

# THE RIGHT STUFF

## PHILIPPIANS 2:19-30

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state. For I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus. But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel. Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly.

Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.

“[The Right Stuff](#)” is the title of both a book, and later a movie, documenting the lives of the first Americans into space. The written work was authored by Thomas Wolfe in 1979, and won the [National Book Award](#) for nonfiction.

Wolfe’s book told the story of the people chosen to be our first astronauts, and launch American space travel.

He focused on *the Mercury Seven*, and their families: Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, Gordy Cooper, Wally Schirra, Deke Slayton, John Glenn, and Scott Carpenter.

Believe it or not, when President Eisenhower started America's manned space program he originally thought about sending a different type of person into space.

Mercury rockets weren't actually *flown* like airplanes, and at the time some experts suggested that athletes, accustomed to high-stress routines, like acrobats and trapeze artists, would be more "*cut out*" for space travel.

But Wolfe revealed why the test pilots of the 1940s and 50s, and their unspoken code of competitiveness, machismo, and bravery - proved to have the character traits considered to be "*the right stuff*" for the mission.

These were the men who dared to ride on dangerous rockets, and be the first to test man's limits of speed and altitude. Later, Thomas Wolfe would write, "(My) *book grew out of some ordinary curiosity* (about what) *makes a man willing to sit up on top of an enormous Roman candle, and wait for someone to light the fuse.*"

He documents what made the Mercury Seven *the right stuff* to become America's first pioneers into space.

And this is why I've entitled this morning's message, "**The Right Stuff**" - for in the last twelve verses of Philippians 2, Paul documents the type of character - *the right stuff, if you will...* that it takes to pioneer the Gospel.

Actually, Paul has already been outlining “the right stuff...” At the end of Chapter 1 he writes, “let your conduct be worthy of the Gospel...” He encourages the Philippians “to strive together for the faith of the Gospel...” - even in the face of suffering - for we’ve been granted both “to believe and to suffer for Jesus’ sake.”

In Chapter 2 we’re told to walk humbly, and put away selfish ambition. We need to look out for each other’s interests rather than our own. Though the church is made up of *different kinds* we should be of “one mind.”

And He points to Jesus to demonstrate what that mindset - *that mentality* - looks like. Jesus was “the right stuff.” Though divine, Jesus laid aside the perks of deity and humbled Himself. The One Who the angels praised, made Himself of no reputation. Jesus became a man, even a servant. He identified with our human condition.

He obeyed God to the point of death on the cross.

And now, He’s been exalted above every name. *One day*, every knee will bow and every tongue will admit that Jesus is Lord. *Today*, is our opportunity to do so willingly.

And when we do, God works in us - *to do and to will of His good pleasure*. **Christianity is a inside job.**

God puts His nature, His Spirit - hey, *the right stuff* - in our hearts. And what *God works in*, *we then work out*.

We’re told to work out our own salvation. That means, think through the ramifications of Christianity - God’s grace and power. Let the Gospel meddle in every aspect of your life.

Respect the Gospel, and what it cost Jesus, and carry its implications to their logical conclusions.

Which includes turning the church into a non-grumbling, no-complaining zone. We're told *hold fast the Word, shine as lights in a crooked world, and be willing to pour ourselves out for the sake of each other's faith.*

Which brings us to this today's text... When author Thomas Wolfe began to research his book, he originally planned to write a comprehensive history about the space program. But after focusing on the astronauts of the Mercury mission, he felt that his work was done.

In Wolfe's mind those seven men embodied *the spirit, the ethos, the daring* that allowed NASA to accomplish all it did in the years that followed. All its achievements grew out of **the right stuff** embodied in those seven men.

And in these last twelve verses of Chapter 2, Paul mentions **two** men, **Timothy** and **Epaphroditus**, who also embodied the traits of which he's been writing... **the right stuff** - or character it takes to be a true servant of Jesus.

There is much we can glean from their example.

**Timothy** was a seasoned pastor sent from Paul to Philippi... **Epaphroditus** was a believer who volunteered to be the messenger, sent from the Philippians to Paul...

We see *"the right stuff"* in the lives of both men.

Paul continues his letter in 2:19, **"But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state."**

Understand first century communications...

Think back into the distant past... *before the days of Twitter and Facebook... beyond cell phones and even car phones... imagine past the day of rotary-dial telephones... prior to that the telegraph and telegram... stretch your mind even further to bygone days of the pony express...* wow, what a mind-bender. Technology has advanced us by leaps and bounds.

But in the days of Paul, all that innovation was still future. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, long distance communication was conducted by messenger.

An envoy traveled, usually on foot, carrying with him a message - sometimes a letter written on a scroll.

And his arrival was far from *a sure thing*. It often took months of travel across rugged terrain - over angry seas - down bandit-invested trade routes. A messenger navigated great danger to convey a communication.

It was a big deal for Timothy to travel from Rome to Philippi on behalf of Paul - **and** for Epaphroditus to journey from Philippi to Rome in the name of the Philippians. Both men were making a serious sacrifice.

The shortest route between the two cities was to leave Philippi, and walk west on the Via Egnatia. This was a Roman road that stretched 350 miles across Macedonia, ending on the shores of the Adriatic Sea.

Then you'd need to take an ocean voyage of 80 miles to Italy. Once there, it was another 350 mile walk to Rome, along another famous road, the Via Appia.

That totals 700 miles on foot, not including the ocean cruise

on a rickety ship. Under favorable conditions such a trip could take 2-3 months. You could encounter all kinds of difficulties that would make it much longer.

My point is, when Paul talks about sending these men back and forth it's no small matter. It was expensive, time-consuming, rigorous, and dangerous.

Yet understand, **people mattered to Paul.**

Remember what Paul wrote of the Philippians in Chapter 1, "I have you in my heart" - and, "how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ..."

Knowing their welfare - getting a bead on their spiritual "**state,**" as he puts it - was worth the sacrifice, and time, and risk, and labor that went into the travel.

With the knowledge that came from communication Paul could *pray more powerfully* for the Philippians, *write more pointedly*, and *pastor them more effectively*.

I wonder what Paul would think of Christians today, people too busy to call a friend - *even with multiple varieties of instant communications at their fingertips?*

When Paul heard of struggling believers he saved his money for weeks to buy an expensive parchment, he painstakingly wrote a letter, waited on an available messenger - who then traveled land and sea, braving danger along the way, just to deliver the message.

Then there was the wait - the grueling wait - *three months there, three months back*. At least six months went by before Paul received a response. This meant painful, anxious, unknowing intervals occurred between every correspondence

Paul would send.

He would pour out his heart into a letter; then send it off... but not hear a response for months - *that felt like years*. In our age of instant feedback it's difficult for us to imagine what that would be like. *Most people get their much longed for tax refund back in less time.*

I know this, Paul would have very little patience with our excuses for not *caring about* and *communicating with* one another. He would be appalled if he heard of a weaker brother at CC who slipped through the cracks, because no one reached out to him. *How could that be when all you have to do is send a text? Really?*

Realize, Gospel-oriented people aren't just about work, stuff, and entertainment - they invest in the lives of people. They seek meaningful relationships. And it's hard to "*relate*" if you don't bother to *communicate*.

This is why Paul is sending Timothy to Philippi. *He's getting ready for the journey. He'll leave "shortly."* It's time to make another investment in their relationship.

And here's why Timothy was sent, "**For I have no one likeminded, who will sincerely care for your state.**"

It's interesting, even in Paul's day Christians with *the right stuff* were a rare commodity... If everybody in America who said they were a Christian really operated like one, this country wouldn't be in the mess we're in.

As a pastor, sometimes it baffles me why we lack teachers for Sunday School, and have a skeleton crowd show up for our Men's Prayer Breakfast. And I'll never know how people

can come week in and week out, and it never cross there mind that they might ought to give a regular offering - *there's a regular power bill.*

But it should be no surprise - for not much has changed since Paul's day... Paul had no one other than Timothy who was truly "*likeminded*" - who looked out for the interests of others rather than just their own interests - who had a servant-mentality - who was willing to let his life be poured out as a drink offering that would accentuate the faith of others around him.

Paul moans in verse 21, "*For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.*" In other words, their favorite subject was themselves. *Have you seen anybody that fits that description? Maybe in the mirror!*

I read a recent study that reveals: 60% of all our communications center around ourselves. And on social media, the percentage rises to a whopping 80%.

We live in the selfie generation no less. We even have *selfie sticks* to capture better views of ourselves.

Yet what's shocking here is that Paul isn't just talking about people - not even just church-folk - he's talking about spiritual leaders. Paul can find no one *but Timothy*, not even a pastor - *who isn't all about himself.*

It reminds me of the Captain aboard the Costa Concordia, the Italian cruise ship that hit an underwater rock off the coast of Tuscany, it capsized, and sank.

The ship hosted over 4000 passengers and was on the first leg of a Mediterranean cruise. The Captain sailed too close to



the shore where he struck the rock.

It turns out he was on the bridge without his glasses, showing-off for a woman passenger. She was a dancer and a romantic-interest he had brought onto the ship.

And then rather than go down with the ship, he was one of the first to abandon. He was warned on the telephone by the owners of the ship to return to the bridge - to man his post and oversee the evacuation.

It all would've been comical had it not been for the 32 passengers that drowned. A ship's captain is to be the epitome' of a servant - *others centered* - willing to serve even to the point of going down with his ship.

Instead this Captain was *all about himself* and impressing people - and it cost 32 people their lives.

This is what happens when a pastor gets the big-head. When his ministry is *all about him...* he starts showing-off from the bridge, trying to impress the bride of Christ... he loses his spiritual vision... he makes mistakes in judgment... This is when *people get hurt*.

It reminds me of the 2013 College World Series. Three girls ran on the field to do one thing, *take selfies*.

The fans paid big bucks to see the games, players worked all season to get there, stadium employees were trying to make a living... but the three immature girls were only thinking about a picture of themselves.

It was a complete disregarded for everyone else.

And this is why a pastor who *“seek(s) his own”* is a travesty. The church meets to glorify God and build up the saints - not

provide a pastor a platform to show-off.

Timothy was *no show-off*. There was nothing “*selfie*” about Him. Paul writes to the Philippians about Timothy, “**But you know his proven character, that as a son with his father he served with me in the gospel.**”

Everyone who knew Timothy’s life had seen “*the right stuff.*” Paul’s son in the faith... this young man who had been raised by a godly grandma and mother, Lois and Eunice - who Paul had led to the Lord back in Galatia - was now known for his “*proven character.*”

Whenever a new submarine comes out of dry dock and joins our Navy’s fleet it’s first subjected to “*a sea trial.*” Sailors often call this “*a shakedown cruise.*”

The Captain takes the submarine to extreme depths. This puts enormous pressure on the hull. The idea is to put the ship under intense stress, so any weaknesses will be exposed. The pressure will pop a poor weld or break a weak seal. If the hull can be compromised it’s best to know it, so it can be repaired. If not, everyone onboard can have confidence in the ship’s integrity.

And this is what had happened to Timothy. The trials he endured had tested his medal. His godly character remained intact *under pressure*. Timothy’s endurance proved his spiritual integrity. His faith in God was real.

Perhaps you’ve been on what you would call “*a shakedown cruise*” over the last few months - *maybe even years*. You’ve been taken to deep places - depths of sorrow you never knew

existed. Realize, God has His purposes. Surely, the integrity of your faith has been tested. He wants your character to be *proven*.

And this is the point of personal character - *not so we can be proud of ourselves* - but so other people will spot our inner strength, and lean in that direction. You find an example in a person who's been tested.

I've heard it said, "The Church today has plenty of characters, what we need though is more character."

Paul says of Timothy, "Therefore I hope to send him at once, as soon as I see how it goes with me. But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly."

Remember, Paul was waiting on his day in court before the Emperor Nero. He was stuck in a Roman prison under palace guard. *He had need of Timothy.*

Timothy will come to Philippi once his purpose in Rome is fulfilled. Paul even had hopes to follow him.

Timothy was probably on Paul's witness list.

The young man traveled with Paul and had seen his ministry firsthand - no one was in a better position to testify of Paul's innocence. Timothy would vouch, Paul wasn't the traitor against Rome he'd been labeled.

I'm sure Paul had plans to share the Gospel with the Caesar. Perhaps he was counting on a converted Nero to spring him free. After their day in court, Paul would send Timothy on to Philippi. And hopefully, the Apostle Paul would be right on his heels.

But Paul had already sent another brother - a man who also had “the right stuff.” This fellow had delivered the letter the Philippians were now reading, and Paul writes of him here, “I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need...” To the Philippians he was their messenger, *but to Paul he'd been so much more.*

Epaphroditus came to Rome with a bag of money - a collection taken up by the Philippians to support Paul.

Understand, in the Roman penal system if you ate or were clothed it was up to your friends and family. There was no such thing as a jailhouse issued jumpsuit, or bedding, or even food to eat. If people on the outside forgot about you - you ended up starving to death.

Apparently the Philippians had sent Paul provisions through a messenger - this man named Epaphroditus.

But again, he was so much more to Paul than just a messenger. I wish Paul had elaborated on his experiences with Epaphroditus, but he refers to him in three ways: “*brother, fellow worker, fellow soldier.*”

First, he was Paul’s “*brother.*” In the church I grew up in the word “*brother*” was a formal title like “*mister.*” You were “*Brother Matt*” or “*Sister Alli*” And as a kid, hearing it just sounded weird and unnatural. I’ve got a brother who’s two years younger, and I would never go around saying to him, “*Brother Ken, stop bothering my stuff.*”

Even today, people come up, slap me on the back, and call me “*Bro.*” I’d rather you take the time to learn my name -

actually, refer to me in an endearing way.

Paul and Epaphroditus didn't just call each other "*brother*" they lived like it. They *loved each other*, and *forgave each other* - they *had each other's back*. We all need someone we can call a true brother or sister.

When you "*work out your own salvation in fear and trembling*" as Paul says in verse 12, you start putting two and two together - you see the implications - you realize if God is your Father that means I am your brother. And if having me as your family doesn't cause some "*fear and trembling*" I'm not sure what will?

But Paul also calls Epaphroditus a "*fellow worker.*" The Greek word is "*synergos*" from which we get our term, "*synergy.*" Paul and Epaphroditus had synergy.

Working together created an impact greater than the sum of their separate efforts. Combine them and they both got better. *They were better together than they could be apart.* They're from a long list dynamic duos...

Like *Batman and Robin, Rogers and Hammerstein, cookies and milk* (here's something that's definitely better together than apart), *Sanford and Son, peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, Simon and Garfunkel, spaghetti and meatballs, Calvin and Hobbes, Fred and Barney,, Romeo and Juliet, Penn and Teller, Hall and Oates, Kobe and Shaq, Starsky and Hutch, chips and salsa, bacon and eggs, Mantle and Maris, Bonnie and Clyde, Sonny and Cher* - *should I continue, or do you get the point.* In each of the cases I mentioned their pairing gave them a certain power.

Jesus expects His disciples to discover this kind of synergy in the family of God. This is one reason He sent His disciples *two by two*. They could feed off each other's faith, and love, and commitment. And this true of us - we're better together than apart. If you want to discover a great joy in life serve alongside a brother.

And thirdly, Paul calls Epaphroditus a "*fellow soldier.*"

They were Army buddies, enrolled in God's Army. Nothing fuses two men like fighting battles together.

Did you know there's now a website "[military.com](http://military.com)" that has a **buddy finder**? It boasts 20 million records. It's purpose is to reunite old army buddies. *A common enemy, shared disciplines, joint missions, close proximity* all brings people together in a unique way.

About the only other service that compares is serving Jesus. A Christian is a soldier in a *spiritual army*. We're fighting *spiritual battles* - winning *spiritual victories*. And doing it alongside a fellow soldier brings a great joy.

And it's clear from verse 26 that Paul and Epaphroditus fought their share of battles together.

He tells the Philippians, "*Since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.*" It's amazing, even in the midst of the slow, snail-like communications of the ancient world, rumors had a way of traveling at supersonic speeds.

All the way across a continent, somehow the Philippians heard their messenger had fallen sick.

It's been said, "*Bad news travels around the globe while*

good news is still putting on its shoes.”

Paul writes, “**For indeed he was sick almost unto death...**” Either at Rome, or in route, Epaphroditus came down with a serious illness. For a time, he was on his death bed, uncertain whether he’d even survive.

But notice what happened, Paul writes, “**but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.**” It’s interesting that Paul, the great miracle worker - Paul, the faith healer - was helpless to bring any kind of healing to his friend.

Notice, a couple of points here... **First**, God doesn’t always choose to heal through miraculous means.

He did on occasion. In Ephesus they took the sweat rags Paul used at work, and laid them on the sick, and they were healed. *How miraculous is that*, but it wasn’t how God always worked. At times, mighty miracles did flow through Paul, but divine healing wasn’t a gift Paul carried with him like a wallet in his pocket. Here, if he’d been able to help Epaphroditus, *you know he would*.

Paul admits he was grieved over his friend’s illness, and if he’d died, it would’ve been “**sorrow upon sorrow.**”

Apparently, what saved Epaphroditus was not Paul’s miracle power, or the gift of healing, but *God’s mercy*. As Paul puts it in verse 27, “**God had mercy on him...**”

And **second**, don’t listen to so-called Bible teachers who tell you if a Christian is walking in the will of God they’ll be immune to sickness and disease. If you’re ill it’s because of

some sin in your life. That's not true.

Epaphroditus came down with his illness while either in Rome, or on the way to Rome - but it was as he tried to help Paul. **He got sick doing the will of God!**

God has left us in a *fallen world* and we inhabit *fleshly bodies*. This makes us subject to sin's effects.

That means we all get sick at times. In fact, even if God chooses to heal you - *and He can* - you'll get sick again, and eventually die. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he still died again. The poor guy died twice!

In this age, the purpose of God's miraculous healing isn't to just to alleviate all sin and suffering. It's to demonstrate the power of God, and to bring Him glory.

And God alone chooses when and who He heals.

I do believe in supernatural healing, but in my life God most often heals by natural means. God created our bodies with curative processes, and He's blessed doctors with medicines to help facilitate that healing. God oversees the healing process by His mercies.

I suppose there is such a thing as perfect healing, but today it goes by another name. It's called *heaven*.

Chapter 2 closes, **"Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful."** As soon as Epaphroditus could travel, Paul sent him back to Philippi. And with the letter we're studying. Epaphroditus was its courier.

And Paul encourages them, **"Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem;**



because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.” Notice the words, “*not regarding his life*” - Epaphroditus sacrificed for the Gospel’s sake. Paul was its chief spokesman, but he needed the church’s assistance. And Epaphroditus was their courier - he **persevered** to deliver a package.

Imagine, Paul’s Fedex man gets mentioned in the Bible. The equivalent of the UPS driver makes the pages of Scripture. Epaphroditus accomplished a simple, yet vital task, that ended up fraught with danger. It’s a good thing he had “**the right stuff.**”

Realize we all have a job description a bit like Epaphroditus - we’re **delivery-men and women.**

We’re either bringing the Gospel, or we’re supporting those who are - and we need to persevere even in tough times, inconvenient times. Don’t let a headache or a hang-nail derail you from getting out the Gospel

Epaphroditus was faithful despite a serious illness, let’s not let the sniffles keep us from serving the Lord!

And it was because “**the right stuff**” seen in Epaphroditus that Paul tells the church in Philippi to “**receive him**” - and to “**hold such men in esteem.**”

When you see a godly leader “*receive him.*” Don’t keep him at arm’s length. Roll out the red carpet. Be gracious and hospitable. Allow the man to speak into your life. Chances are his words will be from God.

And “*hold such men in esteem.*” *Why is it in the church*

*today* the people who get the most recognition are often the ones who least deserve our respect? They crave the *limelight*, rather than the *lowly place*.

Not so with Tony Richardson. You've probably never heard of him, but he played 17 seasons in the NFL.

Tony was a three time Pro Bowl selection. He played fullback for the Eagles, Chiefs, and Jets. He made a living blocking for other runners. Nine seasons in a row Tony paved the way for a back to rush for 1000 yards, while averaging just over 100 yards a season himself.

And Richardson's help didn't stop with his blocking. He was constantly encouraging, and inspiring the other running back. Tony received more joy from casting the spotlight on someone else than shining it on himself.

Tony Richardson once said, "I can't explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me." That's what you hear from a man with "*the right stuff!*" These are the type of people God uses to build His kingdom. ***Are you a person with the right stuff?***

This past week I heard it said, "*Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less and less.*"

That thought fits Paul's words to the Philippians in verse 3, "*Let each esteem others better than himself.*"

And when we find a brother with a selfless, servant-like attitude - a **brother** with "*the right stuff*" - a **fellow worker** with *proven character* - a **fellow soldier** who works out his salvation... *let's esteem him in highly.*

He's a needed example for the rest of us. This was Timothy and Epaphroditus. May it also be you and me.