

TRUE SERVANTS OF GOD

Phil 2.19-30

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing quite like a working model to help us understand how a complex piece of machinery works. I can remember being fascinated as a child by the cut-away models of steam engines that museums often displayed, especially when the display case had a button you could push to activate all the cogs and pistons. It's one thing to read up the theory of steam engines in a book, even if the description comes with lots of elaborate diagrams to help the reader understand the text. But it's something else being able to see all those principles being put into practise, in a cut-away working model.

And that's something Paul realised as he came to pen this letter. In verse 5, he has urged us to adopt the same kind of mindset that was so evident in Jesus, the mindset of a true servant.

- Jesus didn't reach out to try and grasp what didn't belong to him;
- nor did he cling onto all the rights and privileges that were legitimately his as a fully paid up member of the Godhead.
- Instead, after careful consideration, he chose to let go of these things in order to pour himself into the role of a servant for our sakes;
- And he did so, even though that role would lead him to volunteer for death – death by the most painful and shameful form of execution ever devised by man: death by crucifixion.

Last week, we began to look at some of the implications of adopting this kind of servant mentality ourselves.

- We learned that our lives need to be free from grumbling and bickering, because those practises are a denial of our role as servants. They arise when we reckon other people are around to serve us, instead of us being around to serve them.
- We learned the importance of our witness being both visible and audible – we are to shine like stars as we hold out the word of life to people.
- And we are to run the course God has set before us with determination and perseverance, so that on the day of Christ's return, we will be someone else's joy and crown.

And so now, in the verses we are looking at today, Paul provides us with two outstanding examples of people who had cultivated the sort of servant mentality that was so evident in Jesus. They are his working models. They exemplify what verse 5 is urging us: *your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus*. So let's look at these two outstanding examples of what the role of a Christian servant should look like.

First, Paul introduces us to Timothy, his special envoy and right hand man.

1. TIMOTHY: Paul's special envoy (vs 19-24)

Timothy had joined Paul's missionary team part way through Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16.1)

- He lived in a town called Lystra, where Paul had performed a famous healing miracle part way through his first missionary journey, some 18 months earlier (Acts 14.8-10).
- Timothy's religious background was mixed: his mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was Greek, and by implication, an unbeliever.
- But Paul took Timothy under his wing to train him up in missionary service, just as a father used to offer an apprenticeship to his sons in his own specialist trade (v22) – whether as a carpenter, plumber or a bricklayer. In 1 Tim 1.2, Paul refers to Timothy very affectionately as *my true son in the faith*. Timothy was the son Paul never had (Paul being a bachelor).
- And we see here the fruits of Paul's fatherly training of Timothy (vs19,23). He had become Paul's special envoy, his most trusted colleague. And now he was about to be sent on a fact finding visit to Philippi (v19). Paul had been concerned about the state of the church there, in view of the fierce opposition it had encountered (1.28-30), and news of internal disagreements (4.2).

- But Paul was confident that when Timothy reported back on his visit, he (Paul) would be cheered up by Timothy's report. He was confident that Timothy would be able to reunite the church, and strengthen its resolve (v19). *I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I myself may be cheered when I receive news about you* – good news, thanks to Timothy's timely and sensitive visit.

But what strikes us most about these verses is not just the job Timothy was being asked to do – a job, incidentally, that called for diplomatic skills and well as clear thinking and shrewd discernment. It was the outstanding qualities, which Timothy would bring to this task, that strike us most. And as Paul enumerates these qualities, they provide us with a superb working model of what it means to have a servant's heart and mind, just like Christ's. In verse 22, Paul refers to Timothy as a servant, when he writes literally, *he has served with me in the work of the gospel*. Timothy had signed up to be a slave of Jesus Christ, for the work of the Gospel.

First of all then, we are struck by Timothy's

1.1 Willingness to learn (v22) which is a key mark of a good servant.

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. Timothy had been willing to serve an apprenticeship under the tutelage of Paul, his missionary mentor. And much of what he learned, he had learned from observation, simply by being in the presence of Paul throughout his missionary journeys. In 2 Tim 3.10-11, Paul reminds Timothy that he knows *all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, and sufferings - what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured.* What an amazing experience it must have been for Timothy to have been privileged to watch the great apostle at work, firsthand, and from such close quarters, as a member of Paul's missionary team!

- It reminds me of the time I was privileged to spend at Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, a big city-centre church, where I learned so much from observing the way the Pastor, Derek Prime, went about his work.
- Before that, I was tutored by my father, in the work he did with Crusaders, the Christian young people's movement. I used to tag along as his helper from the age of 7 right through to the time when I left home for university. He taught me so much about thorough preparation and commitment. For him, it was a case of turning up two minutes before the group was due to start. It was a case of being there half-an-hour beforehand, to set everything up, so he was on hand to greet the boys when they arrived. And he never missed a week during term-time. Our holidays were all taken during the school holidays. Those are the kind of qualities that become deeply ingrained – not from reading books – but from serving a long apprenticeship.
- One of the great qualities young people often bring to their Christian service is their enthusiasm for innovation. They are full of new ideas as to how things should be done – and that's very healthy. Such enthusiasm should never be crushed by those who are older and reckon themselves wiser.
- But one of the great qualities older people can bring to their Christian service is their vast experience – and that is something that should never be despised by those who are younger. It should be treasured, valued.
- So the ideal is when the innovations of the young can be blended with the experience of those who are older. And that calls for a healthy measure of humility from both parties.
- Young people mustn't think they know it all, and have nothing to learn from the old fuddy-duddies! In 1 Peter 5.5, Peter calls *Young men to be submissive to those who are older – in the same way that church elders are not to lord it over those entrusted to them, but be positive examples to the those under their care* (v3). ... *All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*, Peter continues, *because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*
- But equally, older people shouldn't look down their noses at younger people. *Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young*, Paul advises Timothy in 1 Tim 4.12; *instead, set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.* That's the best way to silence critics, whether young or old – by radiating a life transformed by the Gospel.

True servants are always willing to learn from other people. They never reckoned they've arrived. Timothy was ready to submit himself to a programme of learning under the expert tuition of the apostle Paul. And in giving this kind of training to Timothy, Paul was recognising the importance of training up the next generation of Christian leaders. Many churches have floundered as a result of their leadership growing old together; and that's often been because insufficient attention has been given to bringing on the next generation. In 2 Timothy 2.2, we find Paul urging Timothy to perpetuate the apprenticeship scheme on into future generations of church leaders. *The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.* Christian leadership is like a relay race in which the baton needs to be passed on from one generation to the next.

The second great quality I see here in Timothy was his

1.2 Genuine interest in other people (v20)

I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare, Paul writes.

- This is something that Timothy had learned from Paul. In 2 Cor 11.28, Paul speaks of the way in which *besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* Timothy shared Paul's concern for the church at Philippi, because he had been mentored so well.
- And when Paul speaks about Timothy having a genuine interest in the Philippians welfare, he is using a word that could refer to a 'legitimate' child, a true son or daughter. That's what Timothy was, as far as his spiritual father was concerned: like master, like pupil. Paul's deeply heartfelt concern for all the churches had rubbed off on Timothy.
- The word translated *interest* here is a very strong one. It crops up in Luke 10.41 to refer to Martha's worry over all the preparations she was trying to make for her special visitor, Jesus. Timothy was burdened about the state of the church in Philippi.
- And in this, it seems that Timothy was unique amongst Paul's companions. *I have no one else like him – literally, no one with the same psyche, the same outlook or mindset.*
- *It is such a rare thing to find a person like Timothy, someone has commented, someone really burdened about the welfare of another church and the believers there, someone willing to give himself to a fatiguing journey to resolve the personal differences in the church at Philippi. It would be a delicate task to handle, calling for wisdom, tact, and patience. No one with any pastoral experience would envy Timothy's task – particularly as he was still a young and relatively inexperienced man (1 Tim 4.12), temperamentally timid (2 Tim 1.7), frequently ill (1 Tim 5.23), and emotionally fragile (he was known to have shed tears in Paul's presence, 2 Tim 1.4). In view of all this, his readiness to help exemplifies supremely the attitude of a true servant [Martin, p125].*
- Timothy was burdened about how the Philippians were faring in the light of the fierce persecution they were encountering (1.28-30), as well as their internal differences.
- In churches today, people are often concerned about the physical well-being of their fellow believers, and rightly so. When someone falls ill, or ends up in hospital, everyone is concerned for them.
- We also show concern over one another's social and material needs – people's employment or immigration frustrations; people's difficulty in obtaining work permits or finding suitable employment; people having enough to live on, and being housed in suitable accommodation. All of these are very legitimate concerns to which we rightly give our attention.
- But I would suggest that it is rare to find people who are genuinely concerned for other people's spiritual wellbeing, as Timothy was.
 - How often do we ask people how their relationship with the Lord is getting on?
 - How often do we ask people what the Lord has been teaching them through their reading of his word?
 - How often do we ask people what the Lord has been teaching them through the experiences they have passed through?
 - Have we asked anyone how they have got on trying to implement the teaching of last week's sermon, about doing us doing everything without grumbling or bickering?
 - And what about your prayer life? Have you had any answers to prayer that you would like to share?

Or any unanswered prayers that are bothering you?

- It's rare to find ourselves in conversation about our spiritual lives, isn't it, our relationship with the Lord. But Timothy wasn't afraid to broach the subject. In fact, it was what he was really burdened about – because he had cultivated the outlook of a true servant. Nothing matters more to Jesus than our relationship with his Father God. And when we take on his mindset, we find that becomes our number one concern too.
- So why was Timothy the way he was? The answer lies in his third outstanding quality.

1.3 His passion for the glory of Jesus (v21)

Everyone [else] looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ, Paul writes.

- Most people are preoccupied with themselves – their own needs and aspirations, their own concerns and dreams, their own particular problems or joys.
- But Timothy was different. What mattered most to him were the best interests of Jesus. Timothy's mind was not wrapped up in himself. It was focussed on Jesus. So he was constantly asking himself, "What's in Jesus' best interests in this situation? What would please him most? What will advance his cause? What will bring the greatest honour to his name? What's at the top of his agenda right now?"
- Timothy wasn't self-absorbed, because he had taken on the mantle of a servant.

Timothy's reputation as an outstanding servant of the Gospel was well deserved. Paul says to the Philippians in verse 22, *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.* Timothy was like a good apprentice who has been trained on the job. He had applied himself well to learn his trade thoroughly. And as a result, he had passed all his exams – not just the theory ones, about sound doctrine; but the practical ones too, about humble service. And he had passed with flying colours.

He shows us what it means to have the mindset of a true servant. He was willing to learn; he was genuinely burdened about other people's spiritual welfare; and he was passionate about the glory of Christ.

But Paul doesn't provide us with just one working model of what a true servant is like. He provides us with two! In verses 25-30, he tells us all about Epaphroditus – a man whose name very appropriately means 'attractive', and that is certainly, what he is as far as his servant attitude is concerned.

2. EPAPHRODITUS: the Philippians' special envoy (vs 25-30)

If Timothy was Paul's special envoy to the Philippians, Epaphroditus was the Philippians' special envoy to Paul. In verse 25, he is described as their *messenger*; and when we turn over to 4.18, we discover what kind of a messenger he was. He had been chosen by the Philippians to carry a financial gift to Paul from them. *I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, Paul writes. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*

- So Epaphroditus had been entrusted with a very important and responsible task by his sending church at Philippi.
- But in the process of delivering their much needed funds to Paul, or perhaps whilst staying with Paul in Rome, Epaphroditus had fallen sick (v26). He had fallen ill; and the illness was very serious (v27). He had *almost died* from it.
- This had naturally caused his sending church a lot of anxiety – just as we were very concerned about my Andrew last October, when he was taken ill in Laos and ended up in a hospital in Thailand.
- But the Philippians' anxiety over Epaphroditus caused *him* to be *distressed* about the worry he was giving *them* (v26)! *He is distressed because you heard he was ill*, Paul writes, using a very strong word that is also used to describe our Lord's distress in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mat 26.37). It indicates '*great mental and spiritual perturbation, of the kind that follows a great shock*' someone has written (Martin, p130). We can only guess at the nature of this man's illness. Paul uses a term that covers nervous disorders and well as physical suffering. Perhaps Epaphroditus, like Paul, had been thrown into prison, and the ordeal was almost more than he could bear, psychologically. We simply don't know, and it's for our good that we don't – because the more general the statement, the more widely applicable it is. What

is clear is that his illness occurred because he committed himself to fulfil the task his Lord had set before him.

- And the Lord had been merciful to him, to Paul, and to the Philippians, in ensuring a full recovery (v27). *God had mercy on him, and not only on him, but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.* Imagine how bad Paul would have felt if this special envoy, who had risked his life to bring him financial aid, had died in his hands. God had been merciful to all concerned.
- And so to relieve the anxiety of all concerned, Paul was proposing to send Epaphroditus back to his sending church (v25, 28). He was *eager to send him, so that when the Philippians saw him again they would be glad and Paul would may have less anxiety over them.*

So what do we notice about Epaphroditus, as far as the way he had cultivated a servant mentality is concerned. Two things stand out for me. First, it is clear that he was

2.1 A good team player (v25)

Notice how warmly Paul speaks about him. He speaks of him as

(a) my brother.

For Paul, it was like having a member of his own family with him, so rich was the bond of fellowship they enjoyed together. Epaphroditus is spoken here of as *taking care of Paul's needs* – as if it were his sacred duty. Paul uses a word here from which we get our English word *liturgy*, which describes an act of worship. *He was sent as a messenger but ended up as a minister*, is how one person has put it.

Paul also refers to Epaphroditus as

(b) my fellow worker.

Not just a *worker*, notice, but my *fellow worker*. Paul uses a word here from which we get our English word synergy. He and Epaphroditus were true colleagues, like a pair of oxen, yoked together, to move in the same direction in the pursuit of a common goal. There was no friction or rivalry between them, no attempt on Epaphroditus' part to pull in a different direction.

Thirdly in this verse, Paul refers to Epaphroditus as

(b) my fellow soldier.

He wasn't just prepared for hard work. He was willing to enter the battle with Paul, against the forces arrayed against him, in the spirit of 1.27, where Paul speaks about us *contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel*. Epaphroditus was a fighter as well as a worker.

His service to Paul was marked by loyalty, industry and endurance – all marks of a good team player. He wasn't a loner, or someone who kept himself apart from his fellow believers. He was one with Paul in his work and suffering for the Gospel.

At my induction to the ministry at Renfrew Baptist Church, Derek Prime, who was preaching for me, said something that I've always remembered. He said (1 Cor 3), "*We will always achieve more in a team than on our own.*" True servants are good team players. They are clear about the contribution they must make, in order for others to make theirs. They understand true body ministry – each part fulfilling its role to enable others to fulfil theirs.

Illustration. My fingers can't play a tune on the piano without the co-operation of my wrists, and forearms, my elbows and upper arms, my shoulders, and eyes and ears. The whole body is involved in what the fingers are doing.

It's like that in a church. True servants are team players, not loners.

- So if you are someone who prefers to work on your own, you should perhaps ask yourself, Why?
- Is it because you find it easier, not having to rely on other people. It often is, but that doesn't make it right! They need you as much as you need them.
- Is it due to some lurking pride, a feeling of superiority, or a lack of trust in other people?
- Perhaps it's due to short-sightedness – a failure to realise that we need to bring other people on, and that takes time and patience. Epaphroditus was a good team player, as all true servants are; and he was also

2.2 A risk taker (v30)

He almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.

Paul is very daring in the language he uses here. He has borrowed it from the casinos of his day. He uses a gambling term (I got into a lot of trouble for saying that in a previous church, but it's what Paul says!).

- Epaphroditus took a gamble – with his life. The stakes couldn't have been higher. He could have stayed put where he was, in the comfort and relative safety of his hometown of Philippi. He could have taken an ordinary job as a civil servant or bank clerk.
- But for the sake of his Lord and the work of the Gospel, he chose to take a gamble – a calculated risk, we would perhaps say. He reckoned the work of Christ to be more important than his own comfort and safety. He recognised how important it was to get this financial aid through to Paul. He lived in the days before the electronic transfer of funds. The church couldn't pop a cheque in the post. The delivery of the funds had to be personal – and Epaphroditus volunteered for the hazardous task. He reckoned it was worth the risk, to dice with death – not in a reckless way (that's never right), but in a coolly, calculating way.
- You see, he was someone who had cultivated a servant mentality, like his Lord's. Jesus had poured out his life to death (v8). And so Epaphroditus was also willing to pour out his life in death, if necessary. (v27). That's the measure of how much Christ meant to him, and how much the Lord's work meant to him.
- He must have been familiar with the Gospel challenge of Jesus, as we find it in Mark 8.34-35. *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.* So he reckoned it was well worth the risk.

What should our attitude be to people who risk all for Christ?

- Perhaps some at Philippi were disappointed Epaphroditus was coming home prematurely. Perhaps they had expected him to stay longer with Paul.
- Perhaps some were critical of him having made the journey in the first place. Perhaps some hadn't reckoned he was up to it, and were tempted to adopt an "I told you so" attitude.

But Paul's line is very different here (v29). He says, *welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour (value) men like him.*

- The time was, when those who risked their lives in overseas missionary service, had their names inscribed on a Missionary Board, a roll of honour, displayed prominently in the church. Those days are perhaps gone. But there are other more important ways in which we can honour those who go overseas for the sake of the Gospel.
- We can, and should, honour such people through the faithfulness of our prayers for them.
- We can, and should, honour them by the financial support we give them, so they are free from those kind of worries – stuck in a foreign land without funds.
- We honour them by the kind of welcome we give them when they return home. We show that we're not just glad to see them back, but glad to hear how they've got on. We honour them by wanting to hear their stories. It's why we had the Sykes come to speak to us a couple of weeks ago, our link missionaries in India. It's why we get people to speak after they've been away on foreign mission trips.
- There are all sorts of good ways we can and should honour those who risk their lives for the Gospel – people who reckon it's worth the risk to exchange a comfortable, settled existence here at home, to take the Gospel to places it hasn't yet reached.

Alex Motyer sums up our two working models of servanthood like this: *The grace of God had been at work in both of them. The energy of God had been empowering them both at the level of their wills and their actions, making them like our Supreme Servant, Jesus himself. They were varied characters,, with very different gifts, roles and temperaments. They came from very different backgrounds. But they had both resolved to be like Jesus, following his example of true servanthood. What was true of them, can and should be true of us too.*