

Humility

The Point: Consider the needs of others before your own.

Session Passage: Philippians 2:1-11

Philippians 2:1-2

Connection to the Point. Love for one another lays the groundwork for humility that leads to unity.

Philippians. Paul was the first preacher to spread the gospel in Philippi, leading Lydia to Christ in a conversation outside the city beside a river (Acts 16:11-15). He also was imprisoned for casting a demon from a slave girl, and while imprisoned led the jailer to Christ (vv. 16-34). The Philippian church supported Paul throughout his ministry, including during the apostle's first Roman imprisonment from where he wrote the letter to the Philippians in response to a monetary gift he had received from the Philippian church (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:10-20). The theme of the letter is joy; the Greek term for "joy" appears five times and the term for "rejoice" eight times in the four chapters.

If, then (v. 1). What Paul wrote in the first chapter of Philippians led to this transition at the start of chapter 2. He began his letter with a note of thanksgiving to God for the Philippian believers (1:3-8). He viewed these Christians as true partners in the gospel as they stood by him while he was in prison. He prayed that God would help them to grow in their understanding of Him so that they might remain faithful and continue to grow to spiritual maturity until Christ returned (vv. 9-11). To ease their anxiety about his imprisonment, Paul explained how God had used his circumstances as an opportunity to advance the gospel (vv. 12-20). Prison stopped his traveling but did not stop his mission. Paul told the Philippians whether he lived or died, Christ would care for him (vv. 21-26). Finally, the apostle urged the Philippian believers to remain faithful to Christ, even in the face of opposition and persecution (vv. 27-30). With these events in mind, he laid the groundwork for his teaching on true humility.

Philippians 2:1-4 is a single sentence in the Greek. It is a type of Greek conditional sentence which assumes the stated premise is true. The four characteristics of the if-clause are true because of the common faith in Christ Paul shared with the Philippians. All these characteristics together produced unity and humility within the church.

Encouragement in Christ (v. 1) refers to the blessings of being in or united with Christ. Both Paul, who was in a Roman prison, and the Philippian believers, who were facing opposition for their faith, could find encouragement in being in Christ. Neither Paul nor the Philippians were alone in their situations. Another characteristic the apostle and the Philippian believers shared was the love they received from Christ (**consolation of love**). Jesus's love for them remained certain (Rom. 8:31-39). Furthermore, this love Christ had for them resulted in their love for one another, which sustained Paul in prison (Phil. 1:3-8).

Fellowship with the Spirit (v. 1) could refer either to fellowship with the Holy Spirit or fellowship brought about by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells every believer and is the source of the love and fellowship believers have for one another. Finally, Paul and the Philippians shared the common experience of grace, whereby God poured out His **affection** and tender **mercy** upon them. He gave them all what they did not deserve—salvation and all its benefits.

Make my joy complete (v. 2). Paul returned to his theme of joy (1:4). The apostle expressed that since they shared all the same characteristics of Christ's love for them (2:1), nothing would make him more joyful than seeing unity and humility in the Philippian church. The apostle first identified the essence of unity.

Thinking the same way (v. 2) refers to being like-minded. Paul was not encouraging uniformity, but rather unity in the sense of sharing common values and purpose in how they viewed things in regard to Christ and the church. Such thinking involves the intellect, emotions, and will, which lead to a comprehensive attitude which is reflected in one's actions.¹

Having the same love (v. 2) refers to the Philippians' shared love for Christ in their lives, which should also manifest itself in the common love toward each other. Because believers have experienced the love of God in Christ, they can and should demonstrate such love toward other believers (John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-21).

United in spirit (v. 2) could refer to both Paul and the Philippians sharing the same spirit in the sense of an attitude, or it could refer to both sharing in the Spirit of God. Both were true. Earlier, in relation to "contending together for the faith of the gospel," Paul wrote that he hoped to hear that the Philippians were "standing firm in one spirit" (1:27).

Intent on one purpose (v. 2) refers to proclaiming Christ—spreading the gospel. All the characteristics that they shared in their relationship with God (2:1) and in their relationships with each other (v. 2) bound Paul and the church together as well as uniting the Philippian church itself.

Philippians 2:3-4

Connection to the Point: Love leads us to place others before ourselves.

Selfish ambition (v. 3). Paul had already written that some preached Christ because of *selfish ambition* (1:17). Before New Testament times, this term appeared only in the writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, when he described those who selfishly sought political office in unfair ways. Here Paul used the term in the sense of having rivalries or self-seeking interests. Elsewhere the apostle used the term to describe those who pursued their own selfish interests rather than God's ways (Rom. 2:8). Paul also used the term in connection with the disunity and factions within the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 12:20). "Selfish ambitions" are also one of the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20). People with selfish ambition exhibit both a lack of humility and a divisive spirit.

Conceit (v. 3) means "empty glory." *Conceit* describes someone claiming glory for himself that does not exist. It can involve either a vain, exaggerated view of oneself or vanity that comes from excessive ambition. It can lead to both provocation and envy (Gal. 5:26).

Humility (v. 3) is the opposite of selfish ambition and conceit. It is having a correct estimation of oneself, particularly in relation to God since we are unworthy to receive all He has given us in Christ. It is modesty. Paul defined *humility* as considering others more important than oneself. It is a characteristic that God's people are to exhibit along with compassion, kindness, gentleness, and patience (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12). Peter encouraged believers to clothe themselves in humility in relation to others (1 Pet. 5:5). It is possible to demonstrate false humility in the pursuit of self-seeking purposes (Col. 2:23).

In first-century Greco-Roman culture, *humility* carried negative connotations. It described the mentality of a slave and was used to refer to members of the society that were viewed as being of little or no value—those seen as insignificant, weak, poor, and so forth. In Scripture, humility is a characteristic of God (Pss. 18:35; Ps. 45:4), and it is through humility that one comes to an understanding of God’s ways (25:9) and gains wisdom (Prov. 11:2). Jesus, who entered the world in a humble birth, taught His disciples to be humble (Luke 14:7-14) and emphasized the need for an attitude of humble servanthood (Matt. 23:11-12; John 13:1-17).

Consider others as more important than yourselves (v. 3). Jesus taught, “Whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12). These words, often known as “the Golden Rule,” are considered a guide for how to relate to others. However, this does not entail self-neglect or self-loathing, putting oneself down—which would be false humility. Rather, it is having a correct estimation of oneself in relation to God and others. Implicit in Jesus’s command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; see Lev. 19:18) is the understanding that we treat ourselves in a healthy, reasonable manner.

To consider others more important than oneself involves not always claiming the rights and privileges that are ours. It entails looking out for **the interest of others** first, rather than only looking out for our **own interests**. Balance is needed. Paul commanded believers to look out for their own families. If they did not provide and care for them they were denying the faith and worse than unbelievers (1 Tim. 5:8). However, believers should not be so concerned with their own needs that they neglect or ignore *the interests of others*. Paul encouraged the Galatian believers to “carry one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

Such an attitude can require sacrifice. Paul continually exhibited through his actions how he put others before himself for the sake of the spread of the gospel. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, the apostle detailed all the things he had humbly endured in order to take the gospel to the world.

Philippians 2:5-11

Connection to the Point. Follow the example of Jesus in displaying humility.

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus (v. 5). The attitude of humility and servanthood Paul had encouraged among the Philippians (vv. 3-4) he now provided an example of (vv. 6-11), most likely using an early Christian hymn. They were to adopt the attitude of *Christ Jesus*, the attitude Christ exhibited in His role as the Messiah.

Christ is the English word for the Greek term meaning “anointed one,” and is the equivalent of the Hebrew term translated “Messiah.” *Jesus* is the name given to Him at His birth because He would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21,25). It is derived from the Hebrew word for “Joshua” which means “God saves.” Jesus is the anointed Messiah promised in the Old Testament and sent by God the Father to redeem people from their sins (John 3:16-18).

Existing in the form of God (v. 6) is contrasted with **the form of a servant** (v. 7). The Son of God always existed with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Through the incarnation, He became a human being. Jesus was not part-man and part-God. He is fully God and fully man. Jesus never relinquished the *form of God*, but He did take the *form of a servant*.

Equality with God as something to be exploited (v. 6). *Equality with God* equates with the *form of God*, both referring to Jesus being the eternal Son of God. The phrase could mean that since the preincarnate Christ already possessed equality with God, He resolved not to cling to it. Or it could mean that Christ did

not reach for His crowning (glorification) prematurely but was willing to wait until after His suffering and death on the cross.

Emptied himself (v. 7). Jesus's humility demonstrated itself in His actions. The first action that He took was that He *emptied himself*. This does not mean, as some have argued, that Jesus divested Himself of certain qualities of the Godhead. While Jesus experienced the limitations of His humanity (Matt. 24:36; John 4:6), He always remained fully God and fully man. The only limitations Jesus experienced were self-limitations, not an emptying of His essence as God. He willingly submitted to the will of His Father by taking on the outward **form of a servant** and **the likeness of humanity**. Jesus deserved to be in heaven. He deserved all the glory of the Godhead. Instead, He emptied Himself of those rights to become a part of humanity He had created. Yet, He never ceased being God.

Humbled himself by becoming obedient (v. 8). In addition to emptying Himself, Jesus also *humbled* Himself. This was the primary reason Paul used this hymn as an illustration. He had challenged the Philippians to live with humility (2:3), and here he provided the ultimate illustration of what that looks like. Every act of the incarnate Christ was a lesson in humility. He experienced life as a human being—birth, growth, temptation, pain, and even died a humiliating death. His every act was in obedience to the will of God the Father (John 6:38-40).

Death on a cross . . . highly exalted him (vv. 8-9). Jesus submitted to crucifixion, the harshest form of capital punishment in the Roman world. He died as the substitutionary atonement for our sins. This was God the Father's plan to which Jesus, God the Son, submitted (Luke 22:42; John 3:16). However, what was viewed negatively as humiliating by the world was the reason for Jesus's exaltation in the plan of God. This exaltation refers to Jesus's resurrection, ascension, and glorification that followed His humiliating death (Acts 2:32-33; 1 Pet. 3:22; Heb. 1:3; 12:2). God the Father exalted Jesus by raising Him from the dead and giving Him **the name that is above every name**. But what is that name? In light of verses 10-11, many consider the name to be "Lord." The title refers to both Jesus's character and function.² Jesus deserves all worship and praise because He defeated death, hell, and the grave, and through His sacrificial death achieved salvation for all who will repent of their sins and place their faith in Him as their Savior and Lord.

Every knee will bow . . . every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (vv. 10-11). Both the bending of the knee and confession of the tongue refer to the act of worship. All of God's creation will one day acknowledge the lordship of Christ. However, that does not mean everyone will be saved. Some will voluntarily acknowledge and submit to the lordship of Christ through repentance and faith in Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Others will be conquered by Christ and acknowledge Jesus as Lord as His defeated foes. These people will not participate in the glory and exaltation of the Lord. Rather, they will experience eternal punishment and separation from God for their rebellion and sin. Nevertheless, one day all will acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

In heaven and on earth and under the earth (v. 10). This is a poetic way of referring to all God's creation. Ultimately every creature in the universe will acknowledge who Jesus is—the angels in heaven, the people who live on earth, and the demons in hell. No part of God's creation is outside of Jesus's lordship.

1. Richard R. Meleck, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 94.

2. Ibid., 106.