

Embracing the Joy of Risk

Philippians 2:25-30

"Honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

Introduction: In 1934, a young entrepreneur and dreamer stood before his fledgling company and for four hours used his mastery of story telling to convince everyone that they were going to do something that had never been done before in the world: create a feature length animated film. They had success in the past with shorts called the *Silly Symphonies* and *Three Little Pigs*, but this was something categorically different. He would leverage the earnings and reputation of company as well as his own house on this venture. Those on the outside looking in were skeptical and mocking, calling the project "Disney's Folly". The movie is called *Snow White*, and it ended up being one of the most profitable movies ever produced (adjusted for inflation), launching the Disney brand into the stratosphere and cementing the genius of Walt Disney, as well as the continued Midas touch of the company through present day.

We live in a day where we try to minimize risk as much as we can. We have companies that will help manage our risk, giving strategies how to recognize, assess, mitigate, and manage risk in business and life. We have probability equations that allow certain decisions to be made to see how to minimize loss and lower the opportunity costs of doing things. Some of us are bigger risk takers than others, but inherently we all will only risk to a point. When you have nothing to lose, you are willing to risk it all.

When you have much to lose, risk assessment becomes much more important.

Risk is inherent to our life with Christ, since the nature of the gospel calls us to recognize we are citizens of another place and that this world is not our home. **John Piper** said it this way in his book *Don't Waste Your Life*:

"If our single, all-embracing passion is to make much of Christ in life and death, and if the life that magnifies him most is the life of costly love, **then life is risk, and risk is right.** To run from it is to waste your life."

Risk is defined as an action that exposes you to the **possibility of loss or injury**. It means that we are willing to lose what is precious to us in this life. It does not mean heroism desire for adventure, courageous self-reliance, or efforts to earn God's favor. *"It is a childlike faith in the triumph of God's love, that on the other side of all our risks, for the sake of righteousness, God will still be holding us. We will be eternally satisfied in him. Nothing will have been wasted."*

This morning we want continue to press down and in on the realities of the gospel in our lives. We have seen (and will continue to see), that in the gospel, our lives are **secure**, meaning we truly do not have to fear this world since even death brings about our greatest joy in being with and seeing Christ (1:21). The expectation is that we will **grow**, and be proactive in that pursuit, since God is at work in us to will and to work for His good pleasure (1:25; 2:12-13). We also can rise above as we walk through any circumstance, pain, suffering, or sorrow since we have **JOY** that will not be taken away and transcends those things outside of us. We will go on to see that all of these realities mean that walking in the gospel is not only right, it is **BETTER** than anything else that we could try, any other pseudo solution we would try.

Embracing risk leads to the service of others (25-28)

*"I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, **near to death**. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious."*

The person: *Epaphroditus*

We often need illustrations to understand what this all looks like in our daily lives, so Paul gave **4 clear examples of gospel living**. The first is the ultimate example, and that was **Christ Himself** (2:5-11), who was willing to take on the form of man, humble Himself as a servant, live on this earth as a servant, and die a death on a cross reserved for common criminals. The second was **Paul**, who was willing to be poured out as a drink offering for the faith of the church (2:17-18). Paul was willing to give up his life so that the church would have joy in the Lord and be acceptable to Him. The third was **Timothy**, of whom Paul said he had no one else like, who was willing to give up family, a home, a "normal" life in order to serve Paul and the cause of the gospel (2:19-24). Timothy showed what it truly meant to seek the interests of others above his own.

Now Paul comes to the fourth and final illustration of what it looks like to live a gospel driven life as a citizen of heaven. NOTE: He moves from Christ, the ultimate, to Paul, an apostle, to Timothy, a pastor/elder, and now to **Epaphroditus**, who we know very little about apart from this letter. Epaphroditus was a layman, a 'normal' member of the church, and yet Paul says to stand up and cheer this type of man, because he lived a life that exemplified what it means to live a gospel driven life.

Paul addresses Epaphroditus with three terms that denoted his character and worth to Paul (my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier) and two to show the special responsibilities he had from the Philippian church that sent him (your messenger, your minister to my need).

The work: *Messenger and Minister*

The church sent him to Rome in order to bring Paul money that he needed for food, clothing, etc. (Phil. 4:10-20). Paul wanted to show the fact of their close and personal relationship, as his first three terms went from general to specific.

My Brother – showed they were not only fellow children of God, but that they had developed a friendship as they served the Lord together

My Fellow Worker – He was a *co-worker* with God in Christ of Paul for the Christian community

My Fellow Soldier – they fought together, side by side, for faith in the gospel and faced adversities and suffering together

He was specifically sent as a **Messenger and Minister** to minister to Paul's needs, not only carrying whatever monetary gift and message from the church to Paul, but also the indefinite stay to care for any other need Paul would have in his personal life and ministry while imprisoned in Rome.

The situation: *He's coming back but has not failed*

Somewhere along the way in his trip, Epaphroditus got sick, contracting something that meant the high possibility of death. That news got back to the church at Philippi, and though Epaphroditus recovered

by the time he got to Paul, the church was obviously concerned with the news they had and the information they could not gain.

He longed for them – denoted an intense longing or yearning, most likely for a considerable amount of time; Epaphroditus was faithful to his call but had fond affection for those back at home

He was distressed for them – this is the same word that was used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37; Mk 14:33); this was a result of the fact that the church heard that he had been ill, possibly from a companion who had left to go back while on the trip, but had not heard that anything had been resolved; this weighed heavy on him

Mercy to heal Epaphroditus – he was ill, a literal ‘neighbor of death’; This was not a common cold or something that could be healed by normal means. God had to intervene in order for him to live

Mercy on Paul – Paul was spared greater sorrow, literally sorrow upon sorrow, for though he knew there was hope for those who died in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13), he would mourn not only the loss of a dear friend, but the fact that it would negatively impact the church at Philippi. Paul shows his theology in practice, that He does not expect God to always heal, but is grateful when His mercy is shown.

Embracing risk is worthy of honor (29)

*So receive him in the Lord, with all joy, and **honor such men.***

Reason for joy

They were to rejoice when they saw him, since they would not have expected to see him. They should not look down on him or think less of him, but instead, rejoice that the friend they heard was so deathly ill was alive, standing in front of them. Paul said the two fold reason for his sending him back was joy for them, and less sorrow and concern for Paul. They were to take him in with the qualifier “in the Lord”, understanding that He comes in the will and hope of the Lord

This back and forth between the church, Paul, and Epaphroditus reminds us of a key principle. For all parties, relationship with each other trumped financial care. They were so tied relationally into each other that there was real joy and real sorrow in the circumstances they found themselves. Far too often our experience in the church is with a few friends, or with the program we get to be a part of, or the service we attend. Instead, we need to view our church family as our born into family, knit together, feeling the pain of loss and the joy of victory, and it should hurt to be out of that kind of fellowship. The only way to get there is to view each other through the lens of the gospel, not our own feelings and sensibilities.

Counterintuitive recognition

Who do we usually hold in high regard or honor?

Do we follow the cult of personality? Do we look for someone who is popular and has the right look? Paul said to honor this normal man. Scripture calls us to honor people not based on their gifts and talents, but their use of them and obedience.

1 Corinthians 16:15-18 - Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), ¹⁶ that you also be in **subjection** to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. I **rejoice** at

the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made us for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. **Give recognition to such people.**

We need to honor and submit ourselves to those who live out what the gospel calls us to. The word honor means treat as valuable, precious, of high regard. Do we honor men based on the right judgment system?

He came close to death for the work of Christ

He came **me, cri qana, tou**, which means ‘to the point of death’

Jesus came **me, cri qana, tou** in Phil. 2:8, which means Jesus came to the ‘point of death’ even death on a cross. This provides a bookend to this section, and also shows the emphasis that Paul is making. They both came to the point of death in obedience to the Father, the only difference was God chose to have mercy on Epaphroditus, and allowed Christ to go to the cross.

The ‘work of Christ’ meant that Epaphroditus was a partner in the work of the gospel (Phil. 1:5).

Sometimes, doing the work of Christ is not safe. Think back in Scripture what it took those who were true servants of the gospel:

- Queen Esther entering into going into the king to save her people, knowing that it could cost her life: “Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish (Esther 4:16)
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abenego who believed God would deliver them from the fiery furnace, but even if He did not, they would still not bow to the idol set up (Daniel 3:16-18)
- Paul going into Jerusalem in order to fulfill his mission the poor there. Even when the prophet Agabus told him that he would suffer if he went, Paul’s response was “What are you doing, weeping and breasting my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 21:13) This trip did lead him into imprisonment and eventually into the jail at Rome. This was Paul’s mode of operation for all of his ministry. The Holy Spirit testified to Paul that imprisonment and afflictions awaited him in every city (Acts 20:23). But he understood the promise of God.

2 Corinthians 4:17 - For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,

- Jesus Himself said, “Remember the world that I said to you: ‘a servant is not greater than his master’. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you

Think about men and women of our time who gave their life:

- David Brainerd – died at 29 years old, 5 months; though he was only a believer for 4 years, ministered for 4 years to the Indian tribes of the East Coast, and there are hundreds of graves now that have people who will not taste eternal torment, as well as thousands of missionaries who have been inspired by his story

- Jacob Cassel - Was the first American missionary sent overseas from our Grace churches, and through his life and death, reached thousands in the Central African Republic and where thousands of churches today trace their lineage back to this risk driven faith.
- John Chau - Inspired by men like Jim Elliot, was willing to be trained in linguistics and cross cultural missions in order to reach the people of North Sentinel Island, a tiny island off the coast of India. He planned, prayed, risked, and died a couple of weeks ago in the attempt to bring the gospel to a group that has not yet heard of Jesus.

The call of the gospel is not a safe call. It is a call to risk. A call to lay down our lives: "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.³⁹ "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. (**Matthew 10:38-39**)

Are we a church that seeks safety first, that views risk management of the Christian life as a primary goal, or are we willing to say that the gospel may cost our lives. It may cost some of us our literal life, knowing that in the end even family members will kill those who believe (Luke 21:16). For the rest, it will daily cost us to live out the gospel. It will cost a life that says my life is not my own, but I have been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19-20). It will mean a **risk of loss** --- a loss of comfort, control, and status quo. It means we are willing to be stretched, to serve when it means giving up personal time, or to do things that make us uncomfortable. **Risk** moves us out neutral because we know our life is not our own, we are secure in the work of Christ, and he desires for us to grow in our trust of Him.

Embracing risk exemplifies & magnifies Christ (30)

for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

Follows the example of Christ

The word that is used here of what Epaphroditus did with his life is literally the word "to gamble or hazard" one's life. The word meant to expose oneself to danger in the interest of friendship. It was used of fighters in arenas who exposed themselves to life threatening situations, and to merchants who for the sake of financial gain, exposed themselves to death. He was willing to be in a situation that for the sake of the gospel he could possibly die. The difference between this and normal gambling is that he knew the outcome. Gambling says the outcome is not certain. When we risk our lives, the outcome has already been decided (1 Peter 1:3-5)

This is exactly the idea behind each of the examples given: Jesus hazarded His life by **becoming a servant** and willingly embracing death. Paul risked by adding his life as a sacrifice on the faith of the Philippian church, willingly giving up his life, freedom, and cultural norms for the sake of others joy. Timothy gave up a family to serve Paul and the church, being stretched beyond his personality and willingly serving the needs of others in a way that was distinctive. Now Epaphroditus willingly risked his life by meeting the needs of Paul on behalf of the church who loved him.

In the years after this letter was written, a group of Christians came together and called themselves the "**Parabolani**", or "**The Gamblers**." They took Epaphroditus as their example and model, and began to visit prisoners and ministered to the sick, especially the outcasts who had dangerous communicable diseases who no one else would help (Barclay; Lightfoot). Because they were secure in Christ they knew they had nothing truly to risk, except not risking at all.

The downside of risk

That is what we must all consider this morning as we examine our own hearts, minds, and lives. We are called to a life of risk because we no longer have to gamble. We think through life not with a lens of **loss** alone but through a lens of **gain**. **When we risk little, we gain little.** And that does not simply mean in the harvest field of unbelievers, but in our daily life with our spouse, with our co-workers, with our spiritual disciplines, and service to one another. We risk because we are **secure**. We risk because we have **joy**, are called to **grow**, and have been given something far **better**. **The only real risk is when we are unwilling to risk our lives for Christ.**

Conclusion:

If we step back and look at Epaphroditus, it almost seems silly what he did. Maybe he could have stopped and recovered before he got to Paul. Maybe he could have gone back to Philippi and they could send someone else. Maybe he should have just got someone else to go. But he was unwilling to stop, and was willing to give up his life to aid Paul in the work of the gospel. Paul said that is the essence of gospel living. Before we pass this off as foolish living for those “out there” Christians, let’s remember the quote by Jim Elliot, who wrote in his journal before entering a career on the mission field.

“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”