

Joyful Ministry

Philippians 2:19-30

The command of Philippians 2 is in v. 5 ***“Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus.”*** We are to embrace the mindset of Jesus, who though He was fully God humbled himself to the point of taking on a fully human body and becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross. This is the model for our service and our obedience as followers of Jesus. It is a joyful obedience, just as Jesus gave himself up “for the joy set before him.”

Last week we saw the instruction to ***“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”*** We are not to work FOR our salvation but to work OUT our salvation. Because we are saved, we should live worthy of that salvation.

Today Paul gives two examples of gospel workers who have the mind of Christ, who joyfully obeyed the Lord and joyfully served the church at Philippi. In v. 29 Paul tells the church to ***“honor such men.”*** We want to be encouraged by their example, to learn from them just as we learn from Christ and from Paul.

So we will look at **Timothy and Epaphroditus** and see two characteristics of joyful ministry. Then we will see how these characteristics were very much embodied in a hero of the Protestant Reformation – Martin Luther. As we approach the 500th Anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses just one week from tomorrow it is a fitting time to remember the bold and faithful gospel workers who led the way – to “honor such men” and follow their example as they were following the example of Christ.

As Paul writes about Timothy and Epaphroditus, he points out ***two characteristics of these leaders***: genuine concern and faithful service. Part of Paul’s purpose in writing to the church in Philippi, maybe his main reason, is to say thank you to this generous church for the gift they sent with Epaphroditus. Remember, prisoners in the first century were not guaranteed any food or other comforts. They depended entirely on what friends would send them. So the financial gift from Philippi was literally what was keeping Paul alive as he wrote. And we’ll see that Epaphroditus brought it at great personal risk to his own life.

First Paul writes about Timothy in v. 20 – ***“I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.”*** Timothy was sincerely compassionate. Just as Paul prayed that the church in Philippi would have an abounding love – that is what Paul appreciated in Timothy. His character and integrity were proven – v. 22 ***“You know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.”*** His quality was tested by service and shown to be pure.

It was not mixed or polluted, which Paul warned against in the section before this – stains that come when people grumble about their situation or dispute against their leaders. There was none of that from Timothy, who was supportive and respectful of Paul like a son with his father. Epaphroditus also showed this kind of authentic concern – v. 26 ***“he has been longing for you all.”***

There are two sides to this genuine concern in these two gospel workers. First, they were concerned **for the glory of Christ** and then for the people of God. In v. 21 Paul contrasts Timothy to other preachers of their day – *“they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.”* Many preachers – then and now – preach for the glory of their own name and the advance of their own agenda. But not Timothy – he, like Paul, was devoted to the glory of the Risen Christ above all things and placed his own interests below those of Christ. The natural result of this primary concern for Christ was a sincere love for the body of Christ.

You can see that **concern for God’s people** throughout this passage – a sincere love with very practical applications. Timothy was with Paul but was genuinely interested in how the Philippian believers were doing. Epaphroditus *“has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard he was ill.”* But God spared his life so that Paul could rejoice and the Philippians, too, could rejoice to be reunited with their faithful messenger.

This is the test for all of us. **Are we GENUINELY concerned?** When we express interest in things at church is it real or are we often faking it? When you serve – and I know we have so many hard working volunteers – when you serve, is your focus on the glory of Christ or do you secretly want credit for yourself? Trust me, I struggle with this probably more than any of you, knowing that my motives are so often mixed with pride and self-interest.

May we crucify any hint of selfish ambition and vain conceit and in humility consider others better than ourselves and the glory of Christ our ultimate concern. May Jesus’ glory be our all consuming passion – may we truly **REJOICE in HIM**.

And may that love for the Lord overflow in love for His people. The two things cannot be separated. If we genuinely love Jesus, we will naturally love His bride. If we love the Father, we will love His children. You can see in this passage that this means to **rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn**.

When Epaphroditus heard that Paul needed funding, he volunteered for the long and dangerous journey from Philippi to Rome – roughly 800 miles across both land and sea. V. 30 says *“he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”*

So these two gospel workers model for us both genuine concern and **faithful service**. The concern was both for the glory of Christ and for the people of God. The service also had two important applications: it was based on the word of God and it was joyfully sacrificial.

They faithfully served in a ministry that was based on the word of God – as Paul says in v. 22 that Timothy *“served with me in the gospel,”* and in v. 25 calls Epaphroditus *“my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier and your messenger and minister to my need.”* Their ministry was laser focused on proclaiming the Word of God and, like Paul, it was a joyful ministry – even in the face of risk, suffering and sacrifice.

The tone of **joy runs through this whole passage**, as it does the whole book of Philippians. V. 17 and 18 are Paul’s encouragement that even if he gives his life as a sacrificial offering they should rejoice with him as he rejoices with them. Paul wants to send Timothy, v. 19, to be cheered by news from Philippi. Then in v. 28 he says, *“I am eager to send” Epaphroditus “that you may*

rejoice at seeing him again,” and in v. 30 he instructs them, *“Receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men.”*

Here are two examples of men who worked with Paul in joyful ministry. They showed genuine concern for the glory of Christ and for the people of God. They were bold, diligent, faithful Gospel workers who embraced the risk and endured the sacrifices the Lord called them to – with joy, just as Paul did.

As we see that spirit in one another, may we follow Paul’s direction here to *“honor such men and women.”* We should celebrate when we see genuine concern and faithful service. We should encourage and build one another up when we see this in each other. “Thank you for your sincere compassion, thank you for your diligent ministry! I see the mind of Christ in you and I appreciate your desire to serve for HIS sake!

Over the last two months *we have observed that spirit all over Oakwood.* The youth ministry team – both the adult leaders and all the students, have this contagious spirit of hospitality and welcome. The deacons have this attitude of availability and willingness to work to support the ministry that is a huge blessing to us their fellow workers. The ministry leaders have an energetic desire to labor together for the harvest – which is so evident in our upcoming Fall Fest on Saturday. The men and women’s ministry teams have been so diligent to get groups and events going to encourage and challenge our men and women. The elders have a sincere commitment to prayer, fueled by their deep faith in Christ and passion for His glory in all things.

Praise the Lord for this work He is doing among us!

Now I’d like to encourage us through the story of Martin Luther. May we honor this great hero of the faith by remembering his genuine concern and faithful service and by following his example to continually reform the church to better reflect the holiness and majesty of our great God and Savior – Jesus Christ!

As a quick disclaimer – most of my quotes are drawn from John Piper’s fantastic little book, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*. I consulted a few other books, but drew most heavily from Piper, so if you are interested to dig a little deeper, by all means get a hold of that book.

Luther was born in 1483 to a copper miner in Germany. These were truly medieval times – which doesn’t mean elaborate shows with horses and knights and eating without forks – it means violence, immorality, the black plague, corrupt local lords, no electricity, no running water, no sewer system and – kids, believe it or not – no internet.

As a young man Luther set out to study law and earned his bachelors degree at age 19 and his Masters by age 21. Like nearly everyone in his day, he was raised Catholic and taught a reverence for the saints. So it was natural for him at the age of 22 to cry out to Saint Anne – the patron saint of miners like his father - when he found himself in a ferocious thunderstorm and feared for his life. *“Help me, St. Anne; I will become a monk.”*

Surviving the storm, Luther kept his vow and became an Augustinian friar. The young lawyer now turned his attention to philosophy and reflection. His fear in the thunderstorm was largely the result of his lack of assurance of salvation related to God. Luther had a deep and holy

reverence for God and, like many in his day, a trembling terror at the likelihood that he would spend forever and forever in the fiery torments of hell.

“In the monastery I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me.... For I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works.” (84)

Luther actually wore out his confessor priest with his constant confessions.

“I tried as hard as I could to keep the Rule. I used to be contrite, and make a list of my sins. I confessed them again and again. I scrupulously carried out the penances which were allotted to me. And yet my conscience kept nagging.

It kept telling me: ‘You fell short there.’ ‘You were not sorry enough.’ ‘You left that sin off your list.’ I was trying to cure the doubts and scruples of the conscience with human remedies and traditions of men. The more I tried these remedies, the more troubled and uneasy my conscience grew.” (Chadwick 45)

Can anyone here relate to these feelings? I know I can as I think about growing up in church – knowing God was holy and righteous and Almighty and I was sinful and weak and constantly falling short of His glory. Luther summed it up like this:

“If I could believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy.” (20)

After around five years as a monk, Luther was chosen to travel to Rome to represent the University of Wittenberg. He had some official duties to take care of for the month he was there, but in every minute of his free time Luther visited every sacred shrine, performed every act of piety over every relic and artifact he could. It was well established in those days that you could reduce your time in purgatory – or get your deceased loved ones OUT of purgatory – by doing this kind of thing. The holier the relic, the more time you could shave off. They had it down to the year – the bones of this saint are worth 50 years; all of the bones and relics in one collection could amount to 1,497 years if prayed over with sincere faith.

So Luther spent his month in Rome, culminating in the 28 stairs moved from Jerusalem to Rome, supposedly from where Pilate stood in judgment over Jesus. It was believed that you could pray the Our Father on every step, making your way up on your knees, and that each of these prayers, said in this holy place could release someone from purgatory immediately! Luther was excited to experience these holy stairs, disappointed only that his parents were still living so he could not serve them through his devotion.

When he reached the top, having completed every medieval Catholic act of piety and devotion he stood up and in the very place where Pilate said, “What is truth,” Martin Luther said, ***“Who knows whether it is so?”*** He had done everything he could and still felt no certainty that his efforts had sufficed for anything. “Who knows whether it is so?” (*Here I Stand*, Bainton p. 38)

“I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I.” (Bainton p. 34)

Dr. Staupitz was Luther's mentor. Finally he had enough of this agonizing and had Luther switch from teaching philosophy to teaching the Bible. So Luther spent five years teaching through the Psalms, Romans and Galatians. The truth of the gospel began to dawn on him like the rising sun on one who has his whole life been in darkness. After five years of teaching Bible he wrote:

"I have indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans... I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' ... God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience... Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know that St. Paul wanted.

"At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live,'

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scriptures showed itself to me.

"Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory.... And I extolled the sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise." (92)

Look at these words that changed Luther and then changed the world.

- **"He who through faith is righteous shall live." Rom. 1:17**

The righteousness of God that was revealed from heaven in Jesus Christ was ***not the wrath of God*** to bring condemnation upon men but was ***the grace of God***, giving all who believe in Jesus the free gift of HIS righteousness. This was not something you could earn or work for or discipline yourself enough to deserve – it was entirely a gift of grace, received by faith alone.

Here was the core of Luther's theology of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. And suddenly, he was FREE from the burden of the Law and filled with the joy he had been reading about in St Augustine but had never yet experienced for himself – what Augustine called a trade of fruitless joys – mere trifles of the flesh – for God, the One Sovereign, Supreme Joy.

It is unclear exactly when this gospel light turned on in Luther's heart and mind. He was certainly teaching it actively by 1517 and probably for a few years before that. And so on October 31, 1517, this 34 year old German professor of the Bible wrote up **95 points of discussion** that he wanted to dialogue on with his ministry peers. So he went to the church in Wittenberg and nailed his 95 theses to the door.

Nowhere in the 95 theses does it mention justification by faith alone. The issue Luther wanted to address was the sale of indulgences to pay for renovations to the famous St. Peter's Church in Rome. ***"The Pope has wealth far beyond all other men – why does he not build St Peter's Church with his own money instead of the money of poor Christians?"*** (Chadwick 43).

Thesis 45 reads: ***"Christians should be taught that he who sees someone needy but looks past him, and buys an indulgence instead, receives not the pope's remission but God's wrath."*** (80)

That was the driving impulse behind the 95 Theses. But the bigger question underneath that concern was that of **AUTHORITY**. And *that* is what got Luther into trouble. See, Luther had studied the history of Indulgences and found there was no basis for selling the forgiveness of sin in the Bible. In fact, the Bible made it clear that the corrupt system of collecting the Indulgences was actually endangering the souls of people it was supposedly helping – giving them a false sense of security; promising years off of purgatory while damning them to an eternity in hell. So he questioned the practice. In so doing, a young German monk was questioning the Pope himself, for the authority to sell indulgences rested securely and solely on the authority of the Pope. So Luther was ordered to retract.

This is what prompted his famous stand before Charles V at the Diet of Worms when he stood trembling but immovable: ***"Unless I am proved wrong by Scriptures or by evident reason, then my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot retract and I will not retract. To go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me. Amen."*** (Chadwick 56).

Here was Luther's genuine concern for the glory of Christ and the honor due to the Word of God as the ultimate authority, not any human whatever his title or power. Before the controversy erupted, Luther's mentor Dr Staupitz affirmed Luther's developing theology (for it was, after all, very Augustinian and that was their order):

"I recall that at the beginning of my cause Dr. Staupitz, who was then a man of great importance and vicar of the Augustinian Order, said to me: 'It pleases me that the doctrine which you preach ascribes the glory and everything to God alone and nothing to man.'" (p. 24)

Yes, Luther was a man of **genuine concern**. There were no pretenses or facades with him. He was forthright and direct, even to a fault. Just as Paul called Epaphroditus a "fellow worker and fellow soldier," Luther was a true warrior for the authority of the Bible and the glory of Christ alone.

Remember the story of **John Hus** who lived 100 years before Luther? As he was being bound to the stake at which he would be burned, us prophesied: ***"You now roast a goose," for the name Hus means goose, "But after 100 years you will hear a swan sing; him you will have to tolerate."*** Luther had come to study and appreciate the teachings of John Hus and the Hussites of nearby Bohemia.

Four years after the 95 Theses, following the Diet of Worms, Luther was officially excommunicated from the Catholic Church and became an enemy of the Holy Roman Empire, under the ban of Charles V – which allowed anyone to kill Luther without consequence. Luther's response:

"If anyone despise my fraternal warning, I am free from his blood in the last judgment. It is better that I should die a thousand times than that I should retract one syllable of the

condemned articles. And as they excommunicated me for the sacrilege of heresy, so I excommunicate them in the name of the sacred truth of God. Christ will judge whose excommunication will stand. Amen. (Bainton 126)

With the break now complete Luther dropped his reservations and fully aligned himself with Hus:

“I said that the Council of Constance condemned some propositions of Huss that were truly Christian. I retract. All his propositions were Christian, and in condemning him the Pope has condemned the Gospel.” (Chadwick, *The Reformation*, 55)

Yes, Luther was genuine. And his primary concern was the glory of God. Here was his prayer as he prepared to preach: ***“Dear Lord God, I want to preach so that you are glorified. I want to speak of you, praise you, praise your name. Although I probably cannot make it turn out well, won’t you make it turn out well?”*** (86)

One of Luther’s chief opponents was Erasmus – a leader in the Renaissance and a humanist who foreshadowed the leaders of the Enlightenment. Ironically, it was Erasmus who completed his translation of the Greek New Testament in 1516 as part of his commitment to expanding human learning and dialogue and this resource is what allowed Luther to study the original text of Romans 1 and later to translate the entire Bible into German for the common man. Erasmus wrote a popular book called *the Freedom of the will*, promoting the ability of man to please God through his own efforts. Luther responded with a book called *The Bondage of the Will* in which he wrote:

“Man cannot by his own power purify his heart and bring forth godly gifts, such as true repentance for sins, a true, as over against an artificial, fear of God, true faith, sincere love...” (109)

“I condemn and reject as nothing but error all doctrines which exalt our ‘free will’ as being directly opposed to this mediation and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. For since, apart from Christ, sin and death are our masters and the devil is our god and prince, there can be no strength or power, no wit or wisdom, by which we can fit or fashion ourselves for righteousness and life.” (110)

Luther would not give any credit for salvation to man, reserving all glory for God alone. This was **the heart of the Reformation** – salvation is purely a gift of God’s grace received by faith ALONE in Christ ALONE. We add NOTHING to the finished work of Christ.

He was not only concerned for the glory of Christ alone but also **for the people of God**. He was a full time professor of theology, but in addition to that he preached two different sermons every Sunday plus one more during the week – a total of more than 3,000 sermons in his lifetime. One biographer described his incredible work ethic: ***“Never a weekend off – he knows all about that. Never even a weekday off. Never any respite at all from preaching, teaching, private study, production, writing, counseling.”*** (87)

He spoke at and led conferences of pastors. He was the catalyst and leader of the entire Reformation which quickly spread across all of Europe and England. He wrote well over 100 documents each year giving guidance and structure to the development of the church. He formulated an elaborate catechism for children and provided training and direction for pastors

and leaders all over Europe. And a core teaching was **the priesthood of all believers** – that priests and bishops were not at a higher plane but that all believers were equal before God. In addition to all of his church work, Luther married an ex-nun – Katie – and they had six children, though one died before her first birthday.

So Luther not only embodied genuine concern and also **faithful service**. He exhorted his fellow pastors:

“Some pastors and preachers are lazy and do no good. They do not pray; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture.... The call is: watch, study, attend to reading. In truth you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well...

the devil... the world... and our flesh are raging and raving against us. Therefore, dear sirs and brothers, pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent.... This evil, shameful time is not the season for being lazy, for sleeping and snoring.” (101)

Luther’s ministry was firmly based on Scripture – convinced that the Word of God had to take precedence over the word of men. When Rome responded to the 95 Theses, a Bishop wrote to Luther:

“He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and the pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.” (77)

At first Luther – still a low level Augustinian monk – remained respectful of the pope, though he managed not to recant anything he had written. But four years after the 95 Theses at the Diet of Worms Luther’s break with Rome was complete when he said, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

Luther wrote about Ps. 119 ***“In this psalm David always says that he will speak, think, talk, hear, read, day and night and constantly – but about nothing else than God’s Word and Commandments. For God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word.”*** (78)

The EXTERNAL Word: the objective, established, unchanging declaration of God.

“The apostles themselves considered it necessary to put the New Testament into Greek and bind it fast to that language, doubtless to preserve it for us safe and sound as in a sacred ark.

For they foresaw all that was to come and now has come to pass, and knew that if it were contained only in one’s head, wild and fearful disorder and confusion, and many various interpretations, fancies and doctrines would arise in the Church, which could be prevented and from which the plain man could be protected only by committing the New Testament to writing and language.” (82)

Sola Scriptura. Scripture alone is the authority. **This was the spark that set all of Europe on fire.** This was the catalyst for a total cultural upheaval. There is no other authority above or alongside the Word of God – not human traditions, human leaders, human experiences or human reason –

Scripture alone. Because of this, Luther gave his life to the study of God's Word in the original Greek and Hebrew. He said:

- ***"The Bible is a remarkable fountain: the more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst."*** (96)

He viewed Bible study as a labor of love – and he knew it was hard work. He compared it to Moses in the wilderness, beating on the rock so that the water of life could pour from it. That was how he reached his breakthrough with the gospel – by studying the Psalms and the apostle Paul. He said, ***"I beat upon Paul to understand what St. Paul wanted."*** He studied and analyzed and meditated on Romans 1:16-17 until the meaning flooded forth like a sudden spring in the desert. Studying the Proverbs he wrote: ***"Solomon the preacher is giving me a hard time, as though he begrudged anyone lecturing on him. But he must yield."*** (96)

May we all be so diligent in our studies that we beat upon God's Word, working and studying and praying to the point that the text yields its meaning to us and gives water for our soul from the very mouth of God.

Luther's service was based on the firm foundation of God's Word and he joyfully endured all kinds of **sacrificial suffering** for the sake of the true church of Christ.

"For as soon as God's Word becomes known through you the devil will afflict you, will make a real [theological] doctor of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word."

For I myself... owe my papists many thanks for so beating, pressing, and frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to a goal I should never have reached." (104)

Luther saw his persecutions and sufferings as part of his growth in understanding and teaching the truth – and he thanked his enemies for strengthening him in this way.

In addition to the political strain and constant threats, in addition to the pressure of leading not only a church but a growing and amorphous movement, Luther constantly battled ill health. Kidney stones, ear infections, constant buzzing in his ears, chronic constipation and ferocious hemorrhoids. Listen to the misery he endured:

"For more than a week I have been thrown back and forth in death and Hell; my whole body feels beaten, my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely, driven about on the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God. But because of the intercession of the faithful, God began to take mercy on me and tore my soul from the depths of Hell." (105)

Even this giant of the faith – this hero of the Gospel – struggled with emotional and spiritual despair. All of you who struggle with discouragement and losing hope, Listen:

"I sit here at ease, hardened and unfeeling – alas! Praying little, grieving little for the Church of God, burning rather in the fierce fires of my untamed flesh. It comes to this: I should be afire in the spirit; in reality I am afire in the flesh, with lust, laziness, idleness, sleepiness..."

For the last eight days I have written nothing, nor prayed nor studied, partly from self-indulgence, partly from other [physical] vexations... I really cannot stand it any longer... Pray for me, I beg you, for in my seclusion here I am submerged in sins. (105)

Luther knew his life and ministry depended entirely on the grace and power of God to sustain him. May we all, like Luther, throw ourselves on the mercies of God as he did with his dying words: ***“We are beggars. This is true.”*** (111) Life is all about God – it is not about us. Our ministry is all about God’s Word – understanding it and proclaiming it.

Hear this final encouragement from Martin Luther to study God’s Word above all other books and writings:

“The writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time, in order that through them we may be led to the Holy Scriptures. As it is, however, we read them only to be absorbed in them and never come to the Scriptures.

We are like men who study the sign-posts and never travel the road. The dear fathers wished by their writing, to lead us to the Scriptures, but we so use them as to be led away from the Scriptures, though the Scriptures alone are our vineyard in which we ought all to work and toil.” (38)

May we not just study the sign-posts and never travel the road. May we be students of God’s Word like Luther so that we can be preachers of God’s Word like Luther. May we be aflame with Luther’s conviction that the Bible alone is the authority over all things and may our hearts and lives be devoted to proclaiming the Gospel of the finished work of Jesus Christ!

Like Timothy and Epaphroditus, Luther was a servant of Christ who lived a life of genuine concern and faithful service. He devoted himself to the ministry of the Word of God – the ministry of the Gospel – to bring glory to Christ alone and freedom and joy to the church. May we hold on to this rich legacy of joy that is ours in Christ Jesus and that came to us through Reformers like Martin Luther. May we “honor such men,” even as we honor the Lord they continually pointed us to.