

WPC
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Did Epaphroditus Have Gastritis?
Philippians 2:12-30

This is now the fourth in our series of sermons on the letter Paul wrote to the Philippians. Last week, we looked at the great hymn that the Apostle Paul sings to Jesus Christ, a hymn in which he also shares with the Philippians who Jesus is.

He tells us that Jesus Christ, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. He identified with us and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. With this great hymn still ringing in our ears, this morning we're going to look at the sentences that immediately follow it.

Notice that at the beginning of this passage Paul reminds the Philippians that they need to be Christians whether he is present or absent. Fred Craddock makes this observation: "there is no question but that Paul's presence personally made a difference in the life of the church. Paul knows

that, but he also knows that he must not tie their conduct directly to his presence. Otherwise the Philippian congregation is a cult, not a church. Paul wishes to set them, in his absence, in God's presence.” (44)

After reminding the Philippians they need to live the Christian life whether he is with them or not, Paul writes, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." How are we to understand this sentence?

The Greek word used here for 'work out' is derived from the root word "erg." We get the English word 'energy' from that word (energy (en + ergon = in + work; more at work)). Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of this verse substitutes the word 'energy' for 'work,' which I believe helps us to get a better sense of what Paul means.

Listen to Peterson's translation: "What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure." (491)

In other words, as Earl Palmer says, make an event out of your salvation . This is not works righteousness. Paul is not saying our work will

save us. What he is saying is that having already been given the free gift of salvation by God, we should take the love of God and share it with the world. We are to be energetic in our life of salvation, the salvation that has been offered to us as a gift.

Why do we need to be so energetic? Well, one reason is that the odds are stacked against us. Paul says that we are like children in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Christians are called to live a holy life in a world that actively discourages such a lifestyle – for example, today’s media promote such things as materialism and narcissism. But even against such staggering odds, we have the promise of God's presence alongside of us.

Having given this advice to the Philippians, Paul then practices what he preaches. One way Paul is being energetic in his life of salvation is by working hard to help two people, Timothy and Epaphroditus.

First, Timothy. Paul wants to provide leadership in his absence. Notice how Paul reassures the Philippians that Timothy can be trusted to minister to them. "Paul did not regard Timothy any less a minister than himself. He does not ask the church to tolerate Timothy until a real minister can come. Timothy is not an underling assigned only to minor tasks. Paul informs the Philippians that he trusts Timothy like a father would his own

son. It is a mark of Paul's greatness that Timothy can be a partner in ministry." (Craddock, 50).

More attention is given to Epaphroditus than to Timothy because of the circumstances. Epaphroditus was probably a convert from paganism, judging from the fact that he was named for the goddess Aphrodite. He was from the church at Philippi, sent to Paul with gifts, and commissioned to remain indefinitely with Paul to serve him. While performing his duties, Epaphroditus became deathly ill.

Through God's grace and Paul's prayers he has now recovered. Paul wants to return him now to Philippi, an act which will both relieve Paul (who, in prison, is in no position to care for his sick friend), will relieve the church (which has heard of Epaphroditus' illness), and will relieve Epaphroditus himself (who has been distressed that the church was distressed). Paul was aware that the Philippians might be very frustrated with Epaphroditus over what seemed to be a failed mission.

(Craddock) - Paul wants to dispel all such anxieties and to pave the way for a joyful return just in case there would be whispering in the church: "We sent him to help and he became a burden"; "I knew we should have sent someone else"; "I wonder if he really was sick or just homesick or scared"; "Probably just indigestion or a touch of the stomach flu..."

To dispel any such nonsense, Paul gives Epaphroditus an extraordinary commendation. In relation to Paul he is brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier; in relation to the church, he is their messenger and minister. In a hostile environment he did not retreat but risked his life to minister to Paul (2:30). And as far as his illness, Paul responds to any who might wonder if Epaphroditus wimped out of his mission because of a minor illness. According to Paul, the answer is emphatically 'NO!' Paul wants the Philippians to know that Epaphroditus was seriously ill – this was no case of Epaphroditus having a simple case of gastritis; in fact, he was so ill he nearly died.

What a great letter of recommendation from Paul. He wants the Philippians to know that Epaphroditus is not a failure, even though things did not work out quite as planned. We can learn a great deal from Paul. The way you handle those who drop the ball will say more for the integrity of your life of faith than how you handle 'successful' people.

Tony Campolo tells a story of a schoolteacher named Miss Thompson who had a student in class named Teddy Stallard. Teddy was a boy that Miss Thompson found difficult to like, and for good reason. He didn't seem interested in school. He wore a deadpan, blank expression on his face, and his eyes were glassy and unfocused. When she spoke to Teddy, he merely

shrugged his shoulders. His clothes were mussed and his hair unkempt. He wasn't an attractive boy, and he certainly wasn't likable.

However, Miss Thompson was aware of Teddy's records, which read:

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

At Christmas, the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her presents, piled them on her desk, and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and held together with Scotch tape. On the paper were written the simple words, "For Miss Thompson. From Teddy." When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson silenced them by immediately putting on the bracelet and dotting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" The other children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "oohs" and "ahs."

When school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson? Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother...and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents."

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God, committed to work out her salvation by loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

Once the school year ended, Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson,
I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

Love, Teddy Stallard.

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson,
They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I have had a good four years.

Love, Teddy Stallard.

And, four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson,
As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the twenty-seventh to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year.

Love, Teddy Stallard.¹

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. In many people's eyes, the young Teddy was a failure. But Miss Thompson helped him to reach his potential. In the same manner, Paul does not want Epaphroditus to feel like a failure because he got ill on his mission. He wants Epaphroditus to reach his potential as well.

Paul wants the Philippians to give Epaphroditus a grand welcome, to welcome him back with the joy and honor appropriate to his selfless and sacrificial ministry. The word honor in Hebrew means literally to be made

¹ Tony Campolo, "Teddy and Miss Thompson," Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks, p. 191-194.

heavy or weighty. The Philippians are encouraged to acknowledge the substantial nature of Epaphroditus' mission. He reminds them that people like Epaphroditus deserve the best you can give. (Peterson, 492)

Like Paul, we as Christians are called to be energetic in our life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. What are some ways you and I are making an event of our salvation? There are many opportunities to do so here at WPC. Perhaps you contributed to the CROP Walk, or you participate in the Adult Study on Sunday mornings. You may be teaching Sunday School, or spending consistent time in prayer for our church, our nation, our world. Serving as an elder, deacon, or trustee, serving on a committee, helping with the music in service, ushering, making a financial commitment to support the many ministries of this church, sending a card to a hospitalized member or a homebound member, etc. Our life of salvation is exciting, and there are so many ways of putting our faith into action.

And the best news of all, is that when you are energetic in your life of salvation, that energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.

Amen.