

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

Though He was in the form of God, He did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But He emptied Himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When He found Himself in the form of a human, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God highly honored Him and gave Him a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

—Philippians 2:5–11, CEB

LEARNING GOALS

1. To define what Paul means by “living a life worthy of the gospel”
2. To introduce the class to the humility of Jesus through the Christ Hymn
3. To call the class to accept the challenge of living a radical life under the confession “Jesus is Lord”

REFLECTION

Few passages of the Bible (if any) describe more fully the character and nature of God than Philippians 2:1–11. Beginning with a set of admonitions and ending with the beautiful lyrical prose of verses 6–11, Paul invites his spiritual children to consider a new way of living modeled after the humble servant of God, Jesus Christ. Taken seriously, these verses offer no short-cut, easy-path Christianity. Rather, the life outlined by Paul and modeled by Jesus requires serious dedication, absolute surrender, and humility unlike anything ever witnessed in the world. Make no mistake: those who choose to model themselves after the One described in these verses will clash with the world. No one can truly call this Jesus “Lord” and still feel at home in a world that has given itself in so many ways to other lords, including money, power,

fame, and safety. Far from being a nice poem to be read from the pulpit on Sunday morning, Paul's words in the first half of Philippians 2 describe a God and a lifestyle that are revolutionary, dangerous, and also attractive.

In Philippians 1:27, Paul instructs the Philippians to "live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel," but he waits until chapter two before he provides a definition of that kind of life. At the heart of that life seems to be the idea of unity within community. Paul writes that his joy will become complete when the Philippians "think the same thing," "have the same love," "are united in spirit," and are "of one mind." This language echoes other places in Paul's writings where he encourages the church to "agree with one another" (II Corinthians 13:11) and "live in harmony" (Romans 15:5). Certainly, these calls for like-mindedness were not commands to agree with each other on every single detail of life or doctrine. History has shown there has always been diversity of belief and practice within even the healthiest of congregations. Instead, this entire pericope centers on humility. Followers of Jesus should not demand their own ways; rather, in humility, each should listen to the other and avoid selfish behavior. Instead of thinking of themselves first, Paul calls the Philippians to think of others and to consider how to bless the lives of those around them. The great, universal vice of humankind seems to be selfishness, and Paul goes to great lengths to discourage the Philippians away from this timeless sin. The key to having the same mind and the same love does not demand absolute uniformity, but it does demand humility.

The most recognized section of this passage, verses 5–11, most likely reflect the words of a first-century Christian hymn. Ernst Lohmeyer, a prominent New Testament scholar, first penned this theory in 1961. He notes the structure of the passage, the rhythm of the prose, and the unique vocabulary found here and nowhere else in the entire Pauline corpus. These realities make it seem as if Paul took a well-known poem or song and inserted it into his letter in order to make his point. In order to provide a reason for the Philippians to adopt a lifestyle centered on humility, Paul offers the example of Jesus Christ.

The basic meaning of the so-called "Christ hymn" is pretty straight forward. Jesus set aside His right to power, became human, and submitted to death on our behalf, and His motivation came from His incredible humility. As a result of his humility, the Father

exalted Him above everything else. The analogy is clear: followers of Christ should emulate the actions of Jesus. As Christians, in humility, die to their own agendas and own demands for the sake of the world, they follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Though the ultimate meaning of the hymn appears simple enough, some important and complex issues do surface. First, there is a word in verse 6 that has been discussed and debated for many decades. The NRSV reads, “[Jesus] did not regard ... something to be *exploited*.” The RSV renders the same phrase, “[Jesus] did not count ... a thing to be *grasped*.” This word, variously translated “exploited” or “grasped,” is used nowhere else in the entire Bible. It’s meaning, attained from extra-biblical sources, can mean anything from “a violent seizure of property” to “a grasping of something that one already has.” James Thompson and Bruce Longnecker write, “Some interpreters have suggested that the imagery indicates that Christ was less than equal to God and, in contrast to Adam, chose not to grasp it” (66). Other interpreters, however, favor the other meaning of the verb, believing Jesus already had the power of God in his grasp and chose to let go. The linguistic evidence and the larger context of the entire hymn seem to favor the latter option. Christ chose not to hold on to what was already His, choosing instead to empty Himself of His status on our behalf. N.T. Wright writes about this issue, “Over against the standard picture of oriental despots, who understood their position as something to be used for their advantage, Jesus understood his position to mean self-negation, the vocations described in vv. 7–8.” The idea of kings and lords giving up power was unheard of in the first-century (just as it is today), so the lifestyle of Jesus stood in complete contrast to the value system of the Greco-Roman world.

Another important note about this hymn concerns its strong and unavoidable political implications. The description of One who was “equal to God” and “did not consider equality with God a thing to be exploited” has echoes of Roman emperors. In the first-century world, Roman emperors were held as equal to God, and they certainly exploited their status! Nearly every description we have of Roman emperors paints the picture of powerful leaders grasping at more power through selfishness, greed, violence, and even murder. The ultimate prize was power, and they did just about anything to attain more of it. The idea of a ruler abandoning power would have

seemed strange in the ancient world. As Thompson and Longnecker write, “The self-emptying of Christ is the antithesis of the self-exalting Hellenistic ruler.”

The most dangerous aspect of the hymn comes at its close. In the end, every tongue will confess that “Jesus is Lord.” First, one should note the importance, for a Jew, of ascribing this title to Jesus. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this term was reserved only for God. To apply this term to Jesus had significant implications for monotheistic Jews, and passages such as this one laid the foundation for later discussions and debates centered on the Trinity. Second, ascribing this title to Jesus put Christians at odds with Roman society. By the time Paul wrote Philippians, “lord” had become the common title for the emperor. This confession played a vital role in creating opposition between Christians and the Roman authorities, because this Christian confession put in question the absolute sovereignty of the emperor.

Teachers of this material in 21st century America should allow their classes to consider the political overtones of this passage today. What does it mean to say “Jesus is Lord” in America today? Where do our ultimate allegiances lie? How can a Christian say at the same time “Jesus is Lord” and “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America?” These kinds of questions undoubtedly surfaced in the first century as Jew and Gentile Christians attempted to make sense of this new object of their allegiance.

In the end, this passage provides the ultimate expression of God. This is who God really is—the One who, in humility, gave up everything on our behalf. One must remember, also, that Paul is not meaning to simply describe God. His ultimate goal is describe what it looks like to “live together in a manner worthy of the gospel.” His answer comes down to this: to believe in God is to be like God. Those who believe in and worship this God do not seek power, status, or privilege at the expense of others. Rather, in humility, they consider others better than themselves, listen before they speak, and lift up others, even if that means they must move to the lowest position.

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage
 - a. What is your favorite Christian hymn?

- i. Pick one hymn and spend a few minutes talking about its implications.
 - ii. What does the hymn say about God?
 - iii. Does the hymn call followers of God to act differently?
- b. This morning, we are going to spend some time examining a hymn from the first century.
 - i. We will ask the same questions of it that we have asked about this more recent hymn.
 - ii. What does it say about God?
 - iii. What does it call God's followers to do?

2. Involve

- a. First, let's read the "introduction" to the hymn.
 - i. Read Philippians 2:1–4.
 - ii. Paul is beginning to define a phrase that he introduced back in 1:27.
 - iii. What does it mean to "live together in a manner worthy of the gospel?"
 - iv. Notice the emphasis upon unity in these verses.
 - 1. What do these phrases mean?
 - 2. Is Paul calling for complete uniformity in thought, speech, and doctrine?
 - 3. What is the key to being like-minded and having the same love?
 - v. Bring the class back to the idea of humility, which is the key to defining these phrases and the key to understanding the Christ hymn.
- b. Read Philippians 2:5–11.
 - i. These words reflect the earliest known Christian hymn.
 - 1. The language here is used nowhere else in all of Paul's letters.
 - 2. There is a rhythmic quality to these lines in the Greek.
 - ii. Pay attention to verse 6.
 - 1. How do your translations render the end of that verse?

2. Drawing upon the Reflection section, discuss the difference between “exploit” and “grasp.”
 3. The sense of the hymn seems to favor “exploit.” Jesus had the power already, but He chose not to exploit it or hold on to it.
- iii. Go through the hymn line by line and discuss some of the implications of each phrase.
 - iv. Consider especially the implications of the phrase “Jesus is Lord.”
 1. What would it have meant for a Jew to say “Jesus is Lord”?
 2. What would it have meant for a Christian living in 1st century Rome to say “Jesus is Lord”?
 3. What does it mean for 21st century Americans to say “Jesus is Lord”?
 - a. Are there still political implications for us in this passage?
 - b. How can we say “Jesus is Lord” and “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America”?
 - c. In what way(s) do we allow our citizenship as Americans stand in the way or overshadow our confession that Jesus is Lord?
 - d. How can we live as loyal citizens of America (or any country) and maintain our allegiance to Jesus Christ?
 - e. What steps can/should we take to ensure that our allegiance to our country does not take precedence over our allegiance to Jesus Christ?

3. Challenge

- a. Dedicate yourself to read this passage every morning for the next week.
- b. Discuss this passage with your family this week. Consider this question: What is one habit we can change, as a family, to more faithfully follow the example of Jesus Christ?
- c. In your personal devotional time this week, consider answering the same question: What is one habit you can change to more faithfully follow the example of Jesus Christ?

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