

“Who to Trust”
Philippians 2:3-5, 19-30
July 27, 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 we return, a second time, to chapter 2, verses 19-30.

As we said last Sunday, our passage this morning is the sort of text we often don’t really think much about. But as is often the case with the Apostle Paul, there seems to be more going on in this passage than first meets the eye. And that is reinforced by where Paul places these verses in the overall flow of the letter. [Lethart]

That’s why we’re spending several Sundays on it.

The topics in this text are practical. But they can be crucial to our Christian lives. [Fee, 259]

Last week, we considered the function of the three visits Paul describes on this passage, and what we saw was that the Lord, in his love and mercy, gives us not only his Word, but also his Church, for our instruction, accountability, and assistance in the Christian life.

This week (and probably next week too), we’ll consider the people Paul describes: their traits, and what they mean for us.

More specifically for this morning, we’ll see that this text is about who we should most trust.

We live in a world where people, where organizations, where pundits, and politicians, and professionals, and advertisers, and individuals all around us ask us to trust them. And yet we also live in a world where not many people are truly trustworthy.

Paul here, in our text, is talking about who he trusts, and why.

And as Paul explains that, he has lessons for us, too, about who¹ we should most trust.

¹ A note for my more scrupulous grammarians: Yes, I just used “who” several times as an object pronoun, rather than “whom.” I’m going to do it a bunch more times before this sermon is over. I even did it in the title. I’m aware that this is technically incorrect. However, I believe that this choice can be acceptable in certain settings. Merriam-Webster, for example, on their website, explains: “*Whom* often sounds fussy and unnatural in regular speech and writing, even when it is technically correct. [...] In these cases, it's perfectly standard to use *who* instead.” [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/grammar/who-vs-whom-grammar-usage>] Now, this could, of course, lead us into all sorts of discussions on prescriptive vs descriptive ideological approaches to grammar. And as interesting as those conversations may be, I agree with David Foster Wallace that often the advocates of both ideological positions have a tendency to miss the fact that different settings call for different grammatical “dialects,” based on social elements. A result of this is that “there are [...] situations in which faultlessly correct SWE [Standard Written English] is *not* the appropriate dialect” [Wallace, in his essay “Authority and American Usage”]. I would venture to say that in some cases,

With that in mind, let's turn again to our text: Philippians 2:3-5 and then 19-30.

As we do, please listen carefully, for this is God's Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

Then down to verse 19:

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

We praise you, Lord,

sermons may be such a situation, as they need to be written for the ear, not the eye, and balance a tone of authority with a tone of approachability. At the end of the day, in a sermon, I don't want my grammar to be a distraction, and on balance, I think the repeated use of “whom” would come off as pretentious and off-putting to many. Key to communication is the relationship between the speaker and the audience. And while I realize my word choice might alienate *you*, my grammatically-oriented friend, I hope that in the spirit of Romans 14 you will be able to set your frustrations aside for the sake of your brothers and sisters around you, who would be put off and distracted if I had made the opposite grammatical choice. In either case, if there is any spiritual truth in this sermon (and I certainly pray there is), then surely that spiritual content is more important than these grammatical questions. And so I encourage you to focus on that content instead, and if you do engage with these grammatical questions, to do so with a mildly amused and self-deprecating smile on your face. For it's in that spirit that this note was written.

and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts,
to meditate on your precepts,
and to fix our eyes on your ways.
Grant us to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word.
In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

Introduction: Those We Can Most Trust in Life

As we said, our text this morning is about who we should trust.

Paul explains to the Philippians about who he trusts, and why he trusts them. And he encourages the Philippians to trust those people too, and for the same reasons.

And with that, Paul models for us the criteria by which we should decide who we will most trust as well.

And this is an important topic for us.

All around us, people are vying for and laying claim to our trust. We are surrounded by voices – in the news, in our political system, on social media, in all sorts of places – who tell us that they are trustworthy, and we should put our trust in them, rather than others.

In our personal lives, we have friends, family, co-workers, and fellow Christians. But at times when we need instruction, or accountability, or assistance – we may struggle to know who to most trust among them.

Or maybe we enter a vulnerable season of life ... things are difficult ... things are painful ... and we don't know who to trust with our struggles, with our pain, with our vulnerability.

In all sorts of situations, we are faced with the question: In a world full of voices, in a world full of people, in a world full of struggles: Who should we most trust?

Do you see places in your life where you struggle with that question? And when you do ... how do you tend to answer it?

In response to such questions, Paul shows us here that those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else, and who will therefore be genuinely concerned for our welfare, and sacrifice for our good, because Jesus is genuinely concerned for our welfare and sacrificed for our good.

Let me say that again. What our text shows us is that those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else, and who will therefore be genuinely concerned for our welfare, and sacrifice for our good, because Jesus is genuinely concerned for our welfare and sacrificed for our good.

We're going to break that down together.

But before we do, I need to clarify two things: one about the use of this text, and the other about the scope.

First, on how this text and sermon should be used: While this sermon is about how we relate to the people around us, its purpose is not for you to weaponize it in order to confront or critique other people. If your takeaway after this sermon is to turn to the person next to you, or across the sanctuary from you, and say, “Why can’t you be more like what he just described?” then you’ve missed the point.

In fact, I’d say that you cannot faithfully speak to others about how they live up to this text until you’ve honestly evaluated how you live up to it. And that’s what we’ll be considering next week. And so, in the meantime, this coming week, you should not be confronting anyone else based on this sermon.

Because this sermon is not about confronting others for their shortcomings. Rather, it’s about evaluating your own decisions about who you most trust in your life. Perhaps you’ve placed more trust in certain people than you should have. Or perhaps you’ve failed to trust certain people in your life who deserve far more trust than you’ve given them. Those decisions – on how much you will trust different people – those are on you. And it’s those decisions you should be thinking about this morning.

Second, on the scope of what Paul is addressing here: Paul in this passage is addressing who we should most trust. He’s encouraging us to think about that very narrow subset of our relationships.

Paul isn’t describing every kind of relationship where we might have some trust in someone else. Trust can take a range of forms. We can have different amounts of trust in different kinds of people. We can have different kinds of trust in different kinds of people. And because of common grace, different kinds of trust can extend to Christians and non-Christians alike. Paul is not taking up all that wide range of forms and degrees of trust that we may have towards various people. Rather, his focus is narrow here – he’s talking about those we most trust, and the focus is on how that trust relates to the deepest aspects of our lives: Who we most trust for instruction, and correction, and help in the matters of our soul, and how we relate to our Maker.

Along with that, Paul is not here addressing who we should most love. The subject instead is trust. Those are not the same thing. For example, you should love your toddler much more than you love your spiritual mentor. But you should definitely trust the spiritual mentor more than you trust your toddler. Paul’s focus here is more narrowly on trust.

Finally, Paul also isn’t outlining boundaries for who we form meaningful relationships with. We’re called to have a range of relationships in life: including relationships with those who reject or even hate the Lord Jesus ... as well as those who hate and reject us. We’re called to love our enemies. We’re called to reach out to those who don’t know the Lord. That is, so often, how the gospel advances. So Paul here isn’t laying out criteria which should serve as the basis for all our relationships.

The scope here is much narrower. Think of it like this: Last Sunday we talked about how Paul is calling us here to receive the gift of the Church, because ordinarily, through the Church, God instructs us, and holds us accountable, and assists us.

But sometimes we don't know who specifically inside the Church we should trust for those things. We may not know, in such matters, who to most trust.

That's what Paul addresses for us in this text – that's what he models for us here.

Paul is describing here who we should most trust in these key areas of our lives.

Those Who Love Jesus Above All Else

And the foundational thing we see is that those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else.

That's what we see when we take verse 4, with verses 20-22.

In verse 4 Paul commended those who look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. And then, in verse 21 and 22, as he echoes that language and describes Timothy, Paul makes it clear that those who will best look to the interests of others are those who seek, first and foremost, the interests of Jesus Christ. [Fee, 260]

Or to put it more concisely: Those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else.

Those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else.

That means they love Jesus more than themselves.

But it also means they love Jesus more than they love us.

Paul is saying here that those who will best care for us – those we can most trust to walk alongside us in life – will be those who, however much they love us, love Jesus even more.

And there's at least two reasons for this.

One is that having their love for Jesus be stronger than their love for us will significantly strengthen their love for us. That might sound counter-intuitive ... but it's true.

Another person's love for us will always be weak if it's rooted primarily in how they feel about us. Because in any real relationship that goes on for a real amount of time, we will eventually act in ways that will make us pretty unappealing to love.

We are sinners. And as sinners, we sin. And we sin in ways that are ugly. And if someone's love for us is primarily rooted in how they see us, and what they think of us personally, then one of two things will happen. Either we'll be open and authentic with them ... and then, when they see our sin – when they see the ugly aspects of who we are – they will love us less. Or in order to keep their love, which is rooted in their high view of who they think we are, we will put up a false front, and wear a mask around them, and try to retain their love and affection for us by never letting them get close enough to us to see our sin and our brokenness ... which will mean that they'll never truly know us.

If someone's love for you is primarily rooted in how they feel about you, then you will end up with one of those two outcomes: either a decline in their love as they see you as you truly are ... or the need to never really let them see you as you are.

But if someone's love for us is not only rooted in how they feel about us, but also rooted – primarily rooted – in their love for Jesus ... well, that will be radically different.

Jesus loves sinners. Jesus loves broken people. And Jesus calls his followers to love what he loves. And so, someone who loves Jesus above all else will also love us, and care for us, and be a faithful friend to us, not only when we look good and appealing in ourselves ... but they will also still love us, and care for us, and be a faithful friend to us, when our sin is exposed, and our brokenness is laid bare. Because their love for us is not ultimately rooted in their admiration of us. But their love for us is ultimately rooted in their love for Jesus.

Timothy loved Jesus above all else. He put the interests of Jesus Christ above his own interests. And for that reason, Paul knew that Timothy could be trusted to love the Philippian Christians well. Paul knew that even when the Philippians sinned against Timothy, even when Timothy saw their ugly side, still, Timothy would still love them well ... because Timothy's love for others was rooted ultimately in his love for Jesus. And Jesus would always be worthy of Timothy's love. Jesus would always be worthy of Timothy's devotion. Jesus never changes. He has no sin. He has no ugliness to him. He is always lovely. And so, if Timothy's love for others was rooted in his love for Jesus, then Timothy's love for others would not waiver.

When someone's love for others is rooted in their love for Jesus, we can have confidence in the constancy of their love, despite the ugliness they may see in us. That's one reason why it's so important that those we most trust love Jesus above all else.

But another element of this dynamic is that if someone's love for us is rooted in their love for Jesus, then we can trust them to be honest with us ... even when it's hard.

If someone loves us above all else ... then they'll be deeply scared to lose our approval, or lose our affection, or lose our appreciation. Which means that they won't be very good at holding us accountable for our sin. They won't be very good at instructing us in matters we don't want to hear. They won't be persistent in assisting us at things we don't really want to do. The person who loves us above all else is not actually a reliable helper in the most important things of life. Because they will be more concerned with pleasing us than with truly helping us.

But if someone's love for us is rooted in their love for Jesus ... if someone loves Jesus even more than they love us ... then, when we sin against Jesus, whom they love ... when we are unfaithful to Jesus, whom they love ... when we ignore Jesus, whom they love ... then they will feel compelled to say something to us – not only because they love us, but especially because they love Jesus.

They will instruct us even in things we don't want to hear, because they know Jesus wants us to hear them. They will hold us accountable in ways we don't want to be held accountable, because they know our sins are sins against Jesus. They will help us grow in areas we may not want to grow, because they know Jesus wants us to grow in those ways, even if we ourselves don't. They will put Jesus's priorities and desires for our lives over our own priorities and desires for our lives.

And while that may not always be what we always most want ... it is what we always most need.

We need that kind of honesty. And that kind of honesty can only be given, in love, if the person speaking to us loves us ... but loves Jesus even more than they love us.

Those we can most trust in life, to instruct us, to hold us accountable, to assist us in the things that are most important in life, are those who love Jesus above all else.

That's a foundational truth we see at work here in Paul's words.

Those Who Will Be Genuinely Concerned for Our Welfare, and Sacrifice for Our Good

But Paul doesn't stop there. He also tells us how we can identify those who love Jesus above all else, and what we can ordinarily expect from them in our own lives.

And there's a lot of overlap between those two things.

He tells us that the way we can identify those who most love Jesus, and so are most worthy of our trust, is that they will be genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, and will sacrifice for their good. And what we can ordinarily expect from them, if we build a relationship with them, and we trust them ourselves, is that they will be genuinely concerned for our welfare, and sacrifice for our good.

First, Paul tells us here that the way we can identify those who most love Jesus, and so are most worthy of our trust, is that they will be genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, and will sacrifice for their good.

We can't see into people's hearts. [1 Samuel 16:7b] But Jesus tells us that we can know people by their fruits, by their actions, by how they live. [Matthew 7:15-20]

And Paul applies that principle here, as he shows us that those who love Jesus above all else will usually be those who are genuinely concerned for the welfare of other people, and will sacrifice for their good.

We see this first when it comes to Timothy. Paul tells the Philippians in verses 21 and 22 that what sets Timothy apart from so many others is that while they seek their own interests, Timothy seeks the interests of Jesus Christ. And the fruit of that, Paul tells us in verse 20, is that Timothy is genuinely concerned for the welfare of others.

Similarly, Epaphroditus has sacrificed himself for others – so much so, we're told in verse 30 – that he nearly died, risking his own life for the good of Paul. And in his sacrificial behavior towards Paul – towards one of Christ's people – Paul tells us in verse 30 that there is evidence of his sacrificial love for Jesus, whose work he was doing. Epaphroditus's sacrificial love towards others was the visible fruit – the noteworthy evidence – of his love for Jesus Christ.

People like this are often overlooked. Today, we don't talk much about Epaphroditus in the Church. And in his own day, Epaphroditus was not the most prestigious gospel worker. And yet, though such people are often overlooked, their absence would be deeply felt. Paul notes in verse 27 that if he were to lose Epaphroditus, he would have had "sorrow upon sorrow." In a similar way, we read in verse 26 that the Philippians were deeply distressed to hear that Epaphroditus was

ill. And in verse 28 Paul says that Epaphroditus's presence with others eases Paul's anxiety for them.

Such people, who are genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, who quietly sacrifice for their good, often have this effect. The thought of losing them produces sorrow upon sorrow for God's people. And their very presence eases our anxiety about the spiritual wellbeing of the people who are around them.

This is, so often, the impact that those who love Jesus above all else have on the people around them.

Who do you know like that? Who, in your life, or in our congregation, has shown these traits?

And whoever they may be ... have you given them the trust that they deserve? Or have you tended to overlook them ... to dismiss them ... or to trust others over them, for the wrong reason?

It's such people, Paul tells us, whose input we should most value in our Christian walk.

But so often, we get this wrong.

So often we look at the wrong evidence to determine who we can most trust to speak into our lives.

Sometimes we look instead to those we seem to be the most morally demanding: who are exacting with moral details ... who hold themselves and others to the highest standard.

And of course we should hold ourselves to high standards. And yet, if we value external moral rigor, over genuine Christian love, then we will be more likely to follow Pharisees than those who most resemble Jesus.

Other times we look to those who seem the most confident or charismatic in their Christian walk – who are so confident in what they think about every issue ... who speak in ways that make us want to follow them – that make us want them to like us.

And yet, as attractive as that can be, those are not the traits that Paul highlights here, or elsewhere, when it comes to who we should trust and follow. After all, self-confidence can often grow out of foolish immaturity much easier than it grows out of sturdy and mature faith. And so confidence and charisma are not what Paul encourages us to look for when it comes to who we should most trust.

Still other times, we look to those who are smart. Those who know a lot – who are clever, who can argue well and teach well, and sound especially intelligent. And I'm a good presbyterian – so I value intelligence too. But intelligence is a gift God gives to the faithful and the unfaithful alike – to the trustworthy and the untrustworthy. Intelligence alone is not a fruit of spiritual maturity or a result of loving Jesus well.

Still other times, we look to those who are the most emotionally expressive – who express deep emotions about their lives, about our lives, about the Lord. And again, emotions are a good thing – they are a gift of the Lord. But emotional expressiveness alone is not itself an indication of devotion to Jesus any more than intelligence or confidence is.

Now ... intelligence, and emotional expression, and confidence, and charisma, and moral rigor, and attention to detail – these things are not bad. They can be quite good. But only when they are servants of Christian love. By themselves, they can be used to help or to harm other people. And so, by themselves, they are not good indicators of who we should most trust.

Instead, Paul tells us here that those we should most trust are those who love Jesus above all else, and whose love for Jesus expresses itself in love for others, in ways that we can see it – as they are genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, and as they willingly sacrifice for the good of others.

That's who we should most trust to come alongside us, as our brothers and sisters, to instruct us, to correct us, and to help us in our own Christian lives.

Who might that be for you? Who, in your life, or in our congregation, has shown these traits?

And once you've identified them: How can you seek them out? How can you ask for their help? How can you seek to learn from them? How can you more heavily weigh their words and their input in your life?

Paul tells us that those we can most trust in life are those who love Jesus above all else, and who show that love by being genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, and sacrificing for their good,

Because Jesus Is Genuinely Concerned for Our Welfare and Sacrificed for Our Good

Paul wants us to recognize such people.

But he doesn't want us to stop there.

Paul doesn't want us to just see them.

But Paul wants us to see the power behind them.

Paul wants us to see that such people are able to be genuinely concerned for our welfare and sacrifice for our good, because Jesus is genuinely concerned for our welfare and sacrificed for our good.

And that's really important. Because the trust we place in the kind of people Paul has described here is not ultimately rooted in the fact that they're just swell people. Rather, it's rooted in the love, the power, and the persistence of Jesus himself.

As wonderful as Timothy and Epaphroditus were, Paul's ultimate hope for the Philippians was not in Timothy or Epaphroditus. It was in Jesus.

Paul knew that Jesus works through his faithful followers. And Paul knew that Timothy and Epaphroditus were faithful followers of Jesus. And their union with Jesus was bearing fruit in their lives. And so Paul was confident that Jesus would instruct, and correct, and help the Philippian Christians through Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Jesus loves his people so well that he not only loves them himself, directly, but he also loves them through his people.

And so, when other Christians in your life have expressed genuine concern for your welfare ... when other Christians have made personal sacrifices for your good ... in those moments, you're not just receiving their love ... you've received the love of Jesus, whether you realize it or not. He's the one who has made those people who they are, because he loves them. And through them, he has also reached out and loved you.

Jesus works through his people. And without him – without his work – no one would be trustworthy. It's only because of Jesus that we can trust his people, and in their love, we are experiencing his love.

Because he is the One who made us. He is the One who watches over us. He is the One who died on the cross in order to save us. And he is loving us, and caring for us, through his people.

He is genuinely concerned for our welfare.

And he has lovingly sacrificed for us in the gospel.

And so, when we receive such love from Jesus's people ... our own response should be to love Jesus even more. Our own response should be to trust Jesus even more. Our own response should be to follow Jesus even more faithfully. Because he's the one behind it all.

Through his servants, Jesus cares for us. Through his servants, Jesus instructs us, and corrects us, and helps us in this life.

Let us receive such gifts. And as we do, let us see them for what they are: Gifts from Jesus, witnesses in our lives to his love.

And so, as we trust his faithful followers, who he has placed in our lives, let's trust him above all.

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.

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.