

Truth Fleshed Out

Philippians 2:19-30

Pastor Bryan Clark

I want to start by giving you an update on the north church plant. First of all, I want to express appreciation for many who responded. For the candidating process to work, we do need to get feedback. And there was a lot of feedback, which was very helpful. As that week progressed, it became obvious that this was not the team God was leading us to hire for this project, so we will not be hiring them. As a matter of fact, we're going back to the basics and asking God, "What is it that You want from us? What is the next step for us as a church?" We feel like we've worked really hard to find God's man to lead the church plant, and it just doesn't seem like God is bringing forth that person. So we're going all the way back and asking God, "What is it you want? What is the next step?" We will be spending several months praying and trying to better understand where God is directing us. That would be a very good way for you to pray—for God to help us to understand what the next step should be. I do believe it's very important to plan. And I do believe it's very important to strategize. But I also believe it's most important to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit of God. And we have to be careful that sometimes we don't plan out the Spirit. So that's where we're at: we're backing up and really wanting to listen and to be sensitive.

As we do that, I think we all understand that the decisions we make regarding the church and our own lives flow out of truth, out of doctrine. We would all agree that right theology and right doctrine is very important. But Paul has also been reminding us that what is really important is that we *live* the truth—that we live our theology. Just stuffing our head full of information does not change us. We have to live it. We have to flesh it out.

The Greeks' model of education is where we get our Western model, which was really a belief that to learn something you just have to be able to mentally understand it—in a sense, to be able to regurgitate it back on a test. But the Hebrew model of education was really different from that. The Hebrew model was based on the idea that if you don't live it, you have not learned it. The Hebrews had no concept of head knowledge. If you didn't live it, it was simply that you haven't learned it. And that really is what Paul is telling us: that if we aren't living out the truth, then we haven't learned the truth.

Several years ago a series of books came out, written by theologians, which were very critical of the church. They were critical because they believed the church had lost its passion for the truth (doctrine) and was really just doing what works. And there was an element of truth in that. There were some warnings that the church needs to listen to and to heed.

But what was frustrating to me as a pastor is that I wish the theologians would own their part in that problem. For generations there have been theologians who have locked themselves in the classroom, and while they were pumping theological information into the heads of the leaders and pastors, there was no real connection between that theological doctrine and life. They didn't spend any time in the trenches; it was just classroom theology. So they sent out graduates who had heads full of knowledge, but no concept of how that theology intersects with real life in the trenches. Consequently, people start thinking truth isn't relevant, and so they just do what works.

I think the same thing can happen to pastors, especially pastors of large churches. It would be very easy for me to lock myself in my office and just study; then come out on the weekends and give you my thing; and then go back and study all week. But as soon as I do that, I just become a public speaker. I cease to be a pastor. My calling, my passion, is not to be a public speaker. I want to be a pastor. I want to take the truth of God's Word and I want to shepherd my people. And to do that, there has to be some understanding of how this grand truth intersects with life in the trenches. It's got to have a pulse.

I know some of you probably think all I do all week is sit in my office and study. So you might be interested to know that my sermon preparation and all that goes into a weekend message is about 15 hours of my week. So it's just a small portion of my week. I spend a lot of time working with the staff in planning and organizing. But I spend a lot of time with people, just shepherding them and trying to help them with their difficulties, because I never want to forget what life is like in the trenches. I want to keep connecting doctrine and theology with real life.

I would say my model for that would be the apostle Paul. I don't think anybody would debate the fact that Paul was the greatest theologian in the history of the church. Yet Paul wasn't a classroom professor; Paul was a pastor. Paul didn't write theological journals; Paul wrote letters. He wrote theology to real people he deeply cared about—people who were struggling and suffering and living life in the trenches. That's who Paul was; that's what he cared about.

Certainly that's been true in our study of the Book of Philippians, as Paul has been encouraging us not just to say we believe this cognitively with our head, but to live it out—to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. In our study this week Paul takes two people—Timothy and Epaphroditus—and, in a sense, he takes this great truth that he's been teaching and he shows us how it fleshes out in the lives of real people down in the trenches.

As we dig into Philippians 2:19-30, let's remind ourselves that Paul is not writing this from a penthouse. He's not writing it from a seminary classroom. He's writing this from a prison cell. It's very obvious in the Book of Philippians that Paul realizes at any moment he may be executed. In my opinion this text is very emotional and very intense, as Paul is wrestling with the reality that it may very well be the end of his race. So this isn't theology that's just talked about in a seminary classroom. This is theology that's flowing out of life in the trenches, and I think that becomes very obvious.

Philippians 2:19 gives us some clues as to the intensity level of this particular text. Paul says, "But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition." There are several things to notice here. One is that he says, "so that I *also* may be encouraged." Paul is going to send Timothy; and what's implied is that when Timothy goes to the people in Philippi, *they* will be encouraged; and when the word comes back to Paul, *he also* will be encouraged.

Let's think about that for a minute. Timothy is going to wait until Paul gets the verdict: either he is to be executed or he is to be released. And Paul will tell us in a couple of verses that Timothy is going to wait until he gets the word; and then he's going to go. It is very possible that Paul could be executed (he just told us that in the last section: "I may be poured out as a drink offering") because of his commitment to the gospel. In the first century it wasn't like today, where he could then appeal that for the next 20 years. When the verdict came down, that very day you were dead. He knows this may be his last hour. So if Timothy

waits, and the verdict comes down “guilty” and Paul is executed, that’s the message he takes to the people in Philippi.

How does that encourage them? It encourages them if we understand what Paul said in chapter 1: that’s been the mission of his life. He told us, “To live is Christ; to die is gain.” He told us that what matters to him is the advancement of the gospel; and if they kill him it will just go out farther. He’s told us about what’s happening in the Praetorian Guard—how the gospel is flowing out of his prison cell. That’s what they’ll celebrate; that’s what will encourage them. That’s what Paul lived for.

Or Timothy will have the message that Paul is going to be released, which has its obvious encouragement. And when that message comes back from Timothy (if Paul is released and Timothy is going to bring it back) what would encourage Paul? What he is going to hear is that these people are hurting. They are suffering and being persecuted. But what is encouraging is what Paul has already told us—that the reality of the gospel is alive and well in them. They are flourishing spiritually and that’s what matters to Paul; he told us that in chapter 1. So that gives us some idea of the intensity level of what’s going on here.

He says, “...so that I also may be encouraged.” It seems like a very ordinary English phrase, but it was a very unusual Greek phrase. As a matter of fact, this is the only time it shows up anywhere in the Bible. It wasn’t common in the Greek culture, but where it was found was in the tombs and sepulchers. It was a phrase written on the walls of some of the tombs, and it basically meant “may it be well with your soul.” It carried the idea that what really matters is that which goes on forever. It was kind of a well wishing for those who had died.

Paul takes that out of those tombs and that’s the phrase he uses, as if to say, “What’s going to encourage these people is that which lasts forever.” Because, from a temporal world standpoint, they’re all suffering. They are all hurting; they’re all in the trenches. So what is going to encourage them is what goes on *forever*. That has to be the perspective.

One other phrase in verse 19 worth noting is where he says, “But I hope *in the Lord*...” He says it again in verse 24. That’s not a cliché. He is saying that he’s going to send Timothy, but basically all of these plans are submissive to the will of God. In other words, right now his life is not something he can control. He may live; he may die. Timothy may make it to Philippi; he may not. It’s simply a submission to the fact that right now everything is in God’s hands. We might say, “...as God wills.”

Verses 20-21: “For I have no one else of kindred spirit [*of like soul*] who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.” Paul looks around and he finds that Timothy is the only one he can send, because Timothy is more interested in the mission of Christ than he is in his own interests. He’s more interested in the interests of others than his own. That’s the theology Paul taught us in chapter 2—to think of others as more important than yourself. Paul looks around and he says, “Timothy is the only one I can find who’s living that way.”

He says, “Timothy has a *genuine interest* in you.” That’s a word which means from birthright. In other words, there’s a natural affection that a parent has for a child. The word used here means that Timothy’s love for these people is real and authentic. It’s natural; it just flows out of him. It’s interesting that Paul looks around at the other Christians and he is saying, “But, you know, most of them are more interested in themselves than Christ. Timothy is the only one I can find that I can send.” So that’s who Paul is going to send.

Verse 22: “But you know of his proven worth...” We’ve seen that word for “proven worth” in chapter 1, verse 10, translated “approved.” It’s a word that means to test something and then to separate out that which is authentic from that which is counterfeit. It was used to describe money. As the coins would come in, they would test them. Those that were authentic they would set over here and those that were counterfeit would be set over there. That’s the word he’s using to say, “We know that Timothy’s been tested and tried. He’s been set over here. He’s the real thing; he’s authentic. He really is fleshing out this theology. He is advancing the gospel. He is thinking of others as more important than himself. He is a slave of Christ.”

“But you know of his proven worth that he *served* with me...” “Served” is the word for slave—we had it in chapter 1, verse 1. We talked quite a bit about the fact that Paul introduces himself and Timothy as slaves of Christ and what that means. It means that the master is in charge and the slave is submissive. It’s the master’s agenda and not the slave’s. The slave just does whatever the master wants the slave to do. And I said the first week of our study that we were going to spend this letter trying to understand what it means to be a slave of Christ. That’s exactly what Paul is saying here. He’s saying Timothy has been a slave—“not a slave *of* mine, but a slave *with* me—a slave of Christ with me in this mission to advance the gospel.”

“He has served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father.” Some of that is lost in this current culture of ours. If you go back a hundred years or so, there was much more of a connection. If a father had sons, those sons dedicated themselves to work with the father, typically on the family farm. That was a necessary thing just for survival. You go back to the first century and that was very much true. The sons were committed to their father and together they formed a partnership to survive. That’s the imagery Paul is pulling up. He’s saying that Timothy was like a son to him—in his commitment to Paul—in order to accomplish the mission God had given them.

“Therefore [verse 23] I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I myself also shall be coming shortly.” That’s where Paul says, “I’m sending Timothy immediately, as soon as he hears word of my fate.” So either he’s going to be released or he’s going to be executed, and Timothy is going to carry that word.

I’m convinced that this section of the letter is very intense and very emotional. Paul has dedicated his life to this mission and he realizes in the next hour it may be over! At this moment, what matters to him is: Who is he going to pass the baton to? Who’s going to take up the mission and go with it? He looks around and he can only see one person who’s fleshing out the truth that he’s talked about; and that’s Timothy. He says Timothy is a proven product. Timothy will take the baton and he will go.

As I thought about that, I had to ask the question: Who am I pouring my life into? Timothy didn’t just wake up one morning and he was spiritual. This was a process of mentoring where Paul poured his life into Timothy. As a matter of fact, it’s a very common biblical principle—that for us to accomplish our mission, part of the strategy has to be to reproduce ourselves. It’s not enough for me just to live my life on the planet and die. I have to reproduce myself in somebody else, that they can take the baton and run the next leg of the journey.

It doesn’t matter if you’re 16 years old or you’re 80 years old. We all need to be pouring our lives into somebody—to be reproducing ourselves in another person. That’s part of the

mission. We all need to ask the question: Who am I pouring my life into, so that they can take the baton and run?

The other thing I was challenged with when I thought about this is: Who is pouring their life into me? In other words, who am I allowing to speak into my life to cause me to grow and to continue to become like Christ? Sometimes we reach a certain level of maturity where we just think we don't need that anymore. And when we think that, we stop growing. There's a certain humility in brokenness that says: I need somebody to speak into my life. I need somebody to pour themselves into my life. I need somebody to help me become more like Jesus, to be a player in the Kingdom. And we all need to ask ourselves: Who's doing that for us?

I think about Paul's statement when he said that Timothy is a proven product. He's saying there is proven worth. This isn't a guess for Paul; Timothy has a track record. It's evident. You know it's easy to say, "I'm committed to the Kingdom. I'm committed to advancing the gospel." Okay...where's the track record? What do you put forth as your track record that gives evidence that's true? What do you give as evidence that you are more interested in advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ than you are your own personal interests? If we were to sit down and go through your checkbook, is that obvious? Is it obvious in your checkbook that you're more interested in building the Kingdom than you are your own interests? What if we go through your Daytimer or your calendar for this past week? Is it obvious that you're more dedicated to advancing the Kingdom than you are your own personal interests? What about your talents and your gifts and your abilities? Is it obvious that those are being used to advance the gospel more than just advancing your own personal interests? That's what Paul says about Timothy—that there's a track record. Timothy is fleshing out the truth Paul has been teaching.

Timothy is going to wait until Paul learns of his fate; so in the meantime he's going to send Epaphroditus. Verse 25: "But I thought it necessary to send you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need." Epaphroditus came from Philippi. The church in Philippi sent him to Paul, in order to shepherd Paul in prison. They said, "You know, Paul's going through a very difficult time. We need to send someone to minister to him—to shepherd him, to take care of him." That was Epaphroditus. So he was sent *to* Paul. Paul says, "He's been my friend, my brother, my fellow soldier." Again, we see the military metaphors.

But now Paul is going to send him back. I'm convinced this came at great personal cost. Imagine what it would be like in prison, knowing that any hour you could be executed. It would be very comforting to have your friends there to walk through this with you. But Paul, in fleshing out his own theology of thinking of others as more important than himself, is sending Epaphroditus away, and I think that hurts. I think it cost him a lot. But his conclusion was, *Those people need him more than I do*, so he sent him.

Verse 26: "...because he was longing for you all..." Paul used that same phrase to describe his own feelings toward them in chapter 1, verse 8. "...he was longing for you and was distressed because you heard that he was sick." That word "distressed" is the same word used to describe Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's a very powerful word. Epaphroditus was distressed, but not about his own situation, but because he hurt for these people. They're upset because they heard that he was sick.

Verse 27: "For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow." I love verse 27,

because it's just real. It's very authentic. It gives you a glimpse into the heart of the apostle Paul. He says Epaphroditus was sick—he was sick to the point of death—but God had mercy on him. But not only on Epaphroditus; He had mercy on Paul. He says, “If Epaphroditus would have died, I would have had sorrow upon sorrow.” In other words, he's saying, “It would have broken my heart.”

We realize that Paul is not a theology machine. He's a person. And I think at this point right now he is hurting. He's hurting, and what he's saying in verse 27 is that it just would have broken his heart if Epaphroditus would have died. I think sometimes we tend to think that somehow Paul was disconnected from life and that his theology is all kind of disconnected. When he talks about joy, he's talking about it from a prison cell. Hour by hour he's waiting for the potential execution, and I think he's feeling the pain.

Sometimes we think that to experience joy it means the absence of sorrow. I don't think that's true. It is joy *in the midst* of the sorrow. I would say some of the most joyful moments in my life have come in times of the most intense sorrow. Because it's in those moments that you realize what really matters. It's in those moments when you really cling to that which is true. It tends to filter out a bunch of the junk and you just find yourself grabbing onto your theology—to what's really true. There's an element of joy in knowing that which lasts forever, and separating that out from that which is temporal. So sometimes it's in our most sorrowful moments that we experience this unexplainable joy; and that's certainly true of Paul. He's being very transparent here.

Verse 28: “Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly in order that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you.” Isn't it interesting in verse 28 that, while Paul is in this very intense time of his life, who is he thinking about? He's thinking about them. He's concerned about them—that's why he's sending Timothy. That's why he's sending Epaphroditus, at great personal cost. Most of us would just be thinking about ourselves, but he's thinking about others as more important than himself.

Verse 29: “Therefore receive him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; [*Why?*] because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.” Paul says when Epaphroditus gets there, receive him with joy and hold him up with great value. Why? Because he's put it all on the line for the Kingdom. He's risked his very life to advance the gospel. That word “risk” is actually a very unusual term. This is the only place it shows up in the Bible. It's a gambling term which means to take a calculated risk. It means he understood he may die in the process, but he's going.

I think Paul puts Epaphroditus and Timothy forward as players in the Kingdom. He's saying, “These are two men who have fleshed out the reality of this truth.” They're players. There's a track record.

I think there are a lot of Christians who want to be used by God. They want to be players in the Kingdom. But they are simply unwilling to pay the price. There are a lot of things in life that we would like to become and a lot of things we would like to do. But we never will, because we won't pay the price. That's certainly true in our Christian faith. To really become a player, to really be used by God, there is a price to pay. It will cost you something. But I'll guarantee you what it costs you will be small compared to what you will gain.

I don't know what that means for you. Maybe that means you would take a short-term missions trip to Ecuador. Maybe it means you will spend the rest of your life in Ecuador.

Maybe it means as a construction worker or a business man or woman or a lawyer or a teacher, that you will dedicate every day to advancing the gospel. In whatever calling God has called you to, you will die to yourself. You will die to your own personal interests and your own rights, and you will live for others. It is true: when God bids us come, He says, “Come and die. Come and die that you might live.”

I find it very helpful that Paul fleshes out this theology through the life of Timothy and through the life of Epaphroditus, but I also thought it would be helpful to hear how this theology has fleshed itself out in one of the members of our congregation. Listen for what he *gave up* and for what he *gained*. I’d like to ask Mike Olive to come and share a little of his story and how God has fleshed out this theology in his life.

Testimony by Mike Olive:

I have a doctorate in medical microbiology; and the only reason you need to know that is because it was the key to my family being able to enter the country of Kuwait as tent-making missionaries. When I was there I was an associate professor at the college of medicine and I was also the associate director of clinical virology in the public health laboratories. As a result of that, I had access to all the best doctors in Kuwait. I was in with the “high society,” so to speak.

In our first year in Kuwait we were befriended by a Kuwaiti Bedouin tribe. Now these Bedouin are not the wealthy high-class Kuwaitis. These are very simple people. They’re the oil field workers. They’re the firemen. And they’re the police officers in Kuwait. As a result, they’re not really high on the social status list in Kuwait. So when they had a medical need, they had to go to the local clinics. The problem with that was, the clinics were a place where some of the worst medicine I’d ever seen was practiced. There were doctors there who had never seen the inside of a medical textbook. They ordered their degree via mail order catalog from Egypt. Imagine what it’s like being a young Bedouin mother sitting over a sick child, not knowing whether the doctor was actually going to be able to help your child, or whether he or she might even kill it.

As a result of our friendship with the Bedouin, they began coming to me and asking me to help them get doctors. And I would do that. I got them pediatricians, neurologists; anything they needed I got it for them. And as my reputation began to grow, more and more Bedouins started coming to me for doctors. It was a preoccupation, almost.

But after two years I began to get frustrated, because I felt, *These people don’t really care about me. And they don’t want to listen to my message. All they’re doing is using me. They just want something that I can give them and that’s it. They don’t care about me at all.* That frustration began to compromise the ministry.

Then one day in my morning quiet time I ran across an excerpt from Oswald Chambers’ *My Utmost For His Highest*; and I’d like to read it to you. It’s called “The Destitution of Service” based on 2 Corinthians 12:15: “And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?” Then Chambers says:

Natural love expects some return, but Paul says—I do not care whether you love me or not, I am willing to destitute myself completely, not merely for your sakes, but that I may get you to God. “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor.” Paul’s idea of service is exactly along that line—I do not care with what extravagance I spend myself, and I will do it gladly. It was a joyful thing to Paul.

The ecclesiastical idea of a servant of God is not Jesus Christ's idea. His idea is that we serve Him by being the servants of other men. Jesus Christ out-socialists the socialists. He says that in His Kingdom he that is greatest shall be the servant of all. The real test of the saint is not preaching the gospel, but washing disciples' feet, that is, doing the things that do not count in the actual estimate of men but count everything in the estimate of God. Paul delighted to spend himself out for God's interests in other people, and he did not care what it cost. We come in with our economical notions—"Suppose God wants me to go there—what about the salary? What about the climate? How shall I be looked after? A man must consider these things." All that is an indication that we are serving God with a reserve. The apostle Paul had no reserve. Paul focuses Jesus Christ's idea of a New Testament saint in his life, viz., not one who proclaims the Gospel merely, but one who becomes broken bread and poured out wine in the hands of Jesus Christ for other lives.

Sometimes if God has a message for you, He taps you gently on the shoulder and whispers it in your ear. The other time, He has to pick up a brick and throw it at your head. This was one of those brick experiences for me, because I realized that instead of being broken bread and poured-out wine and having that kind of a ministry with those people, I was looking for a ministry of self-glorification. I was sticking myself on a pedestal. I realized that all my degrees, all my academic achievements really didn't mean anything to God. It wasn't important. I had to learn that doing the things that I didn't think were necessarily important, but were of utmost importance to God, were the things I should be doing. I had to become, as Oswald Chambers says later, a doormat for Jesus Christ. Now, as I walk through the mall, as I meet new people, as I make new acquaintances, I have to look at them through eternal eyes that say: Where are these people going to spend eternity?

As I began to make this change in my attitude, two things happened. First of all, the frustration went away. It wasn't about me anymore; it was about the gospel. And secondly, the ministry began to prosper. Now I have to constantly remind myself that as I deal with people, I must be able to destitute myself to bring them to God.

Thank you, Mike. I think we need to understand that to be a player in the Kingdom, it does cost you—it *has* to cost you. To be a player in the Kingdom you don't have to have a seminary education. You don't have to be called to be a pastor or missionary. You don't have to have these very impressive skills or great intelligence. But what you do have to have is the heart—a willingness to die that you might live.

Our Father, we are thankful that You give us Your Word and Your Word is real. Your Word is true. It isn't just theological speculation, but it lives and breathes. Lord, thank you for Paul, that in this most intense moment of his life in the trenches, he doesn't abandon his theology, but he embraces it. The truth flows out of real life. Lord, I thank you for the life of Timothy and Epaphroditus and Mike—how they help us understand how this truth is fleshed out in everyday decisions in life. Lord, help us to understand what it means that we must die that we can live. Help us to learn what it really means to think of others as more important than ourselves...to be slaves to the Master...to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel. Help us to understand what it means to really trust You—in the good times, but also in the most difficult times in the trenches of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.