

EXTRA-ORDINARY PEOPLE

SERIES: PHILIPPIANS

by Steve Zeisler

Recently a friend gave me an unusual recommendation for a movie. He told me how much he enjoyed seeing the film, but he did not talk about the plot, the cinematography or the theme. What he did talk about was the characters, A vital intimacy was achieved between the characters in the movie and people in the audience, he said. He was so moved by the characters he said he would like to see the movie a second time so he could spend more time with them.

As I considered that statement, I couldn't help thinking how appropriate such a word would be if it were spoken about Christians. The Lord can create in us a kind of vital, fascinating personality which makes others long to be around us, to know more about how we operate, why we are as we are, what makes us tick, etc.

In the past four weeks we have introduced a number of people from this platform. On the first Sunday in December we introduced two handsome, vigorous young men. The first was a brand new father, the other a convicted child molester who had just been released from prison in Vacaville, California, where he had come to know Christ. These two men urged us to be concerned about the plight of prisoners in California's vile penal institutions. They were fascinating, interesting people who shared a common concern, and their word moved many of us to share their concern.

We have also introduced two other men--Charlie Luce and Don Broesamle--who have been called by God to be elders of this church. Don is a young businessman and Charlie has recently retired from business. As I have gotten to know them I have found them to be dedicated, enthusiastic men who have a great deal to offer. If their lives were portrayed on the screen, I would want to go back to the theater to spend some more time with them.

On another Sunday we introduced a grandmother who is concerned about the plight of unmarried women who have gotten pregnant. She awakened us to the needs of such young women--young girls in some instances--and allowed us to see her concern for their needs.

On another occasion we commissioned a young couple to go to Eugene, Oregon, for a Bible teaching ministry in a new school there; and we commissioned another young couple to go to Sicily for a ministry of church planting and evangelism. So in recent weeks we have had a chance to meet some fascinating people whose lives stand for something, people who are committed to serving the Lord. Wouldn't it be great if Hollywood would make movies of the lives of such people?

In the passage of Scripture from the hook of Philippians which we will be looking at this morning we will be meeting three more fascinating individuals. As we focus our attention on their personalities, we will be able to gather up the ideas and the themes of the passage under study. The first individual we will meet is the author of the book, the apostle Paul. This delightful letter contains some of the most personal and engaging references to Paul's life, to his heart, his thinking, his prayers and his wrestlings with God in all the letters of the New Testament. We will meet him, as ABC Sports would say, "up close and personal."

The second man we are going to meet is Timothy, whom Paul identifies as his child: “Timothy served like a child serving his father,” we are told, The third man is Epaphroditus, who is identified for us as someone who “came close to death” in the service of the Lord. Think about these men as we read, beginning at Philippians 2:12-30:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. And you too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

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. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. Therefore 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. But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. 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.

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. Therefore receive him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

In this section of Scripture, Paul is speaking as an apostle, as a leader commissioned by Christ to direct the church, He uses the word “obey”: “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed...now much more.” Given his commission, Paul has the right to speak commandments to the church.

The verses I just read complete a section of Scripture which began with Philippians 1:27. In that section a series of commandments is given to the church in order to flesh out the command, first mentioned in Philippians 1:27, to “conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.” Our behavior, our manner of life, is to be worthy of the great message of salvation in Christ. Having said that, Paul goes on to ask, “What does that mean practically? What does that include in terms of specific directives?” So Philippians 2:12 falls under this heading of specifics; Paul is continuing to tell us how to live. (Phil. 2:12 hearkens back to Phil. 1:27 as well in its insistence that these believers should obey whether or not Paul is present to oversee them). The commandment of Scripture to us at this point, spoken by the apostle, is, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

As we look at Paul’s life this morning it will help us to focus on these commandments first. “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work within you,” Scripture tells us. The great accomplishment of Jesus on the cross has been applied to your lives, if you are Christians. We are new creatures in Christ if we have been born again into the family of God. The commandment of Scripture here is to see that the transformation that has been made

inside us--the renewal that has taken place in our spirit--has worked into our experience--that we act and live as people who are saved and that our behavior makes it obvious that salvation, freedom, rescue from death and darkness has occurred in our lives.

But we are to work out this salvation, we are told, "with fear and trembling." This same God who exalted Jesus from the depths of death on the cross to "the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9-11) is at work within us. Our obedience is to that exalted Lord. The One who is bringing about the working out of our salvation is the same powerful, awesome God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him a name which is above every name.

There is nothing ordinary, matter-of-fact or commonplace about the Christian life you and I are called to live. Any act or function we perform, no matter how mundane it may seem, really has nothing ordinary about it. We ought to be filled with a sense of awe, a sense of trembling respect every time we consider the fact that God himself is at work within us. Our struggle to obey and to understand ourselves is filled up with the work of God making us willing to obey him, empowering us, giving us the strength to do what he makes us willing to do.

We live in an age of movie super heroes, the first and most famous of whom, probably, is Superman. Every super hero takes on one element of the Superman story, and that is that Superman has another identity, that of Clark Kent, the mild mannered reporter who wears horn-rimmed glasses, a conservative suit, and has a dumpy look on his face. Clark Kent fumbles his way through life; he is always on the periphery of the excitement; he never manages to handle situations properly. But everybody knows that underneath that business suit someone powerful, someone more dramatic and wonderful resides.

In some sense the same thing ought to be true of us in our relationship with Christ. We may look ordinary, we may look exactly like we did before we came to Christ, we may be people who always find ourselves on the periphery of things, we may not be highly respected in the community. Yet if we see ourselves as we should, we ought to be filled with a sense of awe as we consider the fact that God himself is at work within us, changing our hearts so that we choose what is right, empowering us to *do* what is right. We are not ordinary, commonplace nobodies.

Let us consider the appeal of Scripture at a number of different points in this regard. We are told in Ephesians, "Don't be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit." Don't allow yourself to be controlled by anything as base as alcohol, drugs, or any other intoxicant. Rather, be filled with the Spirit of God himself.

In the solemn scene in Acts, when Ananias and Sapphira held back a portion of the money they received from the sale of their property, Peter's indictment was, "You have not lied to man but to God. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you take the Lord God with you. Your lies are an affront to God, not to men."

First Corinthians says that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul asks the profound question, "How can I possibly consider joining the members of Christ's body to a prostitute, taking the Holy Spirit of God with me into that enterprise?" Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out," We ought to have that kind of respect--that kind of fear and trembling--about the lives we live, because we know that God himself, the same One who exalted Jesus to the heights, is present in us, is at work in us, is making changes in us. That is the first commandment here: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling because God is at work within you."

In Philippians 2:14 we have another command: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world." Grumbling and complaining are the opposites of fear and trembling. Obedience which has a sense of self-centered carping, moaning, disputing, rationalizing and blaming is the

very opposite of obedience which has a sense of the greatness of the work of God going on inside of you. “Do everything without grumbling or disputing,” we are told.

So in Philippians 2:12-13, we are told that we ought to be obedient because God himself is at work in us, but the backdrop given for the command to obedience in verse 14 is the darkness of the world: “Do everything without grumbling or disputing that you may prove yourselves to be something glorious, blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a dark and perverse generation.” Being the kind of people who receive the call of God, who act as we ought to act, who honor the Lord in our lives, makes us so utterly different to those around it is as if we were bright stars in the midst of a dark, moonless night.

Have you ever observed the Milky Way from the darkness of the Sierras, without any interference from any other source of light? Then you have seen how gloriously bright the stars are. Our wholehearted, loving obedience to Christ makes us as beautiful as that, with a contrast to the darkness of the world around as pronounced as that. On the one hand our call is to obey God out of a sense of utter respect for the greatness of the Lord who is at work in us; on the other hand it is with a sense of the dramatic difference that will be made in our lives which are as lights in the world compared to the darkness of the generation in which we live.

Most people have religious habits or some kind of religious affiliation that dates back to their youth. It is sad that for most of the people in this world, religion becomes a habit, a routine, one of the drawers in the bureau of life that is occasionally opened and paid attention to, then shut again as others are opened. The spiritual life of so many has a very ordinary quality about it. That is exactly the opposite of the thrust of this passage. There is nothing ordinary about serving Christ. Such service ought to create in us a recognition that God himself is at work in us, and that we are being made as glorious as lights against the dark sky. Such a life ought to have a sense of drama and beauty about it.

The advertising world has caught something of the same thinking in a certain beer commercial which is popular today in this part of the United States. What could be more ordinary or commonplace than water? Yet, if water comes from “artesian,” if water has this mysterious quality in its origin, if it is touched by elfin creatures which no one can see or understand, then it becomes dramatic; we all ought to rush out and buy this product because of the dramatic origin of this special water.

Religion has become a commonplace, routine thing to too many people. Scripture tells us that that kind of thinking is wrong. Religion is remarkable, dramatic and awesome in its origin. Spiritual life is not ordinary, it is not commonplace--we see that in the commands of the apostle Paul in this section of Scripture.

But what of the man who teaches us these things? Who is the individual who is telling us about this kind of Christianity? It would have the same force if it were given to us by a black-robed judicial figure. It would still be true; it would still be the Word of God. If it were delivered by an angel with a flaming sword it would still carry the same force. But it is not. It is given to us by a man who deeply loved the people to whom he wrote. He wrestled with the same issues they wrestled with; he prayed for the people he wrote to; he believed the things he said.

There is an interesting discussion here, beginning in Philippians 2:16, where Paul talks about what the Philippian people believed and his own experience. In verse 16 he says, “Hold fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.” What he is saying here is, “Your obedience to the truth, your growth in Christ, matters totally to me in terms of my own sense of well-being, my own sense of value in having accomplished something. If you walk with the Lord, if you ‘hold fast the word of God,’ then I will be given cause to glory in the day of Christ. My sense of value in some way is caught up with how thoroughly you grasp the truth and are committed to it.” Then Paul turns around and says in Philippians 2:17, “But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all.”

In Numbers 28:6-8 the Jews were ordered to pour out a drink as part of the ceremony in the offering of the sacrifice. The heart of what was going on in the sacrifice was that an animal was killed, then burned as an offering to God. But as a kind of adornment to it, as an attendant beautifier, the Jews were told to pour out a libation. Paul is saying here, "My life may be forfeit; my life may be poured out. I might be condemned to die when I go before Caesar to have my fate decided, but if my life is poured out as a way of honoring and beautifying your faith, then I rejoice. Philippians, your faith is central; it is the sacrifice. If I can in any way act as a beautifying, adorning element to what God is doing in you, I rejoice." It is a way of playing second fiddle, in a sense, to what God is doing in them, In the same way that a gourmet would choose the best china, the best crystal and the best silverware to adorn a quality meal, Paul is saying, "I would be glad to be the libation that is poured out in the 'sacrifice and service of your faith.' What God is doing with you is central."

There is a reciprocal quality in this. On the one hand, Paul is saying of the Philippians, "If you 'hold fast the word of life' it will be a cause for me to glory. In the day of Christ I will be able to hold my head high and rejoice at what God has done," On the other hand he is saying, "I might pour out my life so that you will receive the central place; your faith, 'the sacrifice and service of your faith', can receive the high, honorable place and lam an adornment by the side." There is a reciprocal quality involved. The apostle Paul loved his church and the church obeyed its leader and honored him. Paul cared about these people. He said he would be glad to give up his life, if that was required, as a way of honoring what God was doing with them. If Hollywood could capture on film this man's life--the people he knew, the tenacity with which he believed and the depth with which he loved--we would find ourselves longing for the movie to go on and on; we would wish we could go back to the theater and spend more time with such a man,

What about the other two men identified in this passage, Timothy and Epaphroditus? They are more like us. They did not have Paul's genius, perhaps, his stamina and his apostolic calling. They were not the powerful, brilliant kind of people their mentor was. We know from this and other passages that they were sick, they were fearful at times, they were uncertain at other points. (There is probably even a reference here to Epaphroditus' homesickness.) But if we could see these two men and know them as they really were we would long to know them better. These are fascinating people whose lives counted for something, people we would like to emulate. The world will be burned up, this age will end, hut the words of Scripture will last forever. These two men receive a glorious commendation in Scripture that will forever stand against their names. When you meet them in glory you will be able to say that you knew about the honorable commendation given to them in the pages of Scripture. Look at what is said about Timothy;

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. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely lie concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father.

By implication we are told that Timothy served the interests of Christ first, setting aside his own desires, unlike all the others. What a remarkable statement! What a great epitaph that would have been for him: "A man who served Christ first."

What about Epaphroditus? Look at Philippians 2:29:

Therefore receive him in the lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

Epaphroditus risked his life for the cause of Christ. Travel in these days was difficult and dangerous. We know that Epaphroditus contacted an illness in Rome. This could have been anyone of a dozen that have since been conquered by modern medicine and which we no longer have to worry about. These people lived uprooted lives. They were outcasts in society, denied by their heritage in many instances when they came to Christ. Finally, we are told, Epaphroditus “risked his life in service to Christ.” His epitaph might be the statement in Philippians 2:29, “Hold this man in high regard.”

Again, if we could see these men’s lives portrayed on the screen we would wish to go back into the theater and spend more time with them.

What about us? Earlier we talked about the concern a number in this congregation feel and are acting upon for prisoners in the California prison system, for women who are facing crisis pregnancies, for the work of evangelism in Sicily, for the teaching of the Scriptures in Oregon, for the hard work of preaching and teaching that Paul tells Timothy is required of those who have taken up the responsibility to elder the church. What of those who teach in the Sunday Schools, who minister to children, who lead in worship, who evangelize this community, who reach out to the downtrodden and hurting, those who pray? Do you know people in this congregation who ought to be held in high regard? Do you know people whose lives have been spent in the furtherance of the gospel, who are more interested in the affairs of Christ than in their own personal interests, people in this congregation who, if their lives were portrayed on the screen, would make us long to go back into the theater to spend more time with them? There are people like that in this congregation.

These men in this passage in Philippians should serve as a challenge to us to examine ourselves. If Scripture was being written about us, would it say of us, “Hold men and women like this in high regard”?

Lord, thank you for the challenge of these servants’ lives; they lived for something that was worth living for. We ask that you will make us people whose lives will be found honorable, people whom others can hold in high regard. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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