

Selfless Ministry

Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me. But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel. Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly. Philippians 2:17–24

I've shared before that I once heard a preacher say that in church, there are five kinds of people, not VIPs, but VUPs, VTPs, VNPs, VDPs, and VWPs. VUPs, are very useful people. They are people who give themselves to the service of God in a church and maximise their usefulness. VTPs are Very Teachable People. They are just one step behind. They are on the path to usefulness, but have the virtue of being humble and hungry for truth, wanting to take it in, use it, and obey it. VNPs are in the middle of the spectrum. VNPs stand for Very Nice People. They don't do a lot of good, nor do they do a lot of damage, but they have nice manners, make pleasant conversation, and fill up seats. VDPs are Very Draining People. These are the people who refuse to take their walk with God seriously, and so they end up creating problems out of themselves and for others, draining time and energy. They aren't just regular saints needing help and service and care, they are chronically problematic, the Christian equivalent of an injured soccer player, hugging their shins in agony, needing to be carried by someone. And then there are the VWPs, the Very Wicked People, those who impose their own plans upon the church of God, and end up dividing and destroying in pursuit of their own reputation, or power.

But I don't think anyone begins life in a church expecting to be a Very Wicked Person or a Very Draining Person. Probably most would say that they want to be more than a Very Nice Person. But why then are Very Useful People often in the minority in a church?

Much of it has to do with that foul s-word: Selfishness. Our selfishness comes from two sources. Firstly, from within. We are born sinners, and that means we naturally love and prioritise ourselves above all others. We seek our own way, our own glory. That means we arrive in church, and naturally, we're thinking, "What's in it for me? How do I use this place to my advantage? How do I get recognition?" Or perhaps, "how do I slip in and out almost unnoticed?"

But then the second source of selfishness is our surrounding culture. The world system not only tells you to love yourself more, and build your self-esteem, and take selfies and have plenty of me-time, but they reinforce selfish attitudes and expectations: my legal rights, my personal space, the customer is king, be all you can be, climb every mountain, be the you you were meant to be. We live in a world where we are autonomous consumers with supposedly unlimited potential, and if someone gets in my way, I have a lawyer.

Now take that innate selfishness, magnify it and compound it with life in the world, and then bring it into church. What sort of place will you have? Well, you will either have a place full of conflict, rivalry, envy and crass ambition. Of course, you can also structure your church so that it resembles the world and you will minimise the conflict. Make church like a mall: the customer is still king, come in, choose your flavour of worship, select your ministry of choice, customise the pastor to the kind you like, keep involvement and commitment to a few paid professionals, and Boom! Your building will be full of happy customers.

But if you are interested in following all things that He commanded us, then church is a Body, a family, a flock, a Vine, a living Temple. We are interdependent parts of Christ and of one another.

Now throughout this letter, Paul is seeking to get the Philippians away from the selfishness they know in their culture. In Rome, it was all about personal honour, status, social standing, beating out your rival, being admired by others. But that way of living denies the Gospel that saved them. It

contradicts the message we bring. The same J-Curve He took to save us, death to His own rights and privileges so as to rise up as the Lord of His people, must become ours in the church.

Now Paul's most powerful weapon to teach this in Philippians is through example. His own example, which he began with in chapter 1, and will resume in chapter 3. But along the way, he is also able to turn to two other examples of selfless service, of people who have embraced death and resurrection. Those two people are Timothy and Epaphroditus. These are two VUPs of note, whom Paul can show the Philippians to challenge their selfishness and give them the contrast of selfless service.

In verses 17 to 24, Paul uses some of his own example, and some of Timothy's to describe selfless Christian service. Here we'll have an example, a description of the marks of a Very Useful person.

I. Christian Service is Cheerfully Sacrificial

Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul's first advertisement for unselfish service is how happy it makes him. Paul says, I am glad and rejoice. Philippians, share my gladness and rejoice with me. This unselfish service brings joy. Christian service is cheerful.

Paul knows that selfish people are in pursuit of joy and happiness. Seeking happiness doesn't make you selfish. What makes you selfish is when you seek your happiness apart from God, at the expense of others. But here Paul says I am glad and rejoice if I'm poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith. I am happy for it!

How often are we infected with the idea that service will be a drudgery, a heavy, taxing affair, and happiness and joy will be on the side of those serving themselves. Well, that idea is easy to test. You are surrounded in the world with people who do nothing except serve themselves. Are they perpetually happy? Selfishness gives you bites of happiness, with a lot of gritty unpleasantness inbetween.

Christian service is cheerful. But that is just the attitude, the action is that it is sacrificial. Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith

Paul pictures the faith, the Christian lives of the Philippians like priestly offerings: sacrifice and service. Both those words in the original have to do with ritual sacrifice and ritual service in the Temple. The Philippians like all believers are priests, and our lives come up as offerings to God.

Paul is then an additional offering on top of them.

The drink offering was the act of pouring out a drink, such as wine that would be poured out upon the altar, often on top of or in addition to another sacrifice. Paul says, my service of you Philippians is like that drink offering. I am not taking a little dropper, extracting a drop, and placing an eyedrop's worth of my life onto the ministry. Paul says, it is as if my whole life is in that vessel, God is at liberty to pour some of it or all of it on whoever He wants. My life is not my own; it is there to be spent. It is similar to what he says elsewhere: 2 Corinthians 12:14–15:

“¹⁵And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls;”

Christian service is a spending of oneself for the good of others. We give of our time, sometimes of our family time, our weekend time, or evening time. We give up time to meet, to counsel on the phone, to have over. We give up money to host, to buy a book, to give a lift, to help out. But the

great joy of Christian service is that it does cost.

Remember David? “2 Samuel 24:24

²⁴Then the king said to Araunah, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing.” So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

Now sometimes it is easier for us to remember this when it comes to money than when it comes to people. You see, this Philippian church had already experienced the joy of sacrificial giving when it came to money.

Philippians 4:15–18

¹⁵Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.

¹⁶For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities.

¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account.

¹⁸Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

And in 2 Corinthians, Paul describes how much joy they took in doing so.

2 Corinthians 8:1–4

¹Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia:

²that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. ³For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing,

⁴imploping us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

So here is the backstory: You might remember Paul had to appeal to Caesar to avoid an unfair trial in Judea. When he got to Rome with Luke and Aristarchus, he found out that he actually needed a large sum of money to hire a lawyer to represent him before Caesar. Three months into his house-arrest, Timothy arrives to help. That frees up Aristarchus to go back to Greece and explain Paul's need. The Philippians take up a generous gift, and send it to Rome by the hand of one of their own beloved leaders, Epaphroditus with Aristarchus. Along the way, Epaphroditus gets terribly sick, very likely with malaria. He sends word back to Philippi, but presses on to Rome, knowing how urgently Paul needs the money.

These believers had rushed to the chance of supporting Paul, and later on, supporting the poor saints in Jerusalem. They were exactly what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 9: cheerful givers.

But it is strange how the joy we have in sacrificing in giving doesn't always translate to sacrificing in other ways. Sometimes sacrificing time, or reputation or convenience feels harder, and seems less rewarding. But it isn't. Paul knows that pouring his life out for the Philippians is a source of joy for him and others.

II. Christian Service is Sincerely Considerate

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel. Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly.

Here is the rest of the story. When Epaphroditus and Aristarchus arrive with the financial gift,

Paul's team nurses Epaphroditus back to health, and now Paul's case will be heard in court. Paul no longer even need to worry about defending himself. He is deeply touched by the Philippians' gift, and also by Epaphroditus' sacrifice.

The Philippians likely send Paul a letter through one of Lydia's ships, asking about Epaphroditus, and explaining that some conflict had broke out in the church. Paul then writes out this letter, and send it back with Epaphroditus, and wants very much to send Timothy as well.

Next to Paul himself getting to Philippi, sending Timothy is next best thing. You can see how Paul describes him: there is no one as likeminded as Paul as Timothy. Timothy served as a son next to a father in the gospel. Like father, like son. To send Timothy would be to send a junior Paul.

Who is this Timothy? We meet him first in Acts 16, already a believer, living in Derbe and Lystra, the son of a Jewish woman named Eunice, and a Greek father. He accompanied Paul on his travels, and is called by Paul a son in the faith at least three times in the New Testament. Paul includes Timothy as one of those greeting the churches in Philippians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians.

What was it about Timothy that Paul could trust so implicitly?

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.

Paul wanted to know the spiritual state of the Philippians. He wanted to send Timothy and then hear back from him, because Timothy had the same pastor's heart as Paul. Paul says, I have no one who will sincerely care for your state. The word *care for* translates a word that means be worried over, concerned about. Timothy, like Paul became immediately concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of believers. Their spiritual success and health became his concern, his responsibility.

This is what Christian service is like. It becomes sincerely considerate. It wants to know why someone seems less frequent in church, why that person seems down or depressed. It is concerned that that believer find joy in his marriage, and fruitfulness in her parenting, and usefulness in his retirement. It wants that believer to conquer that addiction, and find more satisfaction in personal devotions and prayer. Put simply, you become burdened that others would know and love and enjoy Christ, that they would live victorious Christian lives, that they would not sink into their own carnality and foolishness. You want other believers to have the wisdom to thrive in the Christian life.

Sometimes this is called a pastor's heart: the longing to see other believers thrive.

Now Paul also gives us the opposite, which was as common in his day as it is in ours: For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.

Obviously, Paul didn't mean there was absolutely no one who served Christ. For effect and emphasis, he is pointing out that most people are intensely selfish. Most people care only about a very narrow portion of their lives: their own family, and job, and interests and hobbies. Other people are incidental: they see them at church, bump into them, say hello, trade some pleasantries. Or, other people are instrumental: they provide people to listen to my drama, or they provide children to play with my children, or they provide company when I'm bored. But apart from incidental and instrumental interest, other people are just stage props for the drama that is my life, in which I am the star, and the tragic hero. I don't know how familiar that sounds, but Paul says it was the way in his day. Timothy is different. He is sincerely considerate.

In fact, Paul says that Timothy has proven character already. But you know his proven character, that as a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel.

The word translated *served* is actually *slaved*. Timothy *slaved* for the gospel with Paul. His sacrificial credentials were beyond question. So Paul says, as soon as I know how things are going to unfold with my trial, I will send him.

Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly.

Philippians, here are these men willing to cross land and sea for you: that's what the gospel looks like, not quarreling over status.

And actually, all of this goes back to the cross. There we learn service; Cheerful sacrifice, and sincere considerateness. Let this mind be in you.