

Philippians 8

“Ministers of Grace: 5 Character Sketches”

08/22/2010

Philippians 2:19-25; 3:17 – 4:3

INTRODUCTION

“Character”, according to Dr. Webster, is “one of the attributes that make up and distinguish an individual”. “Character”, said an old preacher I once heard, is who “you are in the dark”.

Of course there are other applications of the word “character”. Letters of the alphabet are sometimes called “characters”. An actor’s role is the “character” he plays. And any person whose “attributes” are eccentric or quirky is referred to as a “character”. We have a few “characters” in our congregation, eh? You might be married to one!

There are several of those kinds of “characters” in the Bible: Isaiah, to be sure, and Samson; Bartimaeus the blind beggar (**Mark 10**) and Belshazzar, king of Babylon (**Daniel 5**). Simon Peter was a bit of a character, as was the duplicitous prophet Balaam, whose strange story is told in **Numbers 22**. I’m sure many of his contemporaries thought the apostle Paul was a character.

This morning’s text calls our attention to several individuals – Paul among them – who, though perhaps not eccentric “characters”, displayed traits of character worthy of our consideration and either our emulation or avoidance. Let us pray.

LESSON: *Philippians 2:19-25; 3:17 – 4:3*

1. Paul’s abrupt change of tone and topic in v.19 is yet another reminder that what we are studying this summer is not an essay or a doctrinal treatise. The epistle to the **Philippians** is first and foremost a letter – an ancient and famous letter, certainly, and written, we believe, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – but a letter nonetheless. Following the glorious, Christocentric theology of v.5-11, and after his pastoral exhortation of v.12-18, Paul dramatically shifts his attention in **2:19** to, of all things, the matter of travel plans – those he was arranging for Timothy and Epaphroditus, and those he hoped to make for himself at some uncertain future date.
2. Timothy
 - a. He is one of the marginal New Testament characters about whom a good bit is known.

“Son of the devout Jewish woman, Eunice, and a Greek father, Timothy was won to Jesus Christ when Paul preached in Lystra, Timothy’s home town. Paul invited the young convert to accompany him on his second missionary

journey, but had him circumcised to avoid undue criticism by sensitive Jews. Although young and timid, Timothy stayed behind at Berea with Silas while Paul moved on to Athens and Corinth (**Acts 17:14-15**). He rejoined Paul, then was sent back to Thessalonica to strengthen the congregation there (**1 Thessalonians 3:2, 6**). After another sojourn with Paul, Timothy was sent to Corinth (**Acts 19:22, 1 Corinthians 4:17**) to straighten out some of the many problems distressing the young congregation there. Timothy later looked after Paul during Paul's imprisonment. He subsequently was asked to go to Ephesus (**1 Timothy 1:2-4**) to represent Paul, and there received the two letters from Paul that bear his name. Timothy, these letters reveal, was like a son to Paul. The last word in the New Testament about this sensitive, sickly, but faithful young helper was that he was imprisoned but finally released (**Hebrews 13:33**)."

William P. Barker: "Timothy" in *Everyone in the Bible*

- b. Timothy had accompanied Paul to Philippi (**Acts 16:1-12**) and had, no doubt, assisted him in planting the church there. It is entirely possible that he and Paul had re-visited the folks there a time or two in the decade since their first visit.
- c. In v.19 Paul promises, God willing, to send Timothy to Philippi from Rome "soon".
 - (1) Paul, under house arrest and facing a most uncertain future, could not himself go but, good pastor that he was, he wanted to provide pastoral leadership for the Philippian church in his absence. The concerns expressed in the epistle indicate that the church there was dealing with some divisive issues, and Paul seems to have felt that the physical presence of a member of the original team would help. Timothy had experience as a pastor in both Corinth and Ephesus, so he was a logical choice to be Paul's emissary.
 - (2) That Timothy would be sent "soon" suggests that he would not leave Rome right away, not until, perhaps, Paul had learned more about his own future (**2:23**).
- d. In his reference to Timothy in v.20, Paul pays him a significant compliment:

"I have no one else like Timothy, who genuinely cares about your welfare."
- e. This short sentence provides two reasons why Timothy is worthy of our emulation.
 - (1) He has for years been a valuable co-worker with Paul, one who has placed himself at the apostle's disposal as his apprentice (Paul compares their relationship to that of father and son) and has shared in his suffering for the cause of the Gospel. In this "*he has proved himself*" (v.22).

(2) Timothy personifies Paul's exhortation to the Philippian Christians in **2:3-4**:

“Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.”

“This is nothing other than a sign that Timothy follows not only Paul but Jesus. Although Christ Jesus enjoyed equality with God, He did not think of such equality as something to be exploited, but adopted the form of a servant. He became a human being, a man, and then obediently went to His odious death on the cross. Those who follow Jesus Christ inevitably learn to cast self-interest and self-comfort and self-focus to one side. Paul knows that as a general rule *“everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ”* (2:21). But Timothy has escaped that narrow snare.”

- D.A. Carson: *Basics for Believers*

3. Next, in vs.25-30, Paul turns his attention to a man named Epaphroditus.
 - a. His name (after the Greek goddess Aphrodite) indicates that he was probably a pagan Gentile who had come to know Christ through the ministry of the Philippian church. No mention is made of his age or occupation. It is likely that he was young and unmarried.
 - b. These verses contain the only mention of his name in the Bible. He was also with Paul in Rome, having been sent there from Philippi, it seems, for three reasons:
 - (1) To find out whether Paul was still alive and, if so, how he was faring;
 - (2) To deliver a letter to Paul from the church leadership;
 - (3) To remain in Rome as Paul's helper / apprentice / co-worker.
 - c. At some point – either during his journey or since his arrival there – Epaphroditus had fallen seriously ill. In fact, he had very nearly died (v.27), and word of his illness had reached home. Though fully recovered, it seems, by the time Paul wrote this epistle, he remained worried about the anxiety those reports must have caused his family and friends in Philippi. He was also probably a little homesick (v.26), so Paul determined to send him home, but not without going to great lengths in expressing his high regard for Epaphroditus and his appreciation for the service he had rendered during his stay in Rome. He wanted to make certain that his home folks understood that the young man's behavior and performance had been exemplary (v.25).

- d. Paul encourages the Philippian Christians to welcome Epaphroditus back with love, honour, and great joy (v.29) for the two reasons which make him also worthy of our emulation.

(1) First, Epaphroditus had *risks his life for the work of Christ* (v.30).

Paul's language suggests that Epaphroditus had suffered sickness which would normally have resulted in death. The nature of his affliction is not mentioned but, in the first century, an illness as simple as a bronchial congestion or an injury as common as an infected wound could be fatal. The long journey from Philippi, whether by land or sea, would have been difficult and dangerous, as all long-distance travel was in those days. It may well have been that Epaphroditus took ill while traveling, but bravely soldiered on to Rome, discharging his duty despite his sickness. He had volunteered for a task which would take him far from his family and the care they would have provided had he remained at home, and did so knowing that it was possible he might never see or even hear from them again.

"It is difficult for most of us to enter into the worldview of the first century, especially regarding matters like communication and medicine. By way of telephone, fax or e-mail we can be in instant communication with people almost anywhere on the globe, and we are so used to the results of medical science that they now cease to amaze us. In our world most people expect to live through even the most dreaded of diseases, not realizing how recent such a worldview is. In the Greco-Roman world people expected to die of disease or illness and were amazed by recovery. And the only way one could find out about a friend from afar was through courier – and then only if someone happened to be going that way."

- Gordon Fee: *Philippians* (The IVP New Testament Commentary series)

(2) By journeying to Rome and serving there, Paul reports, Epaphroditus "*did for me the things you couldn't do because you were far away*" (v.30). In the Greek text Paul uses words more commonly associated with the work of ministers and priests when he speaks of the help Epaphroditus had provided. In **Romans 12:1** Paul described as "*a living sacrifice*" the Christian life so completely transformed and devoted to service on behalf of the Gospel that it actually becomes *sacramental* – a continuous act of worship. Epaphroditus had so offered himself, stepping out of his comfort zone, pressing on, and risking ("*gambling with*" is the literal translation of the Greek) his life and health in the process.

"Epaphroditus was said to have been four things. He was a brother, a fellow-worker, a fellow soldier, and he was a messenger of the Philippian Christians and a minister in their absence to Paul's needs. These things build toward the final statement. Together they are an important summary of what the Christian life should be."

- James M. Boice: *Philippians*

4. In **Philippians 3:17 – 4:1** Paul asks his readers to consider him as a role model. We need look no further than two famous passages of Scripture in which he offers his personal Christian testimony to know the old apostle was and is, indeed, worthy of the emulation of all Christians in all times and places.

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

“To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 2:21)

5. Just as the Bible includes personalities whose character traits are worthy of our emulation, so it includes those whose character traits should be at all costs avoided. Case in point: two ladies in the Philippian church, named Euodia and Syntyche.
- a. A careful reading of **Philippians 4:2-3** reveals three facts about these women:
- (1) At the time Paul was writing this letter, they were at personal odds;
 - (2) Paul knew them – they were apparently members of the church at Philippi;
 - (3) At some point in the past they had each worked alongside him *for the cause of the Gospel*.
- b. That these women were otherwise commendable for the quality of their past Christian service reminds us that even “good” people in the local church can fall into serious disagreement.
- c. That Paul feels compelled to beseech them to find a way to make peace reminds us that even “minor” personal squabbles between members of a congregation, left unchecked, can do serious harm to the local church.
- d. That he calls them out by name, even though he knew that his letter would be read aloud to the Philippian congregation is evidence that Paul regarded their personal disagreement as an issue which could damage the health of the whole church and, accordingly, should be dealt with openly, involving the entire membership. There might have been a time when these two ladies could be counseled privately, but that time had obviously passed. The unnamed elder (Paul calls him his “*yokefellow*”) into whose care this epistle would be placed, is directed by the apostle to “*help these women*” move toward reconciliation.

“Paul is not saying to Euodia and Syntyche, ‘Ladies, on every single point of doctrine and life I expect you to thrash out your differences and arrive at perfect agreement’. For when the verb is used elsewhere, the appeal is broader and deeper. Recall, after all, Paul’s argument at the beginning of Chapter 2, where the same verb appears: ‘*If you have any encouragement from Christ, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being **like-minded**, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose*’ (2:1-2). In other words, Paul is appealing for an attitude that adopts the same basic direction as other believers, the same fundamental aim, the same orientation and priorities – that is, a gospel orientation.”

- Carson: op. cit.

LESSONS

1. “Imitation,” the old saying goes, “is the sincerest form of flattery”, an observation which suggests that one whose behavior or appearance or lifestyle is being mimicked by others should take pride in the fact that he or she has been deemed worthy of emulation. Such an understanding, of course, has no place in the church!
2. But that is NOT to say that no one in the church should be imitated, or that emulation is a “bad” thing. Quite the contrary!
 - a. Every parent here knows, don’t we, that some of the life lessons we have tried to pass along to our children by way of instruction don’t seem to “take”, even as some of the things we wish our children had NOT learned from us show up in their language, their choices and habits, or how they regard others. Where did they learn such things? Why, they learned them at home, watching US, of course!
 - b. In the same way, Christian character can be “caught” as well as – even better than – it can be “taught”. Neither stern lectures nor good advice will be remembered by our kids as consistently as the godly examples we demonstrate by the way we live our lives. Neither the most persuasive sermon ever preached nor the most carefully prepared Sunday School lesson ever taught are as effective as the character of the pastor and the disposition of the teacher. A kind thought cannot compare to a thoughtful act of kindness. The exhortation to serve is less powerful than the example of committed service.
3. Just as we should be wise to emulate the character and behavior of those – like Timothy, Epaphroditus, Paul, and our Lord Himself – whose devotion and commitment to the kingdom of God are worthy examples for the church, we must also be careful to remember that we, too, as children of God, are ourselves called to be worthy of emulation and imitation by our children, our neighbors, our fellow workers, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, *solī Deo Gloria*. Amen.