

## **Humility: Philippians 2:1-11**

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This passage contains some of the most profound truths taught anywhere in Scripture. Many people will immediately recall in these verses a description of Christ's glorification as Lord of all. But many will not understand the context from which this glorious outburst comes. It will be the purpose of this paper to supply that context-to supply the reasons for the exaltation of Christ and what that means to Christians.

Verses 1-4 constitute one unit of thought that although containing many elements of truth boils down to one overriding theme. And this theme is expanded in the remaining verses of this passage. Without first understanding the first four verses, the last seven will lose their magnificent luster, and instead of shining like the sun at high noon it will shine as the moon at the hour of greatest darkness. There will be blessing and encouragement at the prospect of being on the winning side as our Lord finally puts His foot down and rules over all. But that blessing will not seep down into our souls unless the context for verses 9-11 is understood. That context starts in verses 1-4 and climaxes in verses 5-8.

Let us start our investigation of the first four verses by reading the first two verses. "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind."

At first reading, Paul appears to be exhibiting doubt as to whether consolation, comfort, fellowship, affection, and mercy are to be found in Christ. He appears to be saying that "if

these are in Christ, do them." In other words, the "if" sounds like doubt in Paul's mind as to whether these virtues really lie in Christ. But that is not Paul's point.

The context seems to tell us that the conditional flavor of these "ifs" lies not in any doubt as to whether these things talked about are true about Jesus Christ, but whether these things are true about Paul's readers, about us. The condition lies in the realm of whether or not the believer seeks these things, of whether or not he or she makes them his or her own personally.

What is it Paul is exhorting the Philippian believers to do? Or should I say, what is he telling them to be like and do? Consolation is a noun that is related to the name given the Holy Spirit in John 14: 16 and 26, helper or comforter depending on the translation one has. The word here in Philippians 2:1 means a calling to one's side, hence, either an exhortation or consolation-encouragement (Vine). Paul wants us to be encouragers of each other.

Comfort speaks of the kind of speech that speaks closely to another. It is consolation but with a greater degree of tenderness (Vine), a more in-depth type of encouragement. The type that sees into the fearful heart of another and in love speaks to that fear. It is to reach into the true heart by one's words and actions, not just a surface reaction to the outward emotion of the discouraged person. It is a heart motivated by love speaking through words or actions to a heart heaved by fear, in order that the fearful person might grow toward maturity.

Fellowship is the sharing or common participation in something by two or more people (Vine). The believer has a common share in the life and unity of the Spirit. The believer at conversion was baptized with the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ. All believers share in the same Body of Christ as its

head. We as members of that common Body are to preserve the unity of that fellowship which has already been established by the Holy Spirit. That is why it is called "fellowship of the Spirit." The believing community cannot create this unity of fellowship but are commanded to keep it (MacArthur, 1 Corinthians). And how we are to keep it will be touched on later in this passage.

Affection is a translation of the Greek word *splanchnon*, which denotes the physical organs of the intestines, the place where emotions are felt. It is used to refer to compassion or tender mercies. It is a general word to indicate feelings of compassion for another (Vine).

Mercy, like comfort was a deepening of consolation, is a deepening of affection. It denotes having pity for the ills of others. And seems to point to compassions exhibited in action. Putting affection and mercy together a believer finds himself or herself instructed to both feel and exhibit compassion toward each other.

Affection speaks of humankind's emotional nature and mercy speaks of its volitional nature, two aspects of what it means to be created in God's image. Two other aspects of human nature are also addressed in this passage. They are the rational and personal, or social, dimensions. Verses 2, 3, and 5 address the rational, while verses 1, 4, and 5 address the personal.

Paul continues the sentence he started in verse 1 in verse 2. He continues by commanding all the Philippians to set themselves to pursue the very things he has been exhorting to them in verse 1. He conveys this thought of common pursuit by using the active imperative tense of "fulfill." It is the tense of command that is directed to the volitional nature (Dana and Mantey). Paul appeals to the volitional choice of the Philippians to think the same way about things with their rational nature by telling them to be likeminded continually. This continual sense is conveyed when Paul uses the present

tense of this word, the tense that generally denotes continual, habitual attitude or action.

Paul moves on from his command to be united in mind to his command to be united in behavior. He tells them to have the same love.

Paul further deepens his call for Philippian unity with his next phrase, "being of one accord." Newberry's New Testament translation of the Scriptures translates it literally as "joined in soul." Paul doesn't just want common thoughts and common behaviors for the Philippian church but such unity that would be had if two souls could be united into one. Paul is talking of intimate union here, not as between a husband and a wife, but as between loving siblings. Believers are spiritual brothers and sisters to every other believer, and Paul is commanding the Philippian believers to behave accordingly.

Paul concludes this sentence by exhorting them to center their minds on maintaining unity. Newberry again translates literally, "of one mind" as "the one thing minding." What "one thing"? The answer is unity, which has been the central idea of verse 2.

Verses 3 and 4 give to us a description of the type of behavior needed in order to maintain the unity already established by the Holy Spirit. It is kept by doing "nothing through selfish ambition or conceit" by "esteeming others [to be] better than [oneself]," and by looking out for "not only [one's own] interests, but also for the interests of others."

Let us analyze these "keeping" statements. Selfish ambition comes from the word *erithos*, a hireling, and denotes self-seeking, rivalry, party making, hence, it means "to win followers" (Vine). This same word is used in Philippians 1:16 to speak of those who were preaching Christ with envy in their hearts toward Paul. They wanted what Paul had, his following and the prestige that went along with being an apostle of

Jesus Christ. Paul saw his position as a responsibility given to him by God (1 Corinthians 1:1,17). The enviers saw it as a platform for self-exaltation, a place of prestige.

Conceit means personal vanity (Rienecher). It is to think more highly of oneself than one should. But not only to think it but proclaim it, to boast. James 3:14-16 describes the results of interacting in this way: "...boast[ing] and ly[ing] against the truth...confusion and every evil thing will be there." Notice James says "every evil thing will be there." Where selfish ambition and conceit are, there is no limit to which of the "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21) are manifested as a result. The works of the flesh destroy unity.

The second statement is a positive statement: "let each esteem others better than himself." Esteem means to consider or to suppose. We therefore are to consider or suppose others to be better, or superior, than ourselves. Esteem is a rational word. We are to think in our rational minds that others are more important than we are. Thus, as a subject serves a king because he is more important to the life of the kingdom, each individual believer is to serve others as above him or her in importance.

The third statement regarding unity is in verse 4. "let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." 1 Corinthians 13:5 essentially is saying the same thing, "love does not seek its own." Selfishness is the central problem in our world. "The root of fallen human nature is in wanting to have its own way" (MacArthur, 1 Corinthians). John MacArthur goes on to quote R. C. H. Lenski on this issue of selfishness. Lenski said: "Cure selfishness, and you have just replanted the garden of Eden." In other words, self replaced God, which is the antithesis of the lowliness of mind commanded to us in verse 3. Lowliness of mind, or humility is the main theme I referred to at the start of this message, the ingredient that pulls the entire passage together into a coherent idea.

Since humility is the link that holds the chain of information in these 11 verses together, it behooves us to look at it closely. Jerry Bridges, in his book, *The Practice of Godliness*, writes this of humility: "Humility opens the way to all other godly character traits. It is the soil in which the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit grow." And that is the focus in this Philippian passage. It is the necessary beginning to all the other virtues given to us in verses 1 and 2. Merrill Unger defines it as "lowliness of self-estimation, freedom from vanity." "The word", he continues, "is about equivalent to meekness and is essential to discipleship in Christ (Psalm 25:9, Matthew 18:3-4)."

Humility can also be understood by understanding its opposite, pride. Pride means literally, to be puffed up (Vine) and refers to one's view and opinion of oneself. A prideful person thinks more highly of him-or-herself than he or she should. A prime example is Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. Daniel 3 describes his prideful reaction to Daniel's interpretation of his dream. Daniel identified the head of gold of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream as Nebuchadnezzar himself. He subsequently constructed a giant golden image of himself and decreed that all in the kingdom should bow down to worship it. The story of Herod in Acts 12:20-22 is another example of the unhealthy, sinful type of pride. Herod arranged a grand oration for some visiting dignitaries and wore his royal best. The people witnessing this pompous spectacle shouted, "The voice of a god and not of a man." Herod loved it! He didn't respond as Paul and Barnabas did at Paphos when people sought to offer sacrifice to them, after Paul healed a crippled man. As Acts 14:18 records, Paul and Barnabas were barely able to prevent them from doing it. Nebuchadnezzar and Herod were proud men; they accepted the worship.

Merrill Unger says this of the concept of humility in the Gentile world: "The heathen moralists had not the idea; their humility meant meanness [lack] of spirit." When Paul exhorted these converted Philippians to be humble, he did not have a

lifetime of Philippian understanding to draw on. Paul sometimes met the biblically ignorant pagan on philosophically neutral ground in order to convey truth to them. For example, in Acts 17:22-31, Paul speaks to the Athenian Greeks by reciting familiar Stoic and Epicurean philosophy where it coincided with the truth he was presenting to them. He didn't compromise truth, but he did put it into terms the hearers were able to understand. Paul did not have that luxury when it came to exhorting the Philippians to humility. What they were to know of it, Paul had to tell them. So what does Paul use as an example of humility? The answer lies in verses 5-8

Paul says in verse 5: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." The question immediately comes to one, what mind? I believe "this mind" refers both backward and forward in this passage. It is the central hinge on which the entire passage turns. It refers back to the "lowliness of mind" of verse 3 and refers ahead to the concrete object lesson of Christ's humble life, described in verses 6-8.

What kind of mind did Jesus have? Why is He the One Paul holds up as the ultimate example of humility? Let us look at verses 6-8, for they contain truth that is among the most profound in the entire Scriptures.

Verses 6-7a have been understood basically in two ways. And both interpretations revolve around one word, *harpagmos*, "robbery" in our translation. Vine translates it as "prize." Prize can be understood in the active sense or the passive sense. Vine quotes Gifford, from his book *The Incarnation*, at length on the two possible interpretations. Understood in the active sense verse 6 reads: "Who because He was subsisting in the essential form of God, did not regard it as any usurpation that He was on an equality of glory and majesty with God, but yet emptied Himself of that co-equal glory...." Understood in the passive sense verse 6 reads: "Who though He was subsisting in the essential form of God, yet did not regard His being on

an equality of glory and majesty with God a prize and a treasure to be held fast, but emptied himself thereof." Gifford takes the latter to be the correct meaning, and I concur. He goes on to give his reason for his choice. He sees it as conveying the purpose of the passage, "to set forth Christ as the supreme example of humility and self-renunciation." And if that is Paul's intent, then the passive interpretation seems to fit Paul's mindset in the entire passage. Christ had the divine prerogatives but He willingly laid them aside in order to be the perfect Savior, a Savior Who could identify with the burdens and hardships of His people.

The two following clauses in verses 7b and 7c which follow the verb *keno*, to empty, are exegetical of its meaning. The clauses "the form of a servant" and "coming in the likeness of men" (Vine), tell us about His earthly condition after he emptied Himself. They also hint at His divine condition before the self-emptying. Henry DeVries defines the consensus opinion among evangelical Christians: "He renounced the divine glory and its majesty, its enjoyment, and splendors, but not essential Deity," in other words, His divine prerogatives. The prerogatives, or rights and abilities, that gave Him a distinctively superior advantage. The Logos laid aside the glory that was His (John 17:5), not His existence as God (DeVries). He united Himself to humanity and became a servant.

Verse 8 is extremely interesting because it may give us a hint at Jesus' self-consciousness of being the Son of God. "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." The verse begins with the word *eurethesis* in the passive sense, properly translated in our translation as "being found." And what happens when He "finds" Himself to be in appearance of a man, he humbled Himself. This seems to be speaking of a time in Jesus' earthly life when he became conscious of Himself being the Son of God, Logos Incarnated. It seems clear that this self-consciousness was present before age 12, for Luke 2:41-52 describes Him as already calling God



His father. And when this consciousness came to Him he willingly yielded Himself to fulfill His role as servant to God Almighty, His heavenly Father. This humble yieldedness deepened to include all that the death on the cross involved.

Verses 6-8 describe Christ's humiliation. But that humiliation must be divided into two distinctive acts. The first was the self-emptying of the Logos. The second was the self-humbling of the God-man, Jesus Christ (DeVries). The self-emptying precedes the self-humbling. "The former is His willingness to become man, the latter is His readiness to suffer" (DeVries).

Charles Spurgeon said it well when he commented on verse 8: "Jesus is the great teacher of lowliness of heart. We need daily to learn of Him....Was He not on earth always stripping off first one role of honor and then another, until naked, he was fastened to the cross, and there did He not empty out his inmost self, pouring out his life-blood, giving up for all of us, until they laid Him penniless in a borrowed grave?"

The whole point of Paul's use of the self-emptying and self-humbling is put elegantly by Spurgeon, again: "May the Lord bring us in contemplation of Calvary, then our position will no longer be that of the pompous man of pride, but we shall take the humble place of one who loves much because much has been forgiven him. Pride cannot live beneath the cross. Let us sit there and learn our lesson, and rise and carry it into practice."

Taking Spurgeon's words as our own, just how do we put humility into practice? The humility that nurtures (MacArthur, Hebrews) the other virtues described to us in verses 1-4. "The basis for the exhortation(s) is the believer's position in Christ, verse 1. If they act upon this position they will...realize their unity which will be affected by genuine selflessness and meekness, verses 3-4" (Unger, New Bible Handbook). Other passages also describe the Christian's positional union with Christ. But none better than Ephesians

1. The phrase "in Christ" appears seven times with the idea of in Him are spiritual "riches" (verses 18-21). This union can be understood by reading Jesus' own analogy of this union in John 15:1-8. It is a vital union, not just a theoretical one. Spiritual fruit can only come from spiritual life, and this life is in Christ Jesus (John 5:26, 6:48, 8:12) and by the power of the Spirit of God this life force works in us (2 Corinthians 3:18), "both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

This union is not an impersonal flow of energy, but a union that supplies the needs of all aspects of humans' nature. Verse 5 specifically speaks of humankind's rational nature. This rational nature is to be a reflection of Christ's mind-humble and filled with wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:16). It is to be sought in Him. Whatever does not conform to Christ is to be put aside, for "God shall supply all [our] need(s) according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). For those who are in Christ should be like Christ (1 John 2:6).

What were the results of Jesus' voluntary humiliation? As John MacArthur said, commenting on verses 9-11, "God is immeasurably satisfied with Jesus." This pleasing of the Father is the joy of Jesus' heart-"For the joy that was before Him, He endured the cross, despising [the suffering of] the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus' earthly humiliation was only temporary to accomplish a great work. Jesus now sits at the Father's right hand, waiting for the time when all His enemies and naysayers will be defeated and exposed for what they truly are, enemies of God and His kingdom.

The context of the passage gives the suggestion that exaltation also awaits Jesus' followers, His humble disciples. What is hinted at here in this passage is stated directly in other passages (1 Peter 5:6-7, Luke 18:14, Isaiah 66:1-2, and Isaiah 57:15). These passages speak of God's caring for the humble and His giving to them "beauty for ashes."

Paul's conclusion to this entire passage, and it will be ours, is found in verses 12 and 13. Based on their new understanding of humility and what is theirs in Christ, Paul exhorts the Philippians (and us) to be obedient with fear and trembling, that the salvation that is in them can be worked out of them in their behavior, that they might be in common agreement and common pursuit with God to fulfill His desire for their lives.

## **Sources**

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