Philippians 2:19-30 *No Turning Back: Those We Should Honor*

***It is Hard to Be what You Cannot See***One of the trends in U.S. education in the last several years has been a renewed emphasis on STEM. That is, there is a recognition that we need, as a nation, to raise up people who will pursue careers in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. STEM.

Alongside of that renewed emphasis has also been an emphasis on engaging young women in these fields. Over the years, it seems that Science, Technology, Engineering and Math have been fields entered primarily by men.

But there is no inherent reason for that. It’s not like a Y chromosome automatically makes a person better with numbers. If the goal is to make sure our best and brightest continue to enter fields that lead to innovation; it doesn’t make sense that we automatically assume 50% of the population will not participate.

In the search to figure out why girls were not entering STEM careers a surprising culprit emerged: stock photos. Stock photos are the generic looking photographs that publishing companies, newspapers, magazines and websites use to illustrate their articles. As the people charged with recruiting more people into STEM careers looked back at the images that often accompanied stories about science, technology, engineering, and math; they found that those images overwhelmingly depicted men. They concluded that it is hard for a little girl to grow up dreaming of being a scientist when all the people pictured in lab coats in her science textbook are men. Young ladies don’t even consider a career in construction or engineering when the only people they see wearing hardhats are men. And so, there has been a deliberate effort to make more and more stock photos available showing women doing these kinds of jobs.

Now, you could argue that the photos primarily showed men doing those jobs because it was primarily men who were filling them. But that’s kind of the point. It becomes a closed feedback loop. We think of those fields as being male driven because we mostly see men in those fields. And, in the process, we deprive ourselves of the brain power of 50% of the population because they just can’t picture themselves doing that kind of work.

A catchphrase has emerged: **You can’t be what you can’t see**. In the drive to get the best and brightest to consider STEM careers, the companies that produce stock photos have made a conscious effort to be more inclusive in the people they depict filling these kind of roles.

My sermon today is not about gender roles or science and tech, but it is about that catchphrase: you can’t be what you can’t see. There’s a recognition here that so much of learning is caught rather than taught. It’s one thing to be told what to do and how to do it, it is something else to see it being done. When what we are taught is reinforced by what we see others doing, it becomes so much more likely to take root in our lives.

And that’s true not only in what we imagine ourselves doing for a career, but also in living the Christian life.

***More Than Just a Missionary Letter***The Apostle Paul understood this. He seems to have instinctively understood the power of modeling in the Christian life. On more than one occasion in his writings he invites his readers to imitate him as he imitates Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). We’ve already seen, in the book of Philippians, how he has pointed to Jesus as the ultimate example of humility and servanthood. Now, in our passage for today, he is going to give us two more models of living a life worthy of the gospel.

Our text today is Philippians 2:19-30. In many respects, this passage gives us the sensation of reading somebody else’s mail. And that is, in part, because that’s what we are doing. This book of the Bible started out, of course, as a letter from Paul to the church in Philippi. It’s a real letter from a specific person to a specific group of people at a specific time in history. So it contains information that is very specific to their circumstances. In this case, Paul is sharing information about the travel plans of two of his associates: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

It’s logistics: “If possible, I’m going to send Timothy. Here’s why I sent Epaphroditus. Here’s what has been going on.” It reads like a missionary letter, and it’s tempting to kind of skim over it. Afterall, we don’t know Timothy and Epaphroditus, they’re obviously not coming to visit us, so it’s hard to see how any of this is relevant to us.

But I think Paul is being very intentional by talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus here. More than just a report on their travel plans, Paul sees an opportunity to illustrate what he’s been talking about.

Let’s remember the argument of Philippians so far: the key verse is **1:27-28** where we are told to “conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The way to do that, Paul says, is by standing firm in one spirit. Striving together without being frightened. I’ve summed that up with the phrase “Stand firm and stand together.” We could call it fearless unity. Being unified and fearless in the cause of the gospel.

Most of chapter 2, then, has been focused on how we should follow the example of Jesus in putting others ahead of ourselves. You before me, because of Jesus. **Verses 3 and 4** sum up the way we are called to live as Christians:

**3**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, **4**not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Jesus is the premier example of this, of course. He did not use his equality with God to his own advantage, but instead brought himself down, down, down, for our sakes. What Jesus has done for us we are called to do for others.

But, of course, it can be hard to relate to Jesus. He’s in heaven now. We can’t see him. It’s hard to be what we can’t see. But we can see other Christians. And I think that’s Paul’s point in talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus now. Because they are examples of the kind living Paul is talking about. We can see Jesus clearly, though indirectly, through the lives of those who follow Him.

The key verse in our passage comes at the end. It’s actually just a little phrase. Paul says, in verse 29, about Epaphroditus: **“honor people like him.”** I think he would say the same about Timothy. There are things about Timothy and Epaphroditus that help us see what it means to live a life worthy of the gospel.

Let’s go through the passage in two parts: looking at Timothy and then Epaphroditus, and then I’ll have a couple of applications at the end:

***No One Like Him***First, Timothy. Timothy models putting the interests of others first. **Philippians 2:19-24**:

**19**I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. **20**I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. **21**For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. **22**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. **23**I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. **24**And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

Here are the logistics. Paul says, in verse 24, that he wants to come and visit the Philippians personally, and soon. But there is one snag: he’s in prison. In fact, as we’ve seen, he doesn’t even know if he is going to survive this imprisonment**. So, here’s the plan, verse 19:** he’s hoping to send Timothy, who can visit them and then return to Rome and give a report on how they are doing.

And notice—this is kind of an aside—the phrase “I hope in the Lord Jesus.” That sounds like a Biblical way of talking—sort of a verbal tick from people in the Bible that we don’t give a second thought—but it Paul’s way of saying here something we’ve been saying a lot lately: “Lord willing.” Paul’s plan is to send Timothy. He is sincere in his desire to carry out that plan. But he fully recognizes that the Lord Jesus is sovereign. So, “Lord willing” I will send Timothy to you. “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you.” It’s not just a pious sounding way to talk, it is a crucial perspective on the One whose plans ultimately matter.

What can we say about Timothy? Beginning in Acts 16 he has been a frequent travel companion of Paul. The beginning of this letter lists him almost as a co-author, and we have suggested that it is likely that Timothy wrote while Paul dictated. There are a couple of books of the Bible named after Timothy, letters written by Paul to him while he was serving as the pastor of the church at Ephesus. So…Timothy is a valuable part of Paul’s team, a trusted assistant, and a pastor and leader of the early church in his own right.

And look at what Paul says about him in **verse 20:**

**20**I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare.

Timothy stands out. I don’t think this verse is meant to throw shade on the other members of Paul’s team. He’s not trying to put them down, he’s just lifting Timothy up.

Timothy is exceptional, especially in this particular: he shows genuine concern for the welfare of others. Timothy puts others first. You before me. And it is genuine. It is heartfelt. It isn’t fake.

I’ve been reminded in the last few weeks that there are people who can be pretty good at pretending to be Christians. There are people who peddle Christian- sounding stuff for the purposes of padding their own pockets. Remember that from chapter 1:17? The people who were preaching Jesus out of envy and rivalry, trying to take advantage of Paul’s imprisonment? We can still see evidence of that today. People who use the name of Jesus without genuinely following him. People who say the right things, but whose hearts are far from God.

And, of course, we’ve all encountered people who pretend to be our friends, pretend to be interested in us, but only as a means to an end. They want to sell us something. They want to get something from us. We call them “fake.”

But that’s not Timothy. He’s genuine. He is exceptional in his genuine concern for the welfare of others. **Verse 21:**

**21**For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

This should sound really familiar to you, because it is almost exactly what we are told to do in chapter 2, verse 4. In fact—and I don’t suppose your Bibles are all formatted like mine—but in my Bible 2:4 is in the left-hand column, and 2:21 is exactly across from it in the right-hand column. If you are the kind of people who make notes on the pages of your Bible, you could circle this verse and then draw a line directly to 2:4. Paul’s point is for us to see in Timothy exactly the kind of mind-set he is challenging us all to have.

The difference is that 2:4 says “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” while 2:21 says that Timothy looks not only to his own interests, but to those of Jesus Christ.

We might be tempted to ask: which is it? Should we look to the interests of others, or the interests of Jesus? But I think we know what Paul’s answer would be: both! They are one in the same. When we put the interests of others first, we are putting the interests of Jesus first. When we serve others we are serving Christ.

That’s what Timothy represents then: this is a real-life example of somebody who in humility considers others better than himself. This is a flesh-and-blood model of what it means to have the attitude of Christ Jesus. Timothy serves Jesus by serving others. You before me, because of Jesus. And what we see in Timothy we should seek to implement in our own lives.

***Fellow Soldier***Second, Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus models fearlessness for the sake of the gospel. **Verses 25-30:**

**25**But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. **26**For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. **27**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. **28**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. **29**So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, **30**because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

Unlike Timothy, the book of Philippians is the only place in the Bible where we hear about Epaphroditus. We don’t know a ton, about him; but we can put enough together to understand the story.

According to **verse 25**, Epaphroditus was a messenger from the Philippians to Paul, to take care of Paul’s needs. Remember, Paul is in a Roman prison—most likely under house arrest in a rented apartment in Rome. Back then, if you were arrested, that didn’t mean that the authorities were going to feed you and clothe you. You needed family members or friends would bring food in, you needed help paying your expenses.

Apparently, then, the Philippians heard that Paul was in prison and they decided to do something about it. They took up an offering. And then Epaphroditus volunteered to make the journey—over 4500 miles!—to deliver this gift to Paul. There wasn’t a post office. You couldn’t just call up FedEx to deliver your package. You needed someone you trusted to physically carry this package to Paul. And then, beyond that, Epaphroditus volunteered to stay and take care of Paul’s needs. To run errands and go to the market and whatever else he could do. He was a human care package!

But now, Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to the Philippians. Again, no post office. He wants this letter to get to Philippi, and he selects Epaphroditus to carry it. This letter we are reading now, we need to picture Epaphroditus as the one handing it over to the elders to read to the church. And, if it seems to the Philippians that Epaphroditus is abandoning his post—he was supposed to stay and help—Paul explains. **Verse 26:**

**26**For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill.

Somehow or another, Epaphroditus became ill. Maybe it was on the journey. Maybe he picked something up in the unsanitary conditions Paul was being kept in. Maybe it was something else. But, here’s the character of Epaphroditus, he was distressed—not because he was sick—but because word had gotten back to his friends in Philippi and he didn’t want them to worry. You before me. Looking out for the interests of others. Epaphroditus is worried that rumors of his illness are going to cause pain to his friends back home.

And the truth is, **verses 27 and 28**, he was very sick. Paul was concerned about losing him. And it’s possible that he’s not completely out of the woods yet. And so Paul sees a great advantage in sending him home. It’ll be healthier for him, and Paul will have one less potential sorrow to deal with.

But here’s the thing. While Paul allows that Epaphroditus was a bit homesick, and while the task of carrying this letter was an important one, I have a feeling Epaphroditus had to be persuaded to go. He was committed to Paul, and he was committed to serving the cause of the gospel by serving Paul. Look again at **verses 29 and 30:**

**29**So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, **30**because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.

In verse 25 Paul called Epaphroditus a brother, a co-worker and a fellow solider. He was a solid guy who could be depended on in a spiritual battle. He was willing to give his life for the work of Christ. Paul wants the Philippians to know that his commitment to Christ was total.

Paul put Timothy before us as an example of what it means to put the interests of others ahead of our own. I see that in Epaphroditus as well. But, more than that, Paul is pointing to Epaphroditus as an example of what it means to be fearless for the cause of Christ.

We are singing “I have decided to follow Jesus/No Turning Back, No Turning Back” during this series. Epaphroditus is a real-life example of somebody who is pressing on his desire to know Christ. He is a flesh-and-blood model of what it means to stand firm for the cause of Christ. Epaphroditus risked his life for the work of Jesus. And what we see in Epaphroditus, we should seek to implement in our own lives.

***Honor People Like This***Paul believes in the power of personal examples. This section of the letter that seems like irrelevant logistics to us is actually strategically placed by Paul to illustrate the things he has been talking about. He knows that it’s hard to be what we can’t see, and so he points to Timothy and Epaphroditus as flesh-and-blood examples of what it means to live a life worthy of the gospel.

For our application, then, I want to point you to that little phrase in **verse 29:**

“honor people like him.”

That’s the instruction to us in this passage. This is what we can do. We can honor people like Timothy and Epaphroditus. I get two things from this:

1. To honor people means to **hold in high regard the people who model Christ.**

If we are going to do what this passage asks us to do, then we need to pay close attention to the people in our lives who live like the book of Philippians describes. We need to seek out mentors and role models in the people who put others ahead of themselves and live boldly for Jesus. We need to make heroes out of them.

We all have heroes. We all have heroes, people we look up to, in our profession or athletically or artistically. We all have people we admire and want to be like. They tend to be people who have achieved some kind of fame or name recognition in their area. People who have worked hard and gotten the world’s attention.

The people described here in Philippians are not usually the kind of people we think of in that way. In fact, these are the kind of people who—by definition—tend to deflect attention away from themselves in order to look after the interests of others and the interests of Christ. They are humble. Servants.

But they are the kind of people we should honor. They are the real heroes. We should hold them in high esteem and pay careful attention to their lives. Because what we see in them is the mind set of Jesus.

2. Then, second, to honor people means **seek to imitate the people who truly model Christ.**

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. If we want to honor the people who are following Jesus, then we should shape our lives after their example.

That’s clearly why Paul is talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus the way he is. There are great characteristics evident in them that the Philippians—and us—should seek to imitate.

More than that, we should be mindful of the fact that there are people watching us to get an idea of what it means to be Christian. We should seek to live in a way that models Christ to others and well. Not because we want to be put on a pedestal, not because we want glory and attention for being such noteworthy Christians—we shouldn’t seek to pursue Christlikeness just so other people will want to watch us; but we should be mindful of the fact that there are already people watching. And they are forming their judgments about Christ by what they see in us.

What this passage is teaching us is that in the church, we can be a school of Christ-likeness for each other, and for a watching world. In my own life, I am who I am today in large part because of the examples of living for Jesus that were set before. First my parents and grandparents, then the people in the congregation I grew up in, then my pastors and fellow campus ministry students when I was in college, then my professors and classmates in seminary, and so on and so on. Their examples, like Timothy and Epaphroditus, helped shape for me what it means to follow Jesus.

So…let’s honor people like this. Let us hold in high regard those who model Christ, and let us imitate those who model Christ. Let’s be like Jesus by following the examples of people like Timothy and Epaphroditus.