

What Makes A Good Servant?

Series on "Philippians"

Imagine this evening that instead of meeting together today with other Christians from Westlake Church, you were meeting 2000 years ago with Christians in the town of Philippi in Greece. At the meeting, one of the brothers made an announcement that went like this;

"Our brother Paul, who started the church here in Philippi, is in prison in Rome. We don't know if he is going to be executed or what, but he needs someone to care for him while he awaits his trial. Someone to do practical things like getting his food, washing his clothes and running errands for him. Whoever goes needs to be someone spiritually mature enough to minister to Paul, praying with him and encouraging him. What he really needs is someone who will serve him and Timothy who is there with him. This morning we are going to take up an offering to meet his needs, and we want the person who is going to serve Paul to carry that offering to Rome. There will be lots of dangers on the way, as there are plenty of people out there who would kill you to get the money. Whoever goes on this assignment is going to have to walk. It could take you a month or more to get there. Now, who would like to go?"

If I said to you that we needed someone who would walk from Nyon to Marseilles in France, then from Marseilles to Nice, then from Nice to Genoa, and from Genoa to Rome, we would be talking about roughly the same distance. When they asked that question in Philippi, it was Epaphroditus who put his hand up and said "I'll go". So Epaphroditus walked the 1300 kilometres from Philippi to Rome, risking his life, carrying a bag of money to support Paul and Timothy. Well Epaphroditus made it OK, and served Paul well while he was in Rome. But while he was there, a problem developed. Epaphroditus got sick. So sick he was at the point of death. Word of his illness got back to the Philippian Christians, and they were worried about him, and he knew they were worried about him, which worried him that they were worried about him. He recovered, but they didn't know that, so in the end Paul decided that it would be a wise move to send him back to the church at Philippi. That's why he writes this bit in his letter.

"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 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. 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. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon. 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. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. 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. 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.

***Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me."* (Philippians 2:19 – 30)**

Today I want to talk about what it takes to be a servant. Not a big name person like Peter or Paul, but a Timothy or an Epaphroditus. A person who might never make it into the spotlight. I want to talk about the people who serve in the shadows. They lead and they serve, but they seldom get their name up in lights. People who usually think their contribution to the Kingdom of God isn't all that important. People who often don't realise that without them, the church couldn't function.

Sir Michael Costa was once rehearsing with a large orchestra and a choir with several hundred singers. The organ was thundering out its sound. The singers were in full flight. The drums were pounding out the beat. The whole string section was right into it, when Sir Michael threw up his hands and shouted "Stop!" Everything went quiet, and he turned and asked "Where's the piccolo?" The piccolo player had felt that his contribution was so unimportant, that he had stopped playing. Nobody else had noticed, but the conductor had. This message today is to all the piccolo players out there who think that God doesn't notice when you stop playing. It's to all the people like Timothy and Epaphroditus who serve in the shadows. Here are some characteristics of biblical servants.

1. A servant heart.

What makes a servant? A big heart. Epaphroditus had a huge concern for Paul and he translated that concern into action. He didn't just stay in Philippi wringing his hands saying "I wish someone would do something!" He re-treaded his Roman sandals and got on the road. Sometimes as Christians I think we pray about things that concern us, and the Lord would have us stop praying and do something about answering our own prayers. Epaphroditus knew that he was liable to get robbed, beaten up or even killed if he made the journey to Rome. But he was prepared to risk everything for others. Epaphroditus didn't just give to the offering, he was the offering. When he got to Rome, he was also burdened for his home church. His concern wasn't for himself, but for Paul and the people of his own church. Servant hearted people don't think about themselves – they think about others.

There's a lovely story that came out of the Special Olympics several years ago. The people who compete at the Special Olympics have mental and physical disabilities. You may remember seeing this on TV. It was a sprint race, and a boy named Andrew was in the lead. He was way ahead of the rest of the field, but as he approached the final turn he looked back and saw that his best friend had fallen and hurt himself on the track. Andrew stopped and looked at the finish line. Then he looked back at his friend. People were calling out to him, "Run, Andrew, run!" But he didn't. He went back and got his friend, helped him up, brushed off the cinders. And hand in hand, they crossed the finish line last. But as they did, the people cheered, because there are some things more important than finishing first. That's what servant hearted people do for friends.

2. A servant mind.

Timothy and Epaphroditus both thought like servants. They weren't interested in winning friends and influencing people. They had a genuine concern for the spiritual and physical welfare of others. Caring for other believers was so much a part of them that they did it naturally. Because they saw themselves as servants of Jesus Christ, the natural thing to do was to act like a servant. If you train to be a Doctor, a large part of that training is to get you to think like a Doctor. In a medical emergency, a Doctor doesn't ask herself "I wonder if I should get involved in this?" All the training kicks in. "I need to take charge here, because I'm the Doctor." Fire-fighters think like fire-fighters. When they walk into a building, they are automatically looking for sprinkler systems and smoke alarms and emergency exits. Why? Because they have the mind of a fire-fighter. If we are going to follow Jesus Christ, we have to think like servants. As we discovered earlier on in Paul's letter, we need to have the servant mind of Jesus. ***"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant."*(Philippians 2: 5-7)** Timothy and Epaphroditus were concerned for the spiritual welfare of God's people. They didn't have to make themselves do it, or even think about doing it. It came to them as naturally as breathing. The way they served the Lord was to serve others. Timothy saw his role as being a servant to Paul, so that Paul could be more effective in sharing the gospel. He had done that for 18 years without ever becoming resentful. If you look behind the lives of some of the great men and women of God, you will often find a Timothy. Someone who had the mind of a servant. Hudson Taylor had a sister who prayed for him constantly. John Wesley had a brother who put his theology into songs. Billy Graham had a whole team of Timothy's like Grady Wilson and George Beverley Shea.

3. A servant's training.

Both Timothy and Epaphroditus had learned how to be a servant of the Lord by serving in churches. Epaphroditus had served at Philippi. Timothy served at Derbe and Lystra. It was the Christians in these churches that had told Paul what good servants they were. Each of them had done his apprenticeship in servanthood, and now they could be relied upon for greater responsibility.

We live in an age of instant everything. We are so used to having what we want straight away, that many of us can't be bothered with things that take time. But training to be a servant takes a lifetime. A servant attitude doesn't grow in us after just one sermon, or after attending a conference, or going to a week long seminar. It doesn't even grow in one year of service. It grows in us as we daily serve the Lord, year in and year out. It begins to grow when we make a decision to give our whole life for the gospel, willingly obeying the Lord in everything he tells us to do. It begins to happen when we make a decision to become a slave for the sake of the gospel.

4. A servant's recklessness.

When Paul writes about Epaphroditus risking his life to minister to Paul, he uses a Greek word "Parabolani". The word means "The Gamblers". It has the idea of taking big risks, as Epaphroditus and Timothy had done for the sake of the Gospel. It seems that within the early church there developed a society of risk takers – people who weren't afraid to do outrageous things for the sake of the Gospel. Paul was a founding member of that society of gamblers. So was Timothy. These were people who were prepared to risk their lives for Christ sake. Christians who ministered to prisoners, at the risk of being imprisoned themselves. Christians, who ministered to those with infectious diseases, at the risk of becoming sick themselves. Christians, who at great risk to themselves, claimed the bodies of the martyrs so they could have a decent burial.

In the city of Carthage in AD 252, a terrible plague went through the city and hundreds of people died. Panic set in, and people threw the bodies of the dead into the streets. A Christian leader named Cyprian organised his congregation to tend to the dead and care for the dying. They put their own lives at risk, but they became part of the "Parabolani" – the gamblers. All through the generations, gamblers have taken risks for the sake of the Gospel. I attended a conference a few years back where Michael Frost, one of the Australian speakers, told how he and 7 other friends decided to spend three nights a week at their local pub, just to talk to people about Jesus. They would pray for each other first, and debrief afterwards. They were all scared stiff. After four years of that, they had led 70 people to Christ, and grown a new church. Gamblers for the sake of the gospel.

When George Carey was Archbishop of Canterbury, he was getting off a train, and the Christian man he had been talking to farewelled him with the words "Take care". George Carey stopped him and said "No. Don't take care. Take risks!"

Ask the Lord for a servant heart, and a servant mind. Ask him to give you a servant's training. And be reckless. Take risks for the sake of the gospel.

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