

Lesson 9

Serve With Humility and Love

Christians follow Christ by serving others with humility and love.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

The Apostle Paul called for the Philippian Christians to follow Christ's example of humility and love. Throughout history, people have tended to be proud and selfish, failing to consider the value or well-being of others. In contrast to such sinful tendencies, we as Christians need to heed Paul's admonition to learn from and follow the example of Jesus. This lesson reveals God's people can achieve unity in a divided world by being obedient disciples of Jesus Christ and following His example. Paul promotes this throughout the letter to the Christians in Philippi, and this lesson continues to be desperately needed in the church today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Acts 16:12-40 describes Paul's missionary work in Philippi, which marked the entrance of the Gospel into Europe. There was no synagogue in the city in which to introduce Jesus as the Messiah, but in a prayer meeting of women at the river, Paul found receptive hearts. This included a businesswoman named Lydia, who supported Paul's ministry in Philippi. After being arrested and asked to leave the city, Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians as a prisoner in Rome. From the center of the Roman Empire, with all its opulence and self-importance, Paul wrote about the need for love, humility, concern for others, and unity among Christians.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. BE "OTHERS-FOCUSED": Philippians 2:1-4.

- A. Call to Unity (1-2)
- B. Path to Unity (3-4)

2. FOLLOW CHRIST'S EXAMPLE: Philippians 2:5-11.

- A. Example of Christ (5-8).
- B. Response of God (9-11).

3. BE AN EXAMPLE TO OTHERS: Philippians 2:12-16.

- A. Working Out Salvation Through Obedience (12-13)
- B. Shining Like Stars (14-16)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. BE “OTHERS-FOCUSED”: Philippians 2:1-4.

A. Call to Unity Philippians 2:1-2

The division between chapters 1 and 2 tends to obscure the vital connection between 1:27 and 2:1-2. In 1:27, the church is encouraged to live “as it becometh the gospel of Christ,” which is foundational for what follows in chapter 2. Paul encouraged the Philippian Christians to live in unity, which is consistent with the Gospel. He reminded them even in their suffering (vv. 29-30), they experienced “consolation in Christ...comfort of love...[and] fellowship of the Spirit” (2:1). Therefore, Paul encouraged them to display the same mindset toward one another. Just as they had been comforted and consoled in Christ and the Holy Spirit, (v. 1), they were to bring joy to Paul by being “likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (v. 2).

Paul also connected unity and living a life worthy of the Gospel elsewhere in his letters. For example, in Ephesians 4:1-6, Paul urged the Ephesian believers “[to] walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (v. 1) with the encouragement to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit” (v. 3). In John 13:35, Jesus told His disciples that their love for one another would reveal to others they are His disciples. It is, therefore, little wonder that Paul continued to focus on the important trait of humility as the natural outgrowth and evidence of true love, as well as the hallmark of living in a manner worthy of the Gospel.

B. Path to Unity Philippians 2:3-4

Having called Philippian believers to demonstrate unity among themselves, Paul explained how this can be achieved. Unity rarely comes naturally; it takes focused effort by people willing to set aside selfish desires. In this passage, Paul intended to explain how achieving unity could be achieved. It begins by resisting the urge to focus solely on oneself and one’s own goals and ambitions. This is done by placing greater value on others than on oneself. It goes against fallen human nature to consider others first, but the words of Paul are consistent with the teaching of Christ, who said, “Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30). When we as believers practice humility, valuing others first and putting ourselves last, we more accurately represent Kingdom principles, where greatness is measured on a completely different scale than that used in the world.

Building on this idea of valuing others above themselves, Paul then called the Philippians to look out for the interests of others. It is one thing to talk about prioritizing others, but when self-interests are set aside so action can be taken for the benefit and interests of others, humility becomes evident in our lives. If we practice these principles, unity can genuinely begin to be achieved, which was a goal Paul encouraged the Philippian church to pursue.

Paul’s teaching that we should value others more than ourselves and put the interests of others ahead of ours sounds radical to people influenced by a self-centered culture. Jesus also taught this, and Jesus’ disciples found this message difficult to embrace. At one point, they argued over who was the greatest among them (Mark 9:33-34), which was ironic given that the King of kings was humbly walking among them. We must decide whether to follow the path Christ has laid before us, which honors others above ourselves, or follow the path that elevates ourselves above others.

2. FOLLOW CHRIST’S EXAMPLE: Philippians 2:5-11

A. Example of Christ Philippians 2:5-8

By revealing the example of Jesus Christ, Paul expanded on his general exhortation concerning humility as the means to achieve unity. When it came to the Philippians' relationships with one another, Paul encouraged them, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (v. 5). This is a high standard, but even in the Old Testament, before the Holy Spirit had been poured out to empower the people of God (Acts 2), God called His people to be "holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). The standard was and is high, but grace and the Holy Spirit make it possible for us to achieve it.

Paul L. Walker said, "There is a direct correlation between the knowledge of God and the degree of our humility. The more we know about God, the more humble we are activated to become. The true child of God walks humbly before the Lord in the knowledge of His righteousness."

The Apostle Paul wanted the Philippians believers to recognize what Christ did and the example they were to follow. To begin, Paul noted that Christ was by His very nature God, yet He was willing to limit many of His divine attributes for the well-being of others by taking on human flesh. In addition, Jesus was then willing to submit not only to the pain and suffering associated with death on a cross but also its shame and humiliation (Hebrews 12:2). Paul wanted to ensure the Philippian Christians understood what it meant to put the interests of others ahead of their own. The example of Jesus is a radical and dramatic example of what it means to value others above us, and we are called to practice this lifestyle.

B. Response of God Philippians 2:9-11

Having presented the example of Christ's humility as the model to be followed by the believers in Philippi, Paul then presented the Father's response to Jesus' life of humility. As a result of Christ's obedience and humility, and putting the needs of others ahead of His own well-being and self-interests, Paul explained that God "highly exalted him and [gave] him a name which is above every name" (v.9). In addition to Paul's teaching, there is also attestation in the Gospels of the Father's pleasure regarding Jesus' willingness to come and live humbly in human form to carry out the eternal plan of redemption. From the time of Jesus' baptism, as He entered on the path that would ultimately lead to the cross, and throughout His subsequent earthly ministry, there are repeated references to God's pleasure in the path Jesus was willing to take (Matthew 3:17; 12:18; 17:5).

Paul was not suggesting Christians would be exalted in the same way Jesus was exalted, but he may have been suggesting that by following Christ's lifestyle, we can place ourselves in God's good pleasure and receive His commendation. Although we cannot earn salvation from God through our actions, we can bring joy to God through how we live. In the same way that many people in the Bible pleased God, pleasing Him is possible for all Christians seeking to honor and glorify Him today, whether through humility or other ways of worship and service. After King David led the Israelites in giving generously to build a house of worship, he declared, "As for me, in the uprightness of my heart I have willingly offered all these things; and now with joy I have seen Your people, who are present here to offer willingly to You" (1 Chronicles 29:17). It is possible and expected that we as Christians will bring joy to the Lord.

Philippians 2:5-11 reveals the nature of humility. It has been said, "Humility is not thinking less about ourselves less" (source unknown). Jesus provided the supreme example of humility when, for the sake of others (including those who crucified Him), He surrendered the divine prerogatives and power that were rightfully His. His focus was not on Himself and His own well-being but on

the well-being of others, a trait seen not only in His death but also in His daily life on earth. This is an example that we are called to imitate.

3. BE AN EXAMPLE TO OTHERS Philippians 2:12-16

A. Working Out Salvation Through Obedience Philippians 2:12-13

Building on the example of Christ's obedience, Paul directed his attention to the Philippian Christians' need for obedience to God's will in all things. Just as Christ was obedient to the Father in all things, even to the point of death, so too were the Philippians to give attention to their obedience as they continued working out the salvation they received from the Lord. Paul began by encouraging them and acknowledging their ongoing obedience, even in his absence (v. 12). Their obedience was not performed just when Paul was watching; it continued after he left Philippi to continue his missionary work. Who they were when Paul was watching was who they continued to be once he left, even when he was in prison. For this reason, Paul was very encouraged because he saw the Philippian believers as true followers of Christ walking in obedience during his absence. He wanted to encourage them to continue moving ahead in their obedience to Christ.

Paul then shared an important truth at the heart of their ability to continue living in obedience to the Lord. Paul explained God was at work in their lives, providing them with the ability to faithfully follow Him (v. 13). Amazingly, Paul revealed it was not only God who enabled them to live obediently, but it was God who gave them the desire to obey His will: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (v. 13). In those times when they may not have had the inclination to obey and may have wanted to turn away, Paul assured them God would provide "the will" they needed "to do" what pleased Him.

B. Shining Like Stars Philippians 2:14-16

The obedience of Philippian Christians was not something they were to accomplish only to fulfill Paul's or the Lord's expectations. They were to grow in obedience because that is what would bear witness to others than they were indeed "sons [children] of God" (v. 15). Jesus made this connection between obedience and witness when He told His disciples, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). In Philippians 2:14-16, Paul drew upon this thought, encouraging the Christians in Philippi to understand the importance of their obedience as it relates to the spreading of the Gospel. Paul went further in trying to help them understand the important witness provided by their obedience by saying their lives would make them stand out to others like stars in the sky (v. 15). Paul then acknowledged that seeing the Philippian Christians' obedience would provide him with the certainty that he did not "run in vain, neither labored in vain" (v. 16) when it came to his ministry among them.

Words alone are never enough to validate the life of faith. James 2:26 emphatically states, "Faith without works is dead." When Paul heard about the deeds of the Philippian Christians, he was assured of their true faith, which brought him great joy even while in a Roman prison (Philippians 2:16). As Paul had brought the Gospel to the Philippians, providing for them the opportunity to enter into the joy of the Lord through faith in Christ, so now the Philippian followers of Jesus returned the favor by bringing joy into Paul's life. Hearing that the Philippian Christians were obedient to the teachings of Christ was Paul's reason for celebration.

Paul emphasized in Philippians 2:14-16 that obedience matters. It is not enough to claim to follow Christ; faith is something that must be lived. Words are cheap. The world has seen far too many people claiming to be Christians yet failing to live out the faith. As Paul encouraged the Philippians to live in obedience to promote the Gospel in the world, we are also called to understand the importance of obedience as a witness of our faith in Jesus.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

As Christians, we must examine our lives and measure ourselves by Christ's example. We can lead faithful and humble lives with Christ's help and the Holy Spirit's empowerment.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

In closing today's lesson, spend some time thinking of at least one area in your life where you can begin to follow Christ's example by putting other's needs ahead of your own.

WORKSHEET

Paul and the Macedonian Christians

On a Map of the Mediterranean World in New Testament times, the Roman province called Macedonia is a small territory, now the northern part of Greece, but this was a very important place to the Apostle Paul. He and his ministry colleagues (Silas, Luke, and Timothy) proclaimed the Gospel in Macedonia in obedience to a vision God revealed to Paul (Acts 16:9-10).

According to the Book of Acts, Paul and his ministry colleagues sought to establish Christian congregations in three cities in Macedonia: Philippi (16:11-12); Thessalonica (17:1-2); and Berea (17:10).

Paul and company Succeeded in Establishing Lasting Churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, as evidenced by his two letters to the Thessalonians, his one letter to the Philippians, and other references to them in the New Testament.

In Contrast to Philippi and Thessalonica, it is not known if a lasting church was established in Berea. Paul and Silas were well received by the Jews and Greeks in Berea (17:10-12), and it is said “many of them believed” (v. 12). However, Jews from Thessalonica, who had opposed Paul, came to Berea and stirred up such opposition to Paul, the Berean believers sent him away to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea for a while (vv. 13-15).

The Passage in Acts 17:10-15 Is the Only Place in the New Testament where anything is said about Berea. The beginning of a church in Berea may have been extinguished by intense persecution. Paul never mentioned Berea in any of his writings. One passage, in Acts 20:4, mentions “Sopater of Berea” being among those who accompanied Paul on his trip to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his third missionary journey (spring AD 58).

Paul’s Ministry in Macedonia was successful, resulting in strong, lasting churches being established in Philippi and Thessalonica.

Lights in a Dark World: Philippians 2

1. What various phrases did Paul use to describe unity (v. 2) and what is their significance?
2. What problems can “selfish ambition or conceit” cause in a church, and what is the antidote (vv. 3-4)?
3. Describe the “mindset” (v. 5 NIV) of Christ Jesus (vv. 7-8).
4. Why is Jesus’ name “exalted...above every [other] name” (v. 9)?
5. As Christians, what is our correct posture (v. 10) and confession (v. 11)?
6. What must we not do (v. 14) and what must we do (v. 16) to “Shine as lights in the World” (v. 15)?