



A Few Good Men

Philippians 2:19-30

As many of you know, I used to be a teacher and one of the tasks that I had to do each term was to write a report to parents on the progress of my students. It was quite amazing the responses I got sometimes. Bad students were always genuinely surprised when they got a bad report. It didn't seem to occur that if they didn't perform that I'd say so. It was a kind of denial.

Sometimes it was the opposite. I'd give a student a good, well deserved report and the parents didn't believe it for whatever reason.

Appraisals are a common part of workplace life these days as most of you probably know. Why? Because the bottom line is that we are accountable for our actions in whatever area of life we think about and the workplace or the school are places where this is formalised because the company's profits or people's futures depend on it.

As a church we are accountable. We've made ourselves accountable to the EBA. We are accountable in law to the trust deed our church have. And most importantly we are accountable to God because we do what we do in the name of Jesus.

Let me ask you a question. If God was to produce a report on you now what do you think HE would say? Would it be excellent? Or not good enough? Would we be in denial, full of excuses, trying to cover our tracks - or would it be well done, good and faithful servant?

We've been looking at Philippians and we've already found that this is kind of Paul's appraisal of them and it's been a quite a good end of term report so far, but we found them lacking in the humility and obedience to God stakes.

One of the things I often found when I was given reports at school or job appraisals was that I got compared to someone else, either favourably or unfavourably. I actually never did this as a teacher in my reports, but I often trained my students by using both the excellent and bad efforts that my previous students produced (anonymously of course) to illustrate good and bad practice.

Paul uses the opportunity of talking about two men who were a good example for them who he was sending to them Timothy and Epaphroditus.

I've called this evening's sermon "A few good men". There was a film about this with Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise. Jack Nicholson was the character that wanted to protect his own crooked reputation whereas the Tom Cruise character was a young military lawyer who was one of the few good men who stood for truth. I think he won. Our passage tonight celebrated Paul's "few good men" who honoured the interests of Christ in their example.

Timothy we know a good bit about. He was one of Paul's closest leaders and confidants. Epaphroditus was a son of Philippi who had been sent to Paul to express their support and he was presumably the bearer of this letter back to them. Paul had got to know him and he had also been seriously ill whilst in Rome with Paul. It's clear from the words we read that Paul thought highly of him.

Wow, they must have been so embarrassed as Paul holds them up as examples of what Christian service is all about. But they are good men that are given to us of what Christian living should be about.

So what of Timothy? *20 He is the only one who shares my feelings and who really cares about you. 21 All the others are concerned only with their own affairs, not with the cause of Jesus Christ. 22 And you yourselves know how he has proved his worth, how he and I, like a son and his father, have worked together for the sake of the gospel.*

I have no-one else like him - that's an astonishing thing to say because Paul commended many men and women, but as far as I can see is only of Timothy that he says; I have no-one like him. In fact it's to Timothy that we have to personal letters in the NT. An outstanding man. Why?

One of the reasons is obvious - they shared the same mind. Timothy was Paul's protege and quite clearly they found a common mind. But perhaps more surprisingly they shared a common love and concern for the Philippians.

Paul commends him because he took a genuine interest in their welfare and wan't concernet with his own affairs. I like the way the NIV translates it: *For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.* Remember from verse 4 that they were encouraged to look out for one another. Obviously because they prioritised their own affairs. They would have been Frank Sinatra fans I think. It's 40 years since he recorded "My Way" - a song about personal achievement.

Interestingly, the way Paul describes Timothy here is quite different to how we often describe those we deem spiritual. You know, we use words like "godly life", "profound preacher", "truly anointed", "really committed", "a faithful servant". Now the contrast. Why did Paul commend Timothy - because he looked after the interests of the Philippians. Because in doing so he was serving the cause of Jesus Christ.

Timothy had two attributes then, he was well taught (of Paul) and soundly mentored and disciples. However, the outworking of that discipleship was in his attitude towards people.

The Supermarket

One of the characteristics that has started to build in our church which I want to encourage and build on is our servant spirit. We have tried to apply a caring spirit to both people in the church and now outside. And I encourage this, because it's scriptural and of Christ. There was a real movement in the 20th Century to see being a servant to watering down the gospel. But here we see Timothy being commended because in looking after them, he's serving the cause of Christ. The only time service becomes wishy washy is when we disconnect it from the gospel and leave Jesus out. Paul and Timothy worked for the sake of the gospel and effective sharing of the gospel comes when we have a genuine care for people's welfare.

Why? Because if we have a genuine care for people, we are not just concerned at their here and now issues, but their spiritual welfare - and we would be doing a dis-service to them if we demonstrated care for people and left our faith out of it.

We are God's people, this is His Church, His work, His service, His gospel - these are the interests of Jesus Christ. I've done the commending bit - what about the challenge? We are blessed in this fellowship by people with gifts - practical gifts, pastoral gifts, spiritual gifts - gifts that we may be aware of and others who may be less aware of. All of them are there to serve the purposes of God which inevitably involves serving the needs of this fellowship and our community. There's years of experience in this fellowship. There are those that use them, there are those that don't for whatever reason The challenge I believe God wants to give us this evening

is this: who's interests are you serving - yours or those of Jesus Christ?

There are always the excuses:

I can't do this I haven't grown enough - you won't grow until you serve.

I can't do this because I want to minister in other ways - I'm sure YOU do - what about Jesus?

I can't serve ? I have my problems, I need to take time out. You'd be surprised how your problems sort themselves out when you serve.

I've got more important things to do in life and haven't got time. Really? Who's interests do you serve - yours or those of Jesus Christ.

Maybe next year - maybe when I sort this or that out.

I don't like the person that is leading it - they are cliquy - who are you serving ? them or Jesus Christ?

As you get your minds around who's interest you're serving, it kind of gets worse as we come to Epaphroditus.

Here was a man who came to deliver a letter and got ill. Interesting story this one as God choses not to heal him. Instead he gets an extended stay in Rome. We know it was a long time because there was enough time to get a message to Philippi and back in the meanwhile which would have taken months.

What was Epaphroditus' response to their worry and concern. Was he pleased that they took an interest in him. Glad he wasn't forgotten? What a pity he was laid up for months. Why was he the one to go to Rome - people wouldn't benefit from his presence and his ministry.

Paul says this:

He is anxious to see you all and is very upset because you had heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill and almost died. But God had pity on him, and not only on him but on me, too, and spared me an even greater sorrow.

He couldn't wait to get back because he was concerned for the worry HE had caused THEM! Here was a man who put his fellow saints before his own welfare. But Paul adds this:

Receive him, then, with joy, as a brother in the Lord. Show respect to all such people as he, 30 because he risked his life and nearly died for the sake of the work of Christ, in order to give me the help that you yourselves could not give.

He nearly died in their service to get to see Paul and deliver a letter with their help (money, clothes). I guess for many of us, to die in the service of the Lord is something we would entertain. How many potential martyrs here this evening?

But Epaphroditus wasn't a potential martyr here - he was a man so devoted to the people of God at Philippi and to Paul, that he was prepared to risk his health getting a message through.

He risked his life for the people of God. Who is prepared to die for the people of God here this evening. Who is prepared to serve the Lord for the benefit of God's people here. Astonishing but that is what Epaphroditus was prepared to do. He didn't call out for miraculous healing and quote some scripture about God healing all his sicknesses - he was quite ready to die if it meant getting that message through. What devotion!

We have come to this kind of position in other passages in the Word of God. The quality of our spiritual lives is determined by the quality of our relationships with others - how far are we prepared to go to serve the purposes of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are we prepared to die for them - not as martyrs - but just because we put their needs and them first.

I started the evening by asking you what you thought God's report might be on you if He gave you one now. We've had a challenge. Who's interests are we serving in our lives as God's people? Our own or God's? I'm sure we'd want to say God's - but the interests of Christ are serving others and serving others means putting our interests behind the needs of others and being prepared to risk ourselves - even our lives - if it will benefit them.

If that's the nature of our fellowship in the years to come, then I believe God will make that change in us and people will be drawn to faith in Christ as they see Jesus in our lives as we touch the lives of others.

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 22/3/03
© Mark Reid 2009
Scripture TEV unless otherwise stated.*

Challenging questions to think and pray about:

The Scriptures hold up as commendable folks who have a "genuine interest" in the welfare of other believers. How are you living that way? Find one or two ways to do so today. Ask Christ to help you do so for the right reason.

We are called to demonstrate this kind of Christ-like care regardless of the cost to ourselves (as Epaphroditus did). Consider the needs of someone else and how you might help meet them. Step out in faith and act.

We are called to bear one another's burdens and celebrate together even (and especially) in the midst of suffering. Consider whose burden you might share this week. How can you grieve together? How can you celebrate?