

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Two Faithful Servants: Timothy and Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:19–30

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is the shape of genuine Christian service and the church's responsibility to recognize and honor it. Coming directly after the hymn of Christ's self-emptying and the call to look to the interests of others, Timothy and Epaphroditus are living illustrations of the mind of Christ. Paul also teaches, against every worldly scale of value, that the church is to honor those who serve sacrificially, not the famous or the powerful but the faithful. Be ready to lift up servanthood as the true mark of greatness in the kingdom, and to show the present, practical wisdom of the New Testament about church life.

This passage is also quietly formational in a way your class will feel. Most believers will never be apostles, but they can be Timothys and Epaphrodituses, people genuinely concerned for others, proven in long faithfulness, willing to spend themselves for the work of Christ. And every believer can learn to notice and honor such servants rather than overlooking them. The aim is to form both servants and the kind of community that values them.

So aim at both targets. Hold up Timothy and Epaphroditus so that your students aspire to their self-forgetful, sacrificial faithfulness, and at the same time teach the class to recognize, receive, and honor the faithful servants God has placed among them, in a way that reflects the kingdom rather than the world.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul commends Timothy as one who is “genuinely concerned for your welfare” and who seeks “the interests of Jesus Christ” rather than his own (2:20–21). What does this passage teach us marks out a truly faithful servant of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's commendation of Timothy is striking in its simplicity. What sets Timothy apart is not brilliance or charisma but genuine concern for others and a settled habit of seeking the interests of Jesus Christ above his own. This is the mind of Christ from the hymn, now embodied in a young man.

Notice the sad contrast in verse 21, they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Paul is not being cynical, he is being honest about how rare true selflessness is, even among

workers. Timothy stands out precisely because self-seeking is the default and self-forgetfulness is the exception.

Help students see that faithfulness is measured here by orientation, not by talent. The faithful servant is the one whose heart is turned toward Christ's interests and others' welfare. This is something God can form in any believer, regardless of gifting, because it is a matter of the heart's direction.

Draw out the link to the previous chapter. Paul had just commanded the church to look to the interests of others (2:4). Timothy is the proof that it can be done. He is what the command looks like when a real person lives it out over years.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Genuine concern for others as the mark of a faithful servant
- Seeking the interests of Jesus Christ above one's own
- The rarity of true selflessness even among workers (2:21)
- Faithfulness measured by the heart's orientation, not by talent
- Timothy as the living embodiment of the command to look to others' interests (2:4)

Discussion Prompts

- What actually sets Timothy apart, according to Paul?
- Why is genuine concern for others so rare, even among Christians?
- How is faithfulness a matter of the heart's direction rather than gifting?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says most people seek their own interests. Where do you see yourself doing this, dressing up self-interest as service? What would it look like this week to genuinely seek someone else's welfare instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses verse 21 onto the student's own heart. The uncomfortable truth is that we can perform service while still seeking our own interests, doing visible good for the sense of being needed, admired, or in control.

Help students detect the subtle forms of self-interested service, helping only when noticed, serving to be thanked, giving advice that flatters our expertise, volunteering for the visible roles and avoiding the hidden ones. Self-interest is skilled at wearing the costume of love.

Move toward the cure without shaming. The point is not to stop serving until our motives are perfect, that day will never come, but to grow in genuine concern by deliberately seeking another's welfare in a way that brings us no return.

Press for one concrete act of unrewarded welfare-seeking this week, a need met that no one will notice, an interest of another's genuinely put ahead of our own. Selflessness grows by practice, and one specific act trains the heart more than a resolution to be less selfish.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The capacity to perform service while still seeking our own interests
- The subtle costumes of self-interest: serving for thanks, visibility, or control
- Growing in genuine concern by seeking another's welfare without return
- One concrete, unrewarded act as training for the heart

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you dress up self-interest as service?
- What does self-interested service look like in your life specifically?
- Whose welfare could you seek this week with no return to yourself?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says Timothy's "proven worth" was shown as "a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (2:22). What does this teach us about how Christian character and usefulness are formed, and about the value of serving alongside more mature believers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul describes Timothy's formation in a beautiful phrase, like a son with a father, he has served with me. Timothy did not become useful in a classroom alone or by sudden inspiration, but by working shoulder to shoulder with Paul over years. Character was forged in shared labor.

This is the New Testament pattern of discipleship. Jesus formed the Twelve by having them with him. Paul formed Timothy by taking him along. Maturity is caught as much as taught, transmitted through relationship and shared work, not merely through information. Your class should see how relational and practical discipleship is meant to be.

Note the phrase proven worth. Timothy's worth was tested and demonstrated over time. Character that has not been proven is only potential. The long, ordinary faithfulness of serving alongside Paul is what revealed and refined who Timothy was. There are no shortcuts to proven worth.

Help students value both sides of this. The mature are to take the less mature alongside them in real work, as Paul took Timothy. The less mature are to seek out such relationships and submit to the slow forming they offer. A congregation grows strong when this side-by-side discipleship is happening across generations.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Character and usefulness formed through shared labor, not information alone
- The New Testament pattern of relational, side-by-side discipleship
- Proven worth as character tested and demonstrated over time
- The mature taking the less mature alongside them in real work
- Discipleship across generations as the strength of a congregation

Discussion Prompts

- How was Timothy actually formed into a useful servant?
- Why is character caught through relationship as much as taught?
- What does proven worth require that mere potential does not?

Question 4

Student Question:

Who has helped form you in the faith by letting you serve alongside them, or whom are you helping to form? How could you more intentionally give or receive this kind of side-by-side discipleship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the pattern of discipleship personal in both directions, who has formed us and whom we are forming. Many students have never named the people who shaped them, and many have never considered that they could shape others.

Help older or more mature students see their responsibility. They likely have a Timothy nearby, a younger believer, a new convert, a struggling member, who would grow simply by being taken along in the work. The barrier is usually not ability but intention, the choice to invite someone in.

Help younger or less mature students see their opportunity. Growth accelerates enormously when we attach ourselves to a faithful, more seasoned believer and serve beside them. Encourage them to seek out such a relationship rather than waiting to be sought.

Press for one concrete step. An invitation extended, a request made, a shared task taken up together. Side-by-side discipleship rarely happens by accident, it happens when someone decides to make the invitation. Ask each student which direction they are most called to move this season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming those who have formed us and those we are forming
- The responsibility of the mature to invite a Timothy alongside them
- The opportunity of the less mature to attach themselves to the faithful
- Discipleship begun by intention and invitation, not accident

Discussion Prompts

- Who helped form you by letting you serve beside them?
- Whom could you take alongside you in the work right now?
- What one invitation or request could you make this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul calls Epaphroditus “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need” (2:25). What do these many titles reveal about the nature and breadth of genuine Christian service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul piles up five terms for one man, brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier, messenger, minister to my need. Each angle reveals a different facet of service. Brother speaks of family affection, fellow worker of shared labor, fellow soldier of shared struggle and danger, messenger of being sent, minister of meeting concrete needs.

Together these titles show how full and many-sided real service is. Epaphroditus was not a specialist in one religious function. He loved as a brother, worked as a partner, fought as a soldier, carried messages, and met practical needs. Christian service is rarely tidy, it asks the whole person across many roles.

Note especially fellow soldier. Service in the gospel is not only labor but warfare, carried out against real opposition and cost. This dignifies the struggle students feel in serving. Weariness and difficulty are not signs they are doing it wrong, they are the marks of a soldier in a real battle.

Help students locate themselves in these titles. Most are called to be brothers and sisters who work, struggle, carry, and meet needs in the body. The breadth of the titles guards against a narrow view that only certain visible roles count as service. All of it is the work of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The many-sided nature of Christian service shown in five titles
- Service as family affection, shared labor, shared struggle, sending, and meeting needs

- Service as warfare against real opposition, not only labor
- Weariness and difficulty as marks of a real battle, not signs of failure
- A broad view of service guarding against valuing only visible roles

Discussion Prompts

- What does each of Paul's titles for Epaphroditus reveal about service?
- Why does Paul call him a fellow soldier as well as a fellow worker?
- Which of these facets of service is God calling you into?

Question 6

Student Question:

Epaphroditus poured himself out for the work and for Paul. Where is God inviting you to serve in a way that costs you something real, your time, your comfort, or your convenience, rather than only what is left over?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the sacrificial dimension of Epaphroditus' service into the student's own life. The honest pattern for most of us is to give God and others our leftovers, the time, energy, and money remaining after our own interests are satisfied.

Help students feel the contrast. Epaphroditus did not serve from his surplus, he spent himself nearly to death. The widow's mite, the poured-out perfume, the cross itself, all show that the service God honors most is the service that costs. Leftover service is better than none, but it is not the pattern Scripture holds up.

Be wise and balanced. The call to costly service is not a call to neglect legitimate responsibilities or to burn out in unwise excess. Epaphroditus' risk was for the work of Christ, not reckless self-destruction. The aim is intentional, costly generosity, not anxious overextension.

Press for one concrete area where the student will move from leftover service to costly service this week, an hour deliberately given, a comfort surrendered, a convenience set aside for the sake of another or of the work. Sacrifice becomes real in specific, chosen acts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The pattern of giving God and others only our leftovers
- The service God honors most as the service that costs (the widow's mite, the cross)
- Costly service distinguished from unwise burnout or neglect of duties
- Moving from leftover service to one concrete, chosen, costly act

Discussion Prompts

- Do you tend to serve from your surplus or at real cost?
- Where is God inviting you into costly service right now?
- What one comfort or convenience could you surrender for the work this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says Epaphroditus “nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life” to serve (2:30), and that God had mercy on him in his illness (2:27). What does this teach us about the value God places on sacrificial service, and about his compassion toward his servants?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul does not treat Epaphroditus’ near-death as a tragic waste or a sign of failure. He treats it as honorable, something that brought Epaphroditus close to death for the work of Christ. God sees and values service that costs, even when it goes unrecognized by others. No spent effort for Christ is wasted.

Notice also Paul’s tender words in verse 27, that God had mercy on him, and on Paul too, sparing him sorrow upon sorrow. Here is the compassion of God toward his weary servants. Sacrificial service does not mean God is indifferent to our suffering. He is moved by it, and his mercy attends his servants even in their risk and illness.

Hold both truths together. God honors costly service, and God is compassionate toward those who give it. This guards against two distortions, the idea that God demands our destruction, and the idea that he is detached from our pain. The God who calls us to spend ourselves is the same God who has mercy on us.

Help students draw comfort and motivation from this. Their hidden, costly labors are seen and valued by God, and their weariness and wounds are tended by his mercy. They serve a Master who both honors sacrifice and cares deeply for the ones who make it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God seeing and valuing costly service, even when others overlook it
- No effort spent for Christ ever wasted
- The compassion of God toward his weary and suffering servants (2:27)
- Holding together God’s honoring of sacrifice and his mercy toward the sacrificer
- Comfort and motivation for hidden, costly labor

Discussion Prompts

- How does God regard service that costs us dearly?
- What does verse 27 reveal about God’s heart toward his weary servants?
- How do God’s honor and God’s mercy fit together here?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think about the quiet, faithful servants in your own congregation, the ones who serve without applause. Are you aware of them? Name one such person you could thank or encourage this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question trains the student's eyes to see the often-invisible servants among them. Every congregation runs on the labor of people who are rarely thanked, those who set up and clean up, visit the sick, pray, teach children, quietly meet needs.

Help students realize how easily such servants are overlooked. We notice the visible and the gifted, but the steady, hidden faithful often go unrecognized for years. Simply becoming aware of them is the first act of honor.

Connect this to the command Paul is about to give, to honor such people. Awareness is meant to lead to action, a word of thanks, a note, an encouragement, a public recognition. The body is strengthened when its quiet servants know they are seen.

Press for one specific person and one specific act this week. Ask each student to name a hidden servant in their congregation and to commit to thanking or encouraging them concretely. The exercise blesses both the one honored and the one learning to honor.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Learning to see the often-invisible servants of the congregation
- How easily steady, hidden faithfulness goes unrecognized
- Awareness as the first act of honor, meant to lead to action
- One specific servant thanked or encouraged this week

Discussion Prompts

- Who are the quiet, faithful servants in your congregation?
- Why are such servants so easily overlooked?
- Whom will you thank or encourage this week, and how?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul commands the church to "receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men" (2:29). What does this teach us about how the Lord's church is to recognize and honor faithful servants, and how does this differ from the way the world hands out status and fame?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal and pastoral high point of the lesson, so give it room. Paul does not merely thank Epaphroditus privately, he commands the whole church to receive him with all joy and to honor such men. The recognition of faithful servants is not optional courtesy, it is a Christian duty laid on the congregation.

Draw the sharp contrast with the world's economy of status. The world hands out honor to the powerful, the wealthy, the famous, the beautiful, and the self-promoting. The kingdom hands out honor to the faithful, the servants, the ones who spend themselves for Christ and others. Paul tells the church to honor the very kind of person the world overlooks.

This reflects a consistent New Testament teaching. The church is to esteem highly those who labor among them (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13), to give recognition to those devoted to the service of the saints (1 Corinthians 16:15–18), and to count its elders and faithful workers worthy of honor (1 Timothy 5:17). A healthy congregation deliberately honors faithfulness, and in so doing it teaches everyone what truly counts.

Guard against two errors. Honoring faithful servants is not the celebrity culture that elevates personalities and builds followings around gifted individuals, which Scripture warns against. Nor is it the false humility that refuses to thank anyone for fear of pride. Biblical honor is glad, specific recognition of Christlike service, given to build up the body, not to exalt a star.

Press the application on the congregation's culture. What a church honors, it reproduces. If it honors faithfulness, it will grow faithful servants. If it honors only the visible and gifted, it will grow performers. Lead your class to ask what their congregation actually celebrates, and to become people who honor what Christ honors.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring faithful servants as a commanded Christian duty, not optional courtesy
- The kingdom's economy of honor, given to the faithful, against the world's, given to the powerful and famous
- The consistent New Testament call to esteem those who labor (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Corinthians 16:15–18; 1 Timothy 5:17)
- Biblical honor distinguished from celebrity culture and personality-following
- A church reproducing whatever it chooses to honor
- Glad, specific recognition that builds up the body rather than exalting a star

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul make honoring faithful servants a command to the whole church?
- How does the kingdom's economy of honor differ from the world's?
- What does your congregation actually celebrate, and what does that reproduce?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. In Timothy and Epaphroditus you have seen the mind of Christ in ordinary work clothes. Name one specific way Jesus is using these two servants to form you, whether toward more genuine concern for others, more sacrificial service, or a deeper honoring of the faithful around you.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks the student to let these two ordinary servants shape them personally. The passage offers several doors, genuine concern like Timothy, sacrificial service like Epaphroditus, and the honoring of faithful workers commanded to the church.

Press for the specific. Not I want to serve more, but I will take this younger believer alongside me in this ministry, or I will give this costly hour, or I will thank this overlooked servant by name. The mind of Christ in work clothes is always concrete.

Remind students that the point of these portraits is imitation. Paul placed Timothy and Epaphroditus right after the hymn of Christ deliberately, to show that the self-emptying mind of Christ is not reserved for the Son of God alone but is meant to take shape in ordinary disciples like them.

Close in prayer, asking God to raise up Timothys and Epaphrodituses in your class, servants genuinely concerned for others and willing to spend themselves for the work, and to make the congregation a place that honors such people as Christ does. Invite one concrete step this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Letting ordinary servants shape us toward Christlikeness
- Choosing one specific, concrete form of imitation
- The mind of Christ meant to take shape in ordinary disciples
- A congregation that honors faithful service as Christ does

Discussion Prompts

- Which servant, Timothy or Epaphroditus, most challenges you, and why?
- What one specific way is Christ forming you through them?
- What concrete step will you take this week?