

Our Imitation of Christ

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-part series drawn from Philippians

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Philippians 1:27–2:13 (NIV)

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

What is the shape of your life? In what way is it Christ-like?

Steven Spielberg's epic film, *Saving Private Ryan*, tells the story of Private James Francis Ryan, who was brought home from the Normandy battlefield in WWII. After learning that all three of Ryan's brothers had been KIA within a few days of each other, General George Marshall ordered that a team of soldiers find Ryan and bring him home. Capt. John Miller, who died in the fighting, led the team to recover Private Ryan. The movie begins and ends with emotional reflection by an elderly Ryan decades later, as he struggles with the anguish of knowing that he could never have been worthy of such a sacrifice on his behalf. Men died so that he could be saved. Who could really be worthy of such a thing? But perhaps it isn't really a matter of *being* worthy, but of living worthily – of Ryan living a life of goodness and of virtue. Ryan rightly knew that he could never be worthy of what was done for him, but he could live sacrificially for the sake of others.

In a similar way, Paul urges the Philippian believers to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. The heart of this gospel is the proclamation that through the faithfulness of Christ, even to death, we have been made right with God. What was torn asunder in the garden has been repaired and restored in Christ. Paul wants the believers to grasp that

whether he is with them or not is really beside the point. The Christian ministry does depend on the presence or absence of any particular minister. This was as true in Philippi as anywhere else. Fred Craddock writes:

Proud of itself as a little Rome, official, patriotic, suspicious of any persons or movements not aligned and loyal to Caesar, probably quite anti-Semitic (Acts 16:20–21), this city could and did make it difficult for the disciples of Jesus. Paul knows this firsthand and so drops his usual word, which we translate conduct or lifestyle, and uses the local term for living out one’s citizenship (v. 27). He means by it one’s manner of life as it faces upon and intersects with life in the city. The church is not to hide nor apologize for its existence. It is possible for them, in fact, it is incumbent upon them, to live among the people and institutions of Philippi in a way that is informed and disciplined by the gospel of Christ. This is to live “worthily.” “Worthily” is an adverb describing how they conduct themselves, not an adjective descriptive of their character (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27 in contrast to Luke 15:19). This is no easy task. It calls for standing on duty together, striving side by side as fellow athletes who are so completely a team that they function as one person, having one spirit and soul. Nothing the opponents say or do must be allowed to frighten (*stampede*, as with horses) them. They cannot assume that outside opposition in and of itself creates internal unity. Even if it did, it would be a unity defined by the opposition. Therefore, the church must struggle together “for the faith of the gospel.” If they cease to act and simply react, then it is no longer the gospel but the culture which gives the church its identity. Precisely who the opponents are is not clear. They may be neighbors or officials; they may be Romans or Jews; they may operate by litigation or by harassment. We do not know.¹

And what is the shape of the lives these novice Christians are to lead in the midst of a hostile city? The believers are to be unified and of one mind, knowing that they are united in Christ and share in common the Holy Spirit of God. They are to set aside selfish ambition and embrace lives of humility and self-sacrifice. As Paul puts it, they are to put the interest of others ahead of their own. In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson expresses Paul’s writing this way:

“If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.” (Phil. 2:1-4)

In all this, Paul is striving to help the Philippians see the shape of Jesus’ life, so that they can strive to imitate Christ in their own lives, so that they can be people who are of the same mind as Christ – in that they too would live, and die, for the sake of others.

The Christ-hymn

Then, to drive home his point Paul offers the Philippians what amounts to a Christ-hymn. It is an affirmation of faith that sits at the every center of Paul’s theology. In VBS this summer, the children will be learning something about articulating their faith – being ready to tell others about Jesus. It will be one of the Faith Skills they learn.

After urging the Philippians to always put the interests of others ahead of their own, in verse 5 Paul tells the Philippians to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” This is all about attitude! Peterson renders it this way: “Think of yourselves the same way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” So, the obvious question is -- how did Jesus think of himself?

Paul answers this question by using the glorious Christ-hymn of v. 6-11. That it is a hymn, sung or not, is widely accepted. Thus, it gives us a peek into the proclamations about Jesus that were made by some of the earliest Christians. Whether Paul composed it or simply used it in his letter, this hymn, this “Christ-hymn,” was written before any of the gospels.

¹ Craddock, F. B. (1985). *Philippians. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (32–33). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*

Philippians is filled with Paul's teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do's and don'ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology! Jesus was “in very nature God” . . . Jesus “made himself nothing” . . . Jesus was “made in human likeness” . . . all this theology.

But this is Paul's way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:9). Paul understood that we can't separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ's selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

Thus, the phrase in Paul's Christ hymn that most demands our attention is this: “he made himself nothing” in the NIV (v. 7) and “emptied himself” in the NRSV. Remember the points that John drove home time and again at the beginning of his gospel: Jesus was God . . . existing from God's beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But, Paul writes, he gave it all up. He didn't cling to his inherent rights and privileges; he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness” (NRSV). He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross, so that by his obedient faithfulness the whole world might be put right with God.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this; we get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul's point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.” Here is N. T. Wright on this “emptying.”

Let's clear one misunderstanding out of the way in case it still confuses anybody. In verse 7 Paul says that Jesus ‘emptied himself’. People have sometimes thought that this means that Jesus, having been divine up to that point, somehow stopped being divine when he became human, and then went back to being divine again. This is, in fact, completely untrue to what Paul has in mind. The point of verse 6 is that Jesus was indeed already equal with God; somehow Paul is saying that Jesus already existed even before he became a human being (verse 7). But the decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*.

Jesus retained his equality with God; the point of the cross, for Paul, is that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Corinthians 5:19). The point of verses 6 and 7 is that Jesus didn't regard this equality as something to take advantage of, something to exploit. Rather, the eternal son of God, the one who became human in and as Jesus of Nazareth, regarded his equality with God as committing him to the course he took: of becoming human, of becoming Israel's anointed representative, of dying under the weight of the world's evil. This is what it meant to be equal with God. As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.²

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (102–103). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

How does God respond to Jesus' "obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross"? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom "every knee should bend" and "every tongue confess." Using these stirring words of worship from Isaiah (45:23), Paul points us toward Jesus as the image of the one true God, whose self-sacrifice embodies the meaning of true love. Jesus is to be worshiped. His example urges us on toward loving sacrifices of our own. We are not to cling to our privileges, we are to surrender them for the sake of others. For, this is what God is like . . . and we are made in the image of God. This is what it means to live worthily of the gospel.

The Humiliation of Christ

Rome ruled the New Testament world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today's passage, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses "slave" (v.7) – the most dishonorable *public status* one could have, and then "cross" (v.8) – the most dishonorable *public humiliation* one could suffer.

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul's claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the verses immediately preceding today's passage from Philippians, Paul says that we are privileged to believe in Christ and we are privileged to suffer for him. Paul binds together our theology and our ethics. On the one hand, we confess that Jesus is Lord and Savior, and with the other hand, we put others before ourselves, living in humility and selflessness. We cannot ignore the demands of the Gospel and still proclaim its truth. Discuss what this holding together of theology and ethics means for our lives as Christians, as we strive to be better disciples. You might make a list of key beliefs and then consider the ethical implications of those beliefs. Or turn it around. Make a list of what we are called to do, and then discuss the theological implications of those practices. Why do we do what we do? Only because Jesus said so? . . . or ought we to look a little deeper.
2. In her commentary on Philippians, Morna Hooker reminds us that "we cannot expect to find ready-made answers to these modern-day questions in the Bible." The Bible is not a magic answer book! Paul cannot give us a rule book for how to conduct ourselves in the office. Instead, we need to go back to first principles, to consider what God is like and to consider what God has done for us. Paul has given us hints. Unity and harmony seem to be key, as are humility and selflessness and sacrifice. What other hints are there? What sort of portrait emerges from these hints? Take one tough subject (your choice!) and consider how these hints might take us in one direction or another. For example, how does "sacrifice" inform our discussion of homosexuality or prayer in schools?
3. Being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with "humiliated"! Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!???) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being "humble" v. being "humiliated." Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Isaiah 45:23 & Romans 14:10-12 To whom will every knee bow and every tongue confess? What does it mean to proclaim that Jesus is Lord?</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 13:3-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 12 More from Paul on the shape of our lives in Christ</p>	<p>Thursday, James 2:14-26 What we do as Christians really, truly matters.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Peter 3:8-22 Peter on suffering for doing good</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

