

Philippians 2:1-11 (DHT)

¹ Thus, if there is any encouragement in Messiah, or any comfort in love, or any fellowship with the Spirit, or any affections and mercies, ² then fulfill my joy by having unity-of-mind, having the same love, united-in-soul and united-in-mind, ³ doing nothing according to selfishness or boastfulness, but in humility regarding one another as more supreme than themselves, ⁴ not looking to themselves only, but also that of each other.

⁵ Let this unity-of-mind be in you, which is also in Jesus Messiah ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped, ⁷ but he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.

⁸ Being found in the appearance of man, he humbled himself, being made obedient until death, even death from a cross.

⁹ Therefore, God has highly exalted him, and graciously-given him the name beyond every name, ¹⁰ that in the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in the heavens, on the earth, and beneath the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue will confess that Jesus Messiah is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The Vertical and Horizontal Elements of “Gospel Culture”

New Testament (NT) ethics are invariably wrapped up in the character of Christ, for NT ethics finds their purpose in producing in us Christlikeness. NT ethics do not come in isolation; God doesn't tell us to act without an explanation. Now, it should be enough for us to obey simply if God commands it, but that's not the pattern God uses. The way Christians are to live comes as a response to an example set by God himself. In this series, we've been processing what it means to develop a “Gospel-Culture.” This means *how* we live is modeled after Christ. There is both a *Vertical* example and a *Horizontal* response to Gospel-Culture.¹ At the start of this series, we considered the command to *love others*...why? Because God first loved us. After that, the command to *welcome others*...why? Because Jesus has welcomed us. The week after that, the call to *delight in the recovery of the lost*...why? Because God delighted in our recovery. From last

¹ NT scholar Patrick Schreiner writes that as it pertains to kingdom ethics, each book “is written from a vertical and horizontal worldview: because of Christ's enthronement as King and Lord (vertical), community life implications arise (horizontal). The conviction of all these authors was that the kingdom communities were living in the last days because King Jesus had arrived and be raised from the dead.” *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), pg. 115.

week, the command to *seek out fellowship with one another*...why? Because God has sought out fellowship with us. Do you see a pattern? And yet there are others we won't get to in the series:

We are to value life *because* God values life; life at all stages, races, and classes. We are to treat women and men equally *because* God created both male and female equally in his image. To disparage either is to disparage God. We are to be holy *because* God is holy. We are to worship in an orderly fashion *because* God is a God of order, not chaos. We are to be patient with one another *because* God is patient with us. We are to forgive *because* Christ has forgiven us. We are to seek reconciliation with others even though they wronged us *because* Christ sought our reconciliation even though we wronged God. We are to resist temptation *because* Christ resisted temptation. This was also from last week: We are to intercede for others when they confess their sins to us *because* when we confess our sins, Christ intercedes for us. We are to willingly face and endure through suffering *because* Christ willingly faced and endured through suffering.

Do you notice a pattern for how Christians are to live? The word “Christian” means to be “like-Christ.” To be Christlike, we need to think and act like Christ. When it comes to your Christian life, are you just pretending, or are you all-in? So many claim to be Christian, yet their life shows no fruit of Christlikeness. There is, of course, going to be areas of our lives that are not yet like-Christ, for the process of becoming like-Christ is a lifelong process. This doesn't mean you don't pursue Christlikeness at all; what I mean is don't get overwhelmed or think of yourself as a failure because you don't have your life all-together. That's not how transformation works.

The theological term for the process of transformation is sanctification. Sanctification is a *lifelong* process that concludes when we enter glory. To be sanctified means to be made holy. There is a sense in which we are instantaneously sanctified at our conversion when we are *declared* holy; our bodies are immediately deemed suitable to house God's Spirit; and at the same time, we are progressively sanctified as we are gradually transformed into people whose lifestyles and mindsets *become worthy* of God's initial declaration over us as holy. Transformation into Christlikeness doesn't take place overnight, but it does take place; the pursuit is a daily pursuit. When it comes to your Christian life, are you just pretending, or are you all-in?

The Vertical Example of Humility: The Symphony

Philippians 2 fits the pattern of NT ethics in that horizontal action is commanded as a response to the vertical example of Christ. Before we get to our horizontal response, which is in

vss. 1-5a, we should know the vertical example we are responding to, which is in vss. 5b-11. I’ll just say up front, of all the major heresies in history, more have to do with this passage than any other passage. As will soon be apparent, the weighty theological nature of Phil. 2 is unavoidable.

Philippians 2 is one of the Christological hymns of the NT, or songs about Christ. The three most prominent Christological hymns are found in John 1, Col. 1, and Phil. 2. The early church did not principally teach doctrine in a systematic or linear way like we do today. They chiefly taught doctrine through song. There’s a reason for that; songs are easier to recall from memory than individual sermons, and modern science proves what Christians have known for 2,000 years, and what Jews have known even longer than that. Have you ever wondered how Jews teach their sons to memorize Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy by the age of thirteen? Because the entire Hebrew Bible (HB) is written with vocalization. You don’t read the HB; you sing it. This is just how our brains work. As much as it pains me as a teacher and preacher, your individual theology is shaped more by the worship music you listen and sing along to than the sum-total of messages you hear from Dan, Adam, myself, or whoever your pastor happens to be. Church history had little concern for the aesthetics of worship and all concern about lyrical richness, because the purpose of songs was primarily to teach.

Philippians 2 is a popular song that Paul quotes to strengthen his call on the Philippians to exhibit humility.² The symphony of Phil. 2:5-11 teaches about Christ in three movements. Movement 1 in vss. 5-7 of the humility of Christ’s incarnation. Movement 2 in vs. 8 of the humility of Christ’s death. Movement 3 in vss. 9-11 of exaltation as the worthy result of Christ’s humility.

Movement I In vs. 6 we read that “being in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped.” Jesus is fully God and has never not been fully God. Even before his miraculous birth to a young mom, Jesus existed as the eternal Son of God. From the Colossian hymn, we sing that “by Christ all things were created... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:15-20). There is a popular belief that was declared heresy at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381; a heresy called Adoptionism, which erroneously teaches that Jesus was a man who became god when the Spirit anointed him at his baptism. Consequently, when the Spirit anoints us, *we* become little-g gods as well. But this is

² For more on the debate about whether the hymn is original to Paul, see Matthew Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2018), pgs. 79-110.

heretical. Jesus was not a man who became a god; he is God who became a man. The order is significant. Jesus was fully God and then became man. As Paul writes elsewhere, at just the right time, God sent his Son to be born of a woman and born under the law for the purpose of redeeming mankind from the law (Gal. 4:4-5).

God the Father and God the Son are all eternally equal and one in essence and nature. This is an equality vs. 6 clues us into. “Being in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped.” Though Jesus did not grasp at, cling to, or rely upon his equality with God, this verse teaches that there fundamentally *is* an equality between God the Father and God the Son. “But,” vs. 7 continues, “[Jesus] emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.” As Paul writes elsewhere, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). There is a popular belief that was declared heresy at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451; a heresy called Kenoticism, which erroneously teaches that when the Word became Flesh, the deity of Jesus was forfeited or lost. But this is heretical. Jesus is both fully God and fully man; however, the primary contribution of Chalcedon on this point is that Jesus was not two persons, but one person; one person who was both fully God *and* fully man.

The Belgic Confession from AD 1561 summarizes the conclusions of Chalcedon like this: “We believe that by being thus conceived the person of the Son has been *inseparably united* and joined together with human nature, in such a way that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in a single person, with each nature retaining its own distinct properties...”³ The church has wrestled intensely with this passage and over the course of centuries has refined with precision this understanding. Jesus is both fully God and fully man, with both of his natures “inseparably united” in one person, sometimes called the God-man. Because of this, there was never a point in which Jesus was not God; and since his conception there has never been a point in which Jesus was not man. After his resurrection, Jesus ascended bodily in the clouds and was seated at the right hand of God...still alive. Jesus, who is one person not two, is, in fact, *still* fully God *and* fully man.

Verse 7 says “but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.” So what was emptied? Verse 7 begins with the all-important word ‘but,’ which means Jesus’ emptying is defined as the willful refusal to grasp at, cling to, or rely upon his equality with

³ From Article 19 of the Belgic Confession, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>.

God, even though he remained equal with God; Jesus temporarily laid aside his rights as God, even while remaining fully God. Verse 8 continues to sing Jesus’ emptying, as the taking *on* the form of men. When the Word became Flesh, God the Son *added* to himself a fully human nature. Paradoxical as it may sound, the emptying of Jesus is not the subtraction of anything, but rather the addition of humanity to his deity.

Movement II The symphony continues in vs. 8, that “being found in the appearance of man, [Christ] humbled himself, being made obedient until death, even death from a cross.” In Hollywood, there is something called “Method Actors,” in which actors take on the lifestyle of their character even when they are not filming; they make themselves *become* the character to better portray the character on film. The most recent example is Austin Butler who took on the role of Elvis, so much that he continues to talk like Elvis even though the film’s been done for months. Method actors exemplify taking on a new identity, and yet they are still pretending; at some point after they finish their film, they revert back to who they were. They pretend for a while, but they are still pretending.

Jesus was not pretending; he was all-in on the purpose God determined for his life, which required Jesus to lay aside his rights as the eternal Son of God *by taking on* human flesh and all that humanity entails. He was tempted fiercely; suffered immensely; Jesus even says to Peter at his betrayal: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he would at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?” (Matthew 26:53-54; cf. John 18:10). Jesus could have been rescued, but he refused. Jesus was not pretending; he was all-in. Jesus had every right to call on God the Father, his equal, to rescue him from suffering and to rescue him from death, but grasping at, clinging to, or relying upon his equality with the Father was something he did not do. Had Jesus called upon his Father to rescue him, then his taking on of humanity was merely pretend.

The only way for Jesus to go all-in was to take on humanity in its fullness; to live the human experience in its entirety. Jesus *had* to be tempted just like we are, otherwise it could not be said that he lived the human experience. Yet, *unlike us*, Jesus perfectly resisted every temptation. When you face temptation, has it ever struck you that the longer you resist, the stronger the temptation gets? And then we give in and suddenly the temptations are easier to resist? Jesus never experienced that release. His temptations grew stronger and stronger. He suffered through temptation fiercer than any temptation you or I have faced, which is why Hebrews tells us he can

sympathize and empathize with sure wisdom for our every need. This is why Hebrews tells us that he learned obedience through suffering.⁴ Jesus was made obedient until the point of death. Jesus *had* to be tempted, and Jesus *had* to die, otherwise his emptying would be emptied of its significance; Jesus would have just been pretending, but he wasn't. Jesus lived the life that we live, yet he lived the life we fail to live because he lived *obedient* to the point of his death on the cross.

Movement III Jesus exhibited humility in his taking on of human flesh; Jesus chiefly showcased humility in his obedience to the point of death. The resurrection and exaltation of Christ are sung as one movement of ascent from the depths of death. Because of his humble life and humble death, the Father raised Jesus from the dead and a few weeks later raised him even further to the right hand of the Father where Jesus currently reigns as our exalted King. Verses 10-11 quote from Isaiah who also says YHWH gives the glory of his name to none other than his messiah, and it is Jesus who receives the glory of YHWH's name. It is Messiah Jesus who reigns as King, and what is the domain of his kingdom? Movement III sings of the three-part structure of the cosmic temple. All of creation will bow before King Jesus, all who are in the heavens above, on the earth, and beneath the earth. Paul elsewhere writes that “God's purpose...set forth in Christ...is a plan...to unite all things in him” (Eph. 1:9-10). The point is evident: all creation will be gathered to bow before King Jesus. This will happen, and you will either bow in defeat as an enemy of God, or you will bow in worship as a child of God.

Read through the whole Bible and you will not be able to avoid this fundamental truth: God exalts the humble; God humbles the proud. Ps. 147:6 – The Lord exalts the humble and casts the wicked to the ground. Matt. 18:4 – Whoever humbles himself like a child will be exalted in the Kingdom. Luke 14:11 – God will exalt the humble and bring down those who exalt themselves. Jas. 4:10 – Humble yourself and God will exalt you. 1 Pet. 1:6 – Humble yourself and God will exalt you at the right time. Zech. 9:9 prophesies that the Messiah will come humbly mounted on a donkey. Jesus says in Mark 10:45 that he came not to be served, but to serve others and give himself for others. Jesus was exalted *because* Jesus humbled himself. We are commanded to be humble *because* Jesus was humble. This is the glorious vertical example of humility.

⁴ This doesn't mean Jesus was disobedient prior; it means he learned obedience at a depth we have never known. The distinction between quantitative vs. qualitative obedience and wisdom (cf. Luke 1:52-53) is from Bruce Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pgs. 47-58.

The Horizontal Response of Humility: Participation

A leading expert on first century hymns writes that, “Early Christian hymns instruct as much as they praise... [This] instruction...taps into the power of poetry and elevated speech to draw an audience into *participation* in the realities it described.”⁵ Let’s shift to our *participation* in the realities Phil. 2 describes; our horizontal response to the vertical example of Christ.

Paul writes that if there is anything worthwhile about being a follower of Christ, then unity-of-mind is the chief expression. In vs. 2 Paul says, “fulfill my joy by having unity-of-mind, having the same love, united-in-soul and united-in-mind.” Unity-of-mind is the result of being united-in-soul and united-in-love. This does not mean we all become the same person. To be united does not mean to be identical; it means to be devoted to one another and devoted *with* one another to the same thing. Hannah and I are two different people, but we can be united-in-soul when we cling to the source of our shared identity in Christ.

The word for love in vs. 2 is *agape*. I define *agape* like this: “*Agape is an others-focused love typically expressed through sacrificial giving with the goal of building up the other.*”⁶ Paul calls us to shift our mind off ourself and instead on the ‘other,’ whoever that may be. The world celebrates pride. I define pride like this: “*Pride is an unreasonable inflation of the heart stemming from a comparative mindset that favors the self over the other.*” But Paul calls us to the opposite of pride; he calls us to humility.

The world is the source of selfishness and boastfulness, but Paul calls on us to be united by doing the opposite: “regard one another as more supreme or higher than themselves, not looking to themselves only, but also that of each other.” Do you notice that Paul does not define humility as the belittling of yourself? Sometimes we think to be humble means we need to hate ourselves. That’s not humility. Charles Spurgeon defines humility as the practice of thinking rightly about ourselves. CS Lewis famously says it like this: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”⁷ Just as Christ was equal with God yet did not consider his equality as something to be grasped, so also even though we are equal we are not to consider our equality with one another as something to be grasped. Julie and I share an equal standing before God, but it is incumbent upon me not to think, talk, and act as though we are. Even though she’s not greater;

⁵ Gordley, pg. 59, emphasis mine.

⁶ For more, see my message, “What Love Is: It’s the Gospel.”

⁷ This is attributed to CS Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, although there is debate about whether this wording is original to Rick Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life*, from a section summarizing Lewis’ teaching on humility.

even though I know she’s my equal; I’m called to treat her as if she *were* greater. Humility is not a belittling of the self; it is an elevating of ‘the other.’

I recently had lunch with Blake and whether he knew it or not he was helping me prepare because we were thinking aloud about humility. Something Blake said stayed with me, though I don’t remember exactly how he worded it. There are those who are loudly proud and there are those who are quietly humble, but then there’s this middle group who are so humble they need to tell you. “You can cut us in line.” “Thanks! Are you sure?” “Yeah, totally; after all, the last will be first.” Wasn’t it Moses who wrote in Numbers 12:3 that “Moses was the most humble person on all the earth.”? {INSERT MEME} I mean, come on! Humility is not just about external actions; it’s first a mindset that *leads* to external action. Paul doesn’t call us to be humble by bleeding to death on a cross like Jesus. For most, if not all of us, that’s not how we will die; and that doesn’t make us bad Christians. Instead, Paul says “have this *mind* among you.” Humility is not a fake it until you make it sort of thing; it’s a way of life. Are you just pretending, or are you all-in?

Practicing Humility: An Exercise

Humility doesn’t come naturally to us; we are self-oriented. We must learn humility. So, we’re going to close this evening with an exercise. And I’ll just say up front: I absolutely expect all of you to do this. There are pieces of paper on your table; pass one to everyone. You are not going to turn this in to me. This paper is for you. On this paper there are four types of humble people; these aren’t the only four, but I kept things simple with four. Four may or may not be my favorite number. I’m going to describe each of these categories of humble people, and I want you to think of at least one person from this young adult’s community who fits the description, including those who aren’t here tonight, and then I want you to write their name down. If you think of more than one, write them down. But try to think of at least one, and try not to duplicate any names. If you are new or newish or not familiar enough to adequately answer any of these, you are more than welcome to answer based on the community you are most intimately familiar with. But otherwise, as much as we can, let’s try to keep this restrained to the YA community.

Type 1: The Willing to be Inconvenienced

If humility is defined as an *others-oriented* love in opposition to the self-oriented nature of pride, the first category is someone who instinctually or habitually puts others ahead of themselves. This person is content with not getting their way. This person is willing to inconvenience

themselves for you without hesitation. This is a person who embodies Phil. 2:3-4: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This is a person who embodies Gal. 5:13 and 26: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another... Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, or envying one another.”

Type 2: The Unseen Contributor

Part of humility is to serve without needing recognition. One way that all Christians are called to serve is through the use of their spiritual gifts. All of you who are Christians have at least one; none of you have them all; nobody is able to pick their gift; and there is no gift that all Christians have. There are some gifts that are inherently seen. For example, Adam and I have what are commonly called the “seen” gifts. It’s impossible to faithfully steward the gifts of preaching and teaching without being seen in the process. But other gifts are inherently *unseen*; behind the scene gifts that contribute greatly to the body of the church. Paul makes this point: No gift holder is more important simply because they have a seen vs. unseen gift. If Adam or I thrive in the use of our seen gifts it is only *because* we have been supported by those with the unseen gifts. This kind of person uses an unseen gift without the desire or need to be recognized for it. This person is content behind the scenes; a person whose focus is faithfulness to the work the Spirit has stewarded to them; a person who embodies Rom. 12:3-6 and 16: “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think... For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them... Live in harmony with one another. Do not be arrogant, but associate with the humble.” “Humility flows from seeing ourselves in the context of the body of Christ.”⁸

Type 3: The Non-Interrupter

When we are in conversation with one another, it is a normal phenomenon for us to think of aspects from our lives that connect with something the other person has said, and we feel a tendency to share that in the middle of a conversation, especially if it is something about which we are quite familiar. And yet, we often do this by interrupting the other; disturbing the train of thought traveling from their mind out their mouth because we are not really listening to understand, but

⁸ Gavin Ortland, *Humility: The Joy of Self-Forgetfulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), pg. 64.

listening to respond, something that is inescapably self-oriented. In contrast to the interrupter, this is a person who cares about what you think and is willing to give you the space and necessary pauses between thoughts to articulate your thoughts. When you are thinking aloud as many of us often do with one another, there is a special grace in holding your tongue and allowing someone to finish their thought; to give them the space to process without interruption. This is a gracious thing we can give to someone we are talking to, and yet to do this, this takes humility. This is a person who does not interrupt you when you are talking to them because they care about what you have to say, even if they may know more about it. This is a person who embodies Jas. 1:19 and 21: “Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear and slow to speak... put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with humility the implanted word.”

Type 4: The Undeserved Forgiver

Sometimes people wrong us in certain ways that make it particularly challenging to forgive. Sometimes we have wronged people and while we know they are commanded to forgive us, we still feel like we don't deserve to be forgiven. We are all sinners, which means we all sin, which means from time to time we all hurt other people in various ways. Who has forgiven you after you wronged them? This is a person who did not seek revenge. This is a person who did not treat you poorly back. This is a person who embodies 1 Pet. 3:8-9: “All of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.” This is a person who embodies Col. 3:12-14: “Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another... Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”

Finishing the Exercise

Look at your list of four people. Each of these convey the mind of humility Paul has called you to emulate. Each of these convey the same mind that was in Christ. Each of these are gifts God has given you to help guide you on the gradual process of transformation into Christlikeness. I told you that you weren't going to turn these in, and this is true, but there is more I want you to do with this list of people. I want you to talk to each of these four people at some point before next Monday, and tell them why you wrote their name down. No texting allowed. No social media messages allowed. In-person or if it must be written, then handwritten.

Humble people do what they do without the need to be recognized. This doesn't mean they aren't allowed to be recognized. If you receive one of these communiqués, you are allowed to accept it. It's not prideful to say, 'Thank you,' or 'I appreciate you saying that,' or 'I didn't think anyone noticed that.' If nobody talks to you, that doesn't mean you're not humble—it might mean that—but it doesn't automatically mean that. But remember, humble people aren't concerned with recognition. So, if not getting recognized bothers you, that's probably a good sign that humility is something to continue working on. This isn't the normal way we close, but I'd like us to spend four minutes in silence. In these four minutes, I want you to make your gameplan, if you haven't already, for when and how you're going to speak to each of these people, and then I want you to spend the rest of the four minutes in prayer *thanking God* for the gift of each of these one by one. So, let's begin these four minutes of reflective prayer.

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“Lord, we marvel at your stunning display of humility. You, the Most High, have not refrained from taking the lowest and worst position imaginable. O Lord, how foolish all our pride seems when we remember the cross! Help us to follow your example, Lord. Teach us the pathway of humility.”⁹ “Lord, help us embrace these words and know them as joyful words: it's not about us. Give us a sense of the splendor of your glory. Teach us the joy and freedom of spending our lives to make you known, and unite our hearts together with everyone else serving this wonderful cause.”¹⁰ I thank you for the names that have been written and I ask that you prompt everyone here to finish the task of removing the focus from themselves and placing it instead on the people they have written down. May this be a community that praises those who follow your lowly example. I lift this up to you in Jesus' name, amen.

⁹ Ortlund, pg. 7.

¹⁰ Ortlund, pg. 70.