

The Marks of a Leader

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Philippians series during Covid-19

Philippians 2:19-30

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My dear fellow servants in Christ,

It's amazing that God builds his church and kingdom through people like you and me. People are important to God, but not because he can't get by without us. God is all-powerful and he doesn't need us to do what he can accomplish with one single word. But that makes it even more significant that he chooses to use us any way. Sometimes God does things without us, but most times he works through people like you and me to build his kingdom here on earth.

This morning, the word of the Lord shows us the marks of leaders who have been used in the past. If these mark are reduced to one, it would be humility. But humility manifests itself in virtues we see most clearly in Christ and mirrored in his servants Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus and the Philippian church. They were sincere, submissive, servant-hearted, and sacrificial. Those are points we'll look at this morning as marks of leaders in Philippi and equally important for all Christians today, especially those in leadership.

Paul speaks highly here about two fellow-leaders and friends of his who have been of great help to him in his missionary work—Timothy and Epaphroditus. What he says about them certainly applies to pastors and elders and deacons. However, it also applies to parents and teachers and counsellors, as well as to bosses and workers, to pencil pushers, the mop pushers and ditch diggers, equipment operators, construction workers, hospital staff and everyone else. It even applies to children. All of us are called to live as God's people in order to make a Christ-like impact on our world.

Sincerity

To begin with, as we look at Paul and the two men he writes about, we see humility come through in their sincerity. Paul writes about Timothy in v.20,
*Php 2:20 I have no one else like him, who takes a **genuine** interest in your welfare. For everyone else looks out for his own interest, not those of Jesus Christ.*

Could people say that about you? Paul said it about Timothy. The Holy Spirit had given Timothy a heart of genuine or **sincere** compassion for the church of Philippi. He wants for them what Jesus wants for them. That's why, when Paul compares Timothy to others in v.20, he says that Timothy looks out for the interests of Jesus Christ. That's what Christ-like leaders do. They seek to love people the way Christ would. Sincere, Christ-like love.

We can try to gain power and hold people in fear of us. That's the way some executives and politicians and even some parents function. But that's not Christ's way. Look at Paul and Timothy. Both the spiritual father and his spiritual son Timothy are sincere in their desire to care for others the way Jesus would. In the NIV Paul says, *"I have no one like him."* Other translations say, *"I have no one else*

of kindred spirit.” Or *“I have no one likeminded who will be genuinely interested in your welfare.”* The kindred spirit or likemindedness that Paul refers to is certainly likemindedness with himself but, more importantly, Timothy has the mind of Christ. We can only be the kind of compassionate, sincere, loving people God wants us to be when we have Christ in our heart and his mind becomes our mind. That’s why Paul equates genuine interest in other people with having the interests of Christ. Jesus didn’t leave the glories of heaven for fun! He came because he had a sincere interest in our well-being.

Likewise, Paul displays his sincere interest in others even from a prison-house in Rome. Both he and Timothy are familiar with the Philippian church and Paul knows that the church is concerned about him just as he is concerned about them. But to quiet their fears, Paul sends Epaphroditus with this letter to encourage them and he promises to send Timothy later to let them know what will happen to him. Paul does not want his friends in Philippi to be troubled.

Similarly, we learn that Epaphroditus is sincere or genuinely interested in others. When he is sick, he longs to return to Philippi because he has learned that the brothers and sisters there are deeply concerned about him. He has obviously been a spiritual leader in the church in Philippi and now that he is sick the people in the church are, according to v.26, *“distressed”* about his condition. You sense the sincere love of the people for their leader because they have felt his sincere love for them. You’ve probably heard the saying, *“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care!”* That’s a good line for leaders, especially in the church. Epaphroditus wants to rush back to Philippi because he has heard that his friends there are worried about him. He is sincerely interested in relieving their pain and quieting their concerned minds.

Submission

The second mark we see here is submission. Notice how leaders submit their own interests to those of the kingdom of God. Again, this is a subpart of humility.

Timothy is submissive. We know this from 2 Timothy 3:15. Already as a child, Timothy was an eager student of the word of God. Timothy did not try to become great by charting his own course through life. As a child he listened to his mother and grandmother, and eagerly learned about God. As he grew up and met Paul, he submitted himself to Paul as a son to his father. For example, though he wants to stay with Paul in Rome, he is willing to go to Philippi when Paul tells him it is better for the sake of Christ’s kingdom.

Do we live like that? The word of God calls us to submit our lives to the goals of the kingdom of God. Jesus said,

Mt 6:33 Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...

Do we live by that principle? Are we ready to say as Jesus did before going to the cross, *Lk 22:42“Father, not my will but yours be done”*? John the Baptist put his finger on it when he said of Jesus, *Jn 3:30“He must become greater and I must become less.”* In other words, Jesus is first.

Seek first his kingdom! This simple principle is hard for us to live by because it takes faith and the courage that comes from faith to do life Christ's way. For example, in business some say we have to be crooked like everyone else otherwise we won't make a buck. However, we know God says we should be honest and seek his kingdom and his righteousness. Do we, then, submit to his word and trust him, or go our own way? You and I need to look at every area of our lives to see whether we are submitting it to the Lord.

Service

The thirdly mark of a humble Christian leader—that comes with sincerity and submission—is service. Paul speaks highly of the Philippians and Epaphroditus in this regard. Paul calls Epaphroditus

Php 2:25 “*your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.*”

Because the Philippians have been so filled with concern for their Pastor Paul, they sent one of their most respected leaders to go and care for Paul in his prison. They themselves are living in poverty and under persecution but their thoughts are not on themselves. They want to serve Paul. They want to ensure that he is well cared for, that he is not lonely and discouraged while imprisoned. So they send Epaphroditus and he willingly goes. We read that Paul is deeply grateful.

In the résumé of Epaphroditus Paul also calls him, “*my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier.*” What does this tell us about Epaphroditus? He and Paul are fellow-children of God, brothers in Christ. They are united in faith. However, Paul also calls this brother a *fellow-worker and fellow-soldier* because they are united in the work of the gospel. Epaphroditus considers it pure joy, like Paul, to labour for the Lord knowing that his work is not in vain. He is concerned about serving the Lord faithfully.

Christians lead by serving just as Jesus did for us. Willingly and courageously because we know God is with us. Jesus teaches us that he *Mt 20:28* *did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.* At the beginning of Philippians 2, Paul describes how Jesus humbled himself and took on the form of a servant. Paul reminds us that Jesus' form of leadership led him to the cross and hell. But he was willing to be even a suffering-servant for our good.

What would that look like for us in this time of COVID-19? Or this time when racial divisions are running high, especially in the US? We are not immune to that in Canada either. There is so much need all around us. What could we do to serve someone today? Tomorrow? This week? How might we serve our neighbour in the name of Jesus? Pray for the Holy Spirit to show you. Look around.

Maybe the people on your street really need you to knock on their door and just say “Hi! How are you doing today? I know some people during this time are lonely, so I thought I'd check to make sure you're okay.” As white people, we might go to our neighbours of colour and ask, “Do you feel afraid living around here because of the colour of your skin? How can I help to change that?”

Many of the elderly are feeling vulnerable, alone and lonely. Some are just sick of being cooped up and being told what they can and can't do. Maybe they just need a phone call from you to let them know you care. Similarly with our neighbours of colour if they are feeling alone or afraid. Sometimes listening attentively and with understanding is what is needed.

Serving takes some time and intentional effort. It takes some faith and confidence that it's what Christ calls us to and helps us accomplish. It's part of humble leadership.

Sacrificial

Finally, we see in our Bible reading that a humble leader is one who is sacrificial. As we just saw, Epaphroditus gained the reputation of being a hardworker and soldier in the church in Philippi. He had therefore been commissioned by the church in Philippi not only to give an encouraging word to Paul but also to bring the offerings of the Philippian church to Paul in Rome. And though the trip was long—approximately the distance from Edmonton to Vancouver—and the journey filled with potential dangers, Epaphroditus went gladly.

We can drive that distance in a day, but by foot and boat it took about a month. On that trip, Epaphroditus became ill. From the Scripture reading, we note that his condition was very serious for a time. In fact, Paul says he nearly died. He was, however, willing to sacrifice the comforts of home in order to face the dangers of travel so that he might be with Paul and bring a gift to encourage him.

During this time of Covid isolation, economic hardship and heightened racial tension, God is giving us an opportunity to show the sacrificial love of Christ. There is probably someone unemployed living near you. Maybe a young family down the street with three young school age children trying to cope with bills and the pressure of doing school at home. They could really use encouragement today. You might want to drop off a box of food or a few meals you prepared. Maybe a gas station gift card so they can keep gas in their vehicle. Tell them you care. Likewise, reach out to the visible minorities around you. Get to know them and the things they enjoy. Don't be afraid to stretch yourself to give sacrificially.

The gift Paul is talking about here in our reading represented a sacrifice on the part of the Philippian Christians. They were leaders in the area of sacrificial giving. Paul had asked several churches to take an offering in order to help the church in Jerusalem where believers were hungry and persecuted. But Paul did not even ask the Philippians to give because he felt that they were in tough straits themselves. And they truly were. Yet of all the church in Macedonia, the Philippian church excelled in giving. They could apparently afford it least, but they gladly gave because they understood the deep and sacrificial love of Christ. For them **to sacrifice a little in this world was nothing compared to the eternal blessings they looked forward to**. What an attitude and perspective!! The cause of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom of God were more important to them than their own physical comforts and financial security here on earth.

This begs the question of us. How much are we willing to sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom of God? Epaphroditus, according to v.30, was willing to submit his health, to the point where he became ill, for the love of Christ and his servant Paul. The Philippians gave—sacrificed—their best leader to comfort Paul whom they loved. They also dug deep into their shallow pockets and still came up with a sacrificial gift. Paul describes the giving of the Philippians and their neighbours this way in 2 Corinthians 8:

2 Cor 8:3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

I think of an elderly parishioner who is now with Jesus. He once shared how someone came knocking on their door for the Christian school back in the 1950s when immigrants were living on a shoestring. The visitors desperately needed money for the school. This man turned to his wife and asked, "How much money do we have?" And he was talking about all of their money, not just what they had in the house. She said, "We have \$70." And he said, "Give it all to them." He did it without a second thought.

I know we have real hardships and real financial uncertainty, certainly today for many people. But as God's people we must never fear giving our money and time and talents because these are gifts from God, given for us to use to advance his kingdom in our day. What can we do to get out of our comfort zones for the love of our neighbours? How can we serve others with sacrificial love to bridge the gaps of racial divides, loneliness or economic hardships today? Christians are most blessed who learn the joy of sacrifice for the sake of Christ and enjoy living in the comfort of his provision.

In that way, friends, we all lead by putting Christ first in everything whether you're the minister, an elder or deacon, a teacher, a singer, a nursery attendant (when we have nursery) or someone who quietly but faithfully prays for the church and the needs of those around us. Outside of the church too, we all lead in one way or another. We are citizens of the kingdom of God, seeking to live for Jesus in every area of our life and so leading others to see him too.

We must remember that all the treasures we possess in Christ have come to us through his sincere or genuine interest in us, his submission to his Father's plan to save his, his service to us, and his sacrificial love for us. The more we come to see the greatness of Christ and what he has won for us, the more we realize that we have nothing to lose by living fully for him every day.

It truly is amazing that God builds his church and kingdom through people like you and me. Sometimes God does things without us, but most times he works through people like you and me to build his kingdom, just as he worked through Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus and the church in Philippi in the first century. May it be our joy in the 21st century to work with our Lord for the upbuilding of his kingdom and the glory of his name.