

# Five Weeks in Philippi

## Session Three - Philippians Chapter 2

### 2:1 - Therefore...

Paul, in Chapter 1, has just reminded the Christians of Philippi to “*conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ,*” in order to stand united and firm against outside opposition, “*striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel.*” Chapter 2 will be an expansion of just what such conduct entails.

### 2:1-2 – If, then

*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.*

What benefits have we enjoyed as a result of our faith in Christ, within the fellowship of the church? Paul lists the following; are there times when you have experienced such things? What would you add to this list?

- Encouragement
- Comfort
- Friendship
- Sympathy (bowels!)
- Compassion
- Joy

These attributes are to be the marks of our *shared* Christian experience. They arise out of sharing with one another the same love with which Christ has reached out to us, and sharing the blessings of the Spirit we have received.

Our goal as a congregation is to actively seek to share these attributes with others, and so develop the unity which marks us as the brothers and sisters of Jesus. Is there someone to whom you might extend one or more of these things?

### 2:3-4 - Putting Others First

*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.*

Our culture puts a great value upon self-fulfillment. The Christian message is quite different, proposing that true fulfillment comes through seeking to fulfill the needs of

others. “Selfish ambition” is the translation of a Greek word (eritheia), often used to describe the tactics of politicians to gain personal advantage. “Vain conceit” is to be self-absorbed, and to evaluate every situation primarily on the basis of how it impacts you. Both these all-too-common positions are rejected.

Instead, we are called to humility. Since it is so easily misunderstood, Paul defines it for us: “value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” This does not mean regarding ourselves with loathing or contempt; but rather than being self-absorbed, putting our focus and energies into seeking the best for others. Other translations phrase it this way:

- *In humility consider others as more important than yourselves.*
- *Be humble, and honour others more than yourselves.*
- *In humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves.*
- *Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead.*

“Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” is a further expansion on the concept of humility – the extensive definitions show how concerned Paul is that we get this right. Other translations widen the scope:

- *Care about others as much as you care about yourselves*
- *Don't be interested only in your own life, but care about the lives of others too.*
- *None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people's point of view.*
- *Look after each other's best interests, not your own.*

## **2:5 - Resembling Jesus**

*5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

This is what it all boils down to – “*being Jesus*” to others, by guiding our behaviour with the question, “What would Jesus do?” Paul goes even a step further: as Christians, our behaviour should be rooted in “who Jesus is.” And now Paul defines that, in one of the most important passages in the New Testament:

## **2:6-11 – An Ancient Hymn**

*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.*

“Philippians 2:6 – 11 is among the most informative statements in the Bible on the nature of Christ’s incarnation. It speaks of Christ’s preexistence, his equality with God, his identity with humanity, and the costly nature of that identity. It also provides insight into Christ’s status after his incarnation and into the future submission of all created beings to his authority.

“The way in which the passage makes these statements, has led most scholars to believe that it is an early Christian hymn, taken over and perhaps modified by Paul at this point in his argument. If that is true, then the hymn provides a window into the shadowy but critical period of Christian history between the resurrection of Jesus and the composition of Paul’s letters. It provides a glimpse of the earliest Christians at worship.” (NIV Application Commentary)

Whether composed or quoted by Paul, in the original language the passage reads much more like poetry than prose (which is why Bibles “break it up” on the page in this way), and therefore more hymn-like than creedal. What is significant is how Paul uses it to guide our own behaviour. It can be roughly summed up in this way:

- 1) Look who Jesus is: God!
- 2) Rather than exploit that position, for our sake, he laid it aside
- 3) Jesus came as a servant, rather than a ruler
- 4) Jesus exemplified complete humility – even to the point accepting, for our sake, the most humiliating manner of death
- 5) As a result of his earthly humility, he achieved the highest heavenly exaltation
- 6) Jesus will be fully vindicated, and be finally recognised and acknowledged by all as Lord – not for his own sake, but for the Glory of God.

The hymn encourages our behaviour in this way:

- 1) As Christians, we recognise Jesus as Lord, and become his followers
- 2) This is not a position to exploit, or to aggrandise who we are
- 3) Like Jesus, we are to give ourselves to serving others
- 4) This demands humility on our part, which can be very costly
- 5) Our humility will be rewarded by God, and our sacrifices vindicated
- 6) We live such lives for the Glory of God.

## **2:12-18 - Do Everything Without Grumbling**

*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.*

*14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. 17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. 18 So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.*

Paul’s purpose in these two paragraphs is to apply the hymn-story of Christ’s humble self-emptying and exaltation specifically to the Philippian situation. As a result, he begins the new section with “therefore” and turns again to the themes of 1:27 – 30.

- He is concerned in both passages that the Philippians live out the implications of their initial response to the gospel, and that they do this whether Paul is among them or absent from them (1:27/2:12).
- Both passages express concern that the Philippians be unified (1:27/2:14),
- and that this unity be visible to the unbelieving world outside (1:28/2:15).
- The two sections also share an interest in the final day (1:28/2:16)
- and in the experience of suffering for the gospel, which binds the apostle to his friends and apostolic charges in Philippi (1:30/2:17).

The concerns of 2:12 – 18, then, are woven tightly into the fabric of Paul’s larger argument that the Philippians should “conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). The apostle expresses these concerns in three steps.

- 1) He encourages the Philippians, in light of Christ’s example, to continue their good record of obedience (2:12 – 13).

- 2) He then becomes more precise about the area of obedience he wants the Philippians especially to address, when he urges them to avoid “complaining” and “arguing” (2:14 – 16a).
- 3) He shows how their struggle to remain “blameless” and “pure” is bound up with his own struggle to remain faithful to his calling. In light of this calling, he encourages them to work together with him to present God with an acceptable sacrifice and to experience the joy that comes from doing so (2:16b – 18). (The above section is taken from the NIV Application Commentary)

The phrase “*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” carries on after this, and needs to be read in the light of the preceding Jesus hymn: be aware of the one to whom you have sworn obedience – do not take your relationship with Jesus lightly! There are translations in which this is made somewhat more clear:

- *So work with fear and trembling to discover what it really means to be saved.*
- *Continue to live in a way that gives meaning to your salvation. Do this with fear and respect for God.*
- *Be keener than ever to work out the salvation that God has given you with a proper sense of awe and responsibility.*
- *Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear.*

To make it clear that this does not mean that we are the ultimate authors of our own salvation, Paul adds the following: “*for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*” A Rollwage paraphrase: “Your salvation is a great gift, given to you by God, at great cost and sacrifice. God continues to work within you and through you for his good purpose. Take this very seriously, and live your life in the awareness of it.”

Paul then summarises – once again! – just what this means in terms of day-to-day living, both in relation to brothers and sisters in the faith, and to those outside of the faith: “*Do everything without grumbling* (Greek: “gongysmon” – could also be translated “complaining”) *or arguing,*” is an internal church principle, which then is a witness to those outside the faith of our sincerity.

Our internal conduct as a witness to outsiders was eloquently presented by the Christian apologist Athenagoras, in letters to Roman Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius Commodus to stop their policy of persecuting Christians. At one point he asked the emperors to consider whether any philosophers of their acquaintance, “*have*

*so purified their own hearts as to love their enemies instead of hating them; instead of upbraiding those who first insult them (which is certainly more usual), to bless them; and to pray for those who plot against them.”*

*“With us, on the contrary, you will find unlettered people, tradesmen and old women, who though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds. When struck, they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves.”*

2:19-30 – Timothy and Epaphroditus

*19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. 20 I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. 21 For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. 23 I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. 24 And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.*

Paul is sending his closest companion and personal representative, in order to check up on the Philippians. This can be construed as both a promise and a threat – Paul is obviously concerned about the state of the Philippian church, particularly as regards their unity, and the rumours of infighting. As he says: *For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.*

*25 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. 26 For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. 28 Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. 29 So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, 30 because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.*

Epaphroditus was sent by the Philippian church with both personal and financial support. A severe illness struck him, and Paul is sending him home, with this very letter in hand. Calling him “a brother, co-worker and fellow soldier” who “almost died for the work of Christ” and “risked his life” for Paul, Epaphroditus is to be honoured, as the exemplar of the type of Christian Paul is encouraging all the Philippians to be.