

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 20, 2008**

SPIRITUAL HEROES

Philippians 2:19-30

Who are your heroes today? Who are the men and women who impact you the most, who give you your thoughts and feelings about the world you live in? Who are the people – people who are alive today – that you admire because of their courage or their influence?

Some of us draw inspiration from the world of entertainment or sports – we idolize actors or rock stars or accomplished athletes. Others among us follow a politician who we feel we can support, or a successful business leader or a good writer or religious figure. Most of us call heroes those who give their lives in places like Afghanistan or Iraq.

This morning, as we get back into our study of the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, we will look at two heroes from the Bible – Timothy and Epaphroditus, whose courage and influence were held up as examples in the ancient world and to us today. Please turn to Philippians 2:19-30 and follow along as I read.

You will remember that when Paul wrote these words, he was in prison in Rome for preaching about Jesus. Even though he did not know what would happen (whether he would be released or would be executed for his faith), he was content. He knew that because he was in prison, people all over the city of Rome heard about Jesus.

Paul writes to the Philippians who are facing struggles of their own. He tells them how to live lives in relation to their surrounding culture and how to live in fellowship with each other.

Look at a few of his commands to the Philippian church:

In verse 1:27: *Whatever happens . . . that is, no matter the circumstances of your life – insults or persecution from other people, mistreatment on the job, a bout with cancer, whatever suffering you have in life. . . Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . . stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith.*

In verse 2:3: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.* So important that Paul tells us to follow the example of Jesus Christ. The Son of God who willingly stepped down from heaven, who humbled Himself and became a man – even more, a servant – and went to the Cross.

In verse 2:14: *Do everything without complaining or arguing,* We are to live in a way that truly reflects our belief in the gospel. If we do this, the people around us will know about our faith in Jesus, we will shine like stars in the universe.

We saw that this is vital for us as a church. Faith Church can grow from being a good church to a really great one only when we follow Paul's instructions: When we live lives worthy of the gospel, when we stop complaining about our circumstances and humble ourselves before God and consider other people as more important than ourselves.

But does this seem impossible to you? Out there in the real world, with the many things that go wrong or bother us, with the people who may annoy us or even harm us, it is really hard to go about our day without complaining, to put others first and live in a manner worthy of the gospel.

Perhaps you are tempted to think that Paul's commands to the Philippians are impossible to obey, that they are not for you. That's why he gave us Timothy (a missionary and pastor) and Epaphroditus (a layman) as heroes. Through their examples, Paul demonstrates that walking in a manner worthy of the gospel really is possible. Let's see what we can learn from them.

COMPASSION

The first thing I'd like you to see is their compassion. Concern for other people is the trait of a spiritual hero. Paul describes Timothy as a man with compassion. Verses 2:19-20: *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon . . . I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*

It was Paul's intention to send Timothy to Philippi to encourage the church there as well as on his return, encourage Paul with his report.

Verse 20 says that Paul has no one else like him. Literally the word there means "kindred spirit." Paul and Timothy were on the same page; they had one mind. They agreed together that the well-being of the Philippian church was of highest importance. No selfish ambition here, just compassion.

This was particularly important in the self-centered Roman culture where Paul and Timothy lived. Everyday life was about looking out for number one. Paul has already told us that while he was under arrest in Rome, there were Christian ministers who preached Christ out of rivalry or selfish ambition, people who made self-proclaimed heroes of themselves instead of following the example of Christ, the One who did not come to be served but to serve.

Over the years, Timothy had learned to put others before himself. He did this because he made the interest of Christ his own. What excited Timothy, what he was passionate about, were the things of God. And that meant loving and serving the people of God.

There is the story of a soldier in a bygone era who had come home from overseas. A driver was hired to pick him up at the train station. He asked how he could recognize the soldier and his mother said, "Look for somebody helping somebody else." Sure enough, when the driver pulled up to the train station, the soldier was assisting an old woman with her luggage. The soldier was recognized by his compassion. Timothy was the kind of hero who was recognized by his compassion.

CONSISTENCY OF CONVICTION

The next thing I'd like you to see is consistency of conviction. Timothy's compassion was evident to Paul because his life's agenda was to put others' interests and needs ahead of his own. Verse 22 says that Timothy proved himself. To "prove" refers to a testing of one's character.

It has been said that people are like tea bags. You never know how strong they are until you drop them in hot water. Timothy's convictions were strong, his consistency was evidenced over time, in a lot of hot circumstances as he worked like a son with his father, serving together to see the good news of Christ go out.

The trouble with consistency is its demanding repetition, its monotony day after day after day. But that is the test of character; we are proven, we are tested – not only in the extraordinary challenges in life, but in the ordinary difficulties. We develop consistency as we learn to be faithful in those areas that barely get attention. It is in daily life that our convictions are built.

A friend once defined conviction as "A strongly held belief, based on Scripture, developed and tested in the crucible of life" (attributed to Navigator staffer David Coffield). At the time he said this to me, I was beginning to understand what the Bible said about the sovereignty of God, especially when things go wrong. I thought I could learn those truths in the sterile environment of a Bible study. But God wanted me to learn – and re-learn – His truth, not just in my study but through the hassles and problems of life. He keeps teaching because I have a long way to go before that belief becomes conviction.

As long as he was with Paul, Timothy saw his convictions develop, learning under the instruction and care of Paul, as a son from his father. He learned about living a life worthy of the gospel, whatever happens. Listen to Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

Timothy saw and lived this firsthand. He learned from Paul and was a hero because, over time, he grew in the consistency of his convictions.

COOPERATION

Now jump down to verse 25 and look at another trait of a spiritual hero – cooperation. Paul writes this section in his letter in order to explain what is happening. Some time before, the church in Philippi sent money to Paul by way of a messenger named, Epaphroditus. He was not an ordained minister, but a layman in the church at Philippi. They wanted Epaphroditus to stay with Paul so that Timothy would then be freed to come see them. You can imagine the church's surprise when they saw Epaphroditus coming down the road instead of Timothy.

They may have wondered if Epaphroditus failed in his job, if Paul didn't want him around. So Paul writes this letter of explanation. Timothy will come later – after the trial is over, but Paul believed it was important for Epaphroditus to come immediately to encourage the Philippians.

Notice how he describes Epaphroditus: my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier. By mentioning these three traits, Paul identifies three qualities of cooperation that is a mark of a spiritual hero.

The word “brother” describes the relationship between Christians. The term becomes meaningless through overuse, but in the ancient world this close-knit connection was rare. The culture of that time was polarized between Greeks and Romans, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, citizens and slaves. Into this world came the gospel and with it the idea of brotherhood. This change in relationship with God as Father meant a new relationship with one another. Our ability to work together, to cooperate is built on the understanding that we are related to one another because of the work of Christ.

Therefore, the Christian life is fellowship, working together for the gospel. All of us have the same task or assignment. There is to be no sense of selfish ambition or competition here, but working toward the same goal of seeing people come to faith and grow in Christ and honoring God with our lives.

The Christian life is often described as a battle. Not with people, but spiritual forces – with the devil, with the world system that distracts and tempts us at every turn, and with our own tendency to give in to that temptation and sin. Paul pictures the necessity of cooperation on this battlefield as we serve as fellow soldiers.

Epaphroditus was one whom Paul knew would stand shoulder to shoulder with him. In the ancient world where hand-to-hand combat was the norm, the battle would be lost if the warriors did not hold their positions, protect one another from attack.

Let me ask you, would you call yourself a brother, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier? Can other Christians use these terms about you? We build walls far too easily, refuse to cooperate not by antagonism, but by refusing to get involved or to let others know us.

Epaphroditus was the kind of hero who cooperated, shoulder to shoulder with his brothers.

COURAGE AND COMMITMENT

Paul says of Epaphroditus, *He is your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs*. The people of Philippi heard Paul was in jail. In an effort to help, they took an offering to support him while he was under arrest. Epaphroditus was chosen to take the money (4:18).

Epaphroditus' journey was not an easy one. He covered a rough 800 mile journey which would take some six weeks. Either on the journey or once in Rome, Epaphroditus became ill and nearly died. But despite this, he came to Rome to take care of Paul's needs.

In order to serve Paul, Epaphroditus had courage and commitment. Far too often people quit serving, leave behind opportunities to help because such actions are inconvenient or expensive, uncomfortable

or require effort. Ministry always costs. God uses people, like Epaphroditus, who are willing to pay the price.

To be a committed Christian means to put service before comfort. Today's value system says your whole goal in life is to become secure and comfortable, financially independent, popular with everybody. Security and comfort and reputation become goals in life rather than service. Spiritual heroes with courage are willing to take risks for the kingdom of God, are willing to serve God with reckless abandonment.

This week, during Vacation Bible School, I caught a glimpse of that kind of commitment. For those of you who weren't here, we had over 200 children in our building every morning this week. It was an amazing sight – wall to wall kids from age two to twelve, loved and cared for by lots and lots of volunteers (I heard there were over 70 people helping out). Men and women, older folks and junior high and high school students, even a few guys who just graduated college). Some of you I know were serving way out of your comfort zone. All of you could have said to Julie that you had something better to do. But you didn't. You were committed to those 200 kids and to the advancement of the gospel.

Like Epaphroditus, you put the interests of other people above your own. In my book – and I am sure, in Pastor Neil's and Julie's, this week you were spiritual heroes.

CONCLUSION

Timothy and Epaphroditus demonstrated that it is possible to live lives worthy of the gospel, for each of us to be spiritual heroes. What these men did is beyond our grasp, but possible within our lives. Lives of compassion, consistency, cooperation, and commitment come by the power of the resurrected Christ in us.

Let me explain. The thrust of Paul's message is not to praise Timothy or Epaphroditus, any more than it is to praise our musicians or our VBS workers in worship this morning. We praise and honor Jesus Christ. That means the focal point is not us, but Christ and what He has done. That is the gospel.

Jesus Christ came and died for our sins. We acknowledge that as we proclaim His holiness and His lordship. Verses 2:9-11. tell us of the greatness of Jesus Christ: *God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Understanding the gospel means that we acknowledge our own sinfulness. Not as we compare ourselves to other people but as we compare ourselves to Christ. The Bible says all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). This week our kids learned that sin isn't just the big stuff, but any thing we do or say or think that is disobedient to God. That means that every one of us needs a savior – you, me, Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus.

The Bible also says that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). When we understand the gospel, we decide to turn

from our sin (that's called repentance) and believe that Christ died in our place (that's called faith). Repentance and faith are how we enter the Christian life.

Believing the gospel means believing that He suffered in your place. Through the humiliation of Christ, through His compassion, His consistency in obedience to God's Law, His commitment, He died in your place. So let me stop here and ask, "Do you believe the gospel like that?" Have you repented and put faith in Christ? If not, may I encourage you today to stop and come to Him? You can pray to Him like this right now:

Lord Jesus, I admit that I fall short of what you command. Often I put my interest ahead of the interest of others. I am a sinner and can never earn the reward of heaven. I need You. Take me now, not on the basis of my own goodness, but on the basis of Your death on the Cross for me. Forgive me of my sins and accept me as one of Your followers.

If you can pray that prayer and mean it, you can be sure that Jesus has already joined you to Himself. Timothy and Epaphroditus are heroes because they believed the gospel and Christ lives in them. They lived a life of repentance and faith.

None of us will live with the compassion, consistency, and commitment of Christ. Not even Timothy or Epaphroditus. The gospel is not about measuring our performance in these areas, it is about the life of Christ being produced in us. Every day, we see in greater detail how far we fall short of Christ's perfect life.

If we are obedient to Him, we go back to the cross, confess our sins and believe that His sacrifice on the Cross was enough. When we do that, we experience the grace of God. We see the life of Jesus Christ lived out in us, a power that enables us to live lives worthy of the gospel.

Paul showed us that walking in a manner worthy of the gospel is possible, not by our own effort but by our faith in Jesus Christ. Timothy and Epaphroditus lived as spiritual heroes because they believed and acted on the gospel every day of their lives.

You and I can become spiritual heroes by the power of God. Spiritual heroes are men and women who live lives of repentance and faith