

Philippians 2:19-30

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20 For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. 21 For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. 23 I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, 24 and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, 26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. 29 So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, 30 for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Many of you are familiar with the pastor John Piper. Piper has been one of the more well known pastors in evangelicalism for the last 30 or so years. But a few years ago, Piper wrote in the preface to one of his books how unprepared he felt going into the pastorate.

You see, Piper never thought he would be a pastor, so when he was called to pastor Bethlehem Baptist Church at the age of 34, he felt completely unprepared. In his words, he had never performed a funeral, stood by the bed of a dying person, led a council of elders or committee or council, never baptized anyone, never done a baby dedication, and he had barely even preached. That's the level of unprepared we are talking about. Here he was, called to the work of ministry, with no idea how to do it.

In this place, he turned to a brand new invention to teach him. He turned to the Walkman. Now, I am just about too young to know what a Walkman is, but I am sure there are many here that are far too young. It's going to blow your mind. A Walkman was this new, exciting invention in the early 80's that allowed you to play cassette tapes in a small, portable player. It was groundbreaking to take your favorite tunes with you wherever you went.

So, Piper, an avid jogger, began listening to biographies of former pastors on his Walkman while he was on his morning jogs. I can just picture him in early 80's workout attire - maybe a fluorescent headband to match the short shorts - jogging through the streets of Minneapolis, being moved and motivated to work by these tapes. As he tells it, he learned through the lives of these people what it looked like to be a faithful worker for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In our text today, Paul pops the cassette tape in our walkman, and offers us the lives of two of his associates - Timothy and Epaphroditus - to teach us the same. Paul writes of these two guys to offer them as models for who all Christians should be as workers for the gospel.

Of Timothy, he says, "I have no one like him," and of Epaphroditus, he says, "honor such men." These are Paul's employees of the month. They have his highest recommendation on their LinkedIn profile. These are men about their work, and their work is summarized in that little phrase in verse 30, **"the work of Christ."**

It's that phrase, "The Work of Christ," the title of the sermon today on the front of your bulletin, that I want to draw our attention to. What does it mean for each one of us to participate in, like these two and Paul, the work of Christ?

So, what I want us to do today is look at this work that defined these men. We will do it under two headings. We will look at the "The Work of Christ," under three simple headings: 1) The Work of Christ is Christ's Work 2) The Work of Christ is Christlike Work 3) The Work of Christ is Christ's Church's Work (Last one got a little clunky there to keep it consistent)

First, the Work of Christ is Christ's Work

These two associates of Paul that he holds up before the Philippians are just normal men. We don't get much biographical information, but from what we have it's not particularly remarkable. With Epaphroditus, we essentially just get his name. It means, "one belonging to Aphrodite," meaning his parents were likely pagan Greeks.

We get a bit more information about Timothy. He's mentioned throughout Paul's letters, and in Acts 16 we are told his father was a Greek and his mother was a Christian. In fact, in Paul's personal letter to Timothy, Paul celebrates the faith of Timothy's mom, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. Timothy serves as Paul's traveling companion throughout his ministry and is ultimately made the pastor of Ephesus. Paul thinks highly of them, but they are just normal men. And I think that's exactly the point.

When Paul holds them up as models to the Philippians, he does not highlight their credentials or their birthright or their wealth or their talent. (Next week Paul is going to tell us what he thinks about all that stuff.) No, what he holds up might sound quite simple but is actually a profound truth: these men are remarkable not because of something they possess naturally within themselves but because they have the Lord Jesus Christ working in and through them. The work they perform is Christ's work.

Look at how Paul describes Epaphroditus' work. He is Paul's fellow worker and fellow soldier. These images aren't exactly your leisurely workplace images. I don't think he's describing a sort of white collar work where Epaphroditus propped his feet up on the desk and calls on his executive assistant to grab his lunch and take care of his dry cleaning.

No, he's a soldier - a man with a duty, and when Paul sends him back to the Philippians, he's essentially sending him with an honorable discharge. He performed his duty well. And verse 30 is clear, that work he's been given is the work of Christ. It was Christ who discharged his duty and set his tasks.

Look at how Paul describes Timothy's work. He tells the Philippians, **"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."**

Timothy's service to the church is portrayed, not as his interests, not as Paul's interests, not as the interest of the church that will lead to the most people coming and the fewest people going out. Timothy's interests are not his own but the interests of Jesus for their church.

Do you see how remarkable this is?

Christ has interests in your life. Christ has interests in our church. Christ has interests for your family, for your career, for your friends – for all of our lives in every aspect of our lives. Christ is living and active in this world, and he has interests, as verse 20 says, for your welfare.

If you are here today, and you feel unseen by God, or unloved by God - like God doesn't care about you at all. God has been ignoring your calls for some time. Hear this: The work of Christ in this passage tells us that Christ is working in your life because he cares for you and your welfare. In fact, he has already acted to secure your welfare in the ultimate way.

Just a few verses before our section today, Paul told us just how far the Son of God has gone to secure your welfare. In Philippians 2:6-8 Paul tells us that the eternal Son of God humbled himself by taking on human form, and, verse 8, humbled himself ultimately to the point of death, even a death so shameful as a criminal's cross, though he was perfectly innocent.

Christ's taking on flesh and dying on the cross was not some arbitrary matter. How could it be? It wasn't just to show us some example of how to love. No, Christ's work on earth was a divine rescue mission. From the time of our birth we have gone after our own ways, serving our interests, and rejected the God who made us and loves us. We needed someone - someone who was not tainted by sin - to come to restore us to God, and that's what Jesus did in his earthly work. He lived perfectly. He obediently submitted to God's eternal to rescue humans, going to the cross. There he died in our place. He bore the wrath we deserved for our rejection and now presents us to God in his perfection.

God's divine rescue plan was for our welfare, even when we thought we were pursuing our welfare, and it is accomplished through Jesus, and it is continued to be applied to your life through him, as he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and now works on your behalf. Christ's heavenly work is his interest in your life: your salvation, your joy, your welfare.

This is the work of Christ on our behalf, and what's even more wonderful, is that this is a work we are also called to participate in. The work of Christ that Timothy and Epaphroditus were called into and the work that each one of us, if you are a Christian, have been called into by our Lord Jesus Christ is the work seeking his interests in this world, which is ultimately for its welfare.

It is the work of proclaiming the message of what he has done, just as Paul highlighted that Timothy had done, but it is also the work of serving one another in loving sacrifice so that gospel might be proclaimed, just as Paul highlighted that Epaphroditus had done.

If you're a Christian, Christ works through you for this world's welfare. Isn't that remarkable?

Now, I am sure that in every church you have ever been in, they, at some point, had an impassioned plea for you to serve in the church. I know every church I've worked at we have at various times gotten up before the church to call the church to serve in the various ministries of need. But if I had to guess, probably what we forget to say is what I want to be clear to us today: when you serve your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, when you work for the spread of the gospel in this world, you are doing the work of Christ.

As you teach the Bible to children, as you extend hospitality to your neighbor, as you direct parking to ensure people are able to comfortably make their way to church, as you give to missionaries, as you care for the sick and needy, Christ is working through you.

These are not merely examples of Christians doing good deeds. They are examples of our living Savior working through us. I believe that it is not a stretch to truly say, your work for the gospel as a Christian - whether it be practical or proclamation - is a miracle. The work of Christ is Christ's work through you.

And it is precisely because it is Christ's work that it is essential that this work is actually shaped and molded by the same savior who has commissioned us for the work. That's what we see next...

Second, the Work of Christ is Christlike Work

Paul begins this chapter by saying, "**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.**"

He comes back here at the end of the chapter, following his more direct teaching, and starts randomly acting as a travel agent for these two guys. Why put it here and not like the beginning or ending of the letter like usual?

Paul inserts the travel plans here in this seemingly confusing and impractical spot because in the way these two men have performed the work of Christ they were living out everything Paul has been teaching for the whole chapter. Paul's point is that – whatever is going on in the church in Philippi (strife, division, disagreement) – they would get about the work of the gospel in a way that embodied Christ. His endorsement of Timothy and Epaphroditus is him holding them up as two men who have cultivated this type of Christlikeness in their own work. Be like them. Do the work of Christ like Christ.

That same message holds for each of us today. If you want to join the work of Christ in this world, then we have to cultivate a Christlikeness in our lives. And he shows us three aspects of Christlikeness in Timothy and Epaphroditus that he wants us to embody as well:

First, Christlike work is selfless.

We have a savior that Paul has told us, “**Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant.**”

Christ pursued our welfare at the expense of his own. Though he had all the power and rights as God, he does not assert his divine prerogative to serve himself, but as Matthew writes, “**The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.**”

Timothy embodies this selflessness in an obvious way. As Paul says, the Philippians already know his worth. He seeks their interests over his own. Epaphroditus is so concerned for Paul that he extends himself nearly to death. Then, he grows worried about the Philippians being worried about him that he longs to come back to serve them. In the famous dictum of C.S. Lewis, these men do not think less of themselves, but think of themselves less.

Those who do the work of Christ, like Christ, must set aside the desire to serve themselves, assert themselves, and build up themselves. There is this great temptation in each one of our hearts to build our brand or carefully cultivate our image - to serve ourselves.

Selfishness is a powerful force in our lives, and it acts in us like the Ring of Power from the Lord of the Rings.

I’m not sure how familiar you all are with the Lord of the Rings, but you probably think, oh yes, there is the dark and evil ring that they have to destroy. But that’s not exactly right. The ring does have a corrupting influence, but it’s not by making the wearer evil. Rather, when you put the ring on, it magnifies the desire for power that is already within you. That’s why it turns Smeagol, the hobbit, into Gollum, the grotesque cave dweller but Bilbo remains mostly himself. It doesn’t turn you evil, it draws out your self-serving pride that is already present.

In a number of places where one of the hobbits puts on the ring, the description says something to this effect, “**When the Ring goes on you become the only real thing. You are a little, dark, solid rock in a ghostly world. Everything else is vague and shadowy.**”

In so many ways, your inner voice is constantly telling you, “**you’re the only real thing.**” You are all that matters. Your money is yours for your benefit. Your time is yours for you to steward. You are the only real thing.

This sort of mentality asserts itself in so many small, minor ways. It manifests itself in our insecurities, “What do they think of me? Do they like me? Do they think well of me?”

It manifests itself in our decisions. I know I should invite people to my home, but I don’t want people to see my home.

It manifests itself in our service. I don’t want to stand in the parking lot or watch kids. I just want to enjoy church for myself. Is that too much to ask?

In all of these situations and so many more, that ring of power comes back to us and says, "You're the only real thing." Why be selfless? Serve yourself.

When you're the only real thing, the people around you no longer feel like leaving, breathing eternal souls. They are either pawns you move for your good or obstacles you must overcome for your good. But there's no human connection. The selfish world is a lonely, lonely world. Or as Tolkien wrote, "**You are a little, dark, solid rock in a ghostly world.**" It's no surprise that in a world that champions this sort of self-serving mentality that you would also see rates of loneliness and depression skyrocket.

So how can we escape our selfish pride's corrupting influence? How can we do the work of Christ in this selfless, Christlike way?

You can only deny the self-serving nature of our hearts to the extent you see how settled you truly are in Christ Jesus. Do you remember what we said before? You don't have to seek your own welfare. You don't have to seek a name for yourself. You don't have to look for honor or joy for yourself. Your savior has already done that for you, and he continues to do it from heaven and through his people.

Joining in the work of Christ is selfless work. But it is only by turning away from yourself and turning towards Jesus that you find your true self - loved, supported, secure, not needing to prove anything. To the extent you see that, that is the extent you will turn outwards towards others in Christlike service.

What's more, in your selfless work, you'll be someone who is also sacrificial in your work.

Second, Christlike work is sacrificial.

Look in verse 30. Paul writes that Epaphroditus, "**Nearly died for the work of Christ.**" The Greek for this phrase is literally, "**He drew near to the point of death.**" We've already heard this phrase today.

Back in Philippians 2:8, when Paul considers the ministry of Jesus, he says, "**He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.**" These two lines are the only two places in the New Testament where this language is used. Paul is clearly trying to connect the type of service that Epaphroditus rendered him with the death of Jesus on the cross. Epaphroditus served Paul like Christ: he gave all of himself for him.

But Epaphroditus is not the only one sacrificing in this text. Philippi is sacrificing financially for Paul's ministry. Epaphroditus is sacrificing to care for Paul. Paul is sacrificing his dependency on Epaphroditus to relieve the church in Philippi. This section is rife with people tripping over themselves to sacrifice for one another. It seems that it is just natural that these people, secure in Christ, would then turn and expend themselves for others.

And I think that if the church - our church, specifically - wants to be serious about the work of Christ, this is what we would look like. You would look around, and you wouldn't be able to tell where one person's sacrifice ends for the other's beginning.

When you pulled into our parking lot this morning, I hope you saw some smiling faces in neon-vests standing in the brutal heat to welcome you. They get nothing in return. Yet their service enables us to come into church with ease so that we might hear from our God.

When you walked into the door this morning, I hope you heard some screaming kids coming down the children's hallway. I just hope they weren't my screaming kids. Because if you did, it's a reminder to us that there are people that every week go back there to free up families to worship freely without having to hold or entertain a squirming kid.

When you see the baskets get passed around at the end of this service, cynically, you may think this is the payoff of manipulative leaders in churches trying to keep their jobs. But when we remember our sacrificial savior, we see that our giving is one of the biggest ways in which we sacrifice for others. Our giving financially to the church enables our ministry here in Oxford, but it also enables us to support missionaries, literally, all over the world. The gospel only advances through a ministry of sacrificial generosity.

These examples all may seem small to you, but Paul calls Epaphroditus' similar work a ministry. The fruit of the gospel that flows from our church and our missionaries is your fruit born from your sacrifice in all the ways you serve. Isn't that amazing?

Christlike work is sacrificial work, and I believe if we embodied that in our lives in our churches, our life in community would be beautiful and compelling to the world. Because when the world looked at the church, they would see a community committed to one another, not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others. In other words, they would see our love for one another. That's the last characteristic of the Christlike work of Christ.

Third, Christlike work is affectionate.

Philippians is known as the letter of joy. Paul's love for this church rings throughout the letter, and our text today is no exception. Chapter 2, where he first begins describing how he wants to see the Philippians embody Christ leads off with, "**Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love.**"

He continues that thought here. He is sending Timothy just to hear news about them so that he may be cheered. Epaphroditus loves his home church so much that he is distressed by the mere thought they are worried about him. From top to bottom of our text, it's clear, the Philippians loved Paul, and Paul loved them. Their community was selfless and sacrificial because they were driven by deep, true love for one another.

If we are going to be about the work of Christ, the example we are given here is of loving partnership. We will be people most about the work of Christ in a Christ like way when we work together in love.

But, look, I am realistic. I know that our love for the church is not something that always comes easy. I'm sure some of you have, at various times, been frustrated with Grace Bible Church. I'm realistic! There may be some of you here today who have been hurt by the church, or feel ostracized from the church. Loving the church might, for very good reasons, be hard for you. So, how do we do it?

I'm sure we've all had to, at times in our careers or classrooms, participate in the dreaded team building exercises. You know what I am talking about: the human knot, where you all have to work together to untangle yourselves from connected arms and hands. The build-a-tower game, where you are given a bunch of straws and tape, and you have to assemble the tallest tower in a short amount of time. Maybe if your workplace is really cool, your team building exercise is an escape room.

But as much as we dread them, they all share the same lesson: if you're going to accomplish your goal, you have to know how to work together.

If we are going to be about the work of Christ, pursuing his goal, we have to know how to work together in his way, by loving one another. Our gospel message has to accord with our church's life together or our message won't be genuine.

We need the love building exercise. So ask yourself, what diminishes your affection for the church: skipping church, not prioritizing bible studies or small groups, failing to find time to spend with your fellow church members, frustration over minor disagreements, envy, jealousy, unspoken concerns. These things are affection killers. With the church, distance does not make the heart grow fond.

But now ask yourself, what stokes affection? Praying for one another, serving one another, hosting one another, seeing one another, teaching one another's children, eating together, crying together, celebrating together, showing up for one another, reading the bible together, I can go on and on. These are affection multipliers.

This is why, without all sorts of central programming, we try as a church to create so many opportunities for our members to just be around one another. This is why a fellowship lunch after church may feel small, but it is actually massive. This is why we do not want to split our congregation into two services. We want to be together, around one another, frequently. It multiplies our affection.

This is part of why we have our prayer and praise services periodically on Wednesday nights. At these meetings we hear testimonies from our church members. We hear reports from our missionaries. We hear their stories and how God is working in and through them in this world. And when we hear them and pray for them, our affection for them grows.

Christ loves his church. If we are going to be workers about our master's work in this world, we must love it too, and we must work to stir up that affection. And when we do that, we will work together.

Third, the Work of Christ is the Church's Work

This text is from top to bottom a text about partnership. Paul partners with the church in Philippi to support his ministry. Timothy partners with Paul in his mission. Philippi partners with Paul by sending Epaphroditus to minister to him in his imprisonment. Paul, this mighty apostle is clear, I could not have done this work without these men.

The work of Christ, as it is portrayed in this text, is a work that we do together. Sure, you can proclaim the gospel yourself, but your gospel work is actually handicapped without the church.

We need the support of Christ's love working in the church. You can't do it all, and you can't do it by yourself. But you have a savior who works through each member of the church, piece by piece, to complete his purposes for this world.

Your gifting in one area might be exactly what is needed in another person's ministry. The area you may feel weak in, might be exactly the place where a fellow church member has been longing to serve. Christ has gifted all that you need of his church, and we are here to care for you, support you, sacrifice for you in your work. In the words of Bill Withers, **"Lean on me, when you're not strong, and I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on... For, it won't be long 'til I'm gonna need somebody to lean on. Please swallow your pride.. If I have things you need to borrow.. For no one can fill.. Those of your needs that you won't let show."**

Or in the, perhaps more theologically focused words of Kelly Kapic, **"It takes an entire community to reflect the one messiah."**

If you are a Christian, you have been called into this work. It is a grand and glorious work. Christ works in you. But it is not a work we can do alone. Our work is the work of the whole body of Christ. This is a work that requires our selflessness, it requires our sacrifice, but it is a work that proclaims to this world with its words and portrays to this world through its love that our Lord Jesus Christ has its welfare in his view. It proclaims and portrays a gospel of life and salvation for all who would believe. That is our work.

May we serve at it faithfully, fellow workers, fellow soldiers, messengers and ministers worthy of honor, expending ourselves for the work of Christ. Amen.

In Kelly Kopic's incredible book *You're Only Human*, he talks about the discouragement a friend of his named Matt felt at how little he could do in this world. With so many good ministries in the church - prison ministries, ministries to the homeless, overseas missions opportunities, how does one not say yes to everything? Kopic's encouragement is profound. This is what he said, **"I encouraged him the same way I encourage myself. Today I am caring for prisoners in jail; I am evangelizing the disenfranchised in Nepal; I am praying over the sick child in the hospital; I am serving the recovering victims of sex trafficking; I am standing against racial injustice; I am caring for widows. I am doing so much more. How? I am doing all of this because I am part of the living body of Christ. God's Spirit has united me to Christ and, because of that union, to my sisters and brothers of faith. We are one, I am part of the church, both local and global."** In short,