

The Gambler

Passionate Servanthood Part 5
Philippians 2:25-30 6-19-2016

Summary: We are to celebrate and honor people like Epaphroditus, who risked his life for his (support) ministry.

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Philippians 2:25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs (lit: and your apostle and minister of my needs). **26** For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. **27** Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. **28** Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. **29** Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, **30** because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Introduction

The Journey

The whole congregation sat in stunned silence at the news. You could hear a pin drop. On the one hand they were all glad to hear that Paul was at least still alive. After going so long without hearing anything from him, a lot of them figured he was probably dead. But I wasn't surprised. I had a feeling he was still alive. But when they announced that he was in prison in Rome, my heart sank. That means he's going to appear before that maniac Nero, and I can't imagine it going to end well. My mind just filled up with images of what it must be like for him in that prison. It's a lot different than what you think of this prison. Back in our day, they didn't provide you with warm clothes and a bed and three meals a day. Friends and family had to provide for you. Do you suppose Paul has people in Rome who will do that? The more they talked about it, the more my heart just ached for him. And not just for Paul, but for the work. What's going to happen in the work of the gospel now? This is just a major blow.

Well, anyway, the silence started to give way as all the rest of the folks started wondering out loud some the same things I was thinking, and there was a kind of rumble of conversation. But then it went right back to dead silence when the pastor looked straight at us and dropped the bomb on us.

"Once again you have all been incredibly generous. I know many of you are struggling even to put food on the table, and so we are blown away at how much came in in the love offering - just as you have many times in the past, every time we've taken an offering for Paul. This will be enough money to take care of Paul for quite some time..."

That part made everybody happy. What caused the silence was the next thing he said: “But obviously this money isn’t going to do Paul any good sitting here. Somebody needs to take it to him.” That’s the part that brought the silence back. Of course, we all knew that someone would have to take the gift – just like the other times. But those other times he was right here in Macedonia. Now he’s 800 miles away. That means walking all day every day for a month, maybe a month and a half, crossing Macedonia, sailing across the Adriatic Sea, going all the way across Italy...

It will be an arduous trip, and it would be a dangerous trip, carrying that much money. It’s not like we had a Wells Fargo truck or anything. Whoever takes that money had better bring a sword and know how to use it. But even scarier than that – what about Rome? If Nero has Paul in prison for preaching the gospel, what’s going to happen to someone who goes there to try to help Paul? If Paul is on death row, is it going to do him any good for one of us to join him on death row?

All those thoughts raced through my head in a matter of seconds, but even as I was thinking all that, I found myself on my feet – stepping forward. I realize it means I’ll have to quit my job, say goodbye to my friends and family, leave my home that I love, and it’s dangerous and scary and all that, but there just isn’t any question in my mind – *I have to go*. There is just no way I’m going to leave Paul sitting there in that Roman prison. I’m going. I may not be a preacher or a leader, I don’t have any special gifts or anything flashy, but I can carry a bag and I can put one foot in front of the other for a month or two and make my way to Rome.

So before I even realized what I was doing, I heard the words coming out of my own mouth, “I’ll go. And not just to drop off the money. I mean I’ll go and stay there, long-term. However long I can be of any help to Paul, that’s what I want to do.”

Well, I took the next couple days to get all my stuff in order, and I was thrilled to find out that a couple other guys volunteered to go with me. They didn’t want to send that much money with someone walking alone, so these guys were going to come along to make sure I made it to Rome. That made me feel a lot better about the situation.

Well, the journey went pretty well for the first week or so. We had made it about 80 miles outside of Berea when I started going downhill. And I’ll tell you – I’ve never been sick like that in my life. We made it to a village where there was a doctor, and he just told me flat out – “Go back home.” He told me that if I went back home and got bed rest, I might survive. But he said, “If you try to cross the Adriatic Sea and then try to make it all the way to Rome, you’ll be in a coffin before you make it even halfway.”

Yeah, that’s true. That doctor didn’t give him a lot of hope if he kept going. And so we begged him, “Epaphroditus, you’ve got to go back. What good is it going to do Paul if you die trying to cross Italy?” But Epaphroditus just kept talking about Paul, and about the work of the gospel, and there was just no reasoning with him.

So we kept plugging ahead. We’d walk for five or six hours, then Epaphroditus would collapse in a heap, and we’d have to stop and rest. And the farther we got, the worse it got, until it was finally getting pretty obvious – our dear friend wasn’t going to make it. Back in those days we didn’t have the medicine like you do, and so when someone got this sick they almost never recovered. It just didn’t happen. So we shed a lot of tears – Epaphroditus was a good man. And he was so young – it was just heartbreaking to see something like this happen.

There was a real nice couple we met who were actually headed the other direction and they said they were going to pass through Philippi. So we asked them to please let the folks there know what happened to Epaphroditus, and they said they would.

Well, we did finally make it to Rome. That Epaphroditus, he’s a tough guy. I have never seen anyone just keep pushing ahead when they were that sick. But he was determined to get this gift to Paul or die trying.

I don’t know if that’s exactly how it happened, but what we do know is that not only did Epaphroditus almost die from his illness, but the reason he almost died was because he intentionally made some decision that put his life at risk.

Philippians 27 Indeed he was ill, and almost died.

30 he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life

So it's not just that he got sick and almost died, but he almost died because he made a decision, knowing that making that decision put his life at risk. Why did he do that? Because he was just like Timothy – the interests of others were more important to him than his own interests.

We have been studying through the book of Philippians and we come this morning to the last paragraph of chapter 2, which is all about what sort of men and women we are to honor in the church. One thing you'll notice if you read through the chapter is that the first half of the chapter is loaded with commands. Paul is telling us all kinds of things to do. But in the second half of the chapter, from verse 18 all the way to the end, there are no commands ... except for at the very end, in verse 29.

29 Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him

The command is to welcome and honor people who are like Epaphroditus.

Review

Now let me show you how this fits into the overall purpose of the book. The church in Philippi was a great church – maybe the best church in the world at the time. But they were having a problem with disunity because the people were becoming selfish. Selfishness leads to bickering and disunity 100% of the time. And so Paul begs them in the beginning of the chapter: “If you have received any love at all from God – any tenderness – if God has been gracious to you in any way, then please, come together in unity. And here's what coming together in unity looks like:

Philippians 2:3 doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considering others more important than yourselves, 4 each of you looking not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

That's not easy. It goes against all our natural instincts and against everything the world says to do. How is it even possible? What does it even look like for a person to live that way? Paul says, “You want to know what it looks like? Look at Jesus. He set aside the glories of heaven and became a man, lived like a slave, and obeyed God the Father even to the point of submitting to crucifixion – all to serve our interests. He put our eternal interests ahead of his own temporal interests.”

And if that example seems kind of out of reach and you need something a little more down to earth that you can relate to, look at Paul. He poured his life out as a drink offering to serve the Philippians' spiritual interests. Or look at Timothy.

Philippians 2:20 I have no one else like him, who has genuine anxiety over your interests. 21 For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

Unlike everyone else, Timothy put Christ's interests ahead of his own, which means he put the Philippians' spiritual interests ahead of his own temporal interests. So Paul gives us Christ's example, then his own, then Timothy's, and now one more: Epaphroditus. We could title the second half of this chapter “A Few Good Men.” It's three different men who serve as examples for us to follow so we can get the hang of being humble and selfless and putting others' interests ahead of our own.

That is the overall picture of the chapter. But Paul doesn't just give us examples. He is also teaching us in this section how to go about following an example. Last week we learned about that by seeing the type of relationship Timothy had with Paul. We found that if you are going to learn from someone's example, that is most effective when there is a certain kind of relationship – a father/son type relationship like those two men had. Spiritual fathers and mothers in the church need to open up their lives so that people can know them well enough to learn from their example. And spiritual sons and daughters in the church need to have humility like Timothy, who was teachable because he thought of himself as being like a kid with his dad.

So that's one principle about how to follow godly examples – mentoring relationships. And now in this passage we are going to learn another one. Another way to successfully imitate godly examples is to honor them.

The Command: Welcome and Honor

We Cultivate What We Honor

Plato made that observation 2400 years ago. He said, “What is honored in a country is cultivated there.” He was talking about the city of Sparta, which loved warfare and honored fighting and conquest. And predictably, Sparta became famous for cultivating powerful warriors, because when something is honored in a culture, people will naturally aspire to that. Athens was different – they honored intellect. And so they ended up producing many of the great philosophers that are still being studied today. What a culture honors, it will cultivate. You can see that in our culture today with sexual immorality and gender confusion. First it was fornication (having sex before marriage), then homosexuality, and now transsexualism. All three used to be frowned upon, but one by one, pop culture started to honor those things – movies and music that portrayed them in a positive light with good, likable characters doing those things. And as the culture started holding those things up as honorable, we started producing more and more of those things.

That process is observable not only in cultures, but also in individuals. If you look back, in many areas you can track the trajectory of your life by who you admired at the time. The traits you look up to in others will tend to be the traits you cultivate in your own life.

And it's the same way in a church. Paul commands us to honor men like Epaphroditus, not only because people like that are worthy of honor, but also because in honoring them, we will cultivate more of them. So one of the keys to imitation is honor. Take the people we want to imitate, and honor them. Celebrate them. Make a big deal about them. That's one of the responsibilities of a church. God has commanded it.

Are We Doing This?

So what kinds of things are honored in Agape? Whatever it is, that's what we are cultivating and it's what we will tend to produce. So who are we honoring? I don't think we are honoring the wrong people. But are we honoring anybody? It may be that the church in general has been so concerned about not giving too much honor to men, that we err in the other extreme and fail to give honor where honor is due. We have somehow missed Romans 13:7.

Romans 13:7 Give everyone what you owe him ... if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

That's in the context of honoring our civil authorities, but if it applies to unbelieving government officials, how much more would it apply to men and women who love the Lord Jesus Christ?

Honoring the people we want to imitate is something I think the world does a lot better job at than we do. They make a huge deal about the people they admire, and it works – they really do end up producing more of those kinds of people. Pay \$20 million to an athlete, and you get athletes coming out of the woodwork – sacrificing everything to become like that superstar athlete that everyone admires.

I wonder, are there any of our children who come to church, and they see how much a humble person is honored and respected, and it makes them aspire to become humble? Do kids grow up seeing selfless people, gracious people, zealous people so highly honored and celebrated that they aspire to grow up and be like that? Of all the church traditions that exist, can you think of any church tradition that is designed to honor men and women who are like Epaphroditus? It seems like there should be, given the fact that this is a direct, explicit command in the Word of God. Why doesn't the church obey this command more? As I said, maybe it's because we watch the world go overboard with honoring men. They not only honor their

heroes, they practically worship them. I think in the church we see that, and we want to do anything like that, so we hardly honor people at all.

My first year of college I attended the Masters college, shortly after John MacArthur became the president of that college. I didn't have a vehicle, so I had to bum a ride with other students in order to get to church on Sunday. And finding a ride to MacArthur's church was no easy task. Nobody wanted to go to that church for fear of being branded "MacArthurite." Obviously it wasn't a doctrinal issue, because they had no problem going to his college. It was just that they were afraid of being labeled a groupie. So they passed up the opportunity to sit under the preaching of one of the greatest Bible expositors of our time just because they were afraid of being seen as honoring a man. Timothy wasn't afraid of being called Paul's groupie. We can give honor to those to whom honor is due without going overboard and idolizing them. And we must. It is commanded – and not just in this verse. We see it other places.

1 Timothy 5:17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those who labor at preaching and teaching.

1 Corinthians 16:15 ... the household of Stephanas ... have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, 16 to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. 18 ... Recognize such men.

Recognize them. Figure out who they are in the church and honor them.

That's one of the commands in this verse. The other one is to welcome him.

29 Welcome him in the Lord with great joy

Welcoming godly people is something Jesus talked about.

Matthew 10:41 ... anyone who welcomes a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.

So the Bible is very clear. If there is someone in the church who demonstrates godly character, we are required by God to do two things: welcome them with great joy, and honor them. That will help us imitate them. So let's talk about what those two things look like.

Welcoming

The first word (*pros-dechomai*) means to welcome or receive someone. The idea of receiving means they are approaching you and your arms are open wide. So the word itself points to a joyful, warm reception, but then Paul adds this phrase **welcome him in the Lord with great joy**. What comes to your mind when you think of welcoming someone with great joy? I think of throwing a party. Like the way the father responded when the prodigal son came home.

Luke 15:22 But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

That's what comes to my mind when I think of welcoming someone with great joy. Do we ever do anything like that in the church? And if we do, is it in ways that make such a big deal over certain virtues that people in the church will want to aspire to have those virtues? As I was studying this I just couldn't help but wonder if we are falling short of our partying responsibility. And I mean that with all seriousness. The command is very clear – **welcome him in the Lord with great joy**.

Honoring

The other word is to **honor** - *to hold in high esteem, to respect, to prize highly, or to regard as greatly valuable*. Again - the world does this with their heroes. It's called VIP treatment. They go all out,

and they do it for really shallow things – money or fame mostly. We are called to give the VIP treatment not to rich people or famous people, but rather to people who are like Epaphroditus.

So if you put the joyful welcome together with the high honor, basically what you have is Paul ordering them to give Epaphroditus a hero's welcome. And it always makes me chuckle a little bit when I think about this because they are going to get this instruction until after he gets back, because he's the one bringing the letter. So he has already arrived, they greeted him and gave him whatever welcome they were going to give him, and now they read this letter. I wonder if any of them got to this point and thought, "Oops." But we can see from this that Paul is talking about more than just their initial greeting. This is to be an ongoing attitude.

I'm not sure exactly what this would look like. It could be done in formal ways – giving awards or special gifts of recognition; or it could be done in informal ways – just having this attitude of great respect and high esteem towards the person. I think the purpose of the former is to accomplish the latter. The goal is for everyone to have this attitude, and if we did some things publicly, that may help the attitude along.

So what are we going to do at Agape to move in this direction? Honestly, I don't know. I have to admit, this principle kind of blindsided me this week. I have known about this verse all my life, but for whatever reason, it just never really penetrated my thick skull before. I guess I've always thought of this in terms of children or youth. When I was a youth pastor I did this. I had a point system where students could work towards various rewards by earning points. And they could get 10 or 20 points by winning the games we played. Or 50 points for bringing their Bible to youth group. Or 100 points for memorizing a passage of Scripture. But if I ever saw one of them demonstrate humility or selflessness – put someone else first, or go out of their way to welcome an outsider, or admit they were wrong in a conflict – if any of the youth worker saw them doing something like that, they would be given something like 5000 points right on the spot. That kind of thing is easy to do when you're dealing with people who are motivated by points. It's a little harder with mature adults. Most adults are motivated a lot more by an expression of gratitude or a big hug or something like that. So all that to say I'm not sure exactly how to go about improving in this area other than just by preaching this principle, and calling on the whole church to strive to celebrate and honor people like Epaphroditus.

He is not saying to do this for everyone. Obviously we should show respect and love to everyone, but what Paul is talking about here is a special kind of recognition and honor that goes beyond the norm. It's reserved for those who are like Epaphroditus.

The world honors fame - mostly athletes and performers – regardless of their character. And since we live in this culture, that will be our tendency in the church as well. We'll make much of the Christian pop singers rather than men and women who risk their lives for the work of the gospel on the mission field. We will tend to clamor around the talented and the beautiful and make celebrities out of those who can entertain us. But if we do it right, and we really do try to honor men like Epaphroditus, what is it that we are looking for exactly? What was Epaphroditus like?

Paul uses five words to describe him in verse 25: **brother, worker, soldier, messenger, and minister**. We don't have time today to get into each one of those terms – hopefully we'll have time next week. But for now I'll just say, these are high, honoring descriptions. To Paul he was a brother, and the fellow worker, and a soldier, joining at Paul's side and taking on all of Paul's many enemies. And to the Philippians he was a messenger and minister. The Greek words are *apostolos* and *leitourgos* - missionary and priestly minister. That's what Paul sees when he looks at Epaphroditus. Everyone else looks at Epaphroditus and just sees a guy on an errand making a delivery. Paul sees a minister in the priestly service of God carrying out the most holy work. That is a great lesson on how even the most mundane kind of support roles in the church are tremendously important.

The Virtue: Risk

But as wonderful as all that is, that's not the reason Paul told us to honor Epaphroditus. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all working to some degree or another, and we are all involved in spiritual warfare, so we are soldiers. And all Christians are carrying out priestly service in God's temple

because we are a kingdom of priests. So what was it that made Epaphroditus worthy of special honor? One word: *risk*.

Philippians 2:29 Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life...

We are all brothers and sisters and workers and soldiers, but it's one thing to do those things; it's another thing to risk your life to do them. The word translated **risking** literally means *to expose to danger*. A huge part of life is made up of protecting ourselves from danger. That's why we look both ways when we cross the street. It's why we slow down when the roads turn to ice. It's why we lock our doors and buy insurance and watch our step and wear gloves and a thousand other things we do to minimize risk.

But every once in a while something happens that is more important to us than safety. Normally you won't step out into busy traffic, but if your toddler wanders out there, never mind about caution – you are running out there as fast as you can to save your little one's life. Normally you won't touch thorny bushes without gloves, but if someone's life is in danger, you'll take whatever cuts and scrapes you need to save their life. There's nothing honorable about risk just for the sake of risk. In fact, that's foolish. What is honorable is when you take risks and expose yourself to danger in order to serve someone else's interests because you are serving Christ. Some of you have really been hurt in the past. And so now you had to face the question, are you going to focus on protecting yourself, or are you willing to expose yourself to the danger of being hurt again for the sake of ministry? Some of you may be sitting on your spiritual gift because you're afraid to commit to anything. Right now your future is uncertain, you're waiting to see what happens with your job, you are waiting to find out what happens in your family situation, you're waiting to get a little better lay of the land, waiting, waiting, waiting, because you're thinking, "What if I commit and then things change?" You see all these commands in Scripture – serve, become a servant, wash the feet of the saints, use your spiritual gift, function as a part of the body, but you can't bring yourself to do it because there are too many uncertainties. Too much risk. We want to insulate ourselves to the point that there is no risk. We won't do anything unless all the bases are covered ahead of time.

That's the way we naturally function, and so, to overcome that, we need to make heroes out of people like Epaphroditus. I don't know if he could teach or preach or sing or write or lead or any of that, but if a delivery needed to be made to Rome, he would risk his life to get it done. If there was a ministry need out there, no matter how mundane, to Epaphroditus, if it affected the ministry of the gospel, that was like a toddler in traffic. Never mind about safety – this is important. *Honor men like that*. Honor women who are like that. Honor kids who are like that. Let those people be our heroes, so that we create a culture that cultivates more of that, so that all of us begin to imitate it.

In the early church there was a group of people who took this command very literally, and had Epaphroditus as their hero. The Greek word translated risk in this verse is *paraboleuomai*. And so they called themselves the *paraboloni* - the risk-takers. And they were all about taking risks for the sake of the gospel. They ministered to people with infectious diseases. During the great pestilence of 252 AD the *paraboloni* went out and cared for the sick and buried the dead bodies even of their enemies – bodies which had been left out because of the plague. They made it their mission to unhesitatingly, unflinchingly, and boldly proclaim the gospel in any circumstances. Those people are heroes.

It's inspiring to read about people like that throughout church history. I think of the Moravians. The Moravian Church began with John Huss, who refused to stop preaching the gospel and so they burned him at the stake in 1415. And in 1732 a couple of Moravian missionaries were so passionate about getting the gospel to the African slaves that they tried to sell themselves into slavery just so they could get on the slave ships to share the gospel. They weren't allowed to do that because they were white, but they did manage to find a way to reach those slaves at great cost to themselves. Talk about an uncertain future. How'd you like to sell yourself into the slave trade?

That kind of risk-taking comes from a passion for the progress of the gospel. If you care deeply enough about the progress of the gospel and the Word of God taking hold in people's hearts, then you'll

have an attitude that says, “We’ve got to get this done. If I have to get hurt, so be it. If I have to be killed, so be it. If I have to do something really hard, fine. But we’ve got to get this done.”

And whenever we see someone that has that attitude, let’s find a way, as a church, to welcome those people with great joy and to hold them in the highest honor. Then maybe we won’t be so prone to get lulled to sleep by the fact that our ministry role seems so mundane and unimportant. And so we’ll serve, as long as it’s convenient and fun, and it doesn’t infringe too much on our lives. But if our lives were threatened, would we keep going? Maybe you highly value your role at Agape, but would you die for it? You’re helping out in the nursery – that’s great. But if doing that ministry placed you in a position where you would almost certainly die if you kept on with it, would you continue? Are you that committed to anything?

“But I just haven’t found that special ministry niche where I feel that kind of passion.”

Do you think Epaphroditus rolled the dice with his life because he just felt a compelling passion for carrying bags of money from one place to another? Do you think he said, “That’s my gift! God made me good at carrying bags, and when I carry a bag I feel God’s pleasure”? I don’t think so. I don’t think he risked his life for that ministry because he had a passion for walking or carrying bags or making deliveries or anything like that. He did it because he had a passion for the progress of the gospel, and carrying that bag was what was needed at the time for the work of the gospel. The issue in ministry is not about enjoyment of the activities involved. It’s about having your heart so consumed with the final outcome that nothing can keep you from carrying out your role in that outcome.

Conclusion: No Risk

Will you commit to God right now, right where you’re sitting, to make the progress of the gospel through the church the highest priority in your life? Will you tell him right now, “God, I will risk my life if need be”? And if you’re reluctant to do that because of the risk, I have some great news for you. There is no risk. It’s not really a risk.

“Wasn’t Epaphroditus being reckless? Isn’t it foolish to gamble your life?”

No, not in this case because this is a form of gambling that is very different than in Las Vegas. It’s a very rare form of gambling known as “sure thing gambling.” With sure thing gambling, you are guaranteed a 100 to 1 payoff every time you play.

Mark 10:28 & Matthew 10:27-30 - Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" What then will there be for us?" 29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields-and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

So whatever you risk, you are guaranteed to receive 100 times that plus eternal life thrown in as a bonus – just for playing. Will you take those odds?

Benediction: Matthew 25:24 “Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man ... 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ 26 “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! Matthew 25:20 The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’ 21 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

Application Questions (James 1:25)

- 1) Who are some people in our church or other people you know who are worthy of the kind of honor spoken of in this passage?

- 2) Name some of the risks/dangers that could potentially create hesitation in your mind about serving in ministry.
- 3) During what time period of your life would you say you were the most passionate about ministry? What was/is driving that passion?
- 4) What kinds of ministries are you involved in serving in at this time? And is there a specific area of ministry that is your greatest passion?