

PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL • PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

Del Shimandle • October 20, 2019

Good morning, and welcome! If you're new today, I am glad you are here. If you get a chance after the service, I'd love to meet you face to face. It's always worth repeating, at First Free Church our mission is to help people to be disciples of Jesus Christ and our vision is to celebrate lives that are transformed by Him! We invite you to join us on our journey.

Please allow me to pray before I begin: O God Our Father, Jesus our Lord, and Holy Spirit our teacher, we humble ourselves before you now. Speak to us this morning from Your Word in the Book of Philippians. Teach us what it means to be **partners in the Gospel**, to **have the mind of Christ**, and to **rejoice in You no matter what the circumstances**. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O God. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray, Amen!

Last Sunday was the date of the annual Chicago Marathon. I am farthest thing from a runner, but I have great respect for those who attempt marathons. And last week, First Free Church's own Nicole & Greg Foster both ran, AND COMPLETED the Chicago Marathon! Has anyone else here run a marathon? Hats off to you all. I want to share just a little bit of Nicole's & Greg's story, because it demonstrates our passage today. You see, Nicole had set the goal of running the marathon as a way to mark the milestone of her 40th Birthday. That's right, her first marathon at 40 years of age! And, knowing that all of the preparation, as well as the race itself, were a monumental undertaking, her amazing husband Greg stepped up to train and run the race with her. Greg committed to the same training regimen, all the practice runs to build up to 26.2 miles, all of the stretching, worn out shoes, and aches and pains. And I have heard Nicole testify how his support made it possible to follow through and to finish the race.

Having a partner in the effort made the difference!

I want to tell you another quick story about a different marathon last week. Have you ever heard of Eliud Kipchoge? Perhaps you already heard about him in the news. He is widely considered the world's best living marathoner, and last Saturday morning, in Vienna Austria, he became the first person to ever run a full marathon in under 2 hours! That's 13 miles per hour for 26 miles straight! Have you ever tried to run a single mile in 4 and a half minutes? He did it 26 times in a row without stopping! And do you know how he did it? He had team mates! **Partners in the race!** Every few miles a new group of pace setters would take a turn running in front of him blocking any wind and helping him to maintain that grueling pace.

So, where are we going today and why all this talk about running and pace setters? It's a metaphor that the Apostle Paul uses in his writings, in fact twice in this letter to the church at Philippi. Just last week, we heard in the sermon that Paul wrote in Philippians 2:16: "Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life. And **then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.**" Later in chapter 3 Paul writes: "one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 **I press on toward the goal to win the prize** for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

You need to know that the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint, and that we need partners along the way! Here's what I mean: When you become a Christian you don't go straight to heaven that moment. You don't become perfect over night. Don't get me wrong, through faith in Christ salvation is complete in the sense that you are forgiven and reconciled to God. But there is still the business of following Jesus Christ day to day! Discipleship is a life-long process of being transformed.

The book of Philippians tells us discipleship will be joyous (more on that in upcoming sermons!), but it is also sometimes arduous, sometimes boring, sometimes painful, just like running a marathon. The Christian life is not a sprint, it is a marathon, and God has given us each other as partners to run the race!

Today's passage shows us two examples of what **running that race** of discipleship looks like. Three dominant themes of discipleship found in this letter to the Philippians are **partnership in the Gospel** (v1:5, 2:1), **having the mind of Christ** (1:9-10, 2:2, 5), and **rejoicing in any circumstance** (3:1, 4:4). Paul shows us Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of all three.

In this sermon we are going to do just two things! First, we will consider the example that they set. And second, we will ask how we can follow their example!

Please open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 2, starting in verse 19. If you don't have your own, you can use one of the Bibles in the pew, you'll find our passage on page 1162 If you're reading from MY Bible, you'll find it on page 1174 You can read along silently, as I read the passage aloud.

Philippians 2:19-30 (NIV)

- 19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon,
that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you.
- 20 I have no one else like him,
who will show genuine concern for your welfare.
- 21 For everyone looks out for their own interests,
not those of Jesus Christ.
- 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself,
because as a son with his father
he has served with me in the work of the gospel.
- 23 I hope, therefore, to send him
as soon as I see how things go with me.
- 24 And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.
- 25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus,
my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier,
who is also your messenger,
whom you sent to take care 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 So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy,
and honor people like him,
- 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ.
He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

May the Lord bless the reading of His Word, Amen!

In last week's sermon on the verses immediately before this one, Pastor Jason showed us how Paul exhorted the Philippians to "be captivating people... a visible people—who together shine forth the Lord's glory."¹ In this next passage Paul actually gives the Philippians two examples! Timothy and Epaphroditus are two **heroes of faithfulness**. Remember, these two embody those three dominant themes of Philippians. They are **partners in the Gospel**, they have the **mindset of Christ**, and they **rejoice regardless of the circumstances**.

Let's look at Timothy² first...

You probably recognize the name Timothy, because there are two "books" in the New Testament that bear his name: 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy. Paul had appointed Timothy as the pastor at the church in Ephesus, and wrote these two letters to him with advice and exhortations on how to exercise his spiritual gifts, how to live as a godly example before others, and how to conduct ministry as a pastor. Altogether, there are 26 total references to Timothy in the New Testament.

He was in a special mentoring relationship with Paul. Listen to Acts 16:1-3 (NIV):

"1 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2 The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."

It is even possible that Paul was the one who led Timothy to faith in Christ, because he calls him "my son" in three different locations including the letters that bear his name. Here's one in 1 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV):

"17 For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church."

We also know that Timothy was a frequent partner with Paul on missionary trips³, and was even a co-writer or signer with Paul on six of his letters.⁴ Besides traveling with Paul, he was frequently entrusted as Paul's emissary.⁵ Listen to what Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3:

"2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3 so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them."

Of course, in our passage, Paul is about to send Timothy on a journey as well. We don't know if Timothy had ever been to Philippi before, but Paul is going to send him there to get an update on how things are going (v.2:19b).

So Timothy was quite an key person in Paul's ministry. But here's the thing that inspires us about Timothy, look at verse 20-22. Paul says:

¹ See Jason's sermon manuscript [here](http://firstfree.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Sermon-2019_10_13-Philippians-2.12-18.pdf). (firstfree.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Sermon-2019_10_13-Philippians-2.12-18.pdf)

² Read more about Timothy [here](http://biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Timothy). (biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Timothy)

³ Acts 17:15; 18:5; Rom 16:21; 1 Thess 3:2

⁴ 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Philemon 1; 2 Thess 1:1; Col 1:1

⁵ Acts 19:22; Phil 2:19; 1 Thess 3:2

“20 I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.”

How’s that for a great running partner! Nicole had Greg to encourage her, work out with her, build up endurance with her, and finish the race with her! Paul has Timothy, a guy who has proved himself in ministry, and whose greatest concern is for Christ. Timothy is not self-centered, he’s got his eyes fixed on the right thing: Jesus Christ. Timothy has the mind of Christ! That’s the kind of runner I want to be!

Ok, so now let’s look at Epaphroditus⁶

Here is a partner in the Gospel no less heroic than Timothy. In fact, based on this passage, we might even be inclined to think he was more heroic than Timothy.

Timothy is mentioned 26 times in the NT, but do you know how many times Epaphroditus’ name appears? Surprisingly, it is just twice! Once here in verse 25, and once at the end of this letter in chapter 4 verse 18. That means everything we know about Epaphroditus comes from only a few short verses. Needless to say we don’t know much... If we think of these two as heroes at all, we might say Epaphroditus is almost an unsung hero, because if it weren’t for Paul mentioning him in this letter, we would never know him at all.

What we do know is that he’s an assistant of some sort. The church at Philippi had sent him to Paul to care for his needs. We don’t know what the needs were, but from the context it sounds like he was helping Paul with some particular ministry task or need. Epaphroditus apparently had some specific gifts or skills to assist in Paul’s ministry. After all, Paul does refer to him as a brother, and a co-worker, and a fellow soldier! Those terms are as significant as the way Paul described Timothy earlier.

Unfortunately during his time of ministry with Paul Epaphroditus became ill, and his friends back at Philippi heard about it, so they became very worried.

Let me just pause to remind you that our church knows this same kind of worry right now! Our own Bill & Joy are missionaries to Peru, but are here in Chicago because Joy is being treated for cancer. Her treatment has been going well, but just Thursday night she had to be admitted to the hospital because of severe abdominal pain which is a side-effect of the cancer treatment. Yesterday morning, Bill shared the devotional at the Men’s Breakfast. He shared how, almost 30 years ago, they committed themselves to follow God where ever He led them. They spent years of ministry in Brazil, and He called them to Peru. And Bill even gave testimony to his and Joy’s faith that God is leading them through this health crisis as well. Joy hopes to come home from the hospital today, and that the residual side effects of the cancer treatment can be managed so that she is not in constant pain. And like the Philippians concern for Epaphroditus, we are in constant prayer for Joy.

Let us look back at the text in Philippians 2, which tells us that Epaphroditus almost died from his illness. But it also emphasizes that his brush with death was “for the work of Christ!” Whatever ministry task he was working on, the ministry nearly cost him his life. Perhaps he was caring for the sick and contracted some illness himself. Perhaps he was an evangelist like Paul, and was stoned and beaten as Paul had been on several occasions. We don’t know the

⁶ Read more about Epaphroditus [here](http://biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Epaphroditus). (biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Epaphroditus)

specifics, but what we do know is that he was serving Christ sacrificially, even if it cost him his life. Sound familiar? Can you recall the sermon a few weeks ago from Philippians 2:5-8?

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7 rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

8 And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death —

even death on a cross!

Do you see it!? Here's why Epaphroditus is a **hero of faithfulness**, he is living out **the mindset of Christ Jesus!** Like Timothy, he wasn't thinking of his own concerns, he was thinking of those he was ministering to. The text even indicates that he was more concerned that the Philippians would be worried about him, then he was worried about his own health!

As **partners in the Gospel** I think of both Timothy and Epaphroditus as Paul's ultimate hero side-kicks. Heroes themselves in a way. They are there for Paul when things are at their worst. Timothy is always ready to go anywhere or do anything with or for Paul. Epaphroditus is ready to give his life for the work of the Gospel.

But you know what, they are not heroes in the sense that the world thinks of heroes. Even I might be inspired to take up running after hearing about Nicole & Greg, or Eliud Kipchoge breaking the 2 hour barrier... Well, probably not... no, DEFINITELY not, but you know what I mean. Heroes in the worldly sense inspire us in a way, or up to a point... but the experience often leaves us discouraged in our own inability to measure up or to match their deeds.

No, I'm referring to Timothy and Epaphroditus as heroes like those that are described in Hebrews 11. That's the chapter that is often called the "Hall of Faith" in the Bible, because it lists many "heroes" who lived their lives in such a way that honored God. There we read about how Noah, in faith, built the Ark; how Abraham followed God's call to leave his home town and go to he knew not where, and then trusted the LORD's promise to give him a son, even when he was 100 and his wife was 90 years old. The chapter tells us about Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Joshua, David, and so many more heroes of the faith.

It might be more accurate to call them: "heroes of **faithfulness**."

And like those described in Hebrews 11, Timothy and Epaphroditus are selfless! They were not looking for their own glory, they were concerned for God's glory. If it weren't for Paul, and Luke who wrote the Book of Acts, we might know nothing about these two. They weren't trail blazers like Paul. They didn't write any letters that are in the Bible. They weren't famous for being eloquent or great debaters.

They were simply regular guys who came along side Paul in ministry and were faithful. Think about that for a moment. They were just regular people... like you and me!

Paul's goal was to motivate the Philippians to love Christ, not to be amazed by Timothy & Epaphroditus. The truth is that their example is not inspiring enough if we're merely impressed by their deeds. That kind of motivation might get us a little excited, but it will not give us power to live the same way that they lived!

It is in loving the same Christ that they loved that our lives will be transformed. It is in the message of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit that they had power at all! And through the same Gospel and Holy Spirit we too can have that same power!

This is the second thing I wanted to do today: discuss how we could follow their example, 'cuz guess what folks... If you are a disciple of Jesus then you and I are running partners. We are here to help each other get in shape, to set the pace, to stay motivated and focused....

So, I don't want to merely encourage you to be like Timothy and Epaphroditus, nor Paul himself for that matter. You and I are running partners in the Christian life of discipleship. Neither of us are more important than the other. I don't have to be like YOU, and you don't have to be like ME. (I know... Thank God for that, right!?)

Listen to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1 "Follow my example, in the same way that I follow the example of Christ." In other words, he told them: "don't follow ME at all! Follow Christ!"

If we are going to get the right point of this passage, we need to see that it's not about what Timothy and Epaphroditus did. It's not even about who they are. Their example is about whom they loved. Remember what it said of Timothy in 2:21-22: "For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel." And what it said of Epaphroditus in 2:30: "he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me."

These guys did not have their eyes on Paul, and we should not have our eyes set on them... And the same goes for you and me! We are running partners in the Gospel who look out FOR each other, but we don't need to look AT each other in comparison.

Rather, let us fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before Him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame ... Consider Jesus Christ who endured opposition from sinners so that you do not grow weary and lose heart! (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Let us pray.

O God Our Father, Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, O God we thank You for the examples of Timothy & Epaphroditus. Inspire us through their lives to love You as they loved You, to **partner in the Gospel** as they did, to live with **the mind of Christ** as they did, and to **rejoice in all circumstances** as they did. Transform our minds through the study of Your Word, In the name of Jesus Christ I pray, Amen!