

## “TRAITS OF EXEMPLARY CHRISTIANS”

### **I. Introduction**

- A. The focus in the previous section of Philippians was Paul’s exhortation for Christians to live out our heavenly citizenship in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- B. The verses that we are studying this evening mark a transition to a new section of the letter.
- C. Here, Paul returns to a subject he addressed earlier in the epistle, namely, his situation as a prisoner in Rome and his plans for the future.
- D. Having said that, there is a clear connection between this passage and what has immediately preceded it.
- E. As Paul talks about himself, Timothy, and Epaphroditus, we see a description of a number of the traits that are found in the lives of exemplary Christians, Christians whose manner of life is worthy of the gospel.

### **II. Submission to God**

- A. Before we delve into our study of this text, a bit of background about Epaphroditus will be helpful.
  - 1. In chapter 4, we learn that the Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to Paul in order to deliver a gift to help him in his imprisonment.
  - 2. It appears that the Philippians asked Paul to send Timothy back to them, but Paul was not ready to part with Timothy yet.
  - 3. If Paul ended up being sentenced to death, he would need to have Timothy’s help in writing his final words to the many churches that

were always on his mind.

4. In these verses, Paul explains that this is the reason why he is sending Epaphroditus back instead of Timothy.

B. We turn now to the first trait of an exemplary Christian life that we see in this text, which is living in submission to God.

1. This is evident in the way Paul talks about himself and his future hopes and plans.
2. While he has already expressed his confidence that he will be released from this imprisonment, notice how he speaks about this.
3. He says in verse 19 that he *hopes in the Lord Jesus* to send Timothy to them.
4. Then he says in verse 24 that he *trusts in the Lord* that he will shortly come to them.
5. The verbs 'hope' and 'trust' express Paul's confidence that these things will happen, but they also convey that he is not absolutely certain that they will happen.
6. Notice, by the way, that his confidence does not reside in the Roman justice system, but in the Lord.
7. While Paul had not done anything wrong, human courts do not always render just verdicts.
8. This is why our hope needs to be fixed upon the Lord.

C. By expressing his hopes and plans for the future in the way he does, Paul is saying that he submits his will to the will of the Lord.

1. The providence of God was not merely a theoretical matter for Paul.

2. It was the set of lenses through which he viewed everything that took place in his life.
  3. He knew what he wanted to do as far as the future was concerned.
  4. He could also take a guess at what seemed likely to happen.
  5. But he understood that the actual unfolding of events is in the hands of the Lord.
- D. We also see Paul's submission to God in the way he speaks of himself in verse 22.
1. When he refers to his spiritual son Timothy, he says that Timothy "has served with me in the gospel."
  2. Paul may have been Timothy's spiritual father, but in relation to Christ he was Timothy's fellow servant.
  3. He led Timothy by his example, as they served together in the gospel.
  4. Though Paul had the authority of an apostle, he never forgot that he was a servant of Christ.
  5. This reminds us that all Christians, whether old or young, whether shepherds or sheep, are called to take up the yoke of service.
  6. Every Christian is a servant of Christ.

### III. Concern for Other Believers' Welfare

- A. Another trait of an exemplary Christian life that is highlighted in our text is a concern for the well-being of other believers.
1. This is evident in the way Paul speaks of Timothy.

2. Timothy would have been well-known to the Christians in Philippi, as he was there with Paul when the Philippian church was founded.
  3. Paul frequently sent his assistants to various places to conduct ministry, to encourage the saints, and to evaluate the situation of a church and bring back a report.
  4. In this case, Paul wanted to send Timothy to Philippi so that he could get a report from his most-trusted associate about how things were going in the church there.
- B. As Paul describes Timothy, he says that he has no one else like him, one who will be genuinely concerned for their welfare.
1. Then Paul makes a statement that sets Timothy in contrast to others, saying, "For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ."
  2. That is quite an indictment.
  3. Who is Paul referring to when he says this?
  4. It is not likely that he would say something so negative about his other co-laborers in the gospel, especially when we note that he sends greetings from them to the Philippians at the end of this letter.
  5. Instead, this is probably referring to the people Paul mentioned back in chapter 1, the men who were preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry, trying to show that they were better than Paul.
  6. Their zeal in preaching the gospel was fueled by their desire to make Paul look bad.
  7. They were taking advantage of the restrictions that his imprisonment placed upon him and trying to rally the church around themselves.

8. These men may have had some effectiveness, but their motives were selfish.
- C. Timothy stands in sharp contrast to such men.
1. He shares Paul's concern for the spiritual welfare of the Philippian Christians.
  2. Notice that Paul equates seeking the welfare of the Philippian Christians with seeking the interests of Christ.
  3. This tells us that if you love Christ, you will love his people and will want to see them flourish in the faith.
  4. You will be troubled when things do not seem to be going well in Christ's church.
  5. You will want to do what you can to make things better.
  6. This is one of the reasons why it is so wrong for us to think of the Christian faith merely as a private relationship between the individual and Jesus.
  7. Love for Christ is expressed in love for his church.
  8. Commitment to Christ is expressed in commitment to his church.
  9. We see this in Psalm 16, where David's profession, "I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you'", is immediately followed by the statement, "As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight."
  10. David acknowledges that he has no good apart from God.
  11. But then in the very next breath he says that all his delight is in God's saints.

12. You cannot love Christ without loving his people.
- D. The last thing that Paul says about Timothy is that he has served with Paul as a son with a father.
1. This speaks to the close friendship that these two men enjoyed with one another.
  2. Paul was a spiritual father to Timothy.
  3. He would later address Timothy as “my true child in the faith” and “my beloved child.”
  4. The fact that their relationship could be characterized this way tells us that Timothy showed great respect toward Paul and submitted himself to him.
  5. His high regard for Christ led him to hold Christ’s servant in high regard.

#### IV. Sacrificing Self in Service to Christ

- A. This brings us to what Paul has to say about Epaphroditus, where we see that another trait of an exemplary Christian life is the willingness to sacrifice self in service to Christ.
1. Epaphroditus was one of the Philippians.
  2. As we noted earlier, he was sent by the Philippians to provide financial assistance for Paul while he was in prison.
  3. This is what Paul means when he describes Epaphroditus as “your messenger and minister to my need.”
  4. In ancient Rome, prisoners were not cared for by state funds.
  5. Their necessities had to be provided by their family and friends.

6. This meant Paul was dependent upon his fellow Christians, both in Rome and beyond, to supply his needs.
  7. This helps us understand the significance of what Paul said back in chapter 1 about giving thanks for the Philippians' partnership with him in the gospel.
  8. Those weren't just nice-sounding words.
  9. These Christians were literally invested in Paul's work.
- B. Paul further describes Epaphroditus as "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier."
1. This terminology has both a general and specific application.
  2. In the more specific sense, these names should characterize those who serve in the gospel ministry.
  3. The church's elders, ministers, and deacons are brothers in Christ, co-laborers in Christ's cause, and fellow combatants in the fight of faith.
  4. In a more general sense, these qualities describe the ordinary Christian life.
  5. Every Christian is a part of God's family, is called to invest his gifts and abilities in the hard work of building up Christ's church, and is called to be fully engaged in the fight of faith.
- C. Another thing that we learn about Epaphroditus in these verses is that he nearly died while traveling to Rome to bring Paul the Philippian church's gift of support.
1. Epaphroditus grew ill on his journey to Rome, but he decided to press on in order to carry out his task.
  2. There are several things to point out about what Paul says here.

3. First, he says that Epaphroditus was distressed that the saints in Philippi were worried about him.
  4. He was troubled that he had become a source of concern to his fellow believers.
  5. This tells us quite a bit about this man's character.
  6. It shows us that he was not carrying out these duties in order to call attention to himself.
  7. He was a genuine servant, wanting to be used to help the church in Philippi extend support to the apostle Paul.
  8. The fact that he had gotten sick and nearly died was an embarrassment to him, because it cast the spotlight on him.
  9. He was so focused on serving others that he was upset that his own health had become a subject of anxiety.
- D. The second thing to point out about what Paul says about Epaphroditus' sickness is his assertion that God had mercy on Paul by healing Epaphroditus.
1. This might seem to be in conflict with what Paul said back in chapter 1 about death being gain for the Christian.
  2. If death is gain, then why would Paul describe God's sparing of Epaphroditus from death as something merciful?
  3. Furthermore, why would Paul say that he would have had "sorrow upon sorrow" if Epaphroditus had died?
  4. Paul is not contradicting himself in saying such things.
  5. This is simply the way that the Bible talks about the deaths of God's people.



6. Of course it is true that we are not to grieve for deceased Christians as others do who have no hope.
  7. But we still grieve the deaths of our fellow Christians.
  8. God does not expect us to pretend that death is not a bad thing.
  9. It is right for us to mourn, even as we also rejoice that the dead in Christ are presently enjoying a type of fellowship with Christ that far surpasses anything that they knew in this life.
  10. Even though dying and being with Christ is better than continuing in cross-bearing discipleship, it is still a mercy to be spared from death.
- E. The last thing that Paul says about Epaphroditus is that such men should be honored.
1. He risked his life in order to make sure that his church's gift of support reached Paul.
  2. He nearly died as a result of his commitment to the cause of Christ.
  3. Because of this, he should be honored.
  4. The idea of honoring people may make us feel a little uncomfortable.
  5. After all, we know that all the human characters in the Bible are sinful, flawed, and imperfect.
  6. But there is no getting around the fact that the Bible talks about faithful believers in this way.
  7. Many of the individuals mentioned by name in Paul's letters are people of whom Paul has something positive to say, people whom Paul honors.

- F. Such passages teach us that it is a good thing to honor those who exhibit godly character qualities.
1. To do so is to praise God and show gratitude for the good work that he is doing in the lives of his people.
  2. It is a way of encouraging our fellow believers, making them feel loved and appreciated.
  3. It is a way of pointing others to good examples of Christian piety.
  4. And it is a way of cultivating humility in our own hearts, guarding us against the tendency to hold ourselves in higher esteem than others.
  5. So when you see something honorable in the life of a fellow Christian, it is good and proper for you to point it out as something that is worthy of honor.
  6. As David says in Psalm 15, one of the marks of the man who lives in communion with God is that he “honors those who fear the LORD.”

## V. Conclusion

- A. We should not think that the character traits described in these verses are restricted to those who might be thought of as “super-Christians.”
- B. In fact, the vast majority of exemplary Christians are ordinary people who attain no notoriety.
- C. Though such believers do not attain fame, they make a profound contribution to the edification of Christ’s church and to the well-being of society in general.
- D. This is aptly expressed in the closing line of George Eliot’s great novel *Middlemarch*, where the life of the main character is described in these

words: “the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” [889]

- E. May God give each of us grace to live exemplary Christian lives, even in the ordinary and unremarkable duties of daily life.