

HUMILITY IN STREET CLOTHES
PHILIPPIANS 2:17-30

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Douglas Hyde was news editor for several years in the 1940s of the London Communist newspaper *Daily Worker*. After twenty years as a committed member of the Communist Party, he left the organization and converted to Roman Catholicism. He later wrote a little book entitled *Dedication and Leadership*, in which he described what he regarded as the reasons for the effectiveness of the Communist movement during much of the twentieth century. At one point he wrote, **“If you ask me what is the distinguishing mark of the Communist, what it is that Communists most outstandingly have in common, I would not say, as some people might expect, their ability to hate--- this is by no means common to them all. I would say that beyond any shadow of doubt it is their idealism, their zeal, dedication, devotion to their cause and willingness to sacrifice.”**

A fundamental reason for the success of Communism in much of the world in the twentieth century, for the success of national socialism in Germany, for the success of militant nationalism in Japan, and for the success of radical Islam in more recent days is the appeal to people to forsake all and become part of a cause that has universal significance. The reason for the decline of the first three movements was that their philosophical foundations just did not correspond to reality--- to the way that the world really is and to the way in which we humans have been created. Nevertheless there is something within us human beings that admires and finds attractive total commitment to a cause that goes beyond ourselves, which gives us personal fulfillment and even joy. We humans were created to live for something beyond ourselves. We were made to be part of something that is bigger than our own individual lives and communities. But such a cause, to have staying power, must correspond to reality and truth.

We are seeing the power of this commitment to a cause at work in Ukraine. By objective standards, by measurable resources like tanks and planes and artillery pieces and manpower, Russia should be overwhelming the undermanned army of Ukraine. But it is not. Why? A key factor is that the Ukrainians are committed to a cause. They are living and dying for their homeland. The conscripts of the Russian army don't see the “special military operation” as a cause worth dying for.

From our study of the New Testament Book of Philippians we have seen that the Apostle Paul was convinced that he was part of a cause that corresponded to reality and truth. He was also convinced that this cause was worthy of total commitment. Paul had indeed sacrificed much for the sake of his commitment to Christianity. The fact that the movement in which he played such an instrumental part is still around today and continuing to grow proves that it had staying power and should cause everyone to carefully consider its claims for truth.

The passage before us this morning describes a mindset that is essential if we want to be committed participants in this cause. Indeed this is a quality that is required of the participants in any cause that is to have significant impact upon the world. How much more it should be reflected in us who are part of something that provides true answers to the most important questions of life.

We have seen in our study of Philippians that the Apostle Paul had sacrificed all for the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (PROJECTOR ON--- PHILIPPI MAP 2) At the time of the writing of this letter he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial. His charge to the Philippian Christians, who were also faced with persecution for their faith, was **“let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”** One of the primary requirements for this worthy walk, according to Paul, is living in unity with other Christians. The primary requirement for unity is humility. Developing humility in the lives of Christians requires us to focus on the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, to work out our salvation, and, as we saw last week, to learn not to be complainers.

I.

In our passage this morning the apostle shows us what humility looks like in street clothes. He provides us with three examples of humility as displayed in the lives of three different Christians. First of all, in vv. 17 & 18 of #2 in Philippians (p. 981) we are given THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY IN PAUL. (I. THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY IN PAUL) The apostle says, **“Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”**

Drink offerings were part of the sacrificial system of both the Jewish faith and many of the Gentile religions. Numbers #15 describes how the Jews were to bring an animal sacrifice to the tabernacle or temple in certain situations. Wine was to be poured out around the animal when it was laid on the altar. In the pagan Greek religions when animals were sacrificed, the drink offering was usually poured out right on the animal. There were very few Jews in Philippi. Most of the Christians there came from pagan backgrounds. But Paul’s description of drink offerings would have been understood by Christians from both Gentile and Jewish backgrounds.

The drink offering played a secondary role in the sacrifices of the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul here is comparing the sacrifice and service of faith of the Philippian Christians with the primary sacrifice on the altar. Paul is giving credit to the Christian commitment of the Philippians. He has great respect for their service for Christ. He concludes a couple of times in this letter that he is going to be released from captivity. But he sees his imprisonment as suffering that is a sacrifice. Paul says that it is a privilege for him in his imprisonment to serve as an accompanying drink offering for their sacrifice, for their own persecution for the faith.

His attitude in the midst of his own circumstances? **“I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.”** Paul doesn’t complain.

He is not bitter about his treatment. He focuses on the cause. He lives above his circumstances and experiences joy, and he wants his readers to have that same joy.

His humility is exhibited in several ways. **First**, he magnifies the contribution of the Philippian Christians. His own imprisonment in the cause of Christ, or even his possible martyrdom, is but a drink offering in comparison to their service and Christian commitment. In the face of difficult circumstances that have resulted partly because of our commitment to Christ--- getting fired for refusing to lie to customers, going to church when our parents disapprove of that, quitting a job because it takes too much time away from our family--- the temptation is to focus upon our good works. True humility focuses upon the contributions of others. It builds up other Christians for the good things that they have done. That is what Paul does.

Secondly, Paul was willing to sacrifice his own life for the cause of Christ. The essence of humility is putting someone other than ourselves first. Paul did that. He was convinced that his service was of eternal significance. Lenin once declared that "Communists are dead men on furlough." Paul and the first apostles had the same attitude. Communists offered no hope for life after death. How much more Jesus Christ has to offer!

Then, **thirdly**, in the midst of difficult personal circumstances Paul was willing to part with two of his closest co-workers so that they might serve others. Timothy and Epaphroditus were of great personal encouragement and practical help to Paul in his confinement. To send them off was an act of humility. He put the interests of others above his own interests.

II.

In vv. 19-24 Paul describes THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY IN TIMOTHY. (II. THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY IN TIMOTHY) Some Christians could say, "It is really impossible to expect that I could live up to the example of humility in Jesus Christ. After all He was God, and Paul was the Apostle of Jesus Christ. He was unique and had a special empowerment from God. So I shouldn't be expected to live up to his example either." Even if we granted all of that, we would still have other examples of humility with which we would have to contend. Timothy is one such example. He was an ordinary young man who became a great example of humility.

Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor. (LYSTRA MAP) His mother was Jewish, and his father was Greek. Paul preached in Lystra on his first missionary journey. Timothy may have become a follower of Christ on that occasion. (SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY) On Paul's second missionary journey the apostle again stopped in Lystra. According to Acts #16 the Christians there spoke very highly of Timothy. So Paul brought him along on the rest of the trip, and Timothy became an important co-worker with Paul. Timothy was with Paul when he made his first visit to Philippi.

Now according to our passage Timothy is with Paul in Rome. (PROJECTOR OFF) In v. 20 Paul says that he has no one like him there who takes such a genuine interest in the

affairs of the Philippian Christians. Literally he says, **“I have no one else of equal soul.”** In v. 22 he says that Timothy has proven himself. Paul has invested in Timothy and has seen God at work in his life to develop his faith and character and skill. The young man has become a capable Christian and an effective worker..

Now Timothy is willing to go to Philippi for Paul. Apparently there were other Christians who didn't have the same willingness. In #1 Paul made reference to Christians who were preaching the gospel out of impure motives. In v. 21 the apostle speaks of some of these other believers and says, **“For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”** Back in v. 4 of this chapter Paul said, **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** Five or six years prior to this Paul wrote a letter to the church at Rome, and in the last chapter he mentioned 26 Christians in that city by name. Many of them must have been leaders.

Now Paul seems to indicate that of all of these other Christian leaders who might be reasonable candidates to make a trip to Philippi, none are willing to go. Certainly none of them have the same interest in the Philippians which Timothy does, who had assisted in the establishment of the church there. Paul was probably hesitant to part with Timothy because he was a valuable assistant. But Timothy appears to be the best qualified, available, and willing candidate to take on the mission.

There are several reasons why he wants his younger assistant to go to Philippi. **First**, according to v. 19, Paul looks forward to getting another report about how the Philippian Christians are doing. Given the fact that they were faced with persecution of some sort, Paul had a special interest in their well-being. **Second**, though it is not explicitly stated, I suspect that Paul wanted Timothy to do some encouraging of these persecuted Christians. It would be expected that Timothy would do some teaching and preaching among them. Many of them knew Timothy from Paul's first visit to the city, and he knew them. So there was a respect that they already had for this young man.

Third, Paul wanted to let them know how his trial went. Verse 23 says, **“I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me...”** The impression which that leaves us is that the apostle expects to find out soon what the legal disposition of his case will be. So probably he intends to wait for the outcome of that before sending Timothy to them.

In Timothy we thus find another example of humility. We don't know exactly what his family situation was. Even if he was a single guy, going to Philippi involved a trip by sea of 700 or 800 miles. It was a bit shorter by land, but it probably would be longer in time. In either case it meant a journey of a number of months. There were always potential dangers in first century travel. There was a sacrifice involved of time and energy and comfort. But Timothy put the interests of others and of the Lord Jesus Christ above those of his own. He undertook this journey of humble service.

Today we Christians are rarely called upon to make that kind of sacrifice. But how willing are we to send a note of encouragement to one of our church missionaries? Or

how often do we visit a shut-in who has ties to our congregation? How willing are we to suffer even a little inconvenience so that we might encourage other Christians who are faced with some kind of suffering? Are we willing to make a financial contribution to one of the Christian groups providing relief for Ukrainian refugees? Or what about assisting the Gideons who provide Bibles in places all over the world?

III.

There is a third example of humility described in our passage. Verses 25-30 deal with **THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY IN EPAPHRODITUS.** (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE EXAMPLE OF HUMILITY...) Paul was a Jewish believer. Timothy was half Jewish and half Gentile. Epaphroditus seems to have been a full-blooded Gentile. His name is based on the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite. So probably his family had worshipped the Greek gods. The only references to Epaphroditus in the Bible are in this passage and in #4. Evidently he was a leader in the church at Philippi and had been sent to Paul in Rome with a gift of money. The understanding seems to have been that he would stay with Paul for a while and help him in whatever ways that he needed assistance.

The apostle in v. 25 calls him **“my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need...”** The term “messenger” is actually “apostle.” Literally it means “one who is sent.” Epaphroditus was an apostle, or “sent one,” from the church at Philippi as compared to Paul, who was one of that small group of divinely appointed apostles who was sent by Jesus Christ Himself. Epaphroditus was specifically sent to help Paul with whatever help he needed.

What kind of needs do you suppose that Paul had? Did he need someone to teach him spiritual truth? I doubt it. Did he need a prophet to reveal God’s will to him. I doubt it. Paul himself possessed the gift of prophecy. My guess is that Paul needed someone who could help him with everyday needs. For at least the first part of his imprisonment Paul was chained to a Roman guard but allowed to live in his own rented quarters. In such circumstances there would have been practical household tasks that it would have been tough for Paul to do himself. He probably needed somebody to cook for him and to do the laundry. Somebody had to buy groceries. Somebody had to pick up around the house. Somebody had to deliver the rent money. There were letters to be written. There were messages to be delivered and errands to be run. There may have been ministry and teaching opportunities where Epaphroditus was involved, but I suspect that he helped with a lot of these mundane chores.

Was it glorious work? Not in the eyes of most people. But to Paul and to the Lord it was valuable service. It doesn’t necessarily require humility to have a prestigious job, to preach in front of large crowds of people, to lead Bible studies, or to travel around the country. But to wash the clothes, to make the meals, to drive the kids to soccer practice and piano lessons and school meetings, to clean up the church kitchen, and to clean up after church events takes humility.

It was the mundane and routine tasks of life that won the approval of the Apostle Paul. Likewise it is the mundane and routine tasks of life that often win the approval of the Lord. Jesus was talking about humility when He told His disciples (MARK 10:44) in Mark #10, “...**whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.**”

One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that is mentioned in the New Testament is “helps.” Perhaps Epaphroditus had that gift. He certainly served as a helper. We Christians are often more inclined to give honor and respect to pastors and teachers and evangelists who have abilities for public speaking and leadership. But notice the honor that Paul gives to this helper. He calls him a brother and a fellow worker and a fellow soldier and a messenger to his need. In v. 29 he tells the Philippians to honor men like him. So when we set out to appreciate fellow Christians for their service, we need to remember those who play a vital though less glamorous role behind the scenes. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Notice also that Paul says that Epaphroditus became sick while he was helping Paul. In fact he almost died. Why didn't Paul heal his helper? Did he lack faith? I hardly think so. Although Paul was an apostle of Christ, and at other times could heal people by a mere word of command, here he did not heal his co-worker. It seems that he could rely only upon the normal divine instrument of prayer. But God was gracious and did heal Epaphroditus, though it seems that it was not by means of an overt miracle. According to v. 27, “...**God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.**” The first sorrow was Epaphroditus' illness. The second sorrow would have been his death.

The Philippian Christians had heard about Epaphroditus' illness. They were concerned about him, but perhaps a few people might have been thinking or murmuring, “We sent this guy to help Paul, and instead he has become a burden.” Maybe some even mumbled: “Perhaps we should not have sent Epaphroditus in the first place. I thought Rufus would have been a better person to send.” Then there are also some who may have been inclined to speculate, “I wonder how sick he really is.”

To counter any kind of thinking along these lines Paul says in vv. 29 & 30 that the Philippian Christians ought to honor and welcome Epaphroditus because he risked his life to make up for the help that they could not give personally because of their distance from him. It appears that Epaphroditus is going back to Philippi now, and Timothy will be sent later.

So Epaphroditus was truly an example of humility. He was not just content to give money when the hat was passed in Philippi. He was willing to take the hat to Paul in Rome. As with Timothy who was willing to go to Philippi, Epaphroditus also made sacrifices in going to Rome. Paul says that he even risked his life to do it. The trip meant taking at least a few months out of his life to undertake this mission. It meant menial, mundane, practical work. But Epaphroditus was committed to the cause of Christ. He was willing to go where he was needed. So he humbled himself and did what was needed.

I had an older friend in Massachusetts who was a machinist by trade. Adam was also a deep thinker. He was a good father and husband who turned out two fine sons. When Adam and his family came to my church in Massachusetts, he was semi-retired. Years earlier he had been a church youth leader, and he had a gift for teaching. Our church at the time had a need for someone to lead our young single adult group. Some people might not have thought of him as being a likely candidate for the job. He was in his sixties. The people in the group were in their twenties. But Adam was a good candidate. Because Adam was willing to go where he was needed, and do what needed doing, he agreed to help out, and he did a great job for a number of years. He displayed the same kind of humility that Epaphroditus did. He helped out where he was needed for the sake of the cause of Christ. We are blessed to have many people like that in our congregation.

IV.

(PROJECTOR ON--- IV. APPLICATIONS) Consider then a couple of final APPLICATIONS that can be made from these three examples of humility.

A.

First, we Christians need to BE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR THE NEEDS OF OTHER PEOPLE. (IV. APPLICATIONS A. BE ON THE LOOKOUT...) Paul says back in #2 v. 4, **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** As Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus applied that principle, they made considerable sacrifices.

The most basic level of human responsibility that we have as Christians is our families. Concern for them may mean that we husbands and dads need to sacrifice more time and work involvement to be with our wives and children. That responsibility might even involve sacrificing some of our church involvements. The same responsibility also applies to wives and mothers.

I have never heard an older father reflecting back upon his life and saying, “You know, I wish I had spent more time at the office.” I have frequently heard people later in life say, “I wish I had spent more time with my family.” Years ago I heard former Senator George McGovern reflecting upon his own life. At one point his alcoholic daughter was found frozen to death in a snow bank. Senator McGovern confessed that he had blown it as a father when his children were young. He wished so much that he had given more time to his children. Let’s not make the same mistake.

For the senior citizens in our midst, some of whom are limited in their physical abilities by age and health, a concern for others might be reflected in a more concerted effort to spend time in prayer for the needs of other Christians. Several times the New Testament mentions that one of the most valuable services that Christian widows provide is praying for fellow believers.

B.

Another simple thing that we can all do to meet the needs of others is to BE ON THE LOOKOUT TO INCLUDE PEOPLE ON THE MARGINS. (IV. A. B. BE ON THE LOOKOUT TO INCLUDE...) One of the first things that I learned in college when I became involved in a Christian campus group was the principle that we called “divide and conquer.” This principle meant that whenever one is present in a Christian meeting or service, he or she should divide up and look for new people to talk to. Our first responsibility is not to talk to our friends before and after Christian meetings. It is to seek out visitors and new people and people who might be feeling a little left out.

For some of us that involves a sacrifice of our security. We may find it a little threatening to reach out to new people. But if we are going to put the interests of others above those of our own, we need to cultivate a mindset that is always reaching out to newcomers and people that might feel a little left out. I think that we do a pretty good job of doing that. I am sure that we can do even a better job of it.

Another way in which we can exhibit humility is to be on the lookout for practical needs that churches and individual Christians have. Epaphroditus had a primary ministry of meeting the practical needs of the Apostle Paul. Paul said that a helper like Epaphroditus should be held in high esteem, because he had a sacrificial, humble spirit.

In a church community like ours there are always practical needs that need meeting. We have a deacons' fund that we use to meet financial needs of people in our midst. If you designate money for that, it will go to helping out in this area. We have people who set up for the parking lot service. We have a church treasurer who spends time keeping our church finances straight. We have someone who tends to our roses. We have people who help out with outreach events and church socials. Most of these good deeds don't get a lot of attention and recognition. But they are the kinds of things that the Bible labels as humble service. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the fourth century a man by the name of Telemachus decided that he wanted to be truly committed to Christ. So he became a monk and chose to live in the desert and to spend his time fasting, praying, and meditating. After a while he came to recognize that his relationship with God was actually selfish. His attention was focused upon God, but true love for God required him to serve other people. Love for God meant putting the interests of others above those of his own.

The early stories about his life vary somewhat. But it seems that Telemachus headed for Rome. The Empire by this time had largely been Christianized, but as has often been the case with supposedly Christian countries, there were many people who called themselves Christians but few who truly had a personal relationship with Christ. Evidence of this was the fact that the gladiator games were still taking place. Christians were no longer being thrown to the lions, but prisoners of war were being thrown into the arena and forced to fight and kill each other. The spectators would cheer and clap as much as they ever did when Christians were being thrown to the lions.

On the day that Telemachus arrived in Rome the games were taking place. He followed the noise of the crowd to the arena where 80,000 people were gathered. As Telemachus watched what was taking place, he was shocked to see men for whom Christ died killing each other to amuse a supposedly Christian population.

Telemachus jumped the wall and in a moment stood between two of the gladiators. For an instant they stopped their fighting, but the crowd screamed, **“Let the games go on.”** So they pushed him aside. Again he intervened. The crowd threw stones at Telemachus. They shouted for the gladiators to kill him. The commander of the games gave an order, and Telemachus was cut down with a sword.

The crowd suddenly grew silent as it realized that a holy man had been killed. According to the early historians at that moment the gladiator games ended, never again to be resumed. In sacrificing his life Telemachus had ended them. The famous historian Edward Gibbon later wrote of him, **“His death was more useful to mankind than his life.”**

In the ultimate act of humility our Lord Jesus Christ also sacrificed His life so that others might live--- eternally. If we are truly followers of Jesus, we will learn from the example of our Lord, the example of Paul, the example of Timothy, and the example of Epaphroditus to look out for the interests of others. We will pursue humility by making sacrifices for the sake of others around us.