

A Living Example: Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:25-30

Online Sermon:

http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567

The spiritual gifts and divine tasks a believer receive are the work of the Holy Spirit. While we know that every task in the church is to be honored, we tend to rejoice, give credit, and even covet those tasks within the church that are public because they make the believer appear to be holy. I guess in a self-seeking generation this is to be expected for are not those who publicly minister by preaching, singing, playing instruments, or



teaching tempted to seek such positions because they are noticed and therefore prestigious? And is it not easier to convince others that one is holy when the outward mask one wears so visibly and publicly appears to honor our Lord? While some believers seek prestigious gifts for self-serving goals there are many who publicly minister with a servant's heart and deserve to be honored. But what about those who are not given public gifts and roles inside the church but serve indiscriminately in the manner the Lord asks? Does not

seeking unity inside a group of diversified members require that each of us see all others as indispensable and equally valued at the foot of the cross? After all, was not Christ's sacrifice of silence when questioned by Pilot the act of an honorable and holy God?

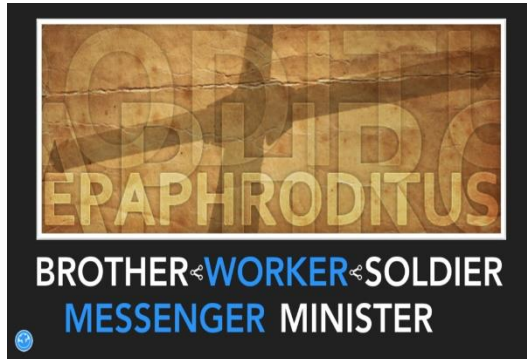
If one wants to live a life worthy of the Gospel should not one be like Christ and practice humble service and give our lives, i.e., our time and resources, to serve others?

Apostle Paul in today's passage reminded the Philippians that while Epaphroditus' service was merely to take a gift of money to him it was truly a sacrifice of praise to the Lord for he risked his very life in doing so! As you read through this sermon, please ask yourself what does an honorable believer look like? What are their characteristics and am I that person? Is there someone in the church that deserves to be honored but has been ignored because their service is not public and if so, how can I honor that person?

The Character of an Honorable Man

When one reads the various letters of Paul to the churches one soon realizes that during his ministry, he encountered a variety of ministers. Some were a "great

hindrance to his work for the Lord”¹ for they “preached Christ out of envy and rivalry” (1:15) but others emulated Christ’s humility and were considered by Paul to be partners, co-equals because they lived the Gospel of Christ!



Last sermon we met such a person, Timothy, whom Paul called his dear son, and this week we are going to look another, Epaphroditus. We know very little about this man² except for the

meaning of his name and what Paul says in his letter to Philippi about him. “Epaphroditus is a Greek name meaning lovely, charming, or amiable. His name was derived from the name Aphrodite, the goddess of love.”³ It is likely he was a Gentile

convert.⁴ He was a messenger sent from the church of Philippi to “convey their love”⁵ to Apostle Paul. Since “Roman prison officials provided little, if any, provisions for prisoners’ food, clothing, bath, or bedding;” it fell upon friends, family, and colleagues to provide these “basic necessities.”⁶ Epaphroditus was commissioned by the church of Philippi to not only take a gift of money to Apostle Paul (4:8) but also to become his personal assistant in charge of taking care of his needs (2:25).⁷ Unlike Timothy whom Paul would send soon (2:19), Paul explained to the church that he felt “it necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus” (2:25). Before giving his reasons for doing so⁸ Paul honored him by stating five of his characteristics that “should be possessed by every born-again believer.”⁹ First, Paul called him brother because having “been adopted by the Father” he had entered a new relationship with other believers, a spiritual sibling in Christ!¹⁰ Are not those in the church today to view each other as family? Second, “he was on a team who lived,

¹ Alan Carr, [“An Anatomy of a Lovely Christian \(Philippians 2:25–30\),”](#) in *The Sermon Notebook: New Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 3002.

² Alan Carr, [“An Anatomy of a Lovely Christian \(Philippians 2:25–30\),”](#) in *The Sermon Notebook: New Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 3002.

³ Paul Barnett, [Philippians & Philemon: Joy in the Lord](#), ed. Paul Barnett, Reading the Bible Today Series (Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press, 2016), 79.

⁴ Peter Thomas O’Brien, [The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 329.

⁵ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 124.

⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon](#), vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 358.

⁷ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 203.

⁸ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 201.

⁹ Alan Carr, [“An Anatomy of a Lovely Christian \(Philippians 2:25–30\),”](#) in *The Sermon Notebook: New Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 3002.

¹⁰ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 123.

traveled, and served Paul for the advance of the Gospel.”¹¹ As ambassadors of Christ are we not also called to give reason why we have hope too (2 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 3:15)? Third, Epaphroditus and Paul had been and were still in a spiritual war which required them to stand firm for Christ and proclaim the Gospel.¹² Are not we as believers still called today to put on the armor of God because we are constantly wrestling against “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:10-23)¹³ as we spread the Good News? Fourth, Epaphroditus was a messenger of the church of Philippi. Likewise, when believers go into the world are we not to let our light shine as messengers of the Lord (Matthew 5:14-16)? And finally, Paul stated Epaphroditus was a servant of the Lord in which we too share in this glorious calling!

Reflection. “Wouldn’t these five terms be wonderful on a tombstone? Wouldn’t you like to be known as a brother, coworker, fellow soldier, messenger, and minister? What would people say should go on your tombstone? Emulate Epaphroditus!”¹⁴

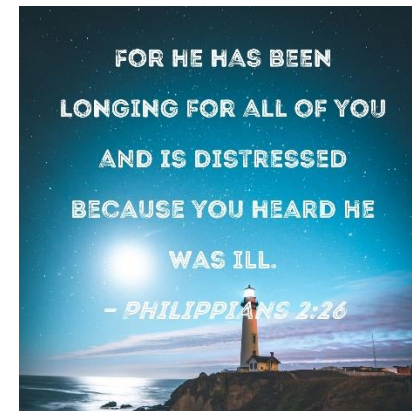
¹¹ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 202.

¹² Homer A. Kent Jr., “[Philippians](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 134.

¹³ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 124.

Sacrifices of an Honorable Man

After having described five amazing characteristics of Epaphroditus Paul stated the reason why it was so urgent to send him back to the church at Philippi. Epaphroditus had become



“distressed” when he found out the Philippians had heard he was ill (2:26). The Greek word for distressed “implies heart-sickness, restless, unsatisfied weariness”¹⁵ and was used in Mark 14:33 to “describe Jesus’ anguish in Gethsemane!”¹⁶

Epaphroditus “was not overwhelmed by homesickness” but instead was concerned that news of his illness had caused great anxiety amongst the Philippians for his well-being.¹⁷ How he became ill is unknown. The journey from

¹⁴ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 124.

¹⁵ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Philippians](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 64.

¹⁶ R. Kent Hughes, [Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 116.

¹⁷ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 124.

Philippi to Rome “overland on the Egnatian Way to Dyrrachium; by ship across the Adriatic to Brundisium; overland on the Appian Way to Rome, a total journey of more than 1500 kilometers!”¹⁸ It is possible during this long journey he caught malaria¹⁹ or some other disease due to poor hygienic conditions both at inns and on boats. Since “Paul had established apostolic precedent in sending large gifts by groups (2 Corinthians 8:16-22),” this would explain how the Philippians found out about his illness for it was likely that one of them likely returned to Philippi to give them the news.²⁰ It is also possible that Epaphroditus became ill at the prison with what ancient writers of the time called “squalor of long captivity” (Lucan, 87 B.C.) or “the squalor of the dungeon” (Cyprian, A.D. 250).²¹ Though we do not know the nature of the illness, Paul boldly stated it was so severe that it required divine intervention to keep him from dying!²² “Even with death at his doorstep, Epaphroditus, like Jesus, was concerned about others more than himself. Jesus was obedient to death (Phil 2:8); Epaphroditus was obedient to the point of death (2:27), yet another way Epaphroditus points us to Jesus.”²³ Paul thanked God for His mercies on

Epaphroditus and thanked God he had been spared “sorrow upon sorrow” should he had died (2:27)!

Though Paul “exclaimed that to die is gain (1:21), promised the peace of God, which transcends all understanding (4:7), and had learned the secret of being content in any and every situation (4:12);”²⁴ rejoicing in the Lord for Paul did not mean denying expressing grief over the death of a dear brother, even if he was hopeful of his final destination (1 Thessalonians 4:13)!

Thankfully, Epaphroditus was healed by the Great Physician, Christ, and could be sent back to his brothers and sisters in the Lord at Philippi!

Reflection. If asked by the Lord, would you be willing to risk your very life to further the kingdom of God? If you were deathly ill, would you be worried about yourself or the anxiety it was causing others? When you go through trials and tribulations for the Lord are you able to rejoice, count your

¹⁸ Paul Barnett, [Philippians & Philemon: Joy in the Lord](#), ed. Paul Barnett, Reading the Bible Today Series (Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press, 2016), 79.

¹⁹ Clinton E. Arnold, [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon](#), vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 358–359.

²⁰ R. Kent Hughes, [Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 113–114.

²¹ Clinton E. Arnold, [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon](#), vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 359.

²² Homer A. Kent Jr., [“Philippians,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 135.

²³ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 125.

²⁴ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 206.

blessings and be like King David and say, “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life (Psalms 23:6)?

Respect for Others in Ministry

Paul was more eager to send Epaphroditus, so that when they saw him again the Philippians might be glad, and Paul might have less anxiety (2:28). Had Epaphroditus not become



ill, almost died (2:26), but now was miraculously healed by divine intervention; Paul would likely have kept him at the prison attending his needs “indefinitely or at least until the outcome of his trial.”²⁵ Paul decided to send him home without haste for a variety of reasons. First, Epaphroditus could carry Paul’s letter thanking the Philippians for their generous gift,²⁶ update his current circumstances in Rome, and by giving a glowing five-point character reference concerning their

messenger the church would not think their mission had failed.²⁷ Paul wanted the Philippians to know it was his decision, not Epaphroditus’,²⁸ to return quickly lest they might think less of him and overlook the incredible sacrifice he made trekking some 1,500 kilometers to provide Paul with their generous gift! And Paul’s second reason for quickly sending Epaphroditus home was to alleviate concern over his health! “The apostle identifies himself so closely with his readers that their sorrow and anxiety are his own!”²⁹

*Upon his arrival the church would know that Epaphroditus had recovered and that would alleviate not only the Philippians anxiety concerning him but also Paul’s and Epaphroditus anxiety over the Philippians worrying about him!*³⁰

Imagine the rejoicing they must have done the moment they saw their dear brother safe and sound! Paul’s “focus in this passage as always is God-centered; rejoicing in Paul’s theology is praise for God’s mercy and delight in God’s presence. By sending Epaphroditus home, Paul knew this would lead the

²⁵ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 206.

²⁶ Peter Thomas O’Brien, [The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 339.

²⁷ Ralph P. Martin, [Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 11, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 140.

²⁸ Ralph P. Martin, [Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 11, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 140.

²⁹ I-Jin Loh and Eugene Albert Nida, [A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians](#), UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 85.

³⁰ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 126.

church into joyful worship for the merciful intervention of God.³¹

Reflection. Paul who was in prison facing death and Epaphroditus who barely escaped death was more concerned about the anxiety of the Philippians than that of their own welfare! Are you willing to seek first the kingdom of God when your circumstances are bleak? During these difficult times are you able to rejoice in the Lord and “not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (4:6-7)?

Honoring the Sacrifices Made

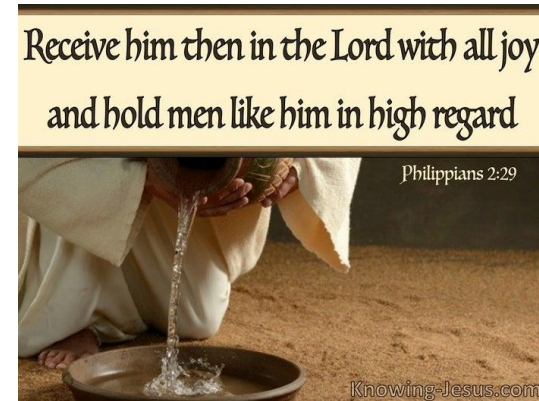
Upon his arrival at home the Philippians were to “welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him” (2:29). Though Epaphroditus was not able to complete his entire mission as outlined by the church, he was not to be

³¹ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 207.

³² Homer A. Kent Jr., “[Philippians](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 136.

³³ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [Philippians](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 64.

criticized³² but honored for his faithful and sacrificial service that the Philippians themselves could not give. Epaphroditus also should be honored for he risked his very life to fulfill his mission! “Risky” in Greek means “to lay down a stake, to gamble.”³³ Having almost died during his service clearly demonstrated



Epaphroditus lived the words of Christ, “those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for Me and for the

Gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).³⁴ “Ancient church tradition tells us that Epaphroditus was known for his work among the sick in Rome. It is said that he and others would try to help people that most others would not even dare go near.”³⁵ Epaphroditus lived Paul’s instruction that the believers were to do nothing out of selfish ambition and vain conceit but in humility were to value others above themselves by looking out for their

³⁴ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 209.

³⁵ Alan Carr, “[An Anatomy of a Lovely Christian \(Philippians 2:25–30\)](#),” in *The Sermon Notebook: New Testament* (Lenoir, NC: Alan Carr, 2015), 3004.

interests! His life was a “fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (4:18)³⁶ because he was living a life worthy of the Gospel message (1:27)! Paul told the Philippians to “greet their returning delegate in royal fashion,”³⁷ which was consistent with the “teachings of Christ who said that the greatest honor among His followers belongs to the one who renders the lowliest service (Mk 10:42–45; Lk 22:24–27; cf. Jn 13:13–15)!³⁸

Paul was basically telling the Philippians you “owe this young man big-time”³⁹ for his sacrificial service and ought to “give him a really big banquet and a permanent place of honor rather than a simple potluck supper and a quick nod for his service.”⁴⁰

It is not just the most “famous, the talented, and the powerful” with the more public spiritual giftings and service that are to be

³⁶ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 209–210.

³⁷ Ralph P. Martin, [Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 11, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 141.

³⁸ Tony Merida and Francis Chan, [Exalting Jesus in Philippians](#), ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), 127.

³⁹ R. Kent Hughes, [Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 117.

honored⁴¹ but those “ordinary people” who do extraordinary ministry behind the scenes, selflessly for the honor and glory of God the Father in heaven!

The Christian life ought to be “filled with honoring one another (Rom 12:10; Eph 6:2; 1 Tim 5:3, 17; 6:1; Heb 13:4; 1 Pet 2:17),” especially those who exemplify the “humble self-sacrificing attitude”⁴² and service of our Lord!

Reflection. Have you ever identified and thanked those in the church that do “out of sight” service for the honor of our Lord? Are you serving the Lord with the spiritual gifts that He has given you? If you were given gifts to serve in the kingdom of God without any possible recognition, would you use your gifts to serve others or would you bury your talent? If you took an inventory of how you live your life can honestly say you are putting the interests of others above that of your own?

⁴⁰ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 208.

⁴¹ R. Kent Hughes, [Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 117.

⁴² G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 208.

Conclusion

The spiritual gifts and divine tasks a believer receive are the work of the Holy Spirit. It is not the perceived status of the gift, i.e., public versus private, or even the results of one's service, for that truly belongs to the Lord; but the attitude of one's heart that defines success in ministry.



Though Epaphroditus did not fulfill his entire mission as outlined by the church, he went way beyond for he risked his very life to serve others! We are not all called to be pastors, worship leaders, and teachers, but in whatever role the Holy Spirit assigns you, serve with the mind of Christ and with His servant's heart! Living in this "ME" generation we

must be careful to not emulate the worldly desire to only give recognition to the most public and prestigious of roles. We must make a conscious effort to not only honor those who publicly but also privately serve the Lord. There are many people inside the church who are like Epaphroditus and sacrificially give of their time and money and often go unnoticed. Please honor them in the name of the Lord and let them know that at the foot of the cross their service is truly a

sweet fragrance unto yourself and more importantly unto the Lord!