

The Gambler

Humility, Part 12

Philippians 2:25-30

Several years ago – before there were policies that never specified on issues like this one – a 300 pound pig – he kind you might see at the State Fair – was allowed to travel on a six-hour US Airways flight from Philadelphia to Seattle, and he didn't ride coach either.

Two passengers convinced the airline representative that the pig needed to fly with them because it was a "therapeutic companion pet"—sort of like a seeing-eye dog. They agreed and the pig was permitted to sit with them in the first-class cabin of the plane.

Passengers described the 300-pound pig as “enormous, angry, and noisy.” He took up three empty seats near the front of the plane (and his companions), but the attendants reportedly had difficulty strapping him in: “It became restless after takeoff and sauntered through the airplane.” One passenger said, “He kept oinking, rubbing his nose on people's legs and at their food trays trying to get them to give him food.”

As the plane began landing, the article reports, “The massive pig panicked, running up and down, squealing as he ran through the airplane; some passengers panicked as well, standing on their seats and screaming. It was absolute pandemonium.”

It took four flight attendants to get the pig out of the airplane, and then it escaped upon reaching the terminal but was later re-captured.

When asked to provide some sort of comment or explanation, US Airways responded: “We can confirm that the pig traveled on our airline, and we can confirm that [this has never happened before] and we can confirm that this will never happen again.”¹

What a crazy story . . . and what a plane ride!

The next time you're not too happy with the guy sitting next to you on the plane – just remember it could be a lot worse!

Actually, the reason I want to begin our study today with that rather strange news item is because when I read it, it struck me that that pig happens to be a perfect illustration of pride.

It might be justified as somebody's excuse for a therapeutic traveling companion, but to everybody else, it's unwelcome, disturbing, self-centered and ugly.

In fact, people who think pride isn't causing a problem – and make room for it in their first class cabin – they rarely have any idea what kind of turmoil they create.

Frankly, I want you to remember this story. In fact, the next time you're tempted to let pride ride along with you, keep in mind that it's a lot like a 300 pound pig – it will ultimately ruin your flight through life and make a mess with everybody else around you!

In this sermon series on the subject of humility, the Apostle Paul began *Philippians chapter 2* with the ultimate, divine illustration of humility – the humility and obedience of Jesus Christ.

Paul then encouraged the church to demonstrate the same attitude of self-sacrifice and deference, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation – which is another way of saying that everybody in your generation is demanding their favorite pig be allowed to fly first class . . . and never-you-mind.

Paul went on to introduce us to the humility of Timothy, a man who was passionate in seeking the interests of others instead of his own.

Now, as Paul concludes his focus on the subject of humility, he closes with yet another example of humility by giving us a brief look at a man you may never have heard of . . . a man who shows up here in Paul's letter to the Philippians . . . and nowhere else.

1. His Reputation

The first thing Paul highlights for us is this man's godly reputation.

Notice *Philippians 2:25*. ***But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus.***

Stop for just a moment.

We discover later, in *chapter 4* (verse 18) that Epaphroditus was a part of the church body in Philippi. In fact, he was the trusted member who was given a large financial gift to be used by Paul to pay his expenses while under house arrest in Rome.

Epaphroditus will end up carrying that gift to Paul; and he will also end up carrying back to Philippi this letter we're studying – a letter that actually serves as Paul's thank you to the church in Philippi.ⁱⁱ

And here Paul describes the messenger boy. He uses several terms that describe the kind of godly reputation for which he was known.

Can I say this? You're about to meet a man who wasn't the kind of man to bring a pig on the plane – he was the kind of man who would give up his seat on the plane, for someone else in need.

Notice the first term – *verse 25* – where Paul calls Epaphroditus, "***my brother***".

This kind of comradery was unknown in Paul's world . . . this would have been striking to a first century audience.

The world of Paul was clearly divided between Greeks and Romans, Jews and Gentiles. You had citizens and you had slaves; you had aristocrats and you had peasants. There was nothing in Paul's world of brotherhood.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here's Paul – a thoroughbred Jew . . . Timothy, we learned in our last study – Paul's son in the faith – was a mixed breed – half-Jew, half-Gentile; and Epaphroditus didn't have a drop of Jewish blood in his veins – he was thoroughly Gentile – in fact, so pagan was the family from which he came, he was named Epaphroditus in honor of Aphrodite, the goddess of passion and pleasure.

At one point in his life, as an unconverted, proud Pharisee, the Apostle Paul would have referred to Epaphroditus as a Gentile dog.^{iv}

Now – he's my brother!

You see, into this world comes the gospel of Jesus Christ and you have men and women of every race and every background and every strata of society converted and transformed and one of the revolutionary evidences is that without any sort of external policy or cultural pressure . . . the believer intuitively understands that we, in the faith, are family.

Paul considers himself a brother to a converted Gentile with a pagan past . . . and a somewhat awkward name.

Epaphroditus . . . is my brother . . . because of the gospel and our common faith in Christ.

Paul goes even further – notice next, Epaphroditus is ***my brother, and fellow worker***.

The term is *sunergos* (συνεργος), which gives us our word, synergy.^v

Not only was there a common bond in the gospel, they share a common mission.

Epaphroditus wasn't just bringing money to Paul – he was joining Paul in the work of the gospel.

Paul loves using this word *sunergos* to refer to partners in ministry.

In fact, of the thirteen times it appears in the New Testament, all of them, except for one, are found in Paul's letters. This term has the idea of an affectionate partnership, not some impersonal, official relationship.^{vi}

By the way, Paul will actually use this word to describe all believers as ***fellow workers with God*** (1 Corinthians 3:9) – we are working in synergy with God.

Imagine we are synergistically effective as we serve together through the fellow synergy of the Holy Spirit. Our combined efforts in the gospel are in synergistic harmony with God Himself.

It isn't just you and it isn't just me and it isn't just you and me together, but all of us working together with God.

Dr. Harry Ironsides, the former pastor of Moody Church once saw a church sign – which, by the way can be very interesting to read. I subscribe to a church leader's magazine that has a picture of what they call the Sign of the Week. Some of them are really interesting:

One church sign read: If evolution is true, why do mothers still only have two hands?

Another church sign sent a mixed message – it read, "We love hurting people". This isn't quite what they wanted to say.

Another sign on a church lawn read: God shows no favoritism but this sign guy does – Go Cubs

Another church sign read, “Having trouble sleeping? We have sermons – come listen to one.”

I didn’t like that one.

Another read, “Don’t criticize your wife’s judgment – look who she married.”

I didn’t like that one either.

One rural church sign read: Welcome: Whoever stole our church air conditioners, you’ll need them where you’re going.

But, welcome.

Back to Dr. Harry Ironside – he was concerned about the church focusing only on itself . . . without any real desire to reach the lost or even defend their faith – but simply satisfied by themselves. In front of their meeting place he noticed that they’d hung up a sign that read: Jesus Only. A few days later, Ironside wrote, the wind blew away the first few letters so that it now read “Us Only.”^{vii}

It’s just us . . . and it’s all about us only.

Sounds like a pig on a plane to me.

If the church at Philippi had only cared about themselves, they would have never cared to send money to the Apostle Paul who at this very moment is in desperate need of funding and genuine partnership in the ministry.

And Paul effectively says, “Epaphroditus, my brother and my fellow-worker has brought me both.”

Finally, Paul refers to this man in *verse 25* as his *fellow soldier*.

The word he uses makes it clear that Epaphroditus not only shares with Paul a common bond and a common mission, but they also share common courage.

He shows up at Rome, having risked his life by carrying quite a bit of money, and now identifies publically with a man incarcerated . . . facing a capital crime.

Epaphroditus literally places himself directly in the line of fire.^{viii}

In fact, the word Paul uses here for soldier, is the same word to describe the Roman soldiers to whom he happens to be chained at the wrist; and it’s this same word Paul uses for Epaphroditus (stratiotes; στρατιωτης) – fellow soldier.

As if to say, “I am bound to these Roman soldiers by chains of iron, but I praise God that I’m bound to a loyal, faithful soldier by chains of gospel mission and family love.”

Several New Testament scholars speculate - and I would throw my hat in the ring with them – that the Apostle Paul is actually anticipating some criticism back in Philippi thinking that perhaps Epaphroditus cut short his mission and quit his task and abandoned Paul so that he could retreat home to safety.^{ix}

I mean it just got too hot for him in Rome.

Hey, did you hear Epaphroditus is back!

So soon?

Yea!

I wonder why?

He probably couldn’t take it

I guess he quit.

Who would have thought?!

You need to understand that these terms are carefully selected by Paul to support the fact that Epaphroditus has returned, at Paul’s command – Paul is effectively defending the reputation of Epaphroditus.

Epaphroditus wasn’t lazy . . . he wasn’t difficult . . . he didn’t quit, no;

he’s my brother,

my fellow worker

my fellow soldier.

Oh, and by the way – Paul adds – he was everything you sent him to be for me – notice not only his reputation, but his responsibilities.

2. His Responsibilities:

Notice verse 25b. He was also your messenger.

The word messenger is from apostle (αποστολος) and Paul uses it, not to suggest that Epaphroditus is officially one of the commissioned apostles by our Lord; the word is used more broadly at times to refer to someone sent as an envoy – sent on a special commission (Acts 14:14; 2 Corinthians 8:23).^x

Paul could have used any number of terms to denote Epaphroditus’ faithful service – but Paul used *apostolos* to add even more gravity to the faithful character of this man.

Paul implicitly ranks Epaphroditus with himself.^{xi}

In other words, don’t start throwing mud at him . . . treat him like you would treat a special envoy.

Paul adds another word, just in case they’re a little slow back at the church in Philippi when the letter is read in the assembly – notice – *your messenger and minister to my needs*.

Paul uses what William Barclay calls a magnificent word – a word that the Philippians would have immediately understood.

The word *minister* – *leitourgos* (λειτουργος) was a person in the ancient days of the Greek city-states who loved their city so much that at their own expense, they supported great civic events – they might have supported their embassy – or paid for the training of their Olympic champions – or built a warship and paid their sailors. These men were such incredible benefactors of their city, they were known as *leitourgoi* – they were the ministers.^{xii}

Were they living today in our culture, they would be honored by the Kennedy Center for Lifetime Achievement, or given an honorary doctorate from some University, or a medal from Congress; they would have had an interstate or boulevard named after them, or a battleship for that matter; they would own a key to the city.

These were the revered ministers – the *leitourgoi* – of their generation.

Paul is effectively saying, the man who returns with this letter to you happens to be a choice minister of God's grace to my needs.

Okay, all that aside . . . there's still this elephant in the room – why did Epaphroditus leave Paul and return home?

3. His Return

Look at verse 26. Because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard he was sick.

He left because he got sick. Well, we all get sick, Paul . . . how sick was he?

Notice verse 27. For indeed he was sick to the point of death. You could woodenly translate this – he was next door neighbor to death. We might say, “He was at death's door”^{xiii}

In other words, he didn't just pick up a little cold here in Rome . . . he didn't just have some sort of allergic reaction to homemade Italian spaghetti.

Maybe you've traveled to another country and eaten the food and gotten sick . . . we understand that – maybe Epaphroditus wasn't careful and he drank the water.

But he was evidently sick long enough for the news to travel back to Philippi and then back again to Rome – which would have taken at least 3-4 months.^{xiv}

And it greatly distressed Epaphroditus because he didn't want them to worry about him.

By the way, that's worth pondering. That's rare humility.

He was distressed that he might have caused them distress.^{xv}

Not like the pig of pride that doesn't really care how anybody else feels . . . I'm going to run up and down and make people uneasy and interrupt whomever I want and have my way with whatever I want . . . and make some noise while I'm at it.

But again, lest anybody think Epaphroditus is using some sickness to bail out on Paul, Paul repeats himself.

Look down at ***verse 30*** where Paul again writes – ***he came close to death for the work of Christ – literally, because of the work of Christ.***

This wasn't a cold . . . this wasn't a spell of fatigue; Epaphroditus literally “had one foot in the grave.”

In fact, Paul assumed he would die. How do we know that? Notice back at ***verse 27. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him.***

I mean, the only reason he's alive is because God wanted him alive. We'd already picked out the casket and his favorite hymns.

But he recovered!

Paul is clearly communicating that this wasn't a matter of Epaphroditus responding to the right medication; or plenty of rest; no, he had been spared death by the merciful intervention of God.^{xvi}

The focus is God-centered – there is no apostolic miracle of healing; no prayer of faith; no gathering of the elders; no desperate intercession by the church.^{xvii}

No – he was going to die – ***but God!***

Let me pull over for just a moment to comment here that this event is one more evidence that Paul is fading in his temporary apostolic power to indiscriminately heal. The miraculous power of these early apostles which validated the gospel (Hebrews 2:4) – but as the scriptures are being written, “*the era of miraculous apostolic sign gifts is nearly over.*”^{xviii}

Paul not only watches Epaphroditus nearly die, but he'll tell Timothy later on in his last letter that he had to leave another ministry partner by the name of Trophimus behind in the town of Miletus because he had become sick (***2 Timothy 4:20***).

Why not just heal him? Does he lack faith?

Not at all . . . in fact, Paul doesn't seem embarrassed in the slightest by the fact that all he can do is pray . . . just like you and me today; Paul doesn't seem to feel the need to explain why his amazing power to heal is evidently no longer active, or needed to validate the gospel of Christ.

In fact, the way Paul writes here is clearly intended to obscure any and all human action from view. We're not even told Paul prayed – although we can be sure he did. Only God's merciful action is seen . . . God had mercy on him.^{xix}

And not only on Epaphroditus – notice further in **verse 27b – but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow.**

You could paraphrase this to read, “so that I would not have wave upon wave of grief”.^{xx}

Thank you for writing with this kind of transparency, Paul.

I thought spiritual people didn't talk about sorrow upon sorrow and wave upon wave of grief.

Paul so emotionally and transparently opens his heart to the Philippians that he says something many Christians would think unspiritual – or not fit for the Prayer chain – or from the pulpit.

If Epaphroditus dies, it will bring me such incredible sorrow – it will be one wave after another of grief in my heart.

But I thought “to live is Christ and to die is gain?” right? Paul said that, didn't he?

He did.

He also said, with perfect spiritual balance and wisdom – We sorrow, yet not as those without hope – 1 Thessalonians 2:14.

We have hope in knowing the deceased believer would never vote to come back. We know where they are . . . and we sorrow that they've left us and we can't wait to go to them.

In fact, because of the gospel, we understand that we haven't lost them – we've just temporarily lost contact with them.

And one day our tears of sorrow will be forever dried away.

But for now – Paul writes, “I'm praising God that sorrow wasn't increased – God had mercy to extend the life of my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier.”

4. His Reward

Notice verse 28. Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. 29. Receive him then in the Lord with all joy.

You get the impression that Paul wants to make sure they receive Epaphroditus home without any complaint or suspicion or doubt.

In other words, give him a rich reward.

As I read and reread this text, it seems to me that Paul sort of pulls back the curtain on all our future glory – when every believer comes home.

Welcome Epaphroditus home ***with all joy.***

In other words, don't hold back . . . celebrate his homecoming, like the prodigal was welcomed back home as well.

Imperfect, yet belonging to the Father – welcomed home with all joy!

Welcome him . . . and honor him – notice further, ***and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.***

In other words, you couldn't come and join me as a church family, but Epaphroditus could; and in his coming I received all I needed.

But don't miss the danger here . . . Epaphroditus ***risked his life*** Paul writes, to come to me.

The word Paul uses here for ***risking his life*** was a word that had been used for centuries. It was found in one papyri scroll that referred to someone risking their life in order to represent a friend in a court case before the emperor. It was used later of merchants who risked their lives to make their fortunes; it was also used of a gladiator in the arena who risked his life in the arena.^{xxi}

These were the parabolani – the gamblers. That's the root word Paul uses here.

In A.D. 252, a plague broke out in Carthage. The unbelievers were terrified and fled – leaving behind their own sick and dying family members. Cyprian, the church leader in Carthage gathered his congregation together and they agreed to bury the dead and nurse the sick – at the risk of their own lives. As a result, they rescued untold numbers of people from death and they saved the city from desolation.^{xxii}

They were called the parabolani – a term which now granted great honor to those with reckless courage literally willing to throw their lives away to serve another.

Paul is giving Epaphroditus the highest commendation – he is one of the parabolani – he is one who gambled his life for the sake of the gospel.

He risked everything for Christ.

No wonder Paul writes here in *verse 29, hold men like him in high regard* . . . here's your model – of courage and humility.

The world today is quick to honor the beautiful, the talented, the wealthy, the powerful . . . not that they don't deserve honor for something worthwhile.

But as Paul comes to the end of his discussion and illustrations on the subject of humility – it's interesting that he ends it by talking about honoring those who demonstrate humility.

People who might never have made it into the spotlight . . . in fact, outside of this little letter, we would have never known what we now know of Epaphroditus.

Hidden away . . . obscure . . . unnoticed – but a rare treasure nonetheless.

Sometime ago I clipped an article from a journal that told of a man in Ohio who was digging through his grandfather's attic. He unearthed a soot-covered cardboard box containing 100 year old baseball cards. The collection was found in nearly pristine condition, still wrapped and bundled in twine – part of a promotional deal with a candy company who wanted his grandfather's business as the local butcher in town. Inside the collection were card of Cy Young, Honus Wagner and Ty Cobb. That collection of baseball cards was valued at \$3 million dollars.^{xxiii}

I wonder which we might be more like: a pig on a plane . . . or a rare baseball card in an attic.

A pig? Pushy, noisy, disruptive, greedy, unhelpful, unproductive, self-serving.

Or a rare card collection – a treasure waiting to be seen for what it's worth – great value that might never be revealed until some future date.

But in the meantime, someone you hate to lose . . . someone you love to follow . . . someone faithful in serving.

Robert Murray McCheyne, a pastor whose life marked so many since his passing in the early 1800's at the age of 30, once wrote in his journal words that describe Epaphroditus . . . and by the grace of God – you and me.

He wrote, Live so as to be missed.

Live so as to be missed.

How do you do that?

- By becoming a brother or sister to those in this family around you.
- By becoming a fellow laborer in our common mission and a fellow soldier with common courage to represent Christ and His gospel.
- By becoming a messenger boy whose great delight is in serving someone; talking about someone else; living for someone else.
- By risking all that you are – for all that Christ is – for all that Christ's church can become.

That is, in a word, humility . . . humility . . . and humility guarantees that you will be living so as to be missed.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/17/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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iii James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians* (Baker, 2000), p. 158

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v Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 554

vi John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 203

vii Warren W. Wiersbe, *Philippians: Be Joyful* (Victor Books, 1978), p. 76

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- xv MacArthur, p. 205
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- xx Hansen, p. 206
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