

“The Path of Christian Growth”
Philippians 2:19-30 (Part 3)
August 3, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We’ve spent the past few months in chapter two of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. And as we conclude our time there, I want to come back to verses 19-30 one last time, because I think it has at least one more important lesson to teach us as we consider this chapter as a whole.

The first 18 verses of Philippians 2 are filled with profound theological truths and lofty ethical callings. But then, the last 12 verses ground us in the practicalities of how we can receive what the first 18 verses are talking about.

We’ve seen how these 12 verses point us to the church, and the kind of people in the Church we should seek out to help us grow.

But along with that, I think Paul is also telling us about what we ourselves need to actively do in order to grow in the Christian life.

Reading the first 18 verses of this chapter ... we can get lost in how high and loft and profound the ideas and exhortations are ... and we can be left wondering: how do we actually pursue these things? What’s the path by which we get closer to these ideals?

But in these final 12 verses of the chapter, Paul shows us, by pointing us to how Timothy, and Epaphroditus, and even Paul himself, grew in these ways. It’s more practical, and on the ground.

It makes me think of “The Scouring of the Shire,” in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Lord of the Rings is a big epic tale – over a thousand pages long. And, within the imagined world of Middle Earth, the novel deals with history-altering events on a massive scale, in a fantasy world of orcs and trolls, of wizards, and elves, and dwarfs, and magic, and kings.

But then, after almost a thousand pages of these epic events, and the resolution of a world-altering battle ... Tolkien gives us a 23-page chapter towards the end, full of what feels like small, ordinary, and mundane conflicts, in a chapter titled “The Scouring of the Shire.” And a lot of readers are puzzled about why the chapter’s even in there. Peter Jackson left it out entirely.

But as I’ve heard one scholar explain it, “The Scouring of the Shire” was important for Tolkien. Because throughout the first thousand pages, Tolkien holds out for us these great big lessons and these high and lofty virtues. We see them play out in powerful wizards, in graceful elves, in men and hobbits facing history-changing moments. And in those settings we can see the virtues and lessons clearly – they are stark and profound. But they also seem a bit distant. Because when we,

as the readers, put the book down ... and look at our ordinary and mundane lives ... it can be hard to see how the big and epic virtues and lessons we've just read about relate to our much less epic daily lives.

And "The Scouring of the Shire" is Tolkien's way of bringing those virtues and those lessons a little bit closer to home. Because in those 23 pages, the same characters are called on to exercise the same virtues and values, but in a much more mundane setting.

It's because of that much more mundane setting that many readers of *Lord of the Rings* are bored by those 23 pages.

And I think it's for similar reasons that many readers of Philippians are bored by these 12 verses at the end of chapter two.

And yet, in both cases, I think the author gives us these mundane passages to challenge us to consider the ordinary concrete steps we need to take in our daily lives in order to cultivate the same virtues that we've had presented to us in a much more a lofty setting in what came before.

Like "The Scouring of the Shire," verses 19-30 teach us how to apply the lessons of verses 1-18, in our own lives, by pointing us to how Timothy, Epaphroditus, and Paul have applied them in their own lives.

Our sermon text this morning is verses 19-30. But before we hear from it, let's review what Paul has written in verses 1-18. And to help, we've even printed those verses for you as well in the bulletin.

Take a look. In these verses, Paul calls on us to live in accord with the Holy Spirit of God, and so to live our lives in true unity with one another, doing nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility counting others more significant than ourselves. He tells us that we must look to the interests of others, and even have in ourselves the mindset of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who humbled himself, who came to earth from heaven, and who knew that being like God didn't mean selfishly grasping, but pouring himself out for others. And so, as you consider not only his sacrificial love, but also his glory, and how one day every knee will bow at his name, so you, Paul says, should work out your own salvation in light of all this: do all things without grumbling, be blameless and innocent, shine like lights in the world, so that when Jesus Christ returns and judges all people, your Christian leaders may be proud of how well you have lived the Christian life.

That's what Paul calls us to in verses 1-18. And it's great.

But how do we get started? What can we do ... today ... to move towards these lofty goals?

In answer to that, in the last 12 verses of this chapter, Paul holds up to us Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself, as models for how we pursue these great spiritual goals in our ordinary daily lives.

So ... with all that in mind, let's now to our sermon text: Philippians 2:19-30.

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

Paul writes:

^{2:19} 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, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,
and our chief counselors.
We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

Introduction: The Path of Christian Growth and Maturity

This spring and summer, as we've gone through Philippians chapter two, we've been thinking about some big ideas of what the Christian life of following Jesus should look like.

And as we end our time in this chapter this morning, Paul gives us some concrete practical help on how we actually pursue these goals.

And what Paul shows us here is that the path of Christian growth is aimed at loving Jesus and loving people, and we advance in it by imitating the right people, by repeatedly choosing to serve others over serving ourselves, and by allowing our hearts to be vulnerable to others.

Let me say that again: The path of Christian growth and maturity is aimed at loving Jesus and loving people, and we advance in it by imitating the right people, by repeatedly choosing to serve others over serving ourselves, and by allowing our hearts to be vulnerable to others.

Let's break that down together.

Aimed at Loving Jesus and Loving People

First, Paul reminds us here of where the Christian life is supposed to be aimed. And what we see is that the path of Christian growth and maturity is aimed at loving Jesus and loving people.

And that might seem obvious ... but that doesn't mean we should assume we're actually doing it.

So stop now and consider: What is your life really aimed at? If someone were to come in, objectively, and observe your life from the outside for a time – to note how you spend your time, how you spend your money, how you spend your effort ... what would they conclude your life is primarily aimed at?

Based on your actions, what would appear to be most important to you?

Is it loving Jesus and loving the people around you? Or is it wealth and financial gain ... or social advancement and career success ... or prestige and how people around you view you ... or your comfort ... your hobbies, your pleasure, your entertainment?

Often ... without realizing it ... other things – things we know, even if they're good, shouldn't be most important in our lives, become the primary aim of our lives. Has that happened to you?

Maybe you'd say that your spiritual life is what's most important to you. But even then we have to consider the aim of our spirituality.

Because in our own fallen hands, we can so easily turn even "spirituality" into just one more way to serve ourselves ... whether we approach spirituality as a way to prove our moral superiority or other people ... or as a quest to become more knowledgeable than other people ... or as a path to feel more personally satisfied in life ... or as a way to grasp at social capital or power. Again, and again, throughout history, and in our own lives, we can turn even spirituality into a selfish pursuit.

But that's not Biblical Christianity. That's not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Because when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." And "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." "There is no other commandment greater than these," he said. [Mark 12:29-31]

Love God. And love people. That's the Christian calling. That's true spirituality. That's what we're supposed to aim at. That's what Christian growth and maturity looks like.

And that's what Paul reaffirms here as well, where in verse 4 he calls us to look to the interests of others, and in verse 21 he calls us to look to the interests of Jesus Christ. Paul is reminding us here again that the path to Christian growth and maturity is aimed at loving Jesus and loving people.

But how do we actually advance on that path? How do we move forward in that pursuit?

That's what Paul describes and models for us in the rest of our passage. And he lays out for us three actions, modeled in Timothy, Epaphroditus, and himself.

Advanced by Imitating the Right People

The first action modeled for us, which we see in Timothy, is that we can pursue these goals by imitating the right people.

Paul shows us here is that the path of Christian growth and maturity is aimed at loving Jesus and loving people, and we advance in it by imitating the right people.

Now ... I won't spend too much time on this because we focused on it the last two weeks. But still, we need to remember how key this is for Paul here.

In verse 22, Paul writes: "But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel."

Now, we may read that mainly as a description of affection. And certainly it included that. But it was also more than that.

As Gordon Fee, points out, in this setting, "the imagery assumes family life in the Greco-Roman world, where the son learns the family trade from his father by working alongside him." [Fee, 269 n.39]

Paul is not just describing a relationship of family love between Paul and Timothy. He's describing the relationship between a mentor and an apprentice. He's describing a relationship not only of learning, but of imitation – of acquiring skills and abilities by observing, and walking alongside someone who already knows how to do something that we ourselves need to grow in.

And with that, Paul is pushing us again to pursue the same kind of relationships if we, too, want to grow in how we love Jesus and others – if we, too, want to advance in the Christian life: then we, too, need to apprentice ourselves to those who know how to do those things better than we do – just as Timothy apprenticed himself to Paul.

Ideas to know and laws to obey are not enough. We also need models to imitate. And God provides us with many models we could imitate.

He gives us models to imitate in the Scriptures: men and women who were faithful to the Lord in ways that we can read of, and reflect on, and imitate, from the Bible.

He also gives us accounts of the lives of Christians throughout history: men and women over the centuries who have advanced in their walk with the Lord, loving Jesus and loving others in such a way that we can learn from them as we study their lives.

But also the Lord provides living models and mentors all around us: men and women we know, whom we can talk with, and apprentice ourselves to in the Christian life, seeking to learn from them and to grow in the faith, by watching how they live – just as we discussed last week – and then seeking to live that way ourselves.

As a Christian seeking to advance in the Christian life ... have you been intentional about who you will apprentice yourself to – who you will seek to imitate?

Because we all imitate someone. We were made to grow in that way. And if we're not intentional about who we will follow – who we will imitate ... then you will easily, without even thinking about it, slip into imitating others who are not especially faithful to the Lord. Whether it's from the culture of celebrity, or the winners of worldly power, or the pugnacious talking heads that dominate our social discourse – you will apprentice yourself to someone. And if you don't intentionally choose faithful mentors to imitate, like Timothy chose Paul ... then you will likely begin to imitate other, unfaithful mentors that our secular culture is all too ready to offer to you.

In Timothy, Paul shows us that the path of Christian growth and maturity is aimed at loving Jesus and loving others, and we advance in it by imitating the right people.

Advanced by Repeatedly Choosing to Serve Other People Over Serving Ourselves

Second, in Epaphroditus, Paul also shows us that we advance on the path of Christian growth, aimed at loving Jesus and loving others, by repeatedly choosing to serve other people over serving ourselves.

Paul shows us here that often it's not as much about one big choice as it is about many smaller choices in our daily lives.

While scholars dispute the details, it seems likely that what Paul is describing in verses 27-30 is a series of choices that Epaphroditus made to serve others rather than to serve himself.

First was Epaphroditus's original decision to travel from the Philippians, in order to help Paul. Paul was in prison. And in the Roman system, a prisoner needed to cover his own living expenses. And so the Philippians prepared a gift for Paul – to provide for him financially. But that gift needed to be carried to Paul by someone reliable, someone trustworthy. And the Philippians chose

Epaphroditus. And rather than see that task as mundane or beneath him – rather than focus on the threats to his comfort and his security, compared to simply staying at home – Epaphroditus chose to go: to carry the gift of the Philippians from Philippi to Paul. He chose serving others above serving himself.

But then, second, it appears that along the way, Epaphroditus became ill. At that point there would have been a strong temptation to turn back – to just go home. But Epaphroditus knew that Paul's need was real, and so he pressed on, in a day before modern medicine, even risking his own life, all to care for Paul in his need – as Paul emphasizes in verse 30. Epaphroditus chose to serve the needs of Paul over serving his own needs.

Then, third, when he had recovered from this serious illness, rather than stay with Paul, rather than seek a more prestigious role working with him ... Epaphroditus was ready and willing to return right back to the Philippians, both to set their minds at ease, and to minister to them – to help them apply Paul's instruction to their lives, as we considered two weeks ago – because that's what they needed. Once again, Epaphroditus chose to serve the needs of others – now the Christians in Philippi – over his own needs. [Fee, 258-284]

Epaphroditus had repeated opportunities to choose his own comfort or his own prestige or his own security over serving other people. But again and again, he chose to serve others, rather than himself.

And that's the model Paul holds up for us, of how we can love Jesus and love others well.

And the path it emphasizes is not first about our feelings ... but it highlights instead the significance of the repeated choices we make. But sometimes we fail to see the importance of that.

C.S. Lewis is helpful with this.

Lewis, writing on Christian love – which he refers to as the virtue of “charity” – writes this; he says: “Though natural likings should normally be encouraged, it would be quite wrong to think that the way to become charitable [the way to become more loving] is to sit trying to manufacture affectionate feelings. Some people are ‘cold’ by temperament; that may be a misfortune for them, but it is no more a sin than having a bad digestion is a sin; and it does not cut them out from the chance, or excuse them from the duty, of learning charity [the duty of learning to love those around them]. The rule for all of us is perfectly simple.” Lewis writes. “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 116]

Choosing to act lovingly towards others – choosing to serve others in loving ways ... that itself can be a starting point or a catalyst to feelings of love. And either way, the choices to serve are a lot easier to make than it is to try to generate feelings out of thin air.

I don't know how Epaphroditus felt in his journeys, from moment to moment, about Paul or the Philippian Christians. But I do know that again and again, he chose to act in love. And when we do that, ordinarily, our love grows.

Advancing in Christian spirituality – growing in our love for Jesus and love for others – is not usually achieved by great big moments of emotional transformation, or grand gestures. It's instead usually forged in countless daily choices – by decisions we are called on to make over and over again.

In all sorts of ordinary moments, in all sorts of unremarkable interactions, we are, again and again, given a choice: Will we serve another person, or will we serve ourselves? Will we serve our spouse, or will we serve ourselves? Will we serve our child, or will we serve ourselves? Will we serve our parent, or our sibling, or our friend, or our neighbor, or our co-worker, or our fellow-church-member, or that annoying person at the supermarket, or that person who is always bugging us at church, or that difficult person everyone else is ignoring and avoiding, will we serve them ... or will we serve ourselves?

Over and over again that question is put to us.

And if we want to grow spiritually – if we want to mature in our Christian walk, then the path to that growth, the path to that maturity, the path to becoming a more loving person, is often to choose in those mundane moments, over and over again, to serve other people rather than serving ourselves.

That's what Epaphroditus did. And that's what Paul calls us to do here as well.

And so, Paul shows us that another way we can advance on the path of Christian growth and maturity – another way we can grow in loving Jesus and loving people – is by repeatedly choosing to serve others over serving ourselves, in the day-to-day trenches of life.

Advanced by Allowing Our Hearts to be Vulnerable

Finally, with how he speaks about himself, Paul also shows us here that we advance on the path of Christian growth and maturity, aimed at loving Jesus and loving people, by allowing our hearts to be vulnerable to others.

We all develop ideas of biblical characters in our minds ... and sometimes we can have a tendency to imagine Paul as sort of stoic ... restrained ... intellectual ... rugged ... emotionally self-sufficient.

But if we actually look at Paul, and how he speaks about himself ... it seems clear that his emotional life was deeply tied up in his relationships with the people around him.

We see this right here in this text. Paul says in verse 27 that if he had lost Epaphroditus, he would have had "sorrow upon sorrow." He speaks in verse 28 about his anxiety for the Philippian

Christians. And this isn't a one-off – elsewhere Paul writes about the distress he has when he's concerned for a close friend, and the comfort he finds from the presence of a good friend. [2 Corinthians 2:13 & 7:6]

Paul's emotional life is all tied up in the wellbeing of other people. He has clearly allowed his heart to be vulnerable to others.

But we sometimes resist this. We sometimes act as if it's wiser, or more mature, or more spiritual to keep our hearts at a distance from others.

But that's not how we see Paul himself approach spiritual growth.

C.S. Lewis, again, is helpful here. He writes: "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell." [Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 279]

As we hear Paul's loving vulnerability in verse 27 ... it's worth asking ourselves if we have similarly made ourselves vulnerable in our relationships with other people ... or have we been more like what C.S. Lewis describes? Have we... in self-protection ... in selfishness ... tried to distance our heart from other people ... wrapping it up ... and storing it away ... in a casket where it cannot be broken ... but also cannot truly grow and live? Such aversion to the vulnerability that comes with love is not an act of Christian maturity – it's a stoic refusal to truly love God and love the people around you whom he has called you to love.

Real love involves vulnerability.

And as Christians, we, of all people, should know that.

After all, we serve a God who made himself vulnerable, in order to love and save us.

In the incarnation – as he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ – God himself opened himself up to heartbreak and pain – to suffering and vulnerability, all to love us, all to know us, all to be with us.

And so ... how can we refuse to make ourselves vulnerable as well, if that's what it takes to more truly love him, and more truly know him, and more truly be with him?

Vulnerability can be scary. Choosing again and again to serve others rather than look out for ourselves can be scary ... but it doesn't have to be. Because whatever earthly vulnerability we may face – whatever earthly losses we may incur, we need not doubt our security and our status with

God. He has proven his love for us by opening himself up to suffering for our sake, by choosing again and again to serve us rather than himself.

And now, after all the love he's shown us, he asks us simply to return that love – to seek to love him as he has loved us.

And no matter what happens – no matter how it goes, he will be with us. He will help us. And he has already paid for every failure we may have along the way with his precious blood.

That is the path to Christian growth that Paul lays out for us here: Confident in Christ's love for us, confident in Christ's care for us, we step out, in imitation of other great saints ... and we too choose to serve others rather than serve ourselves ... to step out of our self-protected shells, and to make ourselves vulnerable to others, so that as we love them, we might love our Lord, and as we follow in his ways, we might know our Lord more and more.

Jesus calls us to follow him. The eternal destination is high and lofty. But the next steps are right in front of us: to imitate others as they imitate Christ, to choose again and again to sacrificially love other people, to risk vulnerability ... because we are confident as we do that Jesus is with us, and he will never leave us nor forsake us.

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/

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1952.

Lewis, C. S. *The Four Loves* in a collection of four works titled *The Inspirational Works of C. S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, copyright 1960, collection printed 1994)

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.