

Text: Phil. 2:25-30

Title: "The selflessness of Epaphroditus"

Time: 11/14/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: I have met many Timothys in my lifetime, but I have never met an Epaphroditus. That is surely evidence of an axiom that my dad always reminded me of, that life is not fair. It seems as though, if life were fair, for every young Timothy growing up in a Christian home there would be another named Epaphroditus.

But it is undoubtedly true that many of the names of the heroes of the faith throughout the history of the church are names that few have known, or if known once, that few have remembered for long. Epaphroditus was one such hero of the faith. The Holy Spirit remembers his name and his service, and He inspired the Apostle Paul to put his name in the Word of God to us this morning.

We have come to Paul's description of this servant of Christ having received word this past week that the churches of the Northeast have lost one of their great Epaphrodituses. You probably do not recognize the name Scott Van Dyne anymore than the name Epaphroditus. I came to know Scott and his wife Renee when he coached my son Brandon's basketball team in high school. We played basketball together for a time when we were younger on Tuesday nights in Dunbarton. Scott was 6'10" and had played college ball at the University of Maine.

But Scott was known by our sister churches, not as a great basketball player, but as a great servant of Jesus Christ. I say churches (plural), because although Scott served faithfully at the core of the ministry of First Baptist Church of

North Conway, NH as one of their deacons, God had made Scott a tremendous blessing to many churches in our region. His gifts varied, from pulpit supply to financial counseling, to construction projects. I was at a meeting in Kittery, ME on Tuesday morning, the day Scott went home to the Lord, and his pastor in that meeting asked us to pray for Scott's sickness and explained to us that Scott had plans over Thanksgiving vacation to travel to Madison, ME and help Cornerstone Baptist Church do repairs on their roof. Pastor Brown was asking us if we had any men in our church who would be interested and able to help Scott. Scott was a uniquely gifted and giving servant of the Lord.

And so was Epaphroditus. Paul puts him in the same category as Timothy, and the virtue that these men shared especially was their selfless love for the Lord and His people. Verses 19-24 were about Timothy's selfless love, and now verses 25-30 are about the selfless love of Epaphroditus. From the example of this humble servant, I want us to see three things about this brother's selfless love this morning.

I. Selfless love put Epaphroditus in the middle of what is necessary (v. 25).

Illustration: We have all heard the proverb that "necessity is the mother of invention." That truth was the moral of Aesop's fable titled, "The Crow and the Pitcher": "In a spell of dry weather, when the birds could find very little to drink, a thirsty crow found a pitcher with a little water in it. But the pitcher was high and had a narrow neck, and no matter how he tried, the crow could not reach the water. The poor thing felt as if he must die of thirst.

"Then an idea came to him. Picking up some small pebbles, he dropped them into the pitcher one by one. With each

pebble the water rose a little higher until at last it was near enough so he could drink." Clearly, the necessity created by the crow's need for water gave birth to the ingenuity of his putting pebbles in the pitcher so the water level would rise so he could get a drink.

Application: So, we know that necessity gives birth to invention, but what gives birth to necessity? In the story of the Crow and the Pitcher, it was the trial of drought that gave birth to necessity. At times, our awareness of spiritual necessity can work much the same way.

The Bible is clear that some things in our lives are necessary, and some things are less so. Paul has spoken of necessity before in this Epistle (Phil. 1:24). When Martha thought it was necessary for Mary to help get a meal on the table, Jesus corrected her with an astonishing statement about what is necessary (Luke 10:41-42, "But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her"). Mary had chosen to listen to the Lord Jesus, and Jesus said that in comparison to all the other good things we may have to do, that one thing is singularly necessary. Worshipping Christ is by far the most necessary thing.

This past week I heard a little quip that I had not heard before. Someone jokingly said to someone else, "Copernicus called, and he said that you are not the center of the universe after all." There is some wisdom in that rebuke, right? We have a tendency, do we not, to put ourselves at times at the center of the known universe? Biblically speaking, there is a different person at the center of the universe, and His name is Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us this in no uncertain terms in Col. 1:15-20, “[Jesus,] Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell. And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.” Very simply, Jesus Christ is the center of the universe. He is the one necessary thing.

So, what gives birth to necessity in this universe of ours? Its center does. The person and work of Jesus Christ is the mother of all necessity. Epaphroditus understood this, like Timothy did and Mary did. Martha had forgotten this under pressure. Because Jesus Christ was at the center of the universe for Epaphroditus, Paul knew him to be his brother, and fellow laborer, and fellow soldier. Epaphroditus was someone whom his church could send to meet a need. When the church of Philippi or the Apostle Paul thought of something necessary to do for Jesus Christ, Epaphroditus’s selfless love for Christ made him a perfect fit for that effort. Whether it required work or warfare, brotherly love or extensive travel, Epaphroditus would do what was necessary.

In Martha’s case it was not evil that was the enemy of the necessary. It was not even the unnecessary that competed with the one necessary thing. Instead, it was getting the guests fed. It was something she correctly felt was necessary. More often than not, the enemy will use lesser necessities to distract us from the greatest priority: loving, wor-

shipping, and serving Jesus Christ as the center of our universe. The best way to make sure we are doing what is most necessary is to selflessly love Jesus Christ as the center of the universe. Selfless love for Christ put Epaphroditus in the middle of what is necessary, and it must do so for us too. Do we believe Jesus Christ is the center of the universe? Does our selfless love for Him cause us to be busy with what is truly necessary?

II. Selfless love put Epaphroditus in the middle of concern for Christ's church (vv. 26-28).

Illustration: Last Thursday was Veterans Day, and so it is fitting that we are focused on one of Paul's fellow-soldiers in this passage. Most veterans are our nation's heroes.

Spec. Monica L. Brown is a US Army medic who earned the Silver Star in Afghanistan in 2007. She served with the 82nd Airborne Division. Treating wounded soldiers in the middle of an ensuing ambush, Spec. Brown used her body to shield them from exploding mortar rounds and ammunition from a nearby burning Humvee at a risk to her own life. After a Humvee in her company's column hit a roadside IED, she responded immediately to her platoon sergeant's command, "Doc! Let's go!" She ran into a hail of enemy fire to assist and protect the wounded.

Her valor that day is credited with the recovery of four soldiers who were in deep trouble. When asked why she did it, she explained that these were her fellow-soldiers, her teammates on the battlefield.

Application: Monica understood the importance of the *fellow* part of the term *fellow-soldier*. Epaphroditus did too. His work required no less of this understanding in Rome than did Monica's in Afghanistan. Some have written books

telling us that it is God's will for us to enjoy "Your Best Life Now" (Joel Osteen, 2004). There is no *fellow-* in that title, nor is there much *soldier*. Epaphroditus never read that book. He was never even attracted to that seducing idea. He was concerned that the Philippian church have a good life for the sake of the gospel.

The word Paul uses for how Epaphroditus felt about his local church ("For he longed after you all," v. 26) is the same word Paul uses about how he felt about this church family (Phil. 1:8). It is the word that Peter uses in 1 Pet. 2:2 of a baby's longing after his milk. It is a very strong desire for someone or something.

But notice too that in Epaphroditus this strong desire caused great distress. The word for "full of heaviness" here is used only here and of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37; Mark 14:33). Epaphroditus felt this heaviness because the church had heard he was sick. And that love was reciprocated. God mercifully healed Epaphroditus, and Paul, evidently unable to work a faith-healing miracle in this context, was delivered from sorrow upon sorrow by that healing. Our sister church in North Conway knows that sorrow upon sorrow as they worship together this morning, but God's mercy shall heal even that someday soon. Because Christ is risen, we too shall rise.

So, is this how we feel about our local church? Does our selfless love put us in the middle of concern for our church?

III. Selfless love put Epaphroditus in the middle of what is honorable (vv. 29-30).

Illustration: We celebrate Veterans Day because the sacrifice of soldiers is honorable. Our nation is in trouble and de-

fenseless to the degree that those who serve and have served are treated dishonorably. The Silver Star is the United States' third highest award for valor on the battlefield. Monica Brown is only the second woman since WW2 to have received that honor. Our nation's enemies sought to destroy her and her fellow-soldiers. An appreciative nation needed to honor her.

Application: The word *reputation* in verse 29 is the idea of honoring someone. Our churches' Epaphrodituses are men and women whom we must receive in the Lord with all gladness, hold in high honor, and follow their example of selfless love and service.

The world sees things differently. They think it too bad that misguided simpletons like Epaphroditus or Scott Van Dyne would risk their lives to make present a ministry that without them would remain absent. I think that is the best way to understand Paul's phrase, "fill up what was lacking in your service to me." The idea is that the church's service to Paul was missing or absent until Epaphroditus made it a present reality. He did a simple task, and he risked his life to do it. Some would have had reason to call him a fool, but the Apostle knew better, and he expected the church to know better too.

Conclusion: The selfless love of the Epaphrodituses and Scott Van Dynes of our churches is not easily replaced. The communication I received from our sister church giving us the sad news about Scott spoke of the sizeable hole he had left behind in that ministry. Who will fill that hole? Who will stand in the gap? John Wesley wrote a poem that is a prayer each of us can pray to the Lord as a request for Him to use us in this way:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee.
All may of Thee partake;
Nothing so small can be
But draws, when acted for Thy sake,
Greatness and worth from Thee.

To scorn the senses' sway,
While still to Thee I tend:
In all I do be Thou the Way,
In all be Thou the End.
If done to obey Thy laws,
E'en servile labors shine;
Hallowed is toil, if this the cause,
The meanest work divine.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching