

# Two Men Worthy of Imitation

By Steve Burchett



The NBA's annual slam dunk contest was epic when I was a boy. It's hard to imagine it getting better than the immense power of Dominique Wilkins versus the insane athleticism of Michael Jordan! They were spectacular examples for me. Of course, I don't mean I could dunk a basketball on a regulation hoop, but I could on the miniature version out in my garage with the tiny basketball that I could palm just like the pros. It's impossible

to calculate the number of hours I spent all by myself, becoming Michael Jordan (never Dominique!).

In Philippians 2, Paul is addressing a disunity problem in the church in Philippi. He says that the pathway to unity requires humility (v. 3), charity (v. 4; “look...to the interests of others), and Christology (vv. 5-11) — a deep reflection on Christ and his humble incarnation and selfless death which demonstrates the mindset that the Philippians were to have toward one another (v. 5). After charging the Philippians to pursue this way of Christ in the strength that God supplies in order to shine as lights in the dark, lost world (vv. 12-18), he tells the Philippians, “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you” (v. 19). At first, this just sounds like logistics, and might seem to be located at the wrong place in the letter. Why not save the itinerary for the final greetings? But by placing this here about Timothy, and then by speaking immediately about Epaphroditus, Paul was saying, “Here are a couple of slam dunk champions to imitate.” In other words, Paul says to the Philippians (and us), “Here are two men who live out what I've been calling you to; here are two humble servants of God's people who consider others better than themselves and who look to the interests of others.”

How did Timothy and Epaphroditus model a Christlike mindset and demeanor? *First, they were active servants.* Saying “active servants” is redundant because if someone is serving, he is automatically “active.” But here's my point: we can call ourselves servants, and we might really like discussions and Bible studies on serving, but servants get going; they get moving; as one pastor says, they “do stuff.” So in Philippians 2:19-30, Paul indicates that Timothy and Epaphroditus were very engaged in the Lord's work — traveling; serving Paul and others; exhausting themselves in kingdom matters.

You might think, “Of course these men were very engaged in this kind of Christlikeness. They had a distinct calling to serve as helpers of the Apostle Paul!” That is true in one sense,

but remember that Paul writes of them as illustrations for all of the believers in Philippi to imitate (cf. 3:17). There is to be no such thing as an inactive believer. Remember Peter's exhortation regarding spiritual gifts: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve on another, as good stewards of God's varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10). It's time to move beyond mere church attendance to considering how to get more engaged in serving others in the church.

*Second, the mindset of Christ is seen in Timothy and Epaphroditus through their genuine concern for those they served.* As Paul writes of sending Timothy to the Philippians, he says, “I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare” (2:20). Timothy had a sincere, heartfelt interest in the well-being of others. And you hear of this same kind of loving concern from what is said about Epaphroditus (who was from Philippi). Paul tells the Philippians that he “has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill” (v. 26).

These two were selfless men, not interested in self-promotion or recognition. Their lives, once again, speak to us. May God deliver us from serving others in order to impress onlookers, or in order to be seen as someone pretty great and “so critical” to the church. May God help us to serve one another in our churches with hearts that hurt for others and rejoice to see them thrive. What a sad legacy it would be if they say of you, “He sought his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (v. 21).

*Finally, Timothy and Epaphroditus show us the mindset and demeanor of Christ through their sacrificial service of others.* Think of Timothy. He was in Rome serving Paul while he was under house arrest. And Paul was going to send Timothy on the long, sometimes treacherous trip back to Philippi. Paul even reminds the Philippians, “But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel” (v. 22). Timothy proved himself as a hard worker and a selfless, submissive helper of Paul. I remember splitting wood with my dad when I was a boy. He did the “main” work of slicing the wood on the gas-powered splitter, but I had an important role. I sacrificed my time (not by choice!) to help push the logs on the splitter and then to stack the wood. So with Paul and Timothy, we know the Apostle did the main work, but the Philippians had seen Timothy stacking the wood — playing his role, sacrificing his time, filling in the ministry gaps.

And what about Epaphroditus? Much is said about his sacrificial spirit in these verses, but notice just verse 30, “(H)e nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.” Both of these men are beautiful illustrations for the kind of love and self-forgetfulness and sacrificial, Christlike demeanor we should have toward one another in the church.

When believers commit to this kind of Christlike, Timothy-like, Epaphroditus-like humility and love in the body, unity is almost automatic.

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