

Pursuing Caring Ministry (Phil. 2:19-30)

Caregivers have a tough job. The work is physically exhausting. It might involve tasks as varied as grocery shopping, helping someone move around their home, and feeding the client. It is also emotionally taxing. During the duration of a shift, a caregiver has conversations with the client, witnesses their pain, and deals with the worries and concerns of family members. For these reasons and more, **it is necessary that the caregiver be a person of character.** They must be trustworthy. They must be willing to work hard and sacrificially. They must be willing to endure the loss of a person who becomes something of a friend over time. The calloused, calculating, and self-interested need not apply. As we close out the second chapter of Philippians, Paul offers his readers **two examples of ministry workers who have character and who exhibit care in their ministries.** Timothy and Epaphroditus represent godly ministry in the name of Jesus. We would do well to learn from their example, so that we might grow in our own caring ministries and so that we might get closer to Jesus whom they served.

To understand the traits of caring ministry as they are embodied by Timothy and Epaphroditus, we must remember **three key pieces of context.** First, **Paul's future is uncertain.** Remember that he is in prison and is aware that he may die before he sees the Philippians again. According to 2:23, Paul is waiting to send Timothy until he sees how things will go for him. Presumably, Timothy's ministry will be somewhat different depending on Paul's outcome. In 2:24, Paul still seems confident that he will be released from prison. In that case, Timothy's visit will likely be preparatory for Paul's coming. However, Paul could die and go to be with the Lord. In that case, Timothy would likely come to Philippi bearing some of Paul's authority. Second, **Paul has already taught that all Christians are to live sacrificially.** Remember that he has said that it is his desire to be poured out as a drink offering upon their sacrifice and service. He will be poured out for them as they are being poured out. This reciprocity and mutual sacrifice are reflected in the lives of Timothy and Epaphroditus. Epaphroditus has already sacrificed much to journey from Philippi to visit with Paul in prison. It has, in fact, almost killed him. Timothy

will also sacrifice to journey from Rome to visit the Philippians. We must see these servants as embodiments of Paul's teaching.

Third, **some preachers of the gospel are self-centered**, but Timothy and Epaphroditus are not like these selfish ministers. Back in 1:18, Paul had rejoiced that the true gospel was preached even by those with selfish ambition. Now in 2:21, he differentiates Timothy from such people: "For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus." It is important to note this distinction, as it sets us up to observe the caring ministries of Timothy and Epaphroditus. It may be possible to preach with selfish motives, but it is very difficult to engage in sacrificial, caring ministries out of such motives. I would take this point so far as to say that one of the great dangers of the megachurch ministry model is that selfish and ambitious preachers become famous even as they are detached from ministry to people. And why can't they do people ministry? Because in such close-up settings, it becomes impossible to hide one's self-centeredness.

With these preliminary observations out of the way, we may now consider **five characteristics of caring ministry as modeled by Timothy and Epaphroditus**:

Communication. Paul wants Timothy to go to Philippi so that he may hear news of them directly from the mouth of Timothy. Timothy is a trustworthy worker, and therefore his report carries great authority. Presumably, Timothy will go also bearing clear news from Paul or in Paul's stead. Likewise, Epaphroditus had traveled to Paul to bear greetings from Philippi; indeed, he is called a messenger in v. 25. Moreover, Epaphroditus is eager to return because of what they had heard concerning his illness. In both men, we see people who want to bear messages, convey information, and clear up confusion. Caring ministry requires **listening, reporting information accurately, and speaking to be understood** and not just heard. To care for other people, we must be committed to the hard work of communication.

Compassion. Timothy will be "generally anxious for your welfare" (v. 20). This is what differentiates him from the self-interested profited in v. 21. The self-interested preachers trying to get a one-up on imprisoned Paul cannot fake the kind of concern that Timothy has for the Philippians. Likewise,

Epaphroditus has been longing for the Philippians. He was distressed because they heard of his illness. He desires to return to his people because he cares for them. Paul also exhibits this compassion. He wants Epaphroditus to return because he is anxious that they be relieved of their distress. Caring ministry requires a holy kind of anxiety for the well-being of other people. Such compassion is **emotionally engaged with the recipient of care**. It must come from the heart. We can all tell the difference between someone who really means an action and someone who is simply going through the motions. To care for other people, we must be compassionate.

Consideration. Timothy is not like those who are looking out for their own interests. His actions reflect a desire to meet the needs of the people before him, not to gratify his own desires at their expense. Consideration flows out of compassion. Epaphroditus acted with compassion, leading him to be a considerate minister to Paul's need (v. 25). When we are emotionally engaged through compassion, we become **attentive to needs**. Epaphroditus wanted to help Paul by serving him in practical ways. Paul wants Timothy to go to Philippi so that he can serve their needs. It is hard to be attentive to the needs of others if I am only concerned with what I can get from a situation. To care for other people, we must be considerate.

Consistency. Timothy has proven himself worthy over time, as he has served with Paul as a son in the faith (v. 22). Epaphroditus has served in such a way that Paul is willing to call him brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier (v. 25). Consistency involves **doing the right thing repeatedly**. The caring minister must honor time commitments, respond with fairness, and act with integrity. Over time, his or her reputation as a caring person will grow. The self-interested will act in ways which are calculated for maximum gain in the moment. The consistent always show up focused on compassion and consideration first. To care for others, we must be consistent.

Costliness. Timothy is prepared to follow in Paul's footsteps, and Paul's life has been marked by great sacrifice. Physically and emotionally, Paul had been brought to the edge many times. Epaphroditus had journeyed long and hard to get to Paul in Rome, and he had even contracted a nearly fatal illness on the way. Serving others will be costly. It will require **a loss of opportunities, notoriety, money, and even health**. It is Christ-like to offer up one's riches

for the sake of another's poverty. I mean that in more than financial terms. Remember that Paul longs to be poured out as a drink offering even as he commends sacrificial living to the Philippians. To care for others, we must make costly commitments.

Personal, hands on ministry which involves care for others is challenging. The kind of ministry I am thinking of involves listening to others, praying for others, and serving the practical needs of others. To do this in the way of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus requires character. It requires a rejuvenated heart under the leadership of God's Spirit. **It is important to remind ourselves that we cannot generate genuine care for others in our own power.** To be more exact, we, apart from God, talk more than listen, manipulate more than pray, and serve ourselves more than we serve others. This reminds us of our need for Jesus. He came to engage in the most sacrificial, most physically and emotionally demanding caregiving in all history. His years of public ministry were constant action in service of the people he loved. And he was led to death on the cross, not because he deserved it, but because we did. We justly deserved the wrath of God against our sins of carelessness and callousness and inconsistency. By trusting in Jesus, we are identified with him in this death that we might be identified with him in his resurrection. **Now the Holy Spirit can work in our hearts to bring about a level of caring ministry that would never be possible apart from Jesus.**

When you find caring ministry to be challenging, it is important to look to Jesus and remind yourself of what he did for you. Remind yourself of his care and his attentiveness. Remind yourself of the cross. And keep thinking upon Jesus until you receive the strength to keep caring. Don't expect it to become easy, by the way. It is possible that the Spirit will only give you enough strength to do it this day. Tomorrow is another opportunity to go back to the well and get another drink. As the Spirit leads one step at a time, we can learn to care for others just like Timothy and Epaphroditus.