, is perhaps referenced in the text. Epaphroditus contracted some sort of illness in his journey to Rome—an illness with a sudden onset and which was so severe that it almost cost him his life. In that day before antibiotics were available, travel to some areas of the Empire carried the risk of contracting life-threatening infections. Sepsis from common wounds was an ever-present danger. Various forms of malaria were common in the Mediterranean regions, as were diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and numerous forms of gastroenteritis. Measles, dysentery, smallpox and bubonic plague are known to have swept through regions and cities from time-to-time costing lives and health.

I suspect that in this present day we have forgotten the terror associated with a diagnosis of any of a number of communicable diseases. I am old enough to remember life before Sabin and Salk vaccines. I recall the fear associated with polio and actually knew people who were permanently crippled by the disease. As Lynda and I watched a movie set in Scotland during the late 1940s, it told the tale of a doctor pleading for streptomycin in order to treat a young boy diagnosed with tuberculosis. Streptomycin was in very short supply and thus restricted to selected experimental cases. At the time Paul writes this letter, if Epaphroditus contracted any of a number of diseases, only the mercy and grace of God would allow him to hope to continue living—and Paul saw God’s grace at work in this man’s life!

³ **PHILIPPIANS 1:5, 7; 2:30; 4:15**

An unspecified interval of time passed between the last transfer of a gift in support of the Apostle and this more recent gift that Epaphroditus brought. For whatever reason, the church had not recently supported the Apostle. When they became aware of his imprisonment, they determined to send a gift, and Epaphroditus was chosen to deliver this gift. This gift revealed their love for Paul, and more importantly, it revealed their love for the Saviour and for His cause.

After Epaphroditus arrived in Rome, whether or not by design, rather than immediately returning to Philippi, he chose to remain with the Apostle, identifying with the prisoner in order to assist him even though he was incarcerated. This decision would have exposed him to the danger of being viewed with suspicion by the Roman authorities. Perhaps this was the intent of the congregation when they commissioned him. Whether that was the case or not, he remained with the Apostle for a period. Thus, this noble Philippian served in the stead of the church itself, completing what was lacking in their service to the Apostle [see **PHILIPPIANS 4:30**].

The passages to which I've alluded in this Letter to Philippian Christians clearly reveal Epaphroditus to have been a bold, courageous personality who did not hesitate to attempt great challenges despite potential difficulty, even when his labour subjected him to peril. I'll go so far as to opine that we should see him as an example of multiplied loyal servants of Christ who to this day perform heroic work with none of the halo that comes to many in other callings of life. The call to heroic labour, to great challenges, still appeals to the best type of young men who enter the ministry of Jesus Christ, as it does to the finest of young women who serve in various capacities among the churches. Our youth do not respond to take up the challenge of Christian service because the task is challenging; they avoid responding because we attempt to make the way easy for them! Challenge and difficulty is all in a day's work for God's choice servants.

SENDING THE RISK TAKER HOME — Epaphroditus' intended service was cut short by the illness he contracted. As already noted, the onset of illness appears to have been sudden and violent, so much so that it appeared he might die. It seems that news of his malady had somehow been transmitted to the Church in Philippi. The illness continued long enough that not only did news of Epaphroditus' illness travel to Philippi, but the impact of this news on the Philippians was then communicated to Epaphroditus. Knowing of their concern only intensified his concern. God was merciful and Epaphroditus did recover. Now, fully recovered, Paul determines to send him back, carrying the missive we know of the Letter to Philippian Christians. The Apostle's intent was so that the Philippians might "rejoice at seeing him again" [**PHILIPPIANS 2:28**].

There are a couple of points that I believe will prove beneficial for our understanding. First, I recognise that some fellow believers hold that God never wants His saints to be ill. In light of this faulty view, it is significant that Epaphroditus suffered such a debilitating illness. Moreover, the malady struck while he was serving the Master. We know, or we should know, that Christians are subject to the same maladies that plague all mankind.

Related to this observation is the fact that Paul does not say that he healed him. Writing the Corinthians, Paul reminds them that "the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works" [**2 CORINTHIANS 12:12**]. From the various gifts named in his first letter to the Corinthians, it should be apparent that healing was included among the "signs and wonders and mighty works" that revealed the Apostle to be a "true apostle." Nevertheless, he did not heal Epaphroditus. I have no doubt that the Apostle prayed for him; but it does not appear that he healed him. When Paul says he left Trophimus ill at Miletus [see **2 TIMOTHY 4:20**], it should be obvious that though the Apostles did heal some of illness on occasion, the ability to heal was not guaranteed by apostleship.

Note, also, that Paul's letter to the Philippians urges them to receive Epaphroditus as a hero. Perhaps there was concern that he would be seen as a failure. Even Christians display a tendency to imagine that when service is cut short it must be due to a flaw either in character or in calling. Epaphroditus' service was cut short due to an illness—an illness that necessitated a return home. Perhaps that is the reason Paul mentions his illness several times in this letter. Indeed, Paul wrote, "[Epaphroditus] greatly missed all of you and was distressed because you heard that he had been ill. In fact, he became so ill that he nearly died. But God showed mercy to him—and not to him only, but also to me—so that I would not have grief on top of grief" [PHILIPPIANS 2:26, 27]. Again, the Apostle would write, "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" [PHILIPPIANS 2:29, 30].

Epaphroditus had dared to do a great thing for the cause of Christ. He didn't fulfil all his aspirations; but he did attempt a great task. Now, the Apostle is urging the home congregation to receive him as the hero he is. It is essential for us to focus on what was attempted for the sake of Christ rather than the accomplishment or failure. We tend to turn matters around in this day, focusing on the one who is successful according to our estimate of success. However, God directs us to see the heart for God's glory and the greatness of the challenge faced.

I would rather attempt some great thing for God and fail, than to do nothing and succeed. There is no divine commendation for playing safe—yet, playing it safe is the choice made by the vast majority of modern Christians. I agree with Abraham Lincoln's statement that I would rather lose in a cause that I know is destined to succeed than to succeed in a cause that is destined to fail. Christians are appointed to fulfil the will of the Father, advancing a cause that shall assuredly succeed. It is those who live for this life only who must one day leave all that they esteemed and valued. The failures most to be pitied in life are those that result from never attempting any great thing.

As I prepared this message, I remembered a scene described before the Eternal Throne. John had witnessed the Lamb of God opening the seals on the scroll He received. Then, the Revelator notes, "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until..." [REVELATION 6:9-11a].

Until what? Until it pleases God to reveal His power and might!

- Until the Passover is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God [LUKE 22:16]!
- "Until the full number of the Gentiles has come it" [ROMANS 11:25]⁴!
- Until Christ Jesus our Lord "delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:24]!
- "Until He has put all His enemies under His feet" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:25]!
- Until God makes Christ's enemies His footstool [LUKE 20:43]!
- Until God redeems His possession, to the praise of His glory [see EPHESIANS 1:14b (margin)]!
- "Until we all attain to the unity of the Faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" [EPHESIANS 4:13]!

⁴ NET Bible

The world looks on the person who lives for Christ and for His glory as a fool. Jim Elliot was correct when he wrote in the flyleaf of his Bible, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Indeed, we who know the Master and who walk with Him confess with the Apostle, “We are fools for Christ’s sake” [1 CORINTHIANS 4:10a]. We warn those infatuated with this dying world, “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness,’ and again, ‘The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile’” [1 CORINTHIANS 3:18-20].

I recall corresponding with the wife of a professor under whom I had studied. She asked what I was doing since leaving the medical school and wondered where I was now working. When I told her that I was planting churches in the Canadian west, she expressed her disappointment. After that, all communication ceased—I was a failure in her eyes. I had heard this before. “You had such great potential; how could you throw it all away to be a pastor?”

I consoled myself by imagining those rabbis who had tutored the Apostle to the Gentiles. As he prepared to kneel on the pavement outside the prison where he was incarcerated, knowing that the executioner would shortly raise the sharp sword before striking to behead him, the Apostle might have heard those same rabbis muttering. “You were the brilliant rabbinical scholar in whom we placed so much hope. You could have done so much for our nation if only you had continued rabbinical studies. You threw it all away, for what? To identify with the Gentiles? To be one with these despised followers of the Way? To proclaim that one who was humiliated in death was actually alive? What a fool you became, Saul of Tarsus!”

Of course, the Apostle knew what they could not know. Paul knew that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:27-31].

Paul understood something they could never know; and he could console the saints of God with these truths. “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’

‘O death, where is your victory?’

O death, where is your sting?’

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-57]. There is great comfort in these truths, comfort leading God’s people who receive this teaching to be “steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [their] labour is not in vain” [see 1 CORINTHIANS 15:58].

Paul dreamed great dreams and risked everything for the cause of Christ. He would write these same Philippian Christians, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” [PHILIPPIANS 3:7-10]. Rather than being a failure, Paul became a hero to the Faith. The Apostle has become a model of one risking everything for Christ.

PARABOLANI, THEN AND NOW — Epaphroditus is commended for risking his life to complete what was lacking in the service provided to the Apostle by the Philippian saints. Anything worth having carries risk. Risk is not a dirty word; without risk, there is no reward. Independence? Sovereignty? Identity? These aspects of humanity are precious to the people of any nation. Canada risks these commodities in consequential federal elections each time the writ is dropped. Yes, I said risk—every time and to varying extents. We risk the nation each time we vote—the risk may be small at times; but we nevertheless risk the nation each time we vote. And the risk isn't always small—we risk our future with each election. It should not be the case that our future as a nation hangs on one election, but elections do matter.

Risk is part of freedom. That's the trade. You risk a car accident for the reward of free movement. You risk your savings for the reward of interest. You risk your career when seizing each new opportunity. You risk comfort for excitement.

Citizens risk their lives as policemen, as firemen, as soldiers, sailors or airmen. We risk crime by allowing a free population granted uncommon liberties. We risk encouraging cheaters by allowing free trade. We risk injury by doing dangerous things.

Christians risk their livelihood, their reputations, their very lives through obedience to Him whom we call “Master.” There is no reward, either in the temporal world or in the spiritual realm, that does not entail risk. Therefore, if Christians never risk anything, they cannot participate in the advance of the Faith.

Whenever we speak with a family member concerning her relationship to the Saviour, we risk rejection. Our children may pout, stamp their feet and tell us how much they hate going to church. What do you expect from one who is unsaved? If we inquire of a friend's faith toward the Master, we risk a strong reaction. He may tell us to mind our own business. We know that telling others of the life that is in Christ the Master *is* our business. Should we ask a fellow church member about his walk with the Lord, we risk angry accusations of being judgemental. However, we are not being judgemental when we exercise discernment. Asking a fellow believer of her walk with the Master is an expression of love and compassion. Whenever we serve Christ there is a risk that we will not be recognised for our service. Yet, each of these cases demand that Christians must be involved in the life of those with whom he or she interacts.

As noted earlier in the message, Epaphroditus risked his life in order to serve the Master. He sought to advance the cause of Christ by standing with the Apostle in a time of need. When Paul's world was constricted because he was gaoled, this noble Philippian was prepared to make himself available to perform necessary tasks which the Apostle would no longer be able to perform. Epaphroditus was prepared to risk his life in order to convey the gift collected by the congregation in support of Paul's ministry. Epaphroditus risked being relegated to the shadows in order to ensure that Paul would continue to occupy centre stage.

Though I previously mentioned the risks Epaphroditus faced, join me in review of the formidable challenges he likely faced in this service before the Lord. He would need to travel a considerable distance, without companions and with the potential danger of facing brigands or pirates. Perhaps this was the more immediate risk, but there was the additional risk that he might contract any of a number of serious diseases. The potential for becoming ill with malaria was a definite risk; it was endemic in Rome and throughout the coastal regions of the Empire.

Though the congregation in Philippi entrusted him with the gift he was to convey, he would need to give an accounting of the journey. This is not an inconsequential matter as there is always the potential for well-meaning saints who are inclined to second-guess how funds are administered. Such individuals can be disruptive to the congregation even as they drain joy and energy from the servant of the Saviour.

Beyond all these very real risks, Epaphroditus was travelling to Rome to convey funds to a man who was to stand trial before the Emperor. There was true risk attending association with Paul—a risk which the Apostle acknowledged in earlier verses of this letter. The Apostle wrote, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment”

[**PHILIPPIANS 1:12-17**].

It is fair to conclude that Epaphroditus risked health, reputation and even life itself. One great purpose appears to have captured his heart—he was determined to labour at this great task until it was either fulfilled or until the Master called him home. The Faith is always advanced by individuals who assume risks. Each missionary assumes great risks to advance the cause of Christ. Each pastor is risking far more than people might imagine in order to stand true to the charge. No less does each Christian receive a call to accept genuine risks in order to fulfil the ministry God assigns. Have you accepted the risk of fulfilling your service?

In the moments remaining, I must speak pointedly to you who listen. Listening today is a parent who has failed to confront his child. That parent has decided that the risk is too great and he cannot jeopardise the tenuous relationship that he has. I only ask, “Father, have you no compassion for your child? Are you actually prepared to allow the world to influence this child, drawing them into a life that leads away from the Saviour?”

Because you are a Christian, I urge you to risk the relationship you think you have, remembering the words of the Master. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” [**MATTHEW 10:34-39**].

There is one who listens at this hour who has put off speaking with a friend, with a neighbour or a colleague. You enjoy what you imagine is peace with this person more than the blessing of God. Yet, this fellow mortal must die and face judgement without the forgiveness of sin because you dare not risk the temporal relationship you believe you have.

In the days of His flesh, despite the performance of many wondrous deeds, the people did not believe Jesus. There is this sad note found in John's Gospel. "Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in Him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" [JOHN 12:42, 43]. Is that the issue with you?

Jesus warned of a generation that sought a sign; His warning is applicable to the thought that we can put off for a little longer our responsibility to speak to the lost of the life He offers. Jesus said, "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" [MATTHEW 12:39-42].

One is listening this day who has been prompted by the Spirit of God to invest time in service for the cause of Christ. Perhaps her call is to lead some someone in a study of the Word. Perhaps your appointment is to direct a ministry among us that has not yet begun. Perhaps God is directing him to take up the challenge of labouring in some obscure position within the congregation of the Lord. You have put off obedience to His call—you are unwilling to take time from your busy schedule to perform the assigned work because you know that the task carries the risk that you will be unnoticed. Jesus' confronted shirkers in a day now far past, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God" [JOHN 5:44].

Should you not heed the Apostolic warning? "You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" [ROMANS 13:11-14].

God has gifted each of us who listen with oversight of goods identified with this world. Among us is one who has received His grace, and that one seeks somewhere safe to invest what He has entrusted to your oversight. All that lies within the realm of this dying world is subject to risk. What of the world to come? Has God appointed you to underwrite the advance of His cause through radio or through television? Perhaps He has equipped you and appointed you to dare believe Him for great grace to provide for the advance of His cause through serving broken humanity by providing counselling for those considering abortion, or for a family that is struggling to heal from a lifetime of abuse.

How compelling are the words Jesus spoke while seated on the side of a mountain some two millennia past! You will remember that Jesus taught those who would follow Him, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" [MATTHEW 6:19-21].

The Christian life is marked with risk; however, the risk leads to eternal glory when we accept it as God leads us. What is needed today is not a way to make it easy to be a Christian. What is required are bold believers who are prepared to do the hard tasks, who dare accept the risk of Christian service. Perhaps you have at some point in your life heard this poem from Edgar Guest. Listen as I read his thoughtful words.

I'd rather be a failure than the man who's never tried;
I'd rather seek the mountain-top than always stand aside.
Oh, let me hold some lofty dream and make my desperate fight,
And though I fail I still shall know I tried to serve the right.

The idlers line the ways of life and they are quick to sneer;
They note the failing strength of man and greet it with a jeer;
But there is something deep inside which scoffers fail to view-
They never see the glorious deed the failure tried to do.

Some men there are who never leave the city's well-worn streets;
They never know the dangers grim the bold adventurer meets;
They never seek a better way nor serve a nobler plan;
They never risk with failure to advance the cause of man.

Oh, better 'tis to fail and fall in sorrow and despair,
Than stand where all is safe and sure and never face a care;
Yes, stamp me with the failure's brand and let men sneer at me,
For though I've failed the Lord shall know the man I tried to be.⁵

The call today is for you to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, to accept the challenge of daring to do difficult things, to embrace the risk of service as a follower of the Christ, to dare great things in His Name. Who is first to openly accept this call? Amen.

⁵ Edgar Albert Guest, "I'd Rather Be a Failure," <http://www.best-poems.net/poem/id-rather-be-a-failure-by-edgar-albert-guest.html>, accessed 20 September 2016