

Fellowship of the King, Phil. 2:25-30, BCF 2013.03.10

A few years ago I first heard students using the term, DTR, which is “defining the relationship”, as in the phrase *my girlfriend and I are having a DTR weekend*. This, from the girls’ point of view was a good thing, and from the guys, a most fearful thing. We tend to think that being in the 21st century and around a very youth-oriented culture that we are very knowledgeable about having relationships. I’m not sure that is at all close to the mark.

And it’s not just in the U.S. where we struggle to know how to have healthy and lasting relationships. When I was visiting a family on the mission field they said, in response to my asking for prayer requests, to pray for the relationships in the family and between fellow missionaries. It seems that Satan attacked them there more than anywhere else.

We live in a culture where there is a deep longing for true community, being a part of something much larger than ourselves. I believe this is part of the image of God upon us. As we study Philippians, “Joy for the Journey”, we see that much joy comes to Paul, and to us, because of the relationships God gives to us.

That’s why I want to entitle this, “The Fellowship of the King”. The Apostle Paul was a man of many and deep friendships, though that did not include elves, dwarves, and hobbits. He often closed his letters with greetings and messages to his friends and companions in the work of the gospel. But here in the middle of the letter to the Philippians we are introduced to two co-workers who are commended for their character and work. Kent spoke about Timothy last week, and this week I will look at Epaphroditus.



Philippians 2:25-30 ²⁵ I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶ for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Here’s the background: Paul is under house arrest in Rome awaiting his first appearance before Nero. He is in chains and guarded, and it is his friends who are expected to supply his needs, such as rent, food, and clothing. The church in Philippi, located in Macedonia (northern Greece), decide to send one of their men, Epaphroditus, to Rome, in order to carry a gift (probably money) for his support (Phil 4:18) and to stay a period of time to keep Paul company, carry letters, and help with any daily needs and errands.

Philippians 4:18 ¹⁸ I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Epaphroditus was likely a younger man, raised in a Greek or Roman pagan family (notice the name of the goddess Aphrodite in his name), who came to trust Christ and became a member and worker in the church at Philippi.

His trip was no easy task. (Even today travel is still hard on the body, as is different food and smells and germs. (As many of you know, who travel internationally or have gone on mission trips!) Epaphroditus traveled across northern Greece, then by boat 75 miles across the Adriatic Sea to the heel of Italy, and then probably by foot 360 miles up the Appian Way. Which included, btw, a long stretch through malaria-infested marsh. Whether he got malaria or not is just conjecture, but along the way, or perhaps after he arrived in Rome, Epaphroditus became very sick, in fact, almost dying. It was a difficult journey, about 800 miles, largely on foot, or by boat. The rigors of travel and exposure were very difficult and took a toll.

What we learn about the Fellowship of the King...

I will be using the terms fellowship / community / friendships in somewhat interchangeable ways. There are differences but for purposes of this message I won't go into them.

1) The first thing we want to see is how important relationships are. God created them. He is from eternity past a relational Being. He gave Paul these companions, he had mercy on Epaphroditus and Philippi and Paul, sparing them from sorrow that would be added to his imprisonment. How tender! Paul was not an unfeeling stoic! He honored this man before them all, and would feel great loss if he died. The Apostle was facing trial before a dangerously unbalanced tyrant and could easily be sentenced to death, but his greater concern than his own safety is that this young man make it safely home! (And with the original copy of the Epistle to the Philippians tucked in his belt!)

I've been reading Stephen Ambrose's observations about Dwight Eisenhower as a general in the latter part of WW2. One of the things that set him apart from other military leaders was his practice of stopping to talk to enlisted men. And when he did, he wouldn't talk about the war, or their jobs or their specialties, but about where they were from and about their families at home. He did not glory in the war but wanted to get all the soldiers safely back home to their families.

Paul's expressed joy in chapter 1 is mainly about the advance of the gospel, and people's participation in it. In chapter 2 it is on friendships, and specifically good relationships. He wants his readers to see the value of these relationships.

But there is an underlying concern in this letter. We see how he addresses this at the beginning of this section... Paul is concerned about possible broken relationships within the Philippian church.

Philippians 2:1-3 *So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind [τὸ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε], having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*

Philippians 4:2 *I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. [τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν κυρίῳ to live in harmony]*

2) Our community, this fellowship of the King, is built upon some very important things we share in common. Community comes about as we share things in common. Friendships can be built around special interests, activities, points of view, etc. Family relationships (blood ties) are a community. Four shared things mentioned in

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need... (2:25)

- “Brother”. A shared family bond. In the case of the believer this is an eternal family relationship.
- “Fellow worker” or “co-worker”. A shared work or labor. For the Christian it is specifically a partnership in labor which has ultimate meaning.
- “Fellow soldier.” A shared battle. To have a common enemy. For the Christian it’s being in the contest against spiritual powers, against evil and all lies. In the fight together / each other’s back / tending wounded / guarding and protecting.
- “Minister” to one another. A shared ministry (λειτουργὸν *priestly service*) “Minister” is a priestly term, used of the Levites in the OT working in the temple. So not just serving, but serving God, serving before God, or serving God by serving others. Or, serving others with a mindset of serving to God. *I take “messenger” (ἀπόστολον) as the particular form this ministry took.*

Serving others or serving God by serving others? **2 Corinthians 4:5** ⁵ *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.* This is how we can serve or empty ourselves to do this. First we are equal in the sight of God so it is not demeaning to serve another. Secondly, we are actually serving God by serving them so it is a noble act. Thirdly, we like Jesus will be glorified for any service done in his name. Helps address: “they’re not thankful” or “not cooperative” or “it’s too difficult” or even when there’s not personal satisfaction or attractiveness to the person being served.

App. The church is a place of relationships that are strengthened because we share some very important things in common. We are in the same family of God (his children, and truly spiritual brothers and sisters), we have a shared work (he has given each of us, and all of us together, something important to do), have a common enemy (fallen world, Satan, flesh), and a shared ministry and mission to the Lord and to his people. Sometimes we are lonely in the church – or feel unattached -- because we have not considered these things to be true and have not embraced the family of God and joined in the work, warfare, and worship. The church is not a place for lifelong spectators.

Another problem when we forget that this ministry is “shared” or “in common”. (Note: “shared”. Partnership illustration: “I’m doing the Lord’s work here.”)

This is the unique basis of Christian friendship... a common family, a common work, a common enemy, and a common ministry to the Lord and his people.

3) This community takes shape as we – though members equal in status and value – voluntary empty ourselves to serve others sacrificially, knowing that God will reward us. (The example of Jesus, Paul, Timothy...)

Epaphroditus like Jesus in his service. Incarnation is a model for our fellowship and service. Both in 2:30 and in 2:8.

Philippians 2:27, 30 *Indeed he was ill, near to death... for he nearly died [μέχρι θανάτου] for the work of Christ, risking his life*

Philippians 2:5-8 ⁵ *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,* ⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,* ⁷ *but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form,* ⁸ *he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, [μέχρι θανάτου] even death on a cross.*

This becomes a model of serving in the fellowship of the King. We are all equal sons and daughters in God’s sight, we all come by recognition of our sin (we’re equally all flawed), and we all have immediate and full inclusion into God’s family. This gives us the freedom to serve others without thought of hierarchy or appearance. When I am most confident and content in my relationship with the Lord, the more free I am to lay down whatever things I might think are important but are not. The resurrection means I actually lose nothing, and God will honor all those who serve him.

“The world values power, comfort, success, and recognition. Jesus frees us to value grief, sacrifice, weakness, and exclusion.” (Tim Keller)

[And this is indeed part of our own mental health... Psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger was reportedly asked what he would do if he knew he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His reply: "I'd go out, find somebody in need, and help him."]

4) This community comes about only through the Lord. He is the One who is more than an example, he is the One who actually gives this to us. He came to us.

Friendship at heart of the gospel. Abraham was called "the friend of God". (2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23) Jesus calls his believers his "friends" (John 15:15) Christianity different from other world religions... God who is eternally relational within himself, takes us to be his children, his friends, his coworkers, etc. He is a God with whom we can have a personal relationship, be in his family. He is not an impersonal force, nor is he just a God who is God and only required obedience but not love and friendship.

So Jesus came into the world, emptying himself, serving to the point of his truly sacrificial death, giving us life, and rising. He has made us part of his family, bringing us into the household of God his Father, who has sent his Spirit to be our bond of unity, who has given us meaningful work which will have lasting significance, and though he has stripped Satan of his power at the cross he calls us to fight a good fight, to stand fast, to deny self, the ways of the world, to labor to shine the light of the gospel into a darkened world. Jesus shares with us his family, his work, his battle, and his service. He grants that we get to share with him in his work and his ministry here, he gives us strength to fight the battle for his truth and light against a world of lies and darkness.

5) Our community, the fellowship of the King, means that we should receive and honor one another in the Lord, especially those who serve sacrificially.

Philippians 2:29-30 ²⁹ *So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men,* ³⁰ *for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.*

What does it mean "to make up what is lacking..." It's not something moral lacking, or a criticism of a shortcoming. The word lack here can mean absence or inability, specifically their inability to be there with him. Epaphroditus was there to represent the people of Philippi who could not be there.

But I wonder, is it possible that Paul wondered if somehow after Epaphroditus reached home that someone might look down on him as not finishing his task, or staying in Rome longer? Whether that is true or not, Paul is making certain they give him a hero's welcome.

"Receive him in the Lord with all joy" = receive him as one being worthy by his association to the Lord. He wasn't just being a messenger boy for the church, he was serving Christ, and that involved great risk. "To honor such men..." ("men" is not in the text, but "to such [pl]" not males but to all such people) means to "regard highly, to have esteem for, to see as valuable".

App. To show honor to our missionaries. They are honored guests. They take risks for the Lord; they have given up many comforts and securities to represent this church and others both here and overseas; when we have lunches, attend the lunches and have them come to your house group.

Sometimes we allow people to become so much furniture in our lives. Used, but unnoticed and under-appreciated. Last Sunday I took pictures of all the people here serving just in support of our Sunday morning worship... Over 75 people serving, many behind the scenes praying, Lord's Supper preparation, greeting, helping, ushering, teaching Sunday school, singing, playing music, caring for children, door-keeping, helping in the library, managing our lights, heat, sound, audio visuals, counting and depositing our offerings, and so on! Here are some of them...

Slides: BCF Servants.