

Philippians 2:1-11

I. Introduction

Compare two kinds of leadership

II. Read text

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 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. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

III. Paul's Call to Humility

A. Paul's example in his opening command

So this is a passage about servant leadership, about humility, and about not standing on your rights and privileges. Note right away that Paul subtly models this kind of leadership in how he introduces the theme. He says "If there is any encouragement...." Then "complete my joy by being of the same mind." Paul doesn't doubt that they've actually had any encouragement, comfort, love, affection, or sympathy. He knows they have. This isn't actually a conditional if-then statement. Paul knows that the normal condition for the Christian life is to be receiving encouragement and love and affection and sympathy from one another. Rather, it's Paul's way of giving them an exhortation without phrasing it as a command.

Paul could have simply written: "Don't bicker; strive for unity; stop being selfish; serve one another. As your apostle, you should listen to me." Instead, he models the very attitude of humility and affection in the way he writes. He appeals to their gratitude for what Christ has done. Just as Christ has blessed them with encouragement and love and comfort, so they should bless one another. Just as he has loved them with his prayers and with this letter, so they should love him by "making his joy complete." Instead of giving them a command, he appeals to our Spirit-led instinct for reciprocal benevolence. When others show us kindness and love, we want to show it back to them. It's another form of the golden rule.

This is a good lesson for pastors and elders---also for city group leaders, parents, anyone in a fight club, and anyone who has covenanted with another believer in a local church. Which means, it's a good lesson for everyone. Everyone of us is, or should be, in a position of spiritual accountability with someone else. If you're not, you're in a position of spiritual danger, and you probably are not receiving the love, encouragement, sympathy, and affection that Paul is talking about here. But if you are, then follow Paul's example. Give exhortations with gentleness. Don't stand on your privileges. Don't rely on commands (there are occasions when that is appropriate. See Galatians!). Exhort, encourage, appeal, plea, and praise. Above all, model the love you want others to emulate.

B. To be of the same mind.

Paul gives us three different images of the unity and humility to which he calls us. In verse 2, he tells us to "be of the same mind." This means to direct one's mind to a thing; to be of one's party, to side with in public affairs. The church is a "party," a faction or sect or tribe. We are to show loyalty to one another—in public. This is a new public identity we have, and we are to stake our lives and our behavior on it. When we join a church, we are joining a new team, a new tribe. This isn't something we just do on Sunday mornings, it's not a personal or private thing we do in the infinite space of our own heads.

No, this is when you turn to a trusted friend going through heartache or a broken marriage or a serious illness or a bout of unemployment, and you say "I've got your back." And then you get his back—you are there for him, you cry together, grieve together, you show up as moral support in court, you help him through a time of need. That's what it means to "be of the same mind." We have a shared loyalty to the same Lord, and we show up to fight together.

C. Counting others more significant

In verse 3, we get another image. Paul tells us to "count others more significant than yourself." Another way of putting it is that we should consider one another as having "surpassing value." We should treat others as being superior in rank. This language sounds foreign, even offensive, to American ears because we pride ourselves on our equality under law. We live in a nation defined by its dedication to the proposition that all are created equal—as indeed we are. Note, the Bible clearly teaches our equal dignity, made in the image of God. Paul is not saying that we are actually less significant than other people, and he is not telling us to practice low self-esteem.

But think for a moment about the world Paul and his original readers lived in. They lived in a world defined by social rank and hierarchy—as pretty much every culture in the world was until very recently. In this world, a hugely important life skill was knowing your rank and knowing how to communicate your rank and demanding proper recognition of your rank. It was an important part of business, of civic life,

even of religious life, to have your place and insist that others recognize it. And, really, has much actually changed?

What Paul is saying here is: don't insist on your rank. He isn't denying the reality of social, cultural, or economic distinctions. But he is saying that they have no place in the church. When we meet together, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of you are rich; some are not. We come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The fact of your wealth or poverty or your ethnic background has no bearing on your standing in the church. And you shouldn't act like it does. We shouldn't act like it does.

If you're rich and you give a lot of money to the church: thank you. We appreciate it. Please keep giving. It doesn't put you on the fast track to be an elder. If you're accustomed to a certain level of deference because of your professional background or achievements, please don't expect them here. Or perhaps you've experienced white privilege. That's a real thing in the world. The church should strive to be a place where no one gets privilege on the basis of their skin color, their wealth, or anything else.

In fact, what Paul is saying is, we should *give* privilege to everyone else. Treat others as if they have higher rank. Think of how Jesus washed the disciples feet, the Creator of the universe acting as their servant. Paul is exhorting us to *act like* others are more significant as a technique for fostering harmony. And we should be able to do this with full confidence that God will care for us. After all, if 100 people do this, you'll have 99 others acting like you are the most significant person in the room. You don't need to worry that you'll be left out or ignored.

D. Looking out for other's interests

Another image is in verse 4, where Paul tells us to look out for others interests. Note that Paul doesn't say not to look out for your own interests. He says don't *only* look out for your own interests. Paul is telling us not to be self-centered. He's saying don't just think of yourself all the time. In essence, Paul is calling us to expand our selves, to treat others in the church as part of our household, part of our "self" whose interests we look out for. Christ makes us bigger!

When you make decisions, think about how those decisions affect other people. If you're married, you got the best schooling in life about how this works. They day you woke up as a newly married man or woman, you no longer had the right to make decision on your own. Pretty much any time you go anywhere to do anything, you at least let you spouse know, if not check with them to see what their plans are first. You lose control over how you spend money. You check with one another for bigger purchases, and you set a budget and promise to each other to stick with it. These are the nitty gritty details of how husbands and wives look out for each other's interests, not just their own. And if you're married and you're not doing

these things, well, let's just say I imagine your spouse has been taking avid notes during this sermon.

We should, in a sense, act the same way with the church. We should be aware enough of the circumstances of each other's lives that we know when someone is in a season of hardship, especially in your own city group. If you don't, please talk to Austin Talbert, our deacon of benevolence. Austin keeps track of partners at our church who are in need of help, and he can direct you to where your help would be most effective. I can think off the top of my head of at least three or four families in our church who are in places of pretty serious hardship and need, some because of medical issues, others because of legal issues. The elders pray with and for them regularly, but we want you, the church, to be the network of support that comes alongside one another and thinks of each other's interests first.

E. This does not mean avoiding responsibility or authority.

I want to take a moment to emphasize that what Paul is saying here is not inconsistent with holding a position of authority, holding others accountable, or engaging in healthy conflict. Jesus accepted the title of teacher, rabbi, master, Lord, and even God, even while he was our example of humility. King David, one of the great exemplars in the Bible, was a king and a general. He gave orders, commanded armies, and governed a kingdom – yet he was “a man after God's own heart.” Jesus regularly rebuked the Pharisees for their sin and false teaching, and Paul regularly exhorts his readers to carefully guard their doctrine, confront sin, and examine teaching to ensure it is sound.

Considering others better than yourself does not mean avoiding authority or evading responsibility or avoiding conflict. As one author has written, “Christ calls us to strength, not to weakness, and certainly not to exhibitions of our own humility.” (Elshtain, Augustine and the Limits of Politics) So if you are in a position of authority, this humility means governing for the good of the governed; it means parenting not for your own convenience, but for the flourishing of your children; it means managing your employees not for your own glory but for the good of your employees and the accomplishment of your common mission. It means confronting sin and folly, when necessary, but doing so from a position of humility, not condescension or self-righteousness.

F. Footnote about elders' joy

Can I take just a second to note that Paul asks them to “make his joy complete”? This really is one of the great privileges of shepherding a church. Helping people grow and mature and serve and love one another is one of the greatest joys in life. It's why parents sacrifice so much to raise their kids, and it's why pastors sacrifice their lives for their churches. If you find real joy in helping others grow, God may be calling you to ministry.

G. Why should we be humble? How can we be humble? Segue:

So far in this sermon I've just told you that you should be good people. Drawing from the first few verses here I've reminded you in several different ways that you and I should be nice and follow the golden rule. If I stopped now, this really wouldn't be a Christian sermon. Every religion in the world tells you to be good. None of them tells you how to be good; none of them equips you or enables you to be good. And, in fact, none of us can be good by our own efforts. This sermon would be pretty useless if I stopped here. Just a lot of bland exhortations. Some of us by sheer dint of will power might muscle through a bit of goodness for a season, but only by worshipping at the altar of some other god, like our own virtue or achievement or something.

Only Christianity both tells us to be good, and then makes us good. Christ was good for us; Christ is goodness in us. The Spirit of Christ empowers us to "will and work for his good pleasure" as we'll hear about next week. In Christ, we have a model and example of goodness – specifically, of humility, submission, and servant leadership that we can follow. And so we should turn our attention to the second half of this passage.

IV. Christ's example of Humility

A. The divinity of Christ

In this second half, here we have one of the most beautiful passages of the New Testament, what some have called the Hymn of Christ. Verses 6-11 are sometimes thought to be a poem because the language is more evocative, and many English translations format the text in stanzas like a poem or a song. This passage has been picked over by theologians for millennia, but the basic point is pretty obvious: As Christ submits to the Father, so should we submit to one another. Paul is drawing a direct connection between Christ's example of humility and our own.

We see Paul building that argument from the beginning. In verse 6: Jesus was in the "form of God," that is, he was co-equal with God. Some readers have gotten hung up on the word "form" here, as if Paul is saying that Jesus was in the "form of God," only had the appearance or shell of God-like-ness, and was not actually God. In fact, Paul means the opposite. Being in the form of God means that Jesus is, in fact, God. This podium has the form of a podium; it is a podium. Paul might be invoking the language of Aristotelian philosophy, in which "A thing's form [morphē] is its definition or essence."¹ Jesus has the same definition or essence as God.

Again, the main point of this passage is clear: As Jesus humbles himself, so should we. But that lesson only works if Jesus is truly humbling himself from a high place to a low one; from divinity to humanity. The lesson about humility doesn't work if Paul

¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/form-matter/>

is saying that Jesus had the mere appearance of God but consented to act like the human he actually already was. That doesn't make sense. No, Paul is clearly asserting Jesus' divinity.

We see this clearly elsewhere in Scripture. The same writer who said Jesus was in the form of God also wrote Colossians 1:15-20:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him...For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Jesus himself clearly claimed divinity. In John 10:30, he baldly claimed, “I and the Father are one.” Similarly, in John 8:58, Jesus said, “Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” His audience so clearly understood that he was claiming to be God that on both occasions they picked up rocks to stone him for blasphemy.

That is why we confess in the Nicene Creed “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.”

B. The humanity of Christ

But Jesus is not merely fully God. He is also fully man. In taking on humanity to himself, he displayed humility and submission to His Father. As Paul says, Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,” he “emptied himself,” “taking the form of a servant.”

Now, as we just noted, Jesus is fully God, so he is actually equal with God the Father. He is one in essence or being with God the Father. Paul is not saying that Jesus is a lesser God or unequal in divinity with the Father. Rather, he is saying that, *even though Jesus is equal in divinity with the Father*, Jesus didn't treat equality with God as his rightful spoils; his equality with God was not at the forefront of his mind. It wasn't something he was out to seize hold of. Jesus is not standing on his rank. He's not insisting on his rights. As we saw earlier in the passage, Paul calls on us not to stand on our rank. Jesus willingly submits to and subordinates himself to the Father.

We see Jesus humility and submission in his Incarnation. Jesus became a human being. He was a baby. He grew and matured. He experienced hungry, fatigue, pain, sorrow, and death. As Paul says, Jesus' humility was made especially vivid in Jesus' humanity and death, “he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

That is why, in the Nicene Creed I quoted earlier, we also confess that Jesus, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.” This is the heart of the good news of Christianity. God himself became man, bore our sins and paid the penalty for them through his death on the cross, and rose again to new life in which we can share through him.

C. The submission of Christ

But Jesus did not only submit and humble himself once in the Incarnation. Submission is part of who the Second Person of the Trinity is. He submits from all eternity. The Son proceeds from the Father and carries out the Father’s will. John 14:28 “The Father is greater than I.” And John 12:49: “I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak.” John 5:19: “So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” Think also of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

Jesus sets the example for us: we are equal to one another in the sight of God, but serve one another in love. Just as he, equal with God the Father, submits from all eternity, so we, equal to one another, submit to and serve each other.

D. The Spirit of Christ

You might be wondering how this is relevant to you. Yes, Jesus is a great example for us – but he’s Jesus! How can we strive to be like him? We’re not God, we don’t have a divine nature and we haven’t been enjoying perfect fellowship with the Father from before all time. Recognizing Jesus’ perfect example might actually feel kind of depressing when we think about how poor we are in comparison.

Let me rewind for a second and notice one of the first things in this passage. Paul says that if his readers have had any “participation in the Spirit,” then they should strive for unity. This is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus has not abandoned us; he gives us his Spirit as a counselor and comforter and to empower us to live like him. Again, we’ll hear next week about how God works in us to enable us to work for his good pleasure. This is the work of the Spirit—God working in us. The Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, and we confess “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.”

The “participation” here is *koinonia* in the Spirit: it means fellowship, community, communion, or intercourse. And again, Paul is not really in doubt about if they have

had this participation or not. He's asserting his expectation that, as part of the normal Christian life, we all have continuous fellowship and communion with the Spirit of Christ, and this fellowship should be one of the main things that impel us to unity with one another. When we share life in common with the Spirit of Christ himself, the Lord of the universe who washed out feet, then being of the same mind with others, treating them as more significant, and looking out for their interest isn't hard—in fact, it should increasingly come naturally to us.

This, by the way, is a great example of how practical theology is. Sometimes we can be tempted to dismiss abstract topics like the Trinity because it feels irrelevant to our daily concerns. But here we see there is nothing more practical than understanding the nature of the God we worship. The doctrine of the Trinity—that God is three persons in one being, equal in divinity and worthy of worship, each with a distinct role and different relationship to one another—is one of the great mysteries of the faith. But it is also one of the great sources of insight and practical application and encouragement. God made us to know him; he made us to be in fellowship with him. The Father gives us his Son as example, teacher, and Savior; the Father and Son together give us his Spirit as comforter, counselor, and life-giver.

E. The exaltation of Christ

We should conclude. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." "The first shall be last, but the last shall be first." God promises great reward to those who humble themselves, turn to him, and serve one another in humility. We see a taste of this in the conclusion to our passage.

"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The Father has made Jesus the Lord and King of all, reigning at the right hand of the Father. As Jesus humbles himself, as is rewarded by the Father, so we too will be rewarded with new life if we humble ourselves, turn from our sin, and find ourselves in him. He invites us to reign with him as co-heirs of his kingdom. Amen and amen.