

"THE FELLOWSHIP OF SERVANTS"

Philippians 2:19-3:1

J.R.R. Tolkien, contemporary and friend of C. S. Lewis, created a fantasy world in his literary masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, which has influenced generations of readers worldwide. This epic adventure of good vs. evil finds a heroic quest that is set in a time of uncertainty in the land of Middle-earth. The future of civilization rests in the fate of the One Ring, which has been lost for centuries. Powerful forces are unrelenting in their search for it. But fate has placed it in the hands of a young Hobbit named Frodo Baggins who inherits the Ring and steps into legend. A daunting task lies ahead for Frodo when he becomes the Ring bearer - to destroy the One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom where it was forged. But he can't do it alone. A Fellowship of diverse individuals bands together in a common cause to lend Frodo the wisdom of Gandalf; the loyalty of his friends Sam, Merry, and Pippin; the courage of Aragorn and Boromir; the skill of Legolas; and the strength of Gimli.

They are aided in their quest by Arwen, Galadriel and Elrond, whose knowledge of the One Ring brings to light the true danger and importance of their journey. And yet as I think about it there is even a deeper fellowship that is pictured in the Word of God.

Our passage today gives us a great description of the fellowship of servants. We read how the Apostle Paul wants to come to Philippi but he has this little problem- he is in prison. So he decides he will send Timothy in his place- young Timothy will be his representative. I mean, after all, there was no one closer to Paul than Timothy. We don't have the details as to how or when Timothy was converted to Christianity, but it was on his second missionary journey that Paul met him and found in Timothy one who could be used greatly in the service of Jesus Christ. One of the great things about Timothy was that Paul was able to use him whenever he wanted to get information **from** one of the early churches that Paul found or if Paul wanted to send advice or encouragement **to** one of the churches or even rebuke one

of the churches but was not able to go himself. So Paul would send Timothy in his place.

You might be thinking after hearing the scripture read and looking at the sermon title and wondering how they go together. Well, this passage does speak to the fellowship of servants and what servants of Christ are willing to do for one another out of their love for each other and their love for Christ. So let me make a few points about this fellowship that involves servanthood and look at three followers of Christ willing to step out and serve.

First, **there is Timothy willing to play second fiddle** when it came to serving Paul and Christ. Timothy was willing to anywhere that Paul asked him to go and Paul knew that in Timothy's hands the message being sent by Paul or the message that Timothy was bringing back to Paul from a particular church was as safe as if it were in Paul's hands himself. The important thing about Timothy was that he was not, let me repeat, he was

not consumed with selfish ambition. He wasn't trying to move his way into taking over for Paul or work his way up the corporate ladder. Timothy's one desire was to serve Paul and Jesus Christ. And in serving Paul and Christ, Timothy was also willing to look out for the welfare of others, and "the others" were the people of the church at Philippi. Where were there others that Paul could have sent instead of Timothy? Yes. Look at verses 20-21 of our passage where Paul says, "I have no one like him [meaning, Timothy] who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." So there were other fish to choose from but none who had the servant's heart and the desire to serve Paul and Jesus Christ like Timothy. As a matter of fact, Timothy has been referred to as the patron saint of all those who are quite content with second place, so long as they can serve. Is serving and service an important part of our Christian walk or do we say, let so-and-so do that, or that's not in my Christian job description?

There is a story told of the great violinist, Niccolò Paganini who willed his marvelous violin to the city of Genoa on the one condition that it must never be played. The wood of such an instrument, while used and handled, wears only slightly, but set aside, it begins to decay. Paganini's lovely violin has today become worm-eaten and useless, except as a relic. And so taking that illustration and bringing it home- a Christian's unwillingness to serve, no matter what the capacity, may soon destroy his or her capacity for usefulness. (J. K. Laney, Marching Orders, p.34)

Second, **there is Paul willing to look out for the issues/needs of another- Epaphroditus.** And with this second point we are going to focus on the wonderful Christian witness of both Paul and Epaphroditus. As Christians, we need to, and I know it is not always easy or possible, but we need to look out for the interests of others. Paul even said this earlier in Philippians 2:4 when he said, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

This is where we pick up the part of the story surrounding Epaphroditus. In verses 25 and following we read that this other disciple of Paul's, Epaphroditus, was going to be sent, by Paul, to the people at Philippi. Let me put this sending of Epaphroditus in context. The Philippian Church, finding out that Paul is in prison, was deeply touched and their hearts were moved into action. And so they sent Epaphroditus with a gift and to stay with Paul in Rome as his personal servant to attend to his needs. Now this was pretty brave on the part of Epaphroditus, for Paul is awaiting trial and this was very risky business for Epaphroditus could also become involved in the same charge. But while in Rome, Epaphroditus became ill with the deadly Roman fever and was near death. But God spared him and he recovered and it is now time to send him home. But there is a hitch. The Philippian Church had sent him to stay with Paul and if he came back home there would be those who thought he was a quitter. And so Paul, looking out for Epaphroditus' interests, writes in this letter to the Philippians a

beautiful testimony that will silence any of the critics and any possible criticism upon his return. Paul was willing to stand up for his friend, Epaphroditus, who came to be with him in prison.

How many times are we willing to put forth the energy and go the second mile for someone else, someone in need? How many times are we more concerned with our own interests than the interests or needs or concerns of others? Too often I am in such hurry or I am "me-focused" that I am not willing to make the time or spend the time for someone or something that has tremendous value because I am focused on me. Now I am not saying that I should become totally consumed with other people and their issues that I neglect my wife and children or even my own health. There needs to be balance but sometimes we make it only about "us" and forget the others.

Dr. Harry Ironside used to tell about a group of believers who thought only of "fellowship." They had little concern for others, they had little

interest for reaching the lost or for sharing the faith. In front of their meeting place they had hung a sign: JESUS ONLY. But one day the wind blew away some of the letters, and the sign read: US ONLY. It was a great example of unbalanced Christians.

Let me ask us- do we have balance in our lives? Are we taking care of ourselves but also looking out for the interests of others? I know, it is easy to get so immersed in one's own troubles that we have no time to think about the troubles of a friend or others. But here we have a great example in Paul, who is in prison, is not sure what tomorrow will bring, if he will be alive or dead, and yet, he had the right attitude with others- he looked after his brother Epaphroditus and the issue that could be facing him upon his return home. And yet Epaphroditus was willing to risk his all for Paul and come to be with him in prison. Do we ever get so focused on our own issues that we will not make time or give an ear to someone else who maybe needs us? Folks, there is always room for more in the ministry of the Church, of

this church. After being at the hospital this past Sunday afternoon with Bradon Lewis and his family I came back to the church for the Walk-In-Meal that had over 190 people being served a warm meal. There are so many needs out there and yes, right in here that I know there has got to be a place where each and every one of us can serve. But we have to have an open heart and be willing to serve and be involved in the fellowship of servants.

There is a Greek word in our passage that later became famous. The word is found in verse 30 of our passage and is translated "risking his life." Another translation reads "not regarding his life" while another translation could read "hazarding his life." The word is *paraboleuesthai* and it is a gambler's word and means to stake everything on the roll of the dice. What Paul is saying in our passage is that Epaphroditus, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Epaphroditus gambled his life. I also found out that in the days of the Early Church there was actually an association of men and women called

the *parabolani*, which translates **the gamblers**. And it was the parabolani[s'] desire to visit the prisoners and the sick, especially those who were ill with dangerous and infectious diseases. It just so happened that in A.D. 252 a plague broke out in Carthage. Those who were not Christians threw out the bodies of the dead and fled for their lives. But Cyprian, the Christian Bishop of Carthage, brought together his congregation and put them to work burying the dead and nursing the sick in that plagued-ridden city. And their very action saved the city from destruction and desolation, at the risk of their very own lives.

In each and every believer in Christ there needs to be built into them this almost reckless courage that is willing to play second fiddle for Christ where we have the mind of the Christ who emptied himself and became a servant where we our lead out of ourselves, freeing us from ourselves, binding us to Christ and to our brothers and sisters; and where we are willing to look to the interests, the needs of others. Reckless courage for

Christ... This is the fellowship of servants; this is the Church of Jesus Christ.

May it be so for us, may it be so. Amen.

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Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*

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Paul uses Timothy

Three followers of Christ willing to step out and serve

First, **there is Timothy willing to play _____ when it came to serving Paul and Christ**

Is serving and service an important part of our Christian walk?

The story of the great violinist, Niccolo Paganini

Second, **there is Paul willing to look out for the _____ / _____ of another- Epaphroditus**

Philippians 2:4

The story surrounding Epaphroditus...

How many times are we willing to expend the energy and go the second mile for someone else, someone in need?

Do we have "balance" in our lives?

Paraboleuesthai- the Greek word meaning "risking his life"

Conclusion: In each and every believer there needs to be built into them this almost reckless courage that is willing to...