

When the Gospel Gets a Hold of a Life

Philippians 2:19-30

Some stories, when you read them over and over again have the effect of lulling you to sleep. *Pat the Bunny* is one of those books, as is *Green Eggs and Ham*, and any number of children's books you may have been subjected to reading over and over again at the request of your children. Some stories, when you read them over and over, have the effect of waking you up—enlivening you to a world of possibility and beauty and hope. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have had that affect on me. The more you read them, the more they color the way you see the world and stir you to live in it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a story. It's a true story. It's the beautiful story of what God has done to establish his kingdom and to deal with our sin and rebellion through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ—forgiving us of our sins, changing our lives, and setting us apart for service to him and his kingdom.

Are you awake to that story? And by that I'm really asking two questions: first, do you believe it, and second, are you awake to it? Do you believe the gospel? Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died for your sins and rose again from the dead, and that by believing in him you may have new and eternal life in his name? Do you believe that apart from Christ you are dead in your sin, a rebel against God's throne, and deserving of eternal death, but that God in his mercy has given his Son to rescue you, to live the life you cannot live because of sin, and to die the death you deserve to die to pay for your sins, that you might know and love and serve God? Do you believe the gospel? And if you have questions about that, or aren't sure, catch me after the service—I want to talk.

But even if you believe it, there's another question: Are you awake to it?¹ Do you really get the weight and magnitude of what the gospel means for you? Does that story rouse in you a whole world of possibility and beauty and hope? Does it color the way you see the world and stir you to live in it? Many of us believe the gospel, but we're asleep to it. We agree with it, we know it's necessary to be saved from sin and enter a relationship with Christ. But frankly we're a little bored with that story—Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for us. We don't see how it makes any difference when it comes to our daily lives. That doesn't mean we're not believers; it just means we're not able to connect the dots.

What difference does what Christ did for me, a sinner, on the cross, make when it comes to studying for a test I don't care about, or getting out of bed every morning for a job I don't love? How does it shape my *ambitions* in life—what I dream about, what I do with my time and money and energy? Or how does the gospel help me when it comes to dealing with a grouchy neighbor,

¹ This metaphor comes from Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

an irresponsible landlord, or an estranged child? I might be able to see how the gospel can rescue me from the wrath of a holy God, but what about the wrath of an unholy spouse? What difference does the gospel make for my *relationships*—how I interact with people? How would those be different—my ambitions and my relationships—if I was awakened to the gospel?

In our passage this morning, Philippians 2:19-30, Paul helps us see how the gospel shapes these two specific areas of life in very practical ways: our *ambition*—our dreams and desires and goals, and our *relationships*—how we interact with others. And he does so by holding up before us two examples of when the gospel gets a hold of a life. Of when we're our ambitions are moved to prioritize Jesus over self, and our relationships consist in loving people instead of using them.

If you're just joining us, we've been in Philippians for a couple of months. It's a letter the apostle Paul wrote to a young church in the ancient city of Philippi, and in the previous section, he has just finished instructing the church to partner together as a community shaped by the gospel and serving the advance the gospel, the message of Jesus. He calls us to live as citizens worthy of the gospel: to "stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

To show us what this looks like, Paul now directs our attention to two men in our passage: Timothy and Epaphroditus. He is explaining his intention to send these two men to the church in Philippi: Timothy, so that he can later to return to Paul with a report of how the church is doing (vv. 19-24), and Epaphroditus, so that he can be reunited with the church who sent him out after what had become a perilous journey (vv. 25-30). But he's doing more than updating his travel plans. He's holding these two men up as examples of lives awakened to the gospel, such that their everyday lives are affected—particularly their ambitions and their relationships.

Let's think first about the gospel-shaped ambitions of Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Gospel-Shaped Ambitions

When we speak of ambition, we're talking about what drives us. What's the ultimate end? For instance, think about a job you don't like—what is it that gets you out of bed and gets you to work? What is it that makes you persevere? You're after something, or you wouldn't be there. What is it? That's your ambition. For some it's status and security—the American Dream. And so you're willing to put in the time at entry level to work your way up the corporate ladder until the big bucks start rolling in. For someone else, perhaps it has nothing to do with the career or the money, but a particular boy that she happens to work with. She tolerates her job because she gets to sit across the room from him every day. A relationship with him is her ambition. Or maybe he's just the handsome face attached to the deeper ambitions of marriage and children and security and a vanilla latte on the way to the soccer field—and we're back to the American Dream. Our ambitions drive us, guide us; they give us focus and resolve for life.

For Timothy and Epaphroditus, they had one overarching ambition that put all other dreams and desires into place: to advance the gospel of Jesus and make much of Christ. Timothy regularly accompanied Paul in his work, and was with him when they first went to Philippi (cf. Acts 16:1-12). Best we can tell, Epaphroditus was a layperson, sent by the Philippian church on a short-term missions trip to bring aid to Paul. Both of them are examples of lives captivated by the

gospel. In v. 22, Paul says that Timothy, “as a son with his father . . . has served with me in the work of the gospel.” Elsewhere in his letters Paul calls Timothy “a beloved and faithful child in the Lord” (1 Cor. 4:17), “my true child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2), “our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ” (1 Thess. 3:2). Many a baby boy bears the name Timothy in his honor.

Epaphroditus gets a lot less love in the baby-naming department, but he is no less a stalwart example of a life captivated by Christ. Look at how Paul introduces him in v. 25 with *five different descriptions*: “my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need.” Epaphroditus had been sent by the church in Philippi to bring aid to Paul, as he says in 4:18: “I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent.” And as Paul says in 2:30, “he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.”

Timothy and Epaphroditus provide a picture of lives captivated by the gospel. They show us that when the gospel gets a hold of a life, *God’s mission* becomes our chief *ambition*, and his glory our central pursuit. God’s mission is our ambition and his glory our pursuit.

These two men actually illustrate what Paul calls the whole church to earlier in the book. Just as Paul told us in 2:3-4, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others,” so he says of Timothy in 2:20-21: “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” And just as Christ gave us a pattern for living by humbling himself to the point of death in 2:6-8, so Epaphroditus followed that pattern and “nearly died for the work of Christ” in 2:30.

And what drove these two men to such sacrifice was their ambition to make much of Christ. They were so satisfied in Jesus that they were willing to lose everything for him. They didn’t just agree with the gospel, it had taken hold of their lives. They could have used Paul’s imprisonment as an opportunity for self-promotion. We learned back in 1:15-18 that some of those near Paul were doing just that—turning gospel ministry into a competition, seeking to take advantage of Paul’s confinement and grow their own personal following at his expense. Timothy and Epaphroditus could have done that. But instead of hijacking the mission to pursue their own glory and ambition, they willingly laid their lives down for the gospel. God’s ambition was their ambition. Like Paul, their goal was to do whatever it takes to make much of Christ and to help others make much of Christ, whether by life or by death.

How does the gospel shape your ambitions? Are you more passionate about Jesus than the Patriots? It’s okay to be passionate about the Patriots. It’s not okay to treat them like God. Are you more passionate about God than your career? Think about Gerritt and Julie. Why would a fun, young couple, with two good jobs, a nice condo in Newton, loving family in the area, deep friendships—why would they pack it up, sell everything they have, and move to Haiti, where their living space will consist essentially of a bedroom and a bathroom, where their safety is at risk enough to require razor-wire and Rottweilers in the courtyard? The world doesn’t have a category to make sense of that. Maybe some of us are even struggling with it—because we love them, and we don’t want to see them go.

But when your eyes are opened to the gospel, when you see the magnitude of your sin—all its ugliness, all the shame and guilt, the painful reality of how you have hurt others and offended God—when that magnitude sets in, and is then overcome by the all-sufficient grace of God that deals with your sin and frees you from it, and you realize how much you’ve been forgiven, how beautiful and satisfying Jesus is, how worthy God is, how powerful is God’s Spirit at work in you—you realize in no uncertain terms that you are not your own. You were bought with a price. You have been awakened, captured, captivated by the gospel of Jesus. So now his ambitions become your ambitions. His glory your goal.

If I’m not satisfied in Jesus, then my ambition will be to find my satisfaction in something else and then to protect that at all costs. When I’m satisfied in Jesus and he is my ambition, then I’m free to lay aside all other ambitions, and to follow Christ’s model of selfless love and humility, the humility of a feed trough in a Bethlehem stable, the humiliation of a Roman cross—we’re free to lay down our lives after Christ’s pattern, even if it means being inconvenienced, taken advantage of, not getting our way. Because Jesus is worth it.

Now being awakened to the gospel doesn’t mean you have to sell everything and move to Haiti. That’s God’s call on Gerritt and Julie’s life. What’s God’s call on yours? How is what you’re going to spend your time, money, and energy doing day to day—whether it’s teaching kids in the classroom, digging your family out of mountains of laundry, making deals in the corporate world, or serving customers in a retail store—how is God calling you to use that for Christ? Are you making the most of the relationships God has given you, loving them after the pattern of Christ and pointing them to hope in Christ? Are you being generous in helping those in need, including those who are called to serve in foreign or special contexts? Is God calling you to something else? When the gospel gets a hold of a life, God’s mission becomes our ambition, and his glory our pursuit.

The second area of life that Paul highlights with his portrait of Timothy and Epaphroditus is how the gospel ought to shape relationships—particularly the genuineness of our concern for one another.

Gospel-Shaped Relationships

When the gospel gets a hold of a life, we relate with people in order to know and love them, not to use them. We relate with people to know and love them, not to use them. And using people is a dreadful temptation in any kind of relationship, including, sadly, our partnership for the gospel.

When you are partnered together for a purpose—whether it’s our partnership in the gospel as the church, or any kind of teamwork—sports, business, family—it’s easy to become so focused on your goal, on the mission—your ambition, that the people we’re relating to and working with become a means to an end; something to be used, rather than someone to be known or loved. They even become expendable if the success of the mission requires it.

Again, think about our relationship with our missionaries as a church. It’s really easy for a list of missionaries to become just that—some vague list. A means to the end of having a missions program, perhaps. But we don’t think of them as real people, with real dreams and real trials and real contributions to the cause of the gospel. Here’s a test: try naming just a third of our missionaries when you go home for lunch today. Just a third. Now I realize some of you are

new and may not realize we even had a missions program. But if you've been here a while, you should know who the missionaries are and be praying for them—unless they're not really people. And by the way, this is something I'm guilty of myself—I have not taken the proper time to get to know who our missionaries are and to begin interacting with them.

And this temptation goes both ways: it's just as easy for a missionary to see his or her donors and churches as the means to the end of getting on the field. It's very easy to depersonalize others, to trivialize our relationships, to lose sight of the fact that partnership involves people, not objects or instruments. Even to downplay or ignore the sacrifices and contributions others have made (usually to make our own contributions look better).

But take a look at what happens to their relationships with the Philippian church when the gospel gets a hold of Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus. Notice first Paul's genuine interest and care. The fact that he's taking the time to write this letter to them, to send these two men in the near future, and the fact that he plans to visit them as soon as he can, even as he "holds them in his heart" and "yearns for them with all the affection of Christ" (1:7-8)—all this suggests that to Paul, the Philippian church was no mere series of notches on his belt, statistics of success; they were people. People whom he loved. That's why he wants Timothy to return to him after his visit to Philippi so he can let Paul know how the church is doing—particularly whether the gospel of Jesus is bearing fruit in and through them as he has exhorted them (2:19).

Neither were Timothy and Epaphroditus mere objects to Paul. We already noted the affection with which he spoke of them. When Epaphroditus almost died as v. 27 tells us, Paul says that not only did God have mercy on Epaphroditus to spare his life, but on Paul to spare him from overwhelming sorrow at his death. Timothy and Epaphroditus were not expendable; they were family. Paul loved them; he didn't use them. He commends their contribution; he is threatened in no way to highlight how God has mightily used someone other than himself for his purposes. He says of Epaphroditus in vv. 29-30: "Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ."

Look next at Timothy: he is characterized by his "genuine concern for their welfare" (v. 20), which Paul equates with seeking the "interests of Christ" in v. 21. We talk a lot about authenticity and genuineness in our relationships. We want to be real with people, and we want people to be real with us. We don't want to hide behind masks. Until your heart is captivated by the gospel, your only recourse for life is to hide behind a mask. Only the gospel of Jesus frees us to be honest about our sin, and our failures, and our brokenness—about who we really are, because only the gospel of Jesus provides a sufficient solution to deal with our sin and failure and brokenness—a Savior who took it all on himself to bring forgiveness, healing, and transformation. Timothy was free to be genuinely concerned because he had said no to self and yes to Jesus—unlike many others according to v. 20. He was free to love people because the gospel had gotten a hold of his life.

And then there is Epaphroditus. A man who was burdened *not* by the fact that he almost died, but by the impact that news of his illness had had on his home church in Philippi. Verse 26 says "he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill." That's genuine concern. Both Paul and Epaphroditus were therefore eager for Epaphroditus to go and for there to be a joyful reunion (v. 28).

Genuine relationships are about knowing and loving people, not using them as a means to an end. So think about your relationships. Think again about your ambitions, and then think about the effect that has on how you treat people. Think about that grouchy neighbor, that irresponsible landlord, that estranged child. Think about the people who don't know Jesus that you're trying to reach out to. Think about your brothers and sisters in Christ; think about your congregation here. Think about your ambition and interaction in all these relationships, and now ask yourself, Am I seeking to know and love these people and help them make much of Jesus, or am I using them as a means to an end? Have I turned this marriage into my private pursuit of happiness, such that I *use* my spouse instead of *know* and *love* them? Have I turned my small group into a chance for people to tell me how good I am at leading, and so been using people to make much of me?

The gospel of Jesus frees us to love people, not use them. This is only possible as we're awakened to and dependent upon the gospel. If we're not satisfied in Christ, then we can't really love others, because we need them too much. We rely on them to fill us and meet our needs in ways only God can. And so each relationship becomes a subtle opportunity for selfish gain. We manipulate and coerce to get what we want.

But the gospel is not so. When the gospel gets a hold of a life, it moves us to prioritize Jesus over self, and so to love people instead of use them.

Are you awake to this story? Does the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection awaken you to a whole world of possibility and beauty and hope as it relates to our ambitions and relationships? As we move now to the Table, the Lord's Supper, I want us to reflect on the truth and beauty and power of this gospel, asking God's Spirit to open our eyes to see afresh the depths of our sin and the sweetness his grace. Only the gospel of Jesus frees us to make much of Christ and willingly lay our lives down with genuine concern for others.

Discussion Questions

1. The sermon suggests that beyond believing the gospel, we need to be awake to it. What do you think this means? What does it look like? What difference does being awake or alive to the story of the gospel make for everyday life?
2. Think about your personal ambitions. What drives you to do what you do day to day? What are you afraid of losing if you don't pursue hard after it? What relationship do those ambitions have to the gospel?
3. What do we learn about how the gospel can shape our ambitions from the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus?
4. What do we learn about how the gospel can shape our relationships from the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus? What's the difference between using people and loving them?

5. Why are we so prone to using people instead of loving them? When are you most prone to this temptation? How does the gospel of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for you, a sinner, augment this?