**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**Model Spiritual Servants, Part 3: Epaphroditus**
Scripture: Philippians 2:25-30
Code: 50-26

Model Spiritual Servants: Epaphroditus

Let's open our Bibles for our time in God's Word this morning again to Philippians chapter 2. We're continuing our three-part study of, "Model Spiritual Servants." In this wonderful second chapter, the Apostle Paul selects himself as one model of a spiritual servant. Then he selects Timothy as the second. And as we shall see today, the third is a man by the name of Epaphroditus. And we will look at verses 25 through 30 of chapter 2 and there we will come to know perhaps in a very special way this wonderful man named Epaphroditus.

I guess all my life since a child, a young man certainly, I've been strongly drawn and attracted to sacrificial people. Maybe the Lord put that in me because He knew I would tend in the flesh not to be a sacrificial person. But I've always been greatly intrigued by people of sacrifice. Part of being raised, I think, in an affluent kind of culture, in a comfortable kind of society, is the fact that you're a little out of touch with other forms of life and styles of living. I can remember as a young man reading about John Payton, or David Livingston, or William Carey(?) or Robert Morrison, or Hudson Taylor. And even in more modern times, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint(?) who literally gave their lives up for the cause of Christ. They always had a profound and somewhat intimidating effect on my own heart, on my own mind. And, frankly, to study eminently sacrificial people today you either have to go back in history or outside of our culture because we know very little about that in our society. Maybe an unknown poet said it well when he wrote, "Many sit at Jesus' table, few will fast with Him, when the sorrow cup of anguish trembles to the brim. Few watch with Him in the garden who have sung the hymn."

There are a lot of people at the table and there are a lot of people who sing the hymn. Few fast and few pray, few watch. The poet went on to say, "Many will confess His wisdom, few embrace His shame. Many while He smiles upon them loud His praise proclaim. Then if for a while He tests them, they desert His name. But the souls who love supremely let woe come or bliss, these will count their dearest heart's blood, not their own but His. Savior, Thou who thus hast loved me, give me love like this." The call for a sacrificial life.

It's hard for us in this society to get in touch with the model of sacrificial living, and so we have been looking at Paul and Timothy and now maybe the richest of all of them, Epaphroditus. And I say that because he is much like us. When you look at the model of Timothy, as we did last week, you say,

"But he is a gifted man, eminently gifted to preach and teach. He is unique spiritually. He was called by God, set apart, spiritual leader, trained under the Apostle Paul, a great leader, a great teacher, a gifted man. I can't very well identify with that."

Two weeks ago we talked about our first spiritual model, Paul, and you say I can't identify with him at all. He was a statesman and an Apostle. Maybe the greatest Christian who ever lived. Give me somebody like me and maybe that's why the Spirit of God prompted the heart of the Apostle Paul to write this beautiful section about a man named Epaphroditus. He is not a statesman. He is not an Apostle. We have no indication that he was even an elder in the church at Philippi. There is nothing said to lead us to believe that his ministry was anything dramatic or dynamic, unforgettable, earthshaking. He, in a sense, is the hero of the common man. And maybe in that sense his level of sacrificial service becomes much more instructive for us because he provides for us a pattern of life at the level with which most of must face it.

He exemplifies the spirit of sacrifice for the sake of Christ that has no public kudos. He had nothing to gain, not preeminence as an Apostle, not as a great teacher, preacher, proclaimer of truth, not popularity like Timothy as one who had been trained under Paul and had had significance ministry throughout his life. There's nothing really incomparable about Epaphroditus as there is about Paul. There's nothing really preeminent about his giftedness as there is in the case of Timothy who was so uniquely gifted of God, a remarkable man in every way. This is just one of us. And in that sense his model and his example becomes all the more direct in its application. We could say there are few Pauls, there are some Timothys, there are many Epaphroditus. This is the people's model.

Now remember as we look at this we are really seeing models of the spiritual truths that have been taught in the first sixteen verses of chapter 2. The chapter opened with a section on humility in which Christ is the great illustration. And Paul is calling for true humility. Then in verse 12 he talks about working out your salvation with fear and trembling. And then follows that up by saying, "Do all of this without grumbling or disputing." And we summed it up to simply say Paul is really giving us a strong call to Christian commitment. He is saying, "Live out your salvation in humility and without complaint."

Those are two good balancing things. If things go well for you, don't be proud. If things go difficult for you, don't complain. Live out your salvation in humility and without complaint. And then in order to help us see more clearly how that works, he gave us three models. He was a model of selfless, humble, living out of salvation without complaint, so was Timothy. And here we come to Epaphroditus, the third model.

Just for sake of distinction we called Paul the sacrificial rejoicer, or the humble rejoicer. We called Timothy the single-minded sympathizer. And now as we come to verse 25 through 30 we see Epaphroditus, let's call him the loving gambler...the loving gambler. And I'll explain that as we go.

Now what do we know about Epaphroditus. Well, directly we really don't know anything about him. We don't know anything about his background directly. We don't know anything about his parents. We don't know how long he had been a Christian. We don't know what his function was in the church. We really don't know anything except by implication in this passage and we'll try to construct the best we can somewhat of a profile of this very unique man.

Remember now, Paul is a prisoner, a two-year incarceration in a private house by the Roman government. The Romans have chained him to one of their soldiers, keeping him a prisoner in his own house. During the time he is imprisoned by Rome he still has some freedom for ministry. The Philippian church who loved him very deeply, the church which he founded, as recorded in Acts 16, when they became aware of his situation were greatly troubled by it and decided they wanted to help him. Realizing he could no longer work to earn his living, support himself in his ministry, they wanted to send him some money. So the Philippians collected sacrificially from their people a gift of love and they sent it to Paul and it was taken by this man Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus took the money to Paul, but there was more involved than that. The Philippian church instructed him not only to deliver the money but to stay and to become the servant of Paul in the matter of all of his personal needs. So Epaphroditus is sent with the money as the chosen delegate of the church and also he is to stay as the servant of Paul, serving all of his personal needs.

Now that alone would tell us something about Epaphroditus. Number one, the Philippian church would never have sent a man to work in close proximity with the Apostle Paul unless he was most eminently representative of the godliness of that congregation. We can assume that they wouldn't want to put anybody suspect very close to the Apostle Paul who may well have been the most discerning human being that ever lived and who could see through anyone. And so we can be fairly certain that Epaphroditus was a man of genuine spiritual virtue, a man of depth in terms of his love and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we could also ascertain that he was a man with a heart of a servant. For him to go and to simply meet all the needs of the Apostle Paul would indicate to me that he saw himself in the role of coming alongside to serve. There's no indication that he was a significant preacher/teacher in the church, although he may well have been able to do that. It could well be ascertained that he was more likely a deacon than an elder and that his role was more the role of serving than the role of leading. But nonetheless we can for sure know that he must have had a servant's heart. The Philippian congregation having chosen him as their ambassador, as it were, to Paul would never have chosen a man who wouldn't literally give his life away in service to someone else because to do so would betray both their love for Paul and Paul's trust in their judgment.

Thirdly, we can ascertain that not only was he a humble serving godly man, but he was a man of great courage because he knew exactly what he was walking into. There was no question in his mind how the Roman government felt about Paul. That was obvious for everyone to see. It was imminently possible that Paul could lose his life because he was, after all, a prisoner and there was consideration about whether or not he should continue to live since he was bringing the heresy of Christianity into the Roman world. And if in fact Paul's life was taken away, it would probably be a matter of course for them to at least consider taking the lives of those who served alongside of him. So he well knew the risk involved.

So here is a man then who is a godly man or he wouldn't have been chosen, who is a servant who is chosen to do that which most fits his gifts, and who has the courage to step into a hostile environment where the very one he serves is hated, rejected. And he is willing to do that.

Beyond that we don't know anything about him. There is a short form of the name Epaphroditus in the Greek and that is Epaphras. And there is an Epaphras mentioned in Colossians 1:7 but there is no reason to identify the two as one. We think they're two different people.

Another thing that might help you in understanding this man is that he has a very common name. The name Epaphroditus was a common name. In fact, the word Epaphroditus was a common word. It was a...it was a common noun, if you will...not only a proper noun. Not just a name but a common term and I'll tell you why. The name is drawn from the name of a Greek god. Have you heard the name Aphrodite? Have you heard that name? Aphrodite was the goddess of love. In Rome her name was Venus, goddess of love. Among the Greeks it was Aphrodite. She was the goddess of love and beauty. And this man is named, as it were, for Aphrodite. The Epaphroditus is simply a term that means "favorite of Aphrodite, favorite of Aphrodite."

This tells us that he came out of a pagan environment. Christians would never name a child like this. Of course, a first generation church isn't going to have any background in Christianity, so he came out of a pagan family. We don't know when he was converted. It's very likely his family worshiped among other deities, this goddess Aphrodite.

By the way, she was an extremely popular goddess and was sort of the goddess of good luck. As I'll tell you a little later. The name Epaphroditus eventually came to mean "lovely, loving, charming," and so forth. But originally meant "a favorite of Aphrodite." And that was a word in and of itself. I'll explain that later as well.

So the man came out of a pagan background, converted to Christ. We don't know where. We don't know in what way. It very possibly could have happened when Paul founded the church at Philippi. He could have been one of the early converts and been there from the very beginning, but we do not know that.

He has become, however, a key Christian in the church, a sacrificial man who has left his home, his employment, his ministry, his church, his friends, to go and serve the Apostle Paul. A very sacrificial man.

Now those are some of the general things we know about this man. Let's get a little more specific, all right. Look with me at verse 25. "I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier who is also your messenger and minister to my need."

Now let's talk a little about these five titles which Paul gives to Epaphroditus because they help us get a little more of an idea about this special man. There are five titles in verse 25, three of them look at Epaphroditus in relation to Paul. Two of them look at him in relation to the Philippian church. The first three are key by the word "my." My brother, implied, my fellow worker and implied my fellow soldier. In relation to me he is brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier. So Paul is really honoring Epaphroditus as a faithful servant. And he does so by giving him those three titles, and they are very special. They're not hard to understand, you can read them and understand them completely.

But let me dig a little bit more deeply and show you that there's a sense in which this is a rather comprehensive kind of titling. First of all, he is called "My brother." The key is the word "my." Paul is viewing him in a very personal way. He is my brother. What does he mean by that? Well he means brother in the sense of spiritual birth. They both have the common source of life, God the Father having given them life in Christ through the Spirit. They are brothers in Christ and so they share the common eternal life. But there's more to it than that. It is not only brother of common life, but it is brother of common love. And the term adelphosalso carries the idea of camaraderie, friendship, affection, feelings. And so Paul is saying, first of all, I want you to know that Epaphroditus not only shares with me common life, but he is a brother loved. I have affection for him, he is my comrade, he is my friend. That's the personal titling. Now what that celebrates is Paul's own inter-personal relationship with him...how he related to Paul. Okay?

The second title is how he related to the ministry, and he calls him "my fellow worker," or fellow worker. This word is used thirteen times in the New Testament, twelve times out of the thirteen by Paul and he uses it of people who worked alongside him in the ministry. You can look up its uses in Romans 16, there's one in Philippians 4:3, another one in 1 Thessalonians 3:2. Paul titles people "fellow worker," who came alongside and worked with him in the extension of the gospel. So he says he not only in relation to my person is brother, but in relation to my task is fellow worker, coworker. The emphasis here is not on common life, but on common effort. He is commendable not only for his relational skills, he is commendable also for his laboring effort, for his diligence. Not just brothers in life and love, but workers together for Christ.

Thirdly, he says "my fellow soldier." This is to say not particularly looking at his relation to Paul or his relation to the task at hand, but that he is commendable in relationship to the enemies which fight against the ministry. The title "fellow soldier," by the way, is a very, very honorable title. I did a little research into that Greek word which is also used in the second verse of Philemon and I found that outside of biblical record that word was used on some special occasion to honor a soldier, usually a common soldier was honored with that title. And the goal was to make the soldier equal to the commander-in-chief. In one case to make a warrior equal to a king. To say you are a fellow soldier, in the very heart of that Greek word is the word stratios(?) from which we get strategist, was to say that you ranked with those who are the strategic people in the forces, the strategists, the great leaders...a great term of honor. And Paul is pulling Epaphroditus up, my fellow strategist, my fellow commander-in-chief, my fellow...as it were...leader in the matter of spiritual warfare.

Now all three of these terms demonstrate the gracious humility of the heart of Paul. Paul doesn't look down on Epaphroditus at all. He looks right eyeball to eyeball with him. In his wonderful humility, he could lift anyone to his own level...my brother, my fellow worker, my fellow commander-in-chief. This is the humble heart of the great Apostle. He doesn't need to brag on himself. He doesn't need to elevate himself. That is contrary to the moving of the Spirit in his heart and contrary to what he knows to be true in terms of the desire of God for his life.

That last term "fellow soldier" is very important because it indicates that there was conflict in the ministry of Epaphroditus. It indicates that while Paul was battling, so was he. And anyone who came alongside him in that environment certainly was battling. Epaphroditus was probably battling not only men but demons, not only the earthly enemy but the heavenly enemy, not only the fleshly but the spiritual dimension.

So here is this unique man. Already we know he was a godly man. Already we know he was a servant at heart. Already we know we was a greatly courageous man. Now we find out he had relational skills and had become really a very loved brother of Paul. He had tremendous work skills so that he was seen to be one who worked right alongside Paul at his own level. And thirdly, he was a great soldier who did not flee in the face of great, great animosity and opposition. That's what we know about him.

There are two more titles that he's given that tell us a little more about him and they are in relation to the Philippian church. And here he introduces the word "your." From my viewpoint these three things describe him. From your viewpoint, these two describe him. He is your messenger and minister to my need. This, very simple. Your messenger is the word apostolosfrom which we get the word apostle, which isn't a translation but literally a transliteration. He was your apostle.

Now somebody might say, "Does this mean he was like the Twelve? Or like Paul? Is he a real Apostle in that sense?" There are others who are so designated. I think of Romans chapter 16 I

think it's verse 7, but was he equal to the Apostles, the eleven and then Matthias who replaced Judas and then Paul who also was an Apostle? Is this an official title?

Well it is official, in a sense, but let me help you to understand this. The Twelve Apostles are unique. The Twelve Apostles, and you must understand this distinction, are Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. Listen to Galatians 1:1, "Paul, an Apostle, not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father." Now noted, there are some Apostles, only a few, eleven plus Matthias, plus Paul, only those men were Apostles selected by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself and sent. He does not say of Epaphroditus he is the Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, he says he is your apostle. And here's the simple distinction. The Apostles with the upper case letters were those sent by Christ. The apostles with the lower case letters were those sent by the church. He is not an Apostle of Christ, he is an apostle of the church. He is not that uniquely called and dispatched and foundational Apostle chosen by Christ, he is that apostle sent from the church chosen by the church. And that's a very important distinction to make.

The first were Apostles of Christ. The second category apostles of the church. And he is such, sent by the church, not by Christ personally Himself.

Now secondly he says, not only is he a messenger, he's your messenger, and what was he a messenger of? He brought him money. That was the issue. He sent whatever they sent, and I'm sure it wasn't just money, there must have been a message with it, a message of love and the promise of prayers and all of that. But secondly he says he is minister to my need. He is your minister to my need. You have sent him.

Now the word for minister here needs our attention for a moment. I don't want to get too technical but I need to give you these foundational ideas. The word is leitourgonfrom which we get liturgy. And we've been noting that word in other studies and that word has to do with sacred priestly religious service from which we get the word liturgy today which is used in relationship to certain kinds of worship.

Now, he comes then as the liturgical priest, if you will. He comes as the ceremonial servant, to minister to Paul. It's a spiritual term, it's a religious term, it's a sacred term. There were in the early years around the time of Paul in the church Greek city states. And some of you have studied about them in your world history. Greek city states were very proud, they had their own armies, they even went to war with other city states. People became very enamored with and very patriotic regarding their own city states. And very often there were men who were so passionately committed to their own city state that at their own expense they would use their money and their time and their efforts to accomplish great civic duties and provide great civic benefits. They were seen as the benefactors of the public. And they became known as the leitourgoi, those who at great personal expense did what they did sacrificially to benefit the populous. And that then is a fitting term for this man who at great

personal expense, leaving his home and his family and his friends and his livelihood and whatever else, literally came and put his life on the line to benefit the Apostle Paul. So he is the servant of the Philippian church come to bring a message and he did sacred service on their behalf in the life of Paul as he was instructed to do.

The money which he brought in chapter 4 verse 18 is called an acceptable sacrifice. And so Paul picks up with that terminology. He was a priest doing sacred service and offering a sacrifice of money for the needs of Paul.

So he's quite a man, quite a remarkable man...unselfish, humble, sympathetic, compassionate, all of those things. He's a servant, he's courageous, he's godly. He built a strong bond with Paul. He worked fairly alongside of him and did his share and he was a great soldier fighting the enemy.

But with that in mind, go back to verse 25 and look at this. After all that commendation, verse 25, "I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus." You say, "Well why are you sending him back? I mean, you just made him out as the most valuable man imaginable, why are you sending him back?" Somebody says, "Well, has he been unfaithful?" No, no indication of that. "Oh, he's homesick. He's homesick for good ole Philippian cooking, is that it?"

It is necessary to send him. It's necessary. You've got to have an answer for that then, why? Because they're going to say why did you send him back, if he just shows up and delivers the Philippian letter which I am confident he took with him, and the Philippian letter doesn't say anything about him, they're going to say...what are you doing here? We sent you there to stay and to see Paul through to the end, either his release or his death. Why are you back here?

So Paul says it is necessary to send you Epaphroditus. In spite of all of these qualities and in spite of the fact that he is my brother whom I love, he is my coworker whom I need, he is my fellow soldier who fights the battle with me, I'm sending him back, it's necessary.

You say why? Verse 26, "Because he was longing for you all." You say, "There it is, homesick, nice try, Epaphroditus, good intentions, couldn't cut it, got lonely." No, you didn't read far enough. "He was longing for you all and was distressed." You say, "There it is...so homesick, pining away that he became distressed." That word, by the way, describes the confused restless half-distracted state produced by physical derangement or mental distress. It can be the product of grief or shame or disappointment or sorrow, any of those things. But it's that confused chaotic restlessness that comes in a time of turmoil. And so he says he's restless and he's in turmoil and he's distressed.

By the way, it's used...the same word is used in Matthew 26 when Jesus in verse 38 says in the Garden, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death." It's a very heavy, heavy distress. One translator calls it, "Full of heaviness." One writer, Sweet(?) says, "It is the distress that follows a great

traumatic shock."  He is really upset.

Why?  Look at this, verse 26, "Because you heard that he was sick."  Now wait a minute.  That's hard to believe.  You heard he wasn't doing well, he knew you'd be sad and your sadness has greatly distressed him.

You say, "What planet did that kind of guy get off?  I never heard of such a thing."  When is the last time you got completely disoriented and restless and totally distressed because you knew somebody was feeling bad about your situation?  And your distress was directly related to the fact not that you were having a difficult situation but that they were having a difficult time with your situation.  Now that will show you the depth of love.  That will show you the bond.

Unfortunately in our society we are more concerned with things than people, more concerned with possessions than relationships.  So we get upset about things and very often ignore how people feel because we're into things, not people.  But the bond that the Philippians had with this man was so deep and so rich that it is apparent that this man was so totally stressed over sadness because the Philippians were worried about him that Paul says I've got to send him to you because he cannot exist feeling that you don't know he's okay.

Boy, that's some kind of guy.  These people he loved so deeply that he does not want them to be distressed.  That is so foreign to most of us.  I have to send him because he is so distressed that you have heard about his difficulty and he wants to come to eliminate your distress.  What a compassionate man. And what a compassionate man is Paul.  Paul could have said, "Look, Epaphroditus, get your act together, for mercy sake, we've got to advance the kingdom, this is big stuff, man.  Don't you know I am THE Apostle, this work is the work of the living God.  Come on, man, snap out of this deal.  You can't be worried about how they feel about how you feel."  Not that.

The problem is Paul feels bad because Epaphroditus feels bad that the Philippians feel bad. Everybody feels bad.  So Paul says you've got to go because they feel bad, you feel bad, you feel bad, I feel bad...they feel bad, I feel bad.  If you just go they'll feel good, you'll feel good, I'll feel good, we've got to turn it around.  It's that simple.

Isn't it wonderful to know that some people in the ministry are compelled by relationships rather than programs?  There is still a place for that, isn't there, where you set aside something on your agenda to meet somebody's need?

Verse 27, now Paul's going to explain a little bit about him so that when he does show up they don't say, "What are you doing here?"  "For indeed...he says...he was sick... to the point of death."  You mean to tell me this Epaphroditus is such a faithful brother, faithful worker, faithful soldier that he is nearly dead?  What do you mean here?  He came near death.  What kind of death?  It doesn't say...it

doesn't say. He came near death.  He got into a very traumatic situation.

You say, "Is Paul sending him home because he wants to get him out of there before he gets himself killed?"  No, not at all.  But when he had come so very near to death and the word had gotten back to the Philippians, probably through some traveler, they were so concerned that their dear beloved Epaphroditus was near death that they got upset and grieved and then when he heard back that they were grieved, that's how the cycle began.

So, listen to this, Epaphroditus isn't upset because of his brush with death, not at all.  He's upset because they're upset.  Notice what Paul says.  Verse 27, "But God had mercy on him."  Isn't that good?  God spared him.  In the brush with death, God spared him.  Would you please notice that any time God spares anybody from death it is mercy, do you understand that?  The soul that sinneth, it shall...what?...die.  The wages of sin is death.  In the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.  Folks, the very fact that you take another breath is mercy, the fact that I take another breath is mercy.  I have long ago deserved death. That is why in the gospels you have so often mercy connected with healings, mercy connected with deliverance.  You remember the blind beggars?  Son of David, have mercy on us.  Why?  Because we don't deserve justice.  You never heard anybody cry out to Jesus, "Heal me, that's fair.  It's fair that you deliver me.  It's not fair that I die."  Oh yeah it is, it's justice that you die, it's justice that you be diseased.  It's mercy that you live.  It's mercy that you're healed.  Mercy is always connected to deliverance and to healing and to restoration.

So God sovereignly was merciful to him.  In other words, he went through some brush with death and God showed him mercy and delivered him from it.  And then he says, verse 27, "Not on him only but also on me."  Boy, when God spared his life it was mercy for me.  Epaphroditus doesn't deserve to live and I don't deserve to have such a friend.  But when God spared his life, he received mercy and me too because now I can have him as my friend.

And then he says at the end of verse 27, "Lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow."  Do you know what would have happened to Paul if Epaphroditus had of died?  He would have had sorrow upon sorrow.  You know what that means in the Greek?  It literally means wave after wave of grief...this man that endeared himself to Paul.  As I say, he may have known him a number of years, we don't know.  But somehow he was deep into the heart of Paul, very deep because when he gets distressed about the Philippians, Paul can't handle his distress.  And so he's got to send him home so he can get undistressed because Paul is distressed about Epaphroditus' distress.  And the only thing worse than that would be Epaphroditus' death which would bring wave upon wave of sorrow to Paul.  See, here's a man who deeply loved, a church who deeply loved, a servant of that church that deeply loved...such profound things, so elusive to us who have put objects in front of people.

So God makes a sovereign decision, spares the life of Epaphroditus in the midst of this brush with death.  And in so doing gives mercy to Epaphroditus and mercy to Paul who would be literally

overwrought with sorrow if that man had lost his life. And by the way, that sorrow upon sorrow is very strong language, very strong...wave upon wave of grief...grief upon grief rolling in. So God delivered Epaphroditus and God delivered Paul.

As a servant of Christ, Paul was ready to face death. I think as a servant of Christ I think Paul was ready to accept the death of his friend Epaphroditus. But he wouldn't have liked it personally because he loved the man. So he was happy to forego the pain of losing Epaphroditus to death.

Now, he is rejoicing because his life has been spared. Then we come to verse 28. "Therefore I have sent him," does it say reluctantly? No. "I have sent him all the more eagerly." Why? "In order that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you." Paul is not only concerned about Epaphroditus, but he's concerned about the Philippians being concerned about Epaphroditus who is concerned about them.

Do you understand a little bit more what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 11 when he said the greatest burden I bear in the ministry is the care of all the churches? Do you understand something of what was in the heart of Paul when he says in chapter 1 verse 8 of Philippians, "God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus?" This is a man with deep feelings. This is a man who cared, who loved deeply and profoundly. This is a man who hurt when the object of his love was in danger or distress or grief. All the more eagerly means without reluctance. I'm not grudging. He's not saying, "Look, I'm going to send him but don't you realize that your sort of whimpy attitude is going to cost our ministry?" It doesn't say that. Even though he needs him, fellow worker, even though he loves to have him alongside, fellow soldier, and even though he knows they sent him as messenger and minister to his need, and he proves himself so valuable that it was mercy that spared his life for Paul would have had sorrow on sorrow losing him, that's how valuable he was. Paul says in spite of all he means to me, I'm sending him to you. Why? Because I'm more concerned about your joy than mine. Magnanimous man.

So he says when you see him again you may rejoice, and when I get the word that you've seen him and you've rejoiced then I'm going to be less concerned about you. Now the only people that have to do all of this kind of stuff to get a burden off their back of concern are people who feel deeply, right? That's why Paul was so successful in ministry, because the people to whom he ministered knew where his heart was. You show me a man, like in Acts 20, who goes from house to house...from house to house for three years preaching and warning people in one location, and I'll show you a man who loves the people deeply and it's little wonder that the result of his ministry to those people was that those leaders when he said he was going to leave and they wouldn't see him anymore fell all over his neck, wept tears all over him and kissed him. Why? Because the bond was deep. So these people loved greatly. And when you read in Paul's letters about loving one another and having affection for one another, this little scenario ought to somehow enrich that and act as a rebuke to our hearts for our indifference to relationships.

So really almost unbelievable, almost incredible. The Philippians are concerned about Epaphroditus. So he's deeply distressed about the Philippians because of their concern. So Paul is deeply distressed about his concern for their concern and the action has nothing to do with what is most important for Paul. And here again you see his humility, and no complaining on the part of Epaphroditus, even though he had a brush with death. No complaining on the part of Paul, even though he's losing a choice partner. Really the Philippians aren't even asking for Epaphroditus. They're in the midst of their own trials, chapter 1 says in verse 29 that they had been granted for Christ's sake not only to believe in Him but to suffer for His sake. Paul's got his own trial. Epaphroditus has just had a brush with death. But nobody's concerned with themselves. The Philippians are concerned with Epaphroditus, Epaphroditus with the Philippians, and Paul with both. But nobody with himself. There's that humility. There's that absence of complaint. There's that just working out of true salvation in the purest way. The whole scene is one of affection and love and sympathy and unselfish concern and seeking to comfort somebody else and saying my needs aren't as important as yours. To put it very simply, go back to chapter 2 verse 3, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not merely look out for your own personal interest, but also for the interest of others." And who's the perfect illustration of that? Jesus Christ.

So on the basis of all of that we come to verse 29. "Therefore...Paul says...receive him in the Lord with all joy and hold men like him in high regard." Receive him in the Lord...receive him really as if he were the Lord. Matthew chapter 18 says that we are to receive one another as little children. And it says there whoever receives one of these little ones, receives Me. The word "receive" means to welcome, to open your arms and embrace, to take in. So he's saying don't accept the fact that he's home as some indication of failure. I'm telling you, receive him as if you were receiving the Lord. Then receive him with joy, rejoice that he's back and that he's well and that he's healthy. And then hold men like him in high regard. Don't just be happy, be respectful. Don't reluctantly say...Well, it's obvious he failed. No, hold him in high regard, hold him as highly prized, would be another way to translate it. Hold him as a precious man...even best, an honored man...an honored man.

And then he tells us why. Why should they honor this man? Obviously he's a lover, obviously he has deep love for the Philippians. But here's the issue, verse 30, "Because he came close to death." What brought him close to death? What brought him close to death? The work of Christ.

I love that statement, "risking his life," can I talk about it for just moment? Risking his life. He uses a very interesting verb, that verb is the verb that is connected to the noun <u>periballa</u>(?) which means dice, and the verb form means to roll the dice. It means to gamble, to play the gambler, to expose oneself to danger might be the best way...he exposed himself to danger. That's what he did. He was so loyal and so faithful and so sacrificial, so humble, so uncomplaining he just put his life on the line in an effort to do what the Philippians wanted done in behalf of Paul. That's why I call him the loving

gambler, he loved Paul, he loved Christ, he loved the cause of Christ, he loved the Philippians so much he loved not himself. He just gave his life away.

That word paraballa(?) came to have some interesting usages. In the days of the early church after the New Testament era, there was an association of men and women who got together and took the name "The Parabalani(?)" which meant "The Gamblers." They took as their hero Epaphroditus who gambled with his life. And it was their aim and their mission to visit the prisoners, to visit the sick, especially those with infectious, dangerous, communicable diseases. It was their mission to unhesitatingly, unflinchingly and boldly proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ in every environment without any hesitation. And they called themselves, "The Parabalani, The Gamblers."

It is also interesting to note that in A.D. 252 the city of Carthage had a terrible plague and the heathen were so frightened of the germs that were in the bodies of the dead that they literally bagged them somehow and hurled them out of the city, not wanting to touch them for burial. Cyprian the Christian bishop gathered the congregation of the believing church together and the church members took their bodies and in a gracious act of human kindness buried the dead bodies of the plague-stricken people. And according to the historians as well, they nursed even the sick people, coming close enough to them to touch them in that plague-infested city, risking their lives to save some in the city and God used them as a tremendous potential, as a tremendous force really to reach people for Christ because of their love.

It may come to that in our society, certainly we can commend those dear people who are willing to go alongside the AIDS victims and give them Christ. Whether you're talking about The Parabalani who gambled with their lives in an infectious disease environment, or whether you're talking about Epaphroditus their hero who gambled with his life by going at a hostile culture with all he had in the service of Jesus Christ, that kind of self-sacrificing example is marvelous.

Now let me take you back to the name Epaphroditus. Remember I told you that it meant to be the favorite of Aphrodite. A little twist on that that must have been in the mind of Paul, he's sometimes fairly subtle. Aphrodite was the goddess of luck, he was the...she was the goddess of luck as well as beauty. And when the Greeks rolled the dice in their games, their gambling games, the common word they used was...they would roll the dice and say "Epaphroditus." In other words, they wanted favor from Aphrodite. So Paul is doing a little play on the name of Epaphroditus. He was a favorite of Aphrodite by name and he gambled with his life. He risked his life.

You say, "Yeah, but, boy, think of what he was going to gain, an empire." No, no empire. "Think of the fame." No fame. "Think of the money." No money. "Think of the popularity." No popularity, he was a humble, behind-the-scenes guy who gambled with his life for the sake of somebody other than himself. Boy, that's character...that's character.

Do you need a better example than that of a sacrificial life? You have Paul, the sacrificial rejoicer who rejoiced to pour out his life an offering. You have Timothy the single-minded sympathizer whose interests were only the things of Christ and who would feel like Paul felt in his heart about other people. And now you have this loving gambler, Epaphroditus, who literally threw his life away, as it were, risking great danger to fill up that which someone else wanted done on behalf of someone else. What a man.

Can I personalize it as we close? What have you sacrificed in ministry to others, what? Lately? What have you turned from in order to wholly focus on Christ? What of Paul is there in you who sacrificed everything? What of Timothy is there in you who turns from all of the allurements to focus only on the interest of Christ? What have you turned from to focus on the interest of Christ?

Somebody said to me yesterday, "My husband has another hobby, just what he needs, another diversion." Nothing wrong with that in itself but how's your focus on Christ. And then in the case of Epaphroditus, what are you risking your life for? What are you laying your life down for? What are you laying down that only the promise of Christ and the power of Christ can pick back up?

You know, we really don't like risk, do we? First thing we get saved, that eliminates eternal risk. Heaven for sure, no risk. Then we back into life and we've got to eliminate all the risk in life. No risk, insulated, isolated, comfortable, got all the money we need, got the burglar alarm working, got the fence, got the gate, got our life closed in, no risk...giving away absolutely nothing. That's why I say I've always been enamored with sacrificial people and every time I look for them I have to outside our culture or outside our period of history. We have so few and the Lord's convicted my own heart and I trust yours as well to think about how to be an Epaphroditus and give myself away for a cause other than my own fulfillment.

I hate that stuff about self-fulfillment. I think I hate it as much as anything because it's counterproductive to everything that God ever called you to do...which is to give your life away for the cause of Christ and for the service of others in humble sacrifice. Well, let's pray together.

Father, we see in this man Epaphroditus humble concern for the needs of others. He was so loving. And we see risking life to meet those needs the loving gambler. Lord, help us to be like him. Help us somehow to put relationships above things and not to find ourselves forever and ever trying to insulate ourselves into comfort zones, but put us out there on the cutting edge where we risk, where we can see the mighty hand of deliverance in our behalf. Some of us don't even know what it is to be rescued because we've never been out there where there's any danger. We've never opened our mouth to speak of Christ. We've never taken a stand. Lord, help us in the service of Jesus Christ to be sacrificial. And may we with humility and without complaint work out our salvation with fear and trembling and may You be pleased with that which we offer you as the sacrifice of ourselves for Your

glory in Jesus name.  Amen.

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