

“Gospel Friendships and Gospel Goodbyes”

Philippians

Downtown

June 20, 2021

Good morning! My name is Ryan if I haven't met you yet, I'm one of the pastors here, I work with Care & Recovery. Happy Father's Day to all you father's out there, I've already called my dad, who now that he's a Grandpa goes by Papa T, I gave Papa T a call this morning to let him know I loved him.

Now, like I said, I am the care and Recovery pastor. And what that means is that I know for a lot of us, Father's day is really hard for one reason or another. So, if that's you I want you to know that my prayer for you this morning is that your Heavenly Father would be near to you today. I've got lots of stories about my dad, and I tell a few of them at Recovery, so if you have a lot of your stories about your dad and you're looking for a place to talk about them, Recovery starts September 27th and we'd love to have you join us. We'll announce it again before then.

We are continuing our series through the book of Phillipians this morning, so If you have a Bible we'll be in **Philippians 2:19-30**.

Our passage for today is unique in that it doesn't have a direct command or direct application. It doesn't say “therefore do _____.” This is one of the reasons why it's important to teach through books of the Bible, because it allows us to look at passages like this and show what we can glean from portions of Scripture that may not feel like they are directly for us.

Today we're talking about “Gospel Friendships and Gospel Goodbyes.” We will look at a goodbye that Paul didn't necessarily want to have, but did anyway. And we'll talk about why, and how he found joy in it still.

Read along with me:

Philippians 2:19-30

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

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, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 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. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Pray.

We are going to look specifically at the two characters that Paul cites: **Timothy and Epaphroditus**. I want to help us see these characters and what they share in common.

1 - Their friendship with Paul

Verses 19-24 mention Timothy. We see him first brought up in Acts 16. He's Greek and became a Christian through his mom and grandmother. And once he encounters Paul, he essentially becomes his traveling companion, helping him plant churches and write letters.

And notice how Paul talks about him in **verse 22 "as a son with a father."** A powerful metaphor.

And then in vv.25-30 we see Epaphroditus, the text says in verses 27 and 30 how he was sick and almost died...

so a bit of context for us. Remember that Paul is in jail in Rome while writing this letter to the Philippians. But at this place and time, prisoners had to pay for their own needs. So if they didn't have resources or family to help them, they were in a bind.

We mentioned back in week 1 that the letter to the Philippians is, in part, a thank you letter to the church in Philippi for sending Paul a large sum of money so that his needs could be met while in prison. Keep in mind they wouldn't be able to Venmo him--someone had to travel by foot several hundred miles to make sure Paul would get it. And who does the church decide ought to send the money to Paul? Epaphroditus.

And notice how Paul describes him in verse 25 - **"My brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need."**

The first word Paul uses to describe him is **as a brother**. Like a sibling who he's grown up with his entire life.

So I want us to step back for a moment and notice this - Timothy and Epaphroditus are such close friends of Paul that the best way to describe them is as members of his family. "He's like a son to me. He's like a brother to me."

Part of this is due to the fact that they are all Christians. They have all repented of their sin, trusted in Jesus alone for salvation, and been adopted into the eternal family of God.

The reason that we often use the "family" language is because the Bible does.

The scriptures teach that no matter where you come from, no matter what you've done, no matter what religion you came from, what cultural background you have, no matter what horrible sports teams you pull for--when you come to faith in Christ, you are now family in the deepest sense of the word. Eternal, forever, unchanging.

But there's also a shared experience between these men that sticks out even beyond the level I just described. Because God arranged their individual lives in such a way that they crossed paths in deeply meaningful ways, such that Paul would use deeply heartfelt language about their friendship.

And here's what I would like to point out. Friendships generally fall into some basic categories, and one difference I would draw is **shared interest vs. shared mission**.

Shared Interest vs. Shared Mission

For example. A few years ago, I went on my first cruise out of Charleston, and I was immediately hooked. And I don't mean that I just go on a cruise once a year now, I mean that I spend time on Cruise message boards, I follow different cruise accounts on Instagram, I think it's the most relaxing vacation. They plan everything for you!

One of the things I love about a cruise is the people you meet on the ship. And they become your cruise friends. And you have dinner together, strangers become family for a week, you add each other on Facebook, but then you go home and get back to normal life and move on, and you never see these people again.

Our shared interest in cruising doesn't last on land. It was fun, but it wasn't lasting.

In contrast to shared interest is shared mission. I think about some of the stories I remember my grandad telling me about guys he served in the Navy overseas during World War II when he was a SeeBee.. There were men he served with that he was close with until he died in his eighties. Men that he had a bond with that surpassed anything I've ever seen.

Friendships born out of a shared mission are something else. And that's exactly what Paul had with Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Their friendship was united around a shared mission.

Look back at how Timothy is described in verse 22:

Philippians 2:22

But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.

The reason Paul says he's like a son to him is because Timothy has served with him in the gospel. By making much of Jesus *with* him. By suffering together *with* him. By planting churches and building up leaders *with* him. Paul's able to say "This guy's my family because of how we've worked side-by-side for so long toward this ultimate goal."

This is similar to how Paul talks about Epaphroditus too. Look back at v.25:

Philippians 2:25

Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, (there's the metaphor) and your messenger and minister to my need.

Paul can say of him, this guy's like a little brother because he's a fellow worker, a fellow soldier in this mission we are on. And it's because these three men share this common goal together, to make much of Jesus in all that they do, that they can really be this loving tight-knit family together.

They have their own set of stories they will never forget. They have shared memories, shared heartaches, shared tears. It doesn't matter that Paul was very Jewish and Timothy was Greek. That became inconsequential once they joined the same mission.

This is instructive for us, because it reminds us of the deepest foundation for a relationship that we have. We can be lulled to sleep by distractions and comforts, but the reality Scripture paints is that there is indeed a spiritual war going on. Jesus says in the book of John that the enemy came to kill, steal and destroy, which is exactly what he's still seeking to do today.

Satan hates goodness and wholeness. Satan hates family harmony, Satan hates laughter, and joy. Satan hates you, he hates your marriage, he hates your purity. He hates our church. He hates it when you go to LifeGroup. He hates it when you confess sin instead of hide. He hates when you encourage someone

rather than find something to criticize.

And when we can see clearly, we see that that war is happening under the surface of our day to day, and we join arms with one another to proclaim that Jesus alone saves, and that with Jesus comes freedom from everything that would destroy you.

We get to proclaim the lordship of Jesus over all, and properly understood, there is no greater mission than this.

And when our friendships are built on this, we aren't captive to the lesser affiliations that so many relationships max out at. Shared interests are good and fine, but this is far deeper.

Interests come and go. Seasons of life change. But having this sort of mutual foundation of being a part of God's mission to make all things new, is something that even when you get older, or are in a new season of life, or even when you have conflict and sin against each other, your friendships can last.

This is how Paul sees it. Because of their common goal they have a deep friendship. And that's what makes the the second part of this so powerful.

2 - Their commissioning from Paul

Remember, Paul is in jail while writing this. Timothy is serving with him, being "like a son" to him according to Paul. Epahproditus has brought funds for him to survive and is like a brother. This is a level of closeness that if I were to find myself in a predicament like Paul, I would be like "Please you guys stay forever. I need you!"

But in this passage immediately after speaking so warmly about both of them, Paul shares his plans to send both out.

Look back at how he talks about Timothy in verse 23:

Philippians 2:23

I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me,

He thinks about it the same way with Epaphrotidus in verses 25-28:

Philippians 2:25-28

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, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 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. I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.

I'm struck that this is someone who Paul says almost died, but God had mercy on both of them, so that Paul wouldn't have sorrow upon sorrow. And then the next thought out of his mouth is "I am the more eager to send him."

He's still willing to send away that close of a relationship. He's still going to lose it to a degree, this time by choice.

Because of Jesus, Paul has such an open-hand with these relationships that he's willing and ready to send them out to the Philippian church so that it will advance the kingdom. Even when it's very difficult for him to do so.

This commissioning by Paul is actually the fruit of their friendship. Their friendships were built on something bigger than their friendship, and that freed them up to prioritize their shared mission.

Paul knows his friendships are ultimately not about him. Yes, they are like family. But out of a deeper love for Christ - Paul's response is to be open-handed with them. It's asking, "**What's going to advance the Kingdom?**" And in this case it meant sending them out.

When it comes to our Jesus-centered friendships here, I think we can tend to err to one of two extremes:

- **Close-handed:** where I love these people so much that I want to hold onto them forever. They mean so much to me, and my walk with Jesus, and my family, and I can't imagine life without them.
 - And praise Jesus if you have those people in your life. But when we don't have that united goal to be on mission together, our relationships can easily become something we hold onto with a death grip.

But on the other hand, there's another extreme we can take in our relationships with others

- **Closed-off:** where honestly you've been hurt one too many times over by other people. And to open yourself up again towards someone who loves Jesus and is in your life, the risk is too much and you'd rather not open-up to them or spend too much time with them because what if they hurt you or what if they leave? So you keep at a distance from others
 - Which I get that, I really do. But if we stay closed-off for too long from others, we close ourselves off from the love of God in turn. C.S. Lewis puts it like this:

C.S. Lewis

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one... Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

And yet the call to having real, deep gospel friendships is to know Jesus is the foundation not us. And when we do that, rather than being closed-handed or closed-off we can be **open-handed** in our friendships. Because we know Jesus' fame is on the line, and that ultimately takes precedence over my preference or comfort.

And when you have these open-handed relationships built on this foundation, and this shared purpose, rather than asking "How can this person make my life better? Or easier? Or more enjoyable?" The question then becomes, "**How can we advance the Kingdom of Jesus together?**" It's about asking,

- "Hey this friendship is really good--how can we invite others into what we have so they can have this sort of friendship - and maybe Lord willing, meet Jesus in the process?"

And when you're open-handed like this, it may mean fruitful gospel ministry together for years to come, being in each others lives for the long-haul and being in LifeGroup together for years on end AND it can also mean that you're willing to send those friendships out if that means Jesus' kingdom will spread.

And as a Family of Churches in our city, it's what we're going for here too. We want to build deep gospel friendships here all the while being open-handed so that the mission can go forward. Asking the question - **“What’s going to advance the kingdom?”**

And as a church, we have a lot of good things to celebrate here. One of which I think we do really well at is our emphasis on relationships. We are a Jesus-centered family here. So we designed our LifeGroups to be the main way we point each other to Jesus. Because Jesus has made us family, each week in people's homes all over the city we study the Scriptures together, we pray for one another, we confess together, we point each other to Jesus - people from different walks of life, seasons of life, with different interests building deep friendships because of Jesus.

We get meals together. We have fun together. We golf together. We make memories together, serve together. One of the best things about our church is this emphasis on relationships--but the goal is never just to hoard what we have. The goal is to spread what we have and invite others into it.

That we might be on mission in everything we do, always asking “What’s going to advance the kingdom?”

Two relationships this has played out recently in my life.

A couple of weeks ago, my LifeGroup sent out one of our members, Grayson, to join the LifeGroup that his wife has been in for a while now. Grayson got married a little over a year ago, and had planned to stay in our LifeGroup for a few months after getting married, but because of the pandemic, that transition was extended a bit. Three months or so ago, Grayson shares with us in LG that it's time for him to transition to join his wife's group. And I felt sad.

I mean, immediately. Just, heart dropped. I mean, this is one of my very best friends, been in LifeGroup with him for coming on five years at this point. And it makes me really sad. And even as I immediately felt sad, I just as quickly knew that it was the right decision for him to join a different group. No doubt in my mind. And there was joy for him, and joy for his family, and even joy for his new group! They're going to get to know Grayson the way that I have for the past 5 years! That's awesome! And I'm sad. And I'm joyful!

Second story I want to tell you about is a man named Stephen. We had walked together through a lot of things for a few years. And I'd had a front-row seat to watch God work redemption and restoration and healing and forgiveness in his life. And one day we were grabbing lunch together, and Stephen shares with me that Tim had asked him to consider joining the Citizens church plant to Charlotte, and he wanted to know my thoughts.

Immediately, no hesitation, yes. Go. Not a shadow of a doubt in my mind, yes, Go. And then, the sorrow. Stephen and I had walked through a lot, and in my role in our church family, I often get to walk closely with people when they're hurting and suffering, and I get a front-row seat to God offering them freedom, and healing, and I see them turn that freedom and healing down. Most people in Stephen's position run. And instead of running, Stephen was sent out to Charlotte. And there's fruit...in Charlotte. And I'm sad that Stephen's no longer in Columbia, and I'm joyful that we got the chance to send him.

And this is what we've been doing for as long as we've been around. Our LifeGroups are designed in such a way to leverage our relationships for mission, so that one day, Lord willing, our LifeGroups grow to such a size that we have to multiply them out - leaders get raised up within the group, and a group gets so big that they have to start a new group in a different area so that Jesus can be made known all the more. Is it hard and painful? Absolutely. Does it change the vibe of the LifeGroup once those people have left?

Yes. Do we see those people much less now than we did before? Of course. And...does it get easier? No.

Yet because of Christ, our call is to be open-handed with our friendships so that Jesus can be made known. That's the aim. It may mean people stick around for the long haul and it may mean people are sent out to start new LifeGroups, whatever advances the Kingdom.

This is why over the last 15 years since our church was started, we've now planted five other churches. God is on the move here, and I am so proud of our church family knowing and understanding the cost so that Jesus can be made known in different parts of Columbia and beyond.

We've sent some of our very best leaders - pastors, LifeGroup leaders and LifeGroup coaches, volunteer coordinators - and as a result, our churches feel different now. There are deficits and gaps when people are sent out. We have to, in a lot of ways, start from scratch: train up new LifeGroup leaders, or raise up new musicians, and find new volunteers. It comes with sending out our best - it means things are going to look different. Things may not be as good as they once were. And heartache may very well come with it all.

If you've been around with us long enough:

- you've experienced the bittersweet of praying over people in your LifeGroup who you've sent out
- you've said goodbye to some of your closer friends
- You've had to grieve over an imagined future living being in the same LifeGroup with them or living in the same city as you

And for what it's worth, it would be very easy to not be a church that sends out, like, in so many ways. For our friendships, for our volunteers, for our leadership, financially, it would be far easier to say, "Yea, no. We need you here, please stay."

And because of Jesus, we would do it all over again because joy is on the other side of it.

This is the same way it was for Paul, he knows that by sending them out, other peoples' joy would increase.

And notice Paul's hope is in sending Epaphroditus in verse 28:

Philippians 2:28

I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again,

There's that word that we see coming up time and time again in this letter: Rejoice. Gratitude. Thankfulness. Joy. Paul's joy is so selfless that he's sending these men out with the expectation that other people's joy will increase and the Kingdom will continue going forward by sending them out.

And the incredible thing is, it did. And all of us, sitting here today are the evidence of that. Churches being planted and disciples getting made were moved in large part by seeing Paul lead in this sending out mentality. This has effects 2,000 years in the future all the way to Columbia, SC.

Paul knew that because of the work of Jesus to adopt us back into God's family, they had forever to enjoy friendship.

They had and still have eternity to be together, to enjoy each other, to tell stories. This eternal mindset freed them up to be open-handed with their friendships for the spread of the gospel.

Even while sending them was difficult, there was also profound joy in it, which will lead to eternal joy.

Until the new heavens and the new Earth, this is what we're after. Open-handed, common-mission friendships that put the gospel on display for people around us. We want to rejoice in seeing more people get baptized through LifeGroups being on mission and multiplying out in our city to reach new people. We want to keep on planting churches so that we can celebrate baptisms in other cities.

So in thinking about Philippians 2 here, what do we do with a passage like this? Paul doesn't give us really clear commands on what to do or not do - so how do we apply this into our lives? I've got two quick questions.

1 - Are you investing in Jesus-centered friendships?

When you think about our church family, do you have people who you can genuinely say "they're like a brother, or a sister, or a son or daughter to me"? And if you're not, are you doing what you can to invest in other people, giving your life away, so that you can get there?

- **United and Open-Handed** - Are you united by a common mission with others who love Jesus? Are you willing to do whatever it takes so that the Gospel might advance?

And because you're united, are you open-handed in those friendships or are you closed-off or closed-handed with them?

For some of you today, you might be brand new to the whole Christianity thing - and there's part of you this morning that wants so much to experience this sort of joy. If that's you, let me encourage you - for those who put their trust in Jesus, who call Him Savior and Lord, Jesus in turn calls you His friend. And to have this sort of deep gospel friendship with others means first going to Jesus so that He might make you a friend of His.

For others of us this morning, you might be brand new to our church, and you might be thinking, "Well, I know Jesus but I sure don't have any friendships like that." And if that's you, let me encourage you to take that first step to sign up to be in a LifeGroup. And then, commit. Commit to these people no matter how awkward or different it might seem, no matter what stage of life they might be in, no matter if their interests are completely different than yours. Because if you commit to these people, and commit to being a Jesus-centered family on mission with them, God is going to use you and grow you in ways you never thought. And on the other side of that initial novelty of it all is the joy of giving your life away to something bigger than yourself--to be united in God's mission for the world.

And because of that...

2 - How can you leverage your friendships to advance the Kingdom?

For Paul, this meant sending his friends out to make much of Jesus somewhere else. And the Lord may be calling you to that or He may be calling you to stay here and dig some deep roots here. But having these sort of friendships means that whatever King Jesus says, we follow.

Historians tell us that Paul probably did see Timothy again after sending this letter, He probably saw the Philippians church and his buddy Epaphroditus again. But we also know how he would go back to prison a few years later to await his beheading, and that time around he's alone again just awaiting execution.

All those friends of his, all of these brothers and sisters in Christ, all of these churches he poured his life

into, even Timothy his beloved son, he never was able to give a proper goodbye the way you and I might hope for. And yet, here's the beautiful thing, for those in Jesus there is no such thing as goodbye.

For the Christian, when we send someone out there is no final goodbye, it's simply a "I'll see you later".

Because there's a place being prepared for us right now to be with Jesus forever. And we'll get to worship alongside every human being who has professed faith in Jesus as Lord.

We'll be worshipping alongside Paul, and Timothy, and the church in Philippi. They feel like a long ago story, and one day we will be with them in-person because in Jesus there is no such thing as a final goodbye. The people who we send out, we might see them later down the road, maybe next month or next year or maybe not. But we're not putting our hope in this life, we're putting our hope in the life to come, which means we're actually freed up to send ahead our people ahead of us, to send our money ahead of us, to send anything and everything if it will make Jesus known to more people.

Because of Jesus, there is no final goodbye, it's just a "I'll see you down the road." And it's our prayer that we become these sort of people, so freed up by Jesus, that we look forward to the day where we see all the kingdom-fruit that happened because we were open-handed with everything we had.

Pray.