

**Pulling Together:**

**The Joy of Serving and Growing Together in the Gospel**

**The Journey of Joy in Christ**

A Series in the Book of Philippians

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In rowing, there is something rare and beautiful called “swing.” It happens only when all the rowers pull together in such perfect unison that their movements become one as their arms, knees, backs, and wrists are all synchronized. In that moment, the boat glides across the water effortlessly, as if alive, and the exertion of rowing, which brings exhaustion, gives way to exhilaration. That’s a picture of what happens when the body of Christ pulls together in the joy of serving and growing together in the gospel. When we move together in this way, the church becomes a healthy, holy, fully functional family of God.

This is the vision Paul casts in Philippians 2, where he not only points to Jesus as the ultimate model of humility and service (vv. 5-11), but also presents Timothy and Epaphroditus as living illustrations of Christlike love, sacrifice, and joy (vv. 19-30). Much of Christian character is “caught as well as taught,” which is why role models matter so deeply in our walk with Christ. Paul shows us that when believers embody the mind of Christ and pull together in the gospel, the result is joy that overflows in service and the maturity of the saints.

**What are the traits of mature believers who serve and grow together in the gospel?**

**Traits of spiritual maturity demonstrated in Timothy’s life                      2:19-24**

**1. Concerned for people’s growth                      2:19-20**

Paul points to Timothy as an example of spiritual maturity. Though still young, Timothy was marked by depth, health, and holiness. His very name means “one who honors God,” and his life reflected that reality through a pattern of genuine concern for people. Timothy’s growth did not happen in isolation. Paul invested deeply in him by first meeting him on his second missionary journey, recognizing his potential, and enlisting him as a co-laborer (Acts 16:1-3). Like a spiritual father, Paul disciplined Timothy by engaging him, modeling the Christian life before him, encouraging him in his faith, and entrusting him with ministry responsibility. God often works this way as He shapes us through the influence of others who disciple, mentor, and encourage us along the way. This is at the heart of Jesus’s Great Commission “to make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-20).

**discipleship:** the intentional and relational process of maturing Christ-centered believers and mobilizing them for ministry

Paul commends Timothy for being “genuinely concerned for your welfare.” The Greek word conveys a profound, heartfelt burden, not a superficial interest. Timothy carried the Philippians in his heart, sharing Paul’s gospel priorities and Christlike affection for the church. Paul even calls him a “kindred spirit”—literally “equal-souled”—because Timothy shared his thoughts, desires, and direction in the

ministry. Like Paul, Timothy prayed for the church, longed for their growth, and loved them with the affection of Christ (Phil. 1:3–8). This kind of genuine care is a mark of true spiritual maturity. Mature believers do not live self-absorbed lives; instead, they reflect the heart of Christ by showing a deep concern for the Christ-centered spiritual growth of others.

## **2. Committed to Christ's interests**

**2:21-24**

In a world where many sought their own agendas, Timothy stood out as a rare example of selfless devotion. Paul commended him as one who consistently pursued the interests of Christ Jesus rather than his own. Like a son serving with his father, Timothy's life and ministry had been tested and proven over time, giving Paul great confidence to entrust him with important responsibilities. He was dependable, disciplined, and devoted to the work of Christ and the care of His church. Unlike most who asked, "What do I want?" Timothy's question was, "Lord, what do You want?" His example reminds us that spiritual maturity is seen when we shift from self-interest to Christ's interests, entrusting our plans to the Lord and faithfully serving where He places us.

Timothy's proven character was forged through discipleship and trials. Paul trained him step by step, much like Christ did with His own disciples—teaching, modeling, encouraging, and then entrusting him with ministry opportunities. Over the years, Paul sent Timothy to encourage persecuted churches, strengthen believers across Macedonia and Greece, and shepherd the strategic church in Ephesus. His faithfulness in the face of difficulty displayed the refining work of God in his life, producing a tested and trustworthy character. This is how discipleship works: roots must grow deep before branches spread wide and bear much fruit. Maturing believers today are called to follow the same path by seeking Christ's interests above comfort or recognition, persevering through challenges, learning from mentors, and investing in others. In doing so, our lives, like Timothy's, grow deep in the rich soil of Christ and His word and reach out in serving Christ in His kingdom work in this world.

## **Traits of spiritual maturity demonstrated in Epaphroditus's life**

**2:25-30**

### **3. Capable of serving**

**2:25**

Epaphroditus stands as another living illustration of maturity in Christ. His life shows that spiritual growth is not measured by titles, degrees, or recognition but by a consistent daily walk that reflects Christ's character. Although his name was linked to Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of love and beauty, the gospel transformed his story. The one "belonging to Aphrodite" became a "lover of God." He believed in Christ, repented of sin, and was united with Him in new life. His unchanged name reminds us that the world may still identify us by our past, but in Christ, our eternity and identity are completely transformed. Epaphroditus became a faithful servant, carrying financial support from the Philippians to Paul and remaining with him in prison to care for his physical and personal needs. His life testifies to the power of the gospel to reshape character and redirect a person's purpose for God's glory.

Paul honors Epaphroditus by describing him with five titles that reveal traits of spiritual maturity. He was a "brother," displaying the deep love and encouragement of spiritual family. He was a "fellow worker," laboring side by side in gospel ministry as Paul's teammate, not his assistant. He was a "fellow soldier,"

faithfully standing firm in the spiritual battle. He was a “messenger,” representing the Philippians and carrying their gift to Paul. Finally, he was a “minister,” humbly meeting practical needs in quiet service. Each title reflects a different facet of Christlike maturity—family love, gospel partnership, spiritual courage, missional faithfulness, and humble service. Epaphroditus did not seek the spotlight; he simply lived out consistent devotion to Christ. His life reminds us that true maturity is not found in seeking recognition but in faithfully serving others with humility and perseverance.

#### 4. Characterized by love and devotion

2:26-30

Epaphroditus also displayed a remarkable devotion and selfless concern for others. Even while gravely ill, his thoughts were not fixed on his own suffering but on the Philippians’ distress over him. Paul says he was “longing for you all” and “distressed,” which is a word also used to describe Jesus’ anguish in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37). His deep love for the church mirrored Christ’s own compassion, showing that genuine love looks outward, not inward. Epaphroditus served faithfully to the point of illness, nearly dying in his efforts to care for Paul and represent the Philippians. Although the precise nature of his ailment is not indicated, it may have originated with the harsh conditions of ancient travel, where diseases like malaria and typhoid were common. Paul identified that his illness was directly tied to the risks of his ministry. Yet God showed mercy in sparing Epaphroditus, and Paul rejoiced at the prospect of sending him back, knowing his return would encourage and strengthen the Philippian believers. His example reminds us that what is done faithfully for Christ, even in the background, is honored by God and all who value the advancement of His kingdom.

Paul exhorts the church to “receive him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard.” Epaphroditus’ devotion was costly as he “risked his life,” literally “gambled” it, by caring for Paul in prison and associating with this uncompromising ambassador of the faith. His example teaches us that serving Christ often requires courage, sacrifice, and risk. Mature believers demonstrate this same love and devotion in everyday ways, such as mentoring someone, visiting the sick, investing in children, leading a group, opening their homes, or quietly meeting needs without seeking recognition. Epaphroditus embodied willing sacrifice and shared joy. His life illustrates that spiritual maturity is not measured by status but by devotion to Christ and love for His people. When believers pull together in humble service and a dedication to discipleship, the church experiences the joy of fellowship and partnership of the gospel (1:5). Our legacy becomes a life poured out for God’s glory, others’ growth and good, and the joy of knowing Christ.

#### **The joy of knowing Jesus leads to the joy of serving and growing together in the gospel.**

**Passage Investigation:** Prayerfully engage with the passage by reading it multiple times. Ask, “*What is this saying?*” and “*Why did God have this recorded?*” Look for the natural, normal meaning of the words and phrases and identify the meaning in context. **Write down your observations** about what the passage reveals about God, Christ, His kingdom, humanity, sin, the gospel, trials, and faith. Ask key questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Let your investigation lead to a deeper understanding and love for God and His word.

**LIFE Application: Questions for our journey of joy in living out the LIFE we have in Christ**  
(Loving God, Investing in others, Following His word, and Engaging our world)

1. Paul describes Timothy as “genuinely concerned” for others’ welfare. Who has modeled this kind of Christlike concern in your life, and how can you reflect that same concern toward others this week?
2. Timothy consistently sought the interests of Christ instead of his own. What practical steps can you take to shift from asking, “*What do I want?*” to “*Lord, what do You want?*” in your daily decisions?
3. Epaphroditus shows us that spiritual maturity is not about titles but about faithfulness in service. In what unseen or humble ways are you serving, or considering to serve, Christ and His people?
4. Paul calls Epaphroditus a brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, and minister. Which of these descriptions do you most identify with right now, and which do you sense God wants to grow in your life?
5. Epaphroditus risked his life for the gospel and was honored for his devotion. What are some ways God might be calling you to take risks—whether with your time, resources, or reputation—for the sake of Christ and His church?
6. Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus each modeled different traits of maturity. What are some ways Christians manifest their faith in Jesus Christ that encourage other people? What legacy are you building today?