

“The Gift of the Church”
Philippians 2:19-30
July 20, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning with our series in the Book of Philippians.

And our passage this morning is the kind of text we often move through pretty quickly. It's surrounded by profound Christian truths. Right before this text, Paul speaks about the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God, and how we too should share in Christ's mindset. Right after this text, Paul declares how knowing Christ and his righteousness is so weighty, that compared to it, all other things are rubbish.

And in between ... we have twelve verses on the travel plans and character traits of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

If we're honest ... this section can seem kind of lame.

But ... as we've seen again and again as we read the Apostle Paul ... if you slow down just a bit, then you soon see that there is way more to each paragraph than initially meets the eye.

And here that may be especially true.

Because it's noteworthy that Paul puts these details about his plans and his co-laborers not at the end of the letter, but at the center. Which is significant because often (not always, but often), in the ancient world, authors put the most important theme of their work at the center of their text's thematic structure. And this passage appears to be at the structural center of Philippians. [Leithart]

This passage may seem more mundane than those around it. And in a sense it is – it deals with very ordinary things. But that doesn't mean it's not important. Far from that, it has several key things to teach us. [Fee, 259]

And so we're actually going to spend a few Sundays with this text.

Next week (and maybe the week after it too), we'll look at what Paul has to say about the people he's sending to the Philippians.

But this week, our focus will be on the function of the visits Paul describes, as he sends first Epaphroditus, then Timothy, and eventually comes himself to the Philippians.

With all that said, let's turn now to our text: Philippians 2:19-30.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God's Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. ²³ I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

²⁵ 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, ²⁶ for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, how can we keep our way pure?
By guarding it according to your Word.
Help us now to seek you with our whole hearts.
Keep us from wandering from your commandments.
Let us store up your word in our hearts,
so that we might not turn from you.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:9-11]

Introduction

As I said, the text before us describes both people and actions. Next week we'll focus on the specific people. This week we'll consider the actions described.

And as we look at the actions Paul describes here, we find in them an important lesson about the Church – the community of God's people.

What we see is that: The Lord gives us not only his Word, but his Church, and rather than rejecting that gift, we need to accept it, for instruction, accountability, and assistance in our Christian lives.

Let me say that again: The Lord gives us not only his Word, but his Church, and rather than rejecting that gift, we need to accept it, for instruction, accountability, and assistance in our Christian lives.

Let's break that down together.

The Lord Gives Us Not Only His Word, But His Church

First of all, we are reminded in this passage that the Lord gives us not only his Word, but also his Church.

And this is fairly striking. Think about this letter in its original context.

The Apostle Paul is writing Scripture and sending it to them. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he's composing the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God and sending it to this community. That's incredible!

And isn't that enough? Isn't God's Word, composed by an Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – isn't that enough for the Christians in Philippi to go out and live the Christian life?

Well ... no ... apparently it's not.

Now, don't get me wrong. As Paul writes elsewhere, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." [2 Timothy 3:16-17] Scripture is central – Scripture is key to knowing God and living the Christian life.

But ordinarily we need more than Scripture. Not that we need another source of revelation – not at all. But we do need more to truly apply the teaching of Scripture to our lives. And for that, God gives us the Church.

Think of it like this: Imagine you have a terrible infection. And you find out that you need a specific IV drug to rid your body of that infection. And so the doctor pulls out an IV bag with the medication, hands it to you, and then walks away.

You have the cure for your ailment – that bag of IV medication contains what you need. No other medication is necessary!

But to rightly receive that medication ... you need more than just the medication in a pouch. You need a needle. And you need an IV line. And you need someone who knows how to use the needle and the line to put the IV into your arm.

You also probably need someone who can test your blood after you've received the medication, to see if you need more of it. And you need someone to monitor your vitals to make sure your body is receiving medication the way it's supposed to.

The medicine is the solution – no other medication is needed. But you need some assistance – you need some help – in actually applying that medicine to yourself.

And the same is often true with the Scriptures. What we need to know about God and to grow in the Christian life – all the content we need for that – is contained in the Scriptures. And there's no additional revelation the Church has in any other form.

But that said ... we often need help actually applying the Scriptures to our lives. And like the needle and the IV line, like the nurses and doctors of a hospital, the Lord gives us the Church, as a gift, as a means of applying God's word to our hearts and lives.

And that's what's going on in our passage this morning.

Which is why, even though Paul has just composed this letter of Scripture for the Philippians, he's not sending that only to them. He's not sending just the Word of God to them. He's also sending the people of God to them.

In this passage, he outlines a schedule of sending God's servants to the Christians in Philippi. First, we see in verse 25 that along with this letter, Paul is sending them Epaphroditus – a fellow minister of the Gospel. He will arrive at the same time as this letter.

But then, a little later, Paul will also send Timothy. That's what he says in verse 19 and 23. A bit after Epaphroditus has arrived in Philippi, Timothy will come to the Philippian Christians next.

But then, the process will go even further. Because after that, Paul himself will come, in person, to minister to the people there. That's what we see in verse 24.

Paul is sending the Word of God to the Philippian Christians. But he's not stopping there. He's also sending them people – leaders of the Church: first Epaphroditus, then Timothy, and then himself, all to help them apply the truths of God's Word to their hearts, their lives, and their community.

The first striking reality we see contained in this passage is that the Lord gives us not only his Word, but also his Church.

Rather Than Rejecting the Gift, We Need to Accept It

And the next thing we see – something implied in this passage – is that rather than rejecting this gift, we need to accept it.

Rather than rejecting the gift of the Church, we need to accept it.

If Epaphroditus had arrived with Paul's letter, at the church in Philippi ... and the Philippian Christians had greeted him at the door, taken the letter from his hand, thanked him, and then closed the door in his face – accepting the letter, but rejecting Epaphroditus ... something would be wrong.

If they had accepted the letter, but later turned Timothy away ... or Paul away ... something would be wrong with that, too.

The gift of God's Word and the gift of God's Church are all tied up together here, and we can't have one without the other.

But increasingly we live in a culture that fails to see that.

A recent Pew Research study found that only 25% of American adults across the country attend weekly religious services.

But in a finding more significant for us, they also found that among those Americans who identify as evangelical Christians, only half of them attend weekly church services, and almost 40% of them attend church less than once a month. [Pew] Even in the conservative Christian subculture in America, many who might profess the importance of God's Word see God's Church as being much less crucial to the Christian life ... so much so that many attend church less than once a month.

But then ... even for those of us who attend church regularly ... we too can have more subtle ways of holding the Church at arm's length. And that also can have a major impact on our spiritual lives.

And it's those more subtle, but still very consequential ways that I want to focus on this morning. And to do that, let's consider the specific ways that Paul expects the Church to shape God's people in this passage – the specific ways he expects Epaphroditus, Timothy, and himself to apply God's Word to the Philippian Christians.

And what we see is that Paul expects these men – these representatives of the Church – to serve as God's gift to the Philippians, for instruction, accountability, and assistance in their Christians lives.

Let's consider each of those dimensions. And each one is especially emphasized in one of these men: Paul, Timothy, or Epaphroditus.

For Our Instruction in the Christian Life

First, God has given us the gift of the Church for our instruction in the Christian life. And we are called on to accept this gift, rather than reject it.

God gives us the Church for our instruction.

Now, we see this aspect of instruction in all three of the ministers being sent to the Philippians. But I think it's most emphasized in the Apostle Paul. When Paul arrives there, we expect that the Christians in Philippi will especially look to him for instruction – for his teaching and preaching.

But this raises a question. The Philippians have the Scriptures. They have the Old Testament, written for God's people as a whole. And now they also have this letter, which is God's Word that especially addresses their situation. They have been given the Word of God – inspired, inerrant, and perfect.

Now, remember ... not everything that the Apostle Paul said or wrote was the Word of God. Not everything he said or wrote was inerrant or inspired. It was only on special occasions, as he penned or spoke the Words that would become Scripture, that his Words had all the properties of Scripture.

And some people who knew Paul, even noted, after experiencing both Paul's inspired Scriptural writing and Paul's in-person teaching and preaching, that there was something different – not in the message or the truths they contained, but perhaps in their power. Paul's opponents in Corinth are recorded as saying about Paul: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." [2 Corinthians 10:10]

And so, we might ask ... if the Philippians already had Paul's inspired Scriptural letter ... why would they need Paul to come and instruct them in person, as he plans to do in verse 24?

Well, it's a reminder that we don't just need Scriptural truth. We need Scriptural truth applied to us, specifically.

Paul, writing a letter, from a distance, even when it was an inspired and inerrant Scriptural letter, still lacked something that him, on the ground, teaching them, would have. On the ground he would see them more clearly. On the ground he would be able to apply the truths in his letter more specifically to them.

And in so many ways, that is the Church's calling – to mine God's Word, and apply it in ways especially needed by God's people in their particular time and place. [Bavinck, I.116]

Which means that proximity to people, and relationship with them, matters in that process.

Think of it like this. Between Saint Augustine and Tim Keller, Augustine is obviously the superior mind among Christian writers and preachers. And yet, despite the fact that Augustine's sermons and written works have been translated into modern English, even so among English-speaking Christians today, Keller is far more widely read and listened to than Augustine. In fact, based on podcast downloads, Keller is the most listened-to preacher in the world. [This statistic is taken from the *Grace in Common* podcast.]

Why is that?

Well, one significant reason is Keller's proximity to us, in time period, and culture. So far as it comes to universal human experience, Augustine too, even though he wrote over 1500 years ago, can meet us where we're at. But when it comes to the specific challenges we face, and the questions of how to apply God's Word to them, Keller understands us, as modern people, in ways that Augustine does not. Even if you've never met Keller, you can feel like he knows you in a way that Augustine maybe doesn't. Because Keller better knows our world, and our culture, and our struggles, and our temptations, and our assumptions, in our time and place. And so he brings something to his application of God's Word to us that Augustine simply cannot. So that's why we so often prefer Keller to Augustine.

And those benefits of proximity are also why God gives us not just great preachers in our own day, like Keller ... but he also gives us ordinary preachers, in our local church congregations.

We might ask: Why, on a Sunday morning, should we listen to Nicoletti, or Gutierrez, or White, rather than Keller, or MacArthur, or Sproul? Keller and MacArthur and Sproul are all superior teachers and preachers to me. And thousands of their sermons are available online and are at our fingertips. So ... when we come together, why don't I just pull out my phone, pull up one of their sermons, and play that into the microphone for you? Wouldn't that be better?

The answer is no. But it's not because I can rival the objective quality of those great modern preachers. The answer is no, because what we need is not just the objective quality that such great men provide ... but we also need teachers and preachers and churches that are closer to us than they are.

God has formed local churches. And he's called local pastors to provide instruction. And yes, we take the quality of our work very seriously here. And we should. But that's not all that matters. What matters too is that we know this congregation. We know our particular cultural setting. We know the moment we live in. We know many of you personally. And so, providentially, the Lord has called and prepared us to provide biblical instruction – to apply his Word – specifically to the people at Faith Presbyterian Church, in Tacoma Washington, in July of 2025. And that is part of the gift that the Lord provides through the instruction of the local church. And he does that not just here, but in churches around the world, every Lord's Day.

The idea is that just as Keller can speak to our situation in a way that Augustine cannot (even though Augustine is the superior mind), so also Nicoletti, and Gutierrez, and White can speak to our situation here in some ways that Keller and MacArthur and Sproul cannot, despite their superior minds. Because we don't just need genius. We need someone close to our situation – someone who knows what it's like to follow Jesus here and now. Someone who knows us.

And that's what Paul would have offered to the Philippians when he came to minister among them that he couldn't offer them as he wrote from a distance.

Our calling is to accept that on-the-ground, close-to-home instruction. Our calling is not to despise our local preachers because they're not Tim Keller or R.C. Sproul, but to consider how God may be using them to speak to the specifics of our needs and our situations.

How do you relate to the instruction that your local church provides you? Do you receive it as a gift that should inform your spiritual life ... or do you instead prefer to approach it more like a critic than a student ... noting it's strengths and weaknesses, comparing its quality to others, and then giving each sermon a review in your own mind ... rather than receiving it as God's gift of instruction for your life?

Because the instruction of the local church is a gift that God gives us, which we are called to accept ... and not to reject, or hold at arm's length.

So first, we see that God gives us the local church for our instruction.

For Our Accountability in the Christian Life

Second, God has given us the gift of the Church for accountability in the Christian life. And we are called on to accept this gift, rather than reject it.

God gives us the Church for accountability.

Think again of the Philippians. Paul has given them God's Word. Paul has said they have God's Holy Spirit. They seem to be Christians of sincerity and integrity. Again, we might ask: Isn't the Word of God, and the Spirit of God, and the personal integrity of God's people enough?

And again the answer seems to be no.

Because Paul also calls here for personal accountability to fellow Christians – to fellow members of the Church.

That's basically why Timothy is going to be sent to them. Some time after Epaphroditus arrives with this letter, and some time before Paul arrives, Paul says in verses 19 and 23 that Timothy will come, so that he can report back to Paul about how well the Philippian Christians have applied what Paul has written to them. In other words, Timothy's main task in that visit was accountability. He was to see how the Christians in Philippi were doing in their Christian walk, to point out where they are doing well, and where they have fallen short, and then also to report that back to Paul before Paul arrived there. Paul puts a positive spin on it, but that's basically what he's describing.

And that was necessary not because the Philippians are sub-par Christians. Far from that, Paul describes the Christians in Philippi as his partners in the gospel [1:5], he expresses his confidence in their ongoing spiritual growth [1:6], and he says that they are fellow partakers with him in the grace of the gospel [1:7]. Paul seems fairly confident here in their faith.

And yet ... by sending Timothy, Paul acknowledges that the Christians in Philippi still need accountability from other Christians ... and that accountability is a gift God gives to his people, through the Church.

We need the gift of accountability because we so often fail to see our own shortcomings. Sometimes we are simply blind to our own spiritual needs or immaturity. Other times, we make excuses, and explain away our sins – blaming our circumstances rather than our own hearts. Still other times, we simply let ourselves get distracted. And in each case, God gives us the gift of the Church to hold us accountable: the gift of other Christians in our community, who know us, and can see our lives, and speak into those situations where we are not living as Jesus has called us to.

But many of us reject this gift. And we do it out of pride.

We may speak very humbly about ourselves. We may admit certain sins and weaknesses. We may readily accept help from others in those areas.

But then ... if anyone in our lives actually tries to confront us over a sin that we don't want to deal with – that we don't want to acknowledge ... then our wrath comes out. Then we respond with defensiveness that ensures they never do that again.

Maybe we get angry, and we argue with them about it. Or maybe we listen to them in silence, and then distance ourselves from them going forward. Or maybe we take what they've said about us, and we repeat it back in an exaggerated form so that they say "No, no, that's not what I'm saying," and they add qualifications, and eventually back-off altogether. But whether it looks like loud disagreement, or icy silence, or twisted exaggerations, we often find a way to reject the honest and sincere Christian accountability that others try to bring to our lives.

Do you see ways that you do that?

We so often reject true Christian accountability in our lives. But we are called on to accept it. We are called on, even to seek it out.

So ask yourself now: Do you have Christians in your life, in this church, who truly know you, and whom you have given permission to hold you accountable in your Christian walk? And not just accountable for one or two specific issues in your life where you already know you need accountability – but have you given them permission to hold you accountable for the entirety of your Christian life, for anywhere they see that you might not be following the Lord faithfully?

And if not, how do you need to pursue that? How do you need to seek that out?

Maybe it's through forming deeper relationships by joining a small group in the fall. Maybe it's through meeting with someone one-on-one and telling them you want them, going forward, to tell you if they see a problem in your spiritual life that you need to address. Maybe it's by going back to someone who has tried, in the past, to call you to accountability, and whom you lashed out at, and apologizing, and asking if they would share their thoughts with you again.

It can look different. But what does this look like for you?

A second thing we see here is that God gives us the Church as a gift, for accountability.

For Our Assistance in the Christian Life

Third, and finally, God has given us the gift of the Church for assistance in the Christian life. And we are called on to accept this gift, rather than reject it.

God gives us the Church for our assistance.

Paul, when the Philippians need help in their spiritual walk, doesn't just send them the Word of God. He also, with the Word, sends them Epaphroditus.

We see that in verse 25. And there Paul even says, "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."

Paul, once again, doesn't think that the Philippians, on their own, with the Word, are sufficient. They need Epaphroditus too. They need Epaphroditus to assist them in their Christian life. They need Epaphroditus to come alongside them and help them apply the truths of this letter to their lives and to their community.

God doesn't leave us to ourselves. He gives us other Christians, in our lives, who are called not just to instruct us, and not just to hold us accountable, but to help us – to assist us – in living out the Christian life. He gives us Christians to help bear our burdens and build us up in the gospel. And that's what Epaphroditus was called to do.

But once again, far too often, we reject this gift rather than accepting it.

Often it's out of pride. Some of you are happy to accept accountability from Christian friends. You're more than willing to accept instruction from Christian friends. But help from Christian friends? That's a different story. That means admitting that you need help. That means letting others see your weakness. That means vulnerability. And often, rather than do that, if anyone tries to come alongside us, to help bear our burdens, or build us up, or encourage us ... we'll instead push them away. Maybe it's subtle or maybe it's overt. But either way, we tell ourselves, we don't need their help.

But we do. In this life we do not outgrow the need for other Christians to come alongside us, and help bear our burdens and build us up, and grow us in the faith. We might not like it. It might make

us feel uncomfortable. It might make us feel vulnerable. But this is how God so often works: through the loving assistance of other Christians in our lives.

Brothers and sisters: When you need it, when you are struggling, do you seek out assistance from your brothers and sisters in Christ? Or does pride often keep you from asking for what you need?

When other Christians try to come alongside you, and love you, and help you in your Christian walk, do you accept that gift from them ... or do you push them away? Does pride keep you from accepting the gift God is trying to give you through his Church?

God, in his love for us, has not left us to struggle and work things out on our own. By the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ he has given us his Church, not only to instruct us, not only to hold us accountable, but to help us, to assist us, to come alongside us, as we seek to follow Jesus.

Conclusion

We serve a gracious and loving God. He has given us the gift of salvation. He has given us the gift of his Word. And he has given us the gift of the Church.

And we are fools if we reject any of those gifts. We are fools if we hold any of those gifts at arm's length.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us accept and embrace the gift of the Church for our instruction, for our accountability, and for our assistance in the Christian life.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Fee, Gordon D. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.

Leithart, Peter. "Structure of Philippians." Theopolis. July 20, 2017.

https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/structure-of-philippians/

McDonough, Sean M. Introduction and notes to Philippians in *The ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Pew Research Center. "8. Religious attendance and congregational involvement" February 26, 2025.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-attendance-and-congregational-involvement/>

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.