

PHILIPPIANS 2: 19 - 3: 16

Key Passage - 3: 1-16.

2: 19 - 30

Paul distinguishes people like Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of life and witness to follow. And he contrasts them to other leaders and travelling missionaries who are more self-interested than genuinely interested in the welfare of the Philippians or the cause of Christ's spiritual body (the church). Finally, Paul will point to himself as an example as well, but not in order to brag. After all, he is a slave of Christ Jesus, and if his life and witness have any value at all, the value is in pointing to Christ as the ultimate model and revelation of divine love lived out. (2: 5-11)

3: 1-16

Honour and status were important values in Roman society as well as in Jewish society. The things that made for honour and status, however, differed. In Roman society, it was wealth, power, control, and respect that made the man (or woman). In Jewish society where religion was totally enmeshed in the fabric of all life, honour and status had to do with one's adherence to the religious (Mosaic) law, with all the rituals and customs surrounding the many commandments (beyond the 10).

1) Clearly, Paul contrasts Timothy, Epaphroditus, himself and ultimately Christ, as counter-Roman-cultural models of what it means to live life right. It is not those who command respect who deserve honour, nor those who value money and power, but rather, those who are willing to treat others as equals, which often means humbling themselves (lowering themselves) to an equal status with the weakest and lowliest. This very movement of humbling is an act of compassionate love - the very nature of God's being, and the very movement that took Christ to the lowest depths of being judged by Roman law as a worthless criminal deserving crucifixion.

2) Jewish society, however, is also guilty of modelling itself after Roman cultural values, in substance if not in kind. For the faithful Jew, a strict religious adherence to the rites, rituals, and practices of the Mosaic law (circumcision was one such key practice), gave one an air of superiority over against those, especially Gentiles, who had no background in Judaism, let alone Jewish bloodlines. Paul's response to such 'mutilators of the flesh' (Paul does not hold back his invective) is two-fold:

A) If they want to brag about their status, he can do one better. Not only do his bloodlines come from the purest of the pure, but his way of life, education, and zeal for the faith, are unrivalled.

B) But Paul is not interested in bragging about such accomplishments or background. He considers this kind of accounting of 'righteousness' (faithfulness) as fundamentally flawed. It is God's action through Christ's life that counts, not our way of life toward God. Righteousness is first and foremost about believing oneself loved and forgiven, and this is a gift given by another, by Christ crucified. His forgiveness from the cross is God's forgiveness to all. Those who are humble enough to receive this as gift (which means, letting go the belief of deserving it as a born Jew and earning it by religious zeal), live out of that forgiven love quite a bit more grateful and compassionate toward others (because humble). Faith in Christ's righteousness inspires a righteousness in us that is not self-righteous, but humbly and tenderly compassionate toward others, following the example of Christ (God's love movement downward)

3) Thus, Resurrection, according to Paul, is not really possible if we are not prepared to share in the downward, humbling movement of God as Christ lived it. Our 'suffering' with Christ, a suffering that sometimes has physical implications (like Paul's imprisonment), is fundamentally about giving up and letting go all those things in the world and in ourselves, things we become attached to, but things which fill us with false pride and security. Who we are before God is more important than who we are before the world's eyes. We must let go the importance we attach to money, status, race, accomplishment, credentials, popularity, appearance, and so on. These are blocks and obstacles to living lovingly (humbly, equally) toward others, and gratefully before God who is the giver of every worthwhile gift, be it in our personality, good fortune, talent, character, or whatever.

4) Paul knows he is far from perfect, and far from having arrived at becoming 'Christ-like'. But the goal is clear in his mind, and he is focussed on moving toward it. Whatever else he does in life, the larger goal is never far from his view. Whatever he does, he measures it over against this goal - does it help or hinder its approximation? What will bring us closer to Christ's way and what will push us further away? Is the goal clear in our minds, and are we passionate enough about moving toward it, even when it involves letting go and giving up other goals which contradict the one goal? Conforming our lives to the pattern of Christ is the greatest goal we could ever have. Being forgiven and welcomed as a child of God, we are invited on the journey without baggage from our past, without a sense of inadequacy in our present and without fear for our future.

Isn't this amazing? Do you feel empowered for all your feeling of inadequacy or unworthiness? God has called you by stirring faith in you. God will complete the work God has begun in you to the end of this life and beyond.