

Supreme Service

Philippians 2

John Breon

In this section of his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul urges his friends to practice love and humility as a believing community. He cautions them about some attitudes that threaten Christian community. He shows them the attitude they should have as it's revealed in Jesus Christ. He reminds them of God's work in them to make following Christ possible. And he gives examples of the attitude of humble love and service that Christ modeled.

1-4 Calling the Community to Humble Love

Paul begins by calling attention to the blessings they have. They have encouragement in Christ. They have comfort from love, which, for Paul, always comes from God the Father. They share in the Holy Spirit; they have fellowship or communion or partnership with and in the Spirit. Because of all this, they have tenderness and compassion among themselves.

Paul then tells them to complete his joy by having the same mind, having the same love, and being one in spirit and purpose. He's not calling them to uniformity where there can be no difference of opinion. The mind they are to have is "the mind of Christ," Christ's attitude or mindset mentioned in verse 5. They are to love each other with the love of God given in Christ. They're to be united in commitment to their common purpose—contending for the faith of the true gospel (1:27), living as God's people in the world (3:20), standing firm in the Lord (4:1). Imagine if Christians really lived like this. Imagine if we really experienced what Paul is talking about and lived this way.

Paul now exposes attitudes that threaten unity and encourages them in ways to strengthen community. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit." *Pride* is the major threat to unity among God's people. We're not talking about healthy pride when we're happy about doing something well. Unhealthy pride is the attempt to put ourselves first all the time. In this

most basic sin we try to put ourselves in God's place. We refuse to yield or submit to God or anyone else.

But humility, not pride, characterizes believers who are alive in Christ. "In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." Be willing to see the good points in other Christians instead of always calling attention to your good points. Rejoice in the honor paid to others at least as much as in the honor paid to you.

This looking out for each other's interests is basic in Christian living. If we're going to follow Christ's example, "it is better to be concerned about other people's rights and our own duties than about our own rights and other people's duties" (F. F. Bruce, *Philippians: A Good News Commentary*).

Now Paul is writing to a church and he's writing about fellowship and community among believers. But what he says applies to all sorts of relationships. These verses give great insight for *families*. Martin Luther has been quoted saying that the great commandment says to love your neighbor as yourself—and your nearest neighbors are your family. The family is a training ground for Christian living. And it's a place to put into practice what we learn of life in Christ.

When Nancy and I were getting married, we saw this passage as a guide for our life together. We had Philippians 2:3-5 read at our wedding as a witness to our commitment to live this way. My brother was doing the service and when he announced that he was going to read the Scripture, a little child in the crowd sighed very loudly. Over the last twenty-nine years we've discovered that it's not easy to consider others better than yourself and to look to the interests of others instead of your own. Pride and selfishness maintain a grip on most of us. I imagine we'll always struggle to grow in this attitude of humility and love. But the struggle is worth it.

Richard Selzer is a surgeon and author. In one of his books, he tells about a young woman from whose face he had removed a tumor. To remove the tumor he had to cut a tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth. Because of this, he said, her mouth was twisted in palsy and looked "clownish."

Selzer describes the scene when he was visiting in her room after surgery. The woman's young husband stands on the opposite side of the bed and together in the lamplight they seem isolated, unaware of Dr. Selzer. "Who are they," the doctor asks himself, "he and this wry-mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?" Then the young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," he replies, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "it's kind of cute."

Dr. Selzer writes, "All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. ...Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works" (reprinted in *The Door* from *Mortal Lessons*).

Look to each other's interests, not just your own. Jesus said something similar: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). We live out this discipleship in all our relationships, in every area of life.

A retired lawyer told about getting to know the janitor of his office building in New York. The lawyer wondered why the man was a janitor. It seemed that this fellow was suited for a different kind of work. When he asked him, the man told him his life story. He was married when he was eighteen. He and his wife had planned to work a few years before they both went to school—she to be a musician, he to be a lawyer. He insisted, however, that she attend college first, a very unusual decision in that day. They saved enough money for her to enroll at Columbia University, where she earned her degree. Meanwhile, he worked two jobs, as a janitor and as a cook on weekends.

Then she got pregnant. And then again. And they had four children in six years. Naturally he couldn't leave his jobs, at least not until all the children were in school. Several years later, though, his wife became ill and died. To care for the children, he hired a housekeeper and kept his two jobs. He never left them.

Every one of his children went on to excel in their professions. Two became doctors. Another was elected a state representative. The youngest was a fine musician who sang with the symphony orchestra. What's more, they all adored their father. Though they begged him to quit his job, he refused. He said there were too many people who needed his help. The lawyer said this janitor was in fact a minister and counselor to the people in the office building.

The lawyer concluded, "His example was one of the reasons I eventually left the law firm and joined the public defender's office. I didn't want to be famous anymore. I wanted to be faithful" (Jerry Sittser, *The Adventure* 72-73).

5-11 Christ the Supreme Example of Service

Having encouraged the Philippians to be united and humble, looking to each other's interests, Paul now lifts up a dramatic example of such humility and service. He calls their attention to Jesus Christ. Earlier he told them to have the same mindset among themselves. Now he says, "Your attitude or mindset should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." Then he reminds them what Christ was like and what he did that shows this kind of humility.

As God, Christ emptied himself. Though Christ was in very nature God, in the form of God, he did not seek to exploit this equality. Christ refused to seize the enjoyment and use of equality with God and status as Lord in order to rule the universe on his own. He had the opportunity to grasp what lay within his reach—since he shared God's throne. He might have tried to be Lord in his own right through self-assertiveness and pride. But he would not aspire to false independence and set up a rebellion against God's rule.

Christ refused to do what Lucifer/Satan tried to do. He refused to do what Adam and Eve tried to do. They tried to grasp for themselves what was not rightfully theirs. Instead of grasping for what *was* rightfully his, Christ emptied himself. As Charles Wesley wrote, Christ "emptied himself of all but love." In this self-emptying, Christ took the very form or nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Jesus didn't trade God's nature for

a servant's nature. He expressed and revealed God's nature *in a servant's nature*. Christ's self-emptying wasn't a decision to stop being divine. "It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*." The eternal Son of God who became incarnate 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. (N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone—Prison Letters* 102-03)

As a human, Jesus humbled himself and obeyed God the Father. His obedience led to death—death on a cross. That was the most humiliating and degrading death one could experience at that time.

But because of Jesus' self-emptying, self-giving, serving and humility, God exalted him to the highest place. This way of life is the way of real life and it's vindicated in resurrection and glory. God the Father gave Jesus his own name of "Lord." Now, at Jesus' name, someday everyone in all creation will bow down and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And all of this brings glory to God the Father.

This retelling of the gospel story serves to remind us of what Christ has done for us. It reminds us of who we are and of our new life in Christ. In this context it also shows us that part of life in Christ is following Christ's example. Jesus truly did not act out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. He refused to do that. He truly humbled himself and looked to the interests of others. He died to save us all.

He left his Father's throne above
(so free, so infinite his grace)
emptied himself of all but love
and bled for Adam's helpless race

(Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be that I Should Gain," *The United Methodist Hymnal* #373)

We are called to follow his example. We don't suffer to atone for sin—ours or anyone else's. But we do follow Christ in the path of humility and service and love.

12-16 God Enables us to Fulfill God's Purpose

If you've ever tried to follow Christ's example of service, you know how difficult it is. We don't naturally live this way. We avoid suffering and giving and serving. So Paul goes on to talk about God's power at work in us to enable us to will and to do what God wills. Salvation is God's free gift, but it needs to be worked out in what we do and how we live. In verse 12 Paul is not urging each member of the church to keep working at his or her personal salvation. He's talking about living out salvation in community. But the point remains: God is present and is at work, enabling us to will and work. It's by God's power that we lay aside pride, selfish ambition and vain conceit. It's by God's power that we regard others as better than ourselves and look to the interests of others instead of our own. God's power in the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to follow the example of Jesus.

17-30 Examples of Putting Christ's Attitude into Practice

Now Paul gives three practical examples of the self-renouncing attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Paul knew that he might soon be executed. He saw his martyrdom as an offering to God that could accompany the sacrifice and service of the Philippian church. He was willing for the giving of his life to be part of their offering to God.

Timothy gave unselfish service to Paul and showed genuine concern for other Christians.

Epaphroditus was from Philippi. He was the church's messenger who brought the church's gift to Paul. He was devoted to his mission at great risk to his health and, nearly, to his life.

All these display the unselfconscious care for others enjoined at the beginning of this chapter and reinforced by the powerful example of Christ's self-emptying. (F. F. Bruce)

During World War II, in the Pacific, three American bombers were shot down near a small island in the Philippines. Two of the crews parachuted to safety in the water. They were near enough to the island to swim to it. They discovered that the natives of the island were friendly. The natives picked them up in boats and took them to a small village on a bay. There the natives hid them, fed them, and cared for them.

The Japanese came looking for the bomber crews. The natives played dumb and, surprisingly, it worked. The Japanese probably figured that even if the Americans had survived, they would never get off the island. The waters were regularly patrolled. The Americans didn't know how they would escape.

But the natives came through for them again. They had hidden a fishing boat on a remote side of the island where the Japanese rarely patrolled. One night the Americans left the village and made their way to that side of the island. To ensure their safety, a couple of the natives dressed in American uniforms and went ahead of them. They learned later that one of those natives was shot and killed.

A member of the bomber crew telling this story said, "Incredible, isn't it? That's getting into another person's skin. ...We all made it. Freedom never felt so good. ...Freedom to do what I knew I had to do: to live like the natives who risked their lives for us" (*The Adventure* 112-13).

We are given freedom to live like the One who gave his life for us. Along with this freedom, the Lord gives us his own Spirit to make it possible for us to follow him.