

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: The Mind of Christ

Philippians 2:5–11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake in this passage is nothing less than the identity of Jesus Christ, his full deity, his real incarnation, his obedient death, and his present exaltation as Lord. This is one of the towering Christological texts of the New Testament, and your class deserves to see its height clearly. Christ existed in the form of God and shared equality with God, then truly became a servant and a man, was obedient to death on a cross, and has now been exalted to the highest place, so that he is confessed as Lord. Be ready to teach the deity and lordship of Christ confidently, and to present his reign as a present reality, for he is Lord now, exalted at the Father's right hand.

At the same time, Paul did not write this passage to win an argument but to heal a church. The whole portrait is introduced as the mind we are to have among ourselves. The doctrine is meant to reshape the disciple. The God who descended to a cross is the pattern for how we are to treat one another, going low in love rather than grasping at our rights. So this lesson must hold worship and formation together. We behold who Christ is, and we are changed into his likeness.

Aim, then, at both targets. Lift up the glory of the descending and exalted Christ so that your students worship him as Lord and God, and at the same time press his downward path of humble obedience into their relationships, so that the mind of Christ becomes their mind.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says Christ was "in the form of God" and had "equality with God" (2:6). What does this passage teach us about who Jesus is before and apart from his coming to earth, and why does his full deity matter for everything that follows?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul begins not with Bethlehem but before it. Christ was already in the form of God and possessed equality with God before he ever took on flesh. The word translated form points to the essential nature, not a mere appearance. Paul is affirming the full deity and prior existence of the Son. He did not begin to exist in the manger, he descended into it.

This is foundational for the whole hymn. The wonder of the passage depends entirely on who is doing the descending. If a mere man humbles himself, that is admirable. If God the Son lays

aside his glory and stoops to a servant's death, that is the astonishment of the ages. The height of his starting point measures the depth of his humility.

Be ready to teach this plainly against any view that reduces Jesus to a great teacher or a created being. The New Testament is consistent, the Word was God (John 1:1), in Christ the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9), and here he shares equality with God. To confess Jesus as Lord is to confess his deity.

Help your students feel why this matters for everything that follows. Only one who is truly God could reveal the Father perfectly, bear the weight of the world's sin, conquer death, and be rightly worshiped by every knee. The humility, the cross, and the exaltation all draw their meaning from the deity of the one at the center.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The full deity and prior existence of the Son before the incarnation
- Form of God pointing to essential nature, not mere appearance
- The height of Christ's starting point measuring the depth of his humility
- The consistent New Testament witness to Christ's deity (John 1:1; Colossians 2:9)
- Christ's deity as the ground of his saving work and his right to be worshiped

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter so much who is doing the descending in this passage?
- How would you answer someone who says Jesus was only a great teacher?
- How does Christ's deity give weight to his humility, his cross, and his reign?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul introduces this passage by calling us to "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (2:5). In what specific relationship right now do you most need the mind of Christ, and what is currently in the way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question grounds the soaring passage in the student's actual relationships. Paul did not offer this hymn for admiration but for imitation, so the right response includes naming where the mind of Christ is most needed.

Help students locate the relationship honestly. It is usually the one with the most friction, a marriage under strain, a child who disappoints, a coworker who grates, a fellow member they avoid. The mind of Christ is most needed precisely where our own mind keeps asserting its rights.

Then ask what stands in the way. Usually it is the very thing Christ released, our grip on being right, being respected, being served. Naming the obstacle makes the next step possible, because we cannot surrender what we will not admit we are holding.

Note Paul's encouraging phrase, this mind is yours in Christ Jesus. The humility he commands is not foreign to the believer, it is the family resemblance of those united to Christ. We are not summoning a virtue from nowhere, we are letting the mind we already share with Christ come to expression.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The mind of Christ given for imitation, not mere admiration
- Locating the relationship where our own mind most asserts its rights
- Naming the obstacle, usually our grip on status or being right
- The mind of Christ as the family resemblance of those united to him

Discussion Prompts

- Which relationship most needs the mind of Christ right now?
- What specifically is in the way, and what are you holding onto?
- What does it mean that this mind is already yours in Christ?

Question 3

Student Question:

Christ "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (2:6). What does it reveal about the heart of God that the Son would willingly let go of his rightful glory rather than clutch it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The phrase a thing to be grasped pictures something to be seized and clutched, held onto at all costs. Christ had every right to his glory, it was genuinely his. Yet he did not treat his equality with God as a prize to be hoarded. He held it with open hands for our sake.

This tells us something staggering about God's own heart. We tend to imagine that the highest being would be the most self-protective, the most insistent on his rights. The opposite is true. At the very center of God is a self-giving love willing to release glory for the sake of the beloved. The cross does not contradict God's nature, it reveals it.

Contrast this with the first temptation. Adam and Eve grasped at being like God, reaching for what was not theirs. Christ, who actually was equal with God, did the reverse, refusing to clutch even what was rightfully his. The grasping of humanity is undone by the open-handedness of God.

Help students feel the pastoral weight. The God we worship is not a grasping tyrant but a self-giving Savior. This changes how we trust him and how we imitate him. We can release our smaller rights because we follow a Lord who released infinitely more.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ holding his rightful glory with open hands rather than clutching it
- Self-giving love revealed at the very center of God's heart
- The contrast between humanity grasping at godhood and Christ releasing it
- The cross as the revelation, not the contradiction, of God's nature

Discussion Prompts

- What does Christ's open-handedness reveal about God's heart?
- How does this overturn our assumptions about power and rights?
- How does following such a Lord free you to hold your own rights loosely?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where in your life do you find yourself grasping, holding tightly to your rights, your reputation, your comfort, or the last word? How does the example of Christ expose and challenge that grip?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of Christ's open hands into the student's clenched ones. Everyone grasps at something. The aim is to identify the particular thing each person clutches most tightly.

Help students notice the symptoms of grasping, defensiveness when challenged, keeping score, insisting on credit, refusing to yield, replaying offenses. These are the fingerprints of a tightly held grip, and they usually appear in the places where we feel our rights are threatened.

Hold up Christ as both the exposure and the cure. He exposes our grasping by showing how much more he released, and he cures it not by mere willpower but by giving us a glory that cannot be taken, so we no longer need to clutch the small ones. The secure can afford to be generous.

Press for one concrete loosening. Ask each student to name one right or comfort they will deliberately hold loosely this week, a preference yielded, a credit not claimed, a last word surrendered. The grip relaxes through specific acts, not general intentions.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the particular thing each person clutches most tightly

- The symptoms of grasping: defensiveness, scorekeeping, refusing to yield
- Christ as both the exposure of our grip and its cure
- Security in Christ freeing us to hold lesser things loosely

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one thing you grasp most tightly?
- What symptoms reveal that grip in your daily life?
- What right or comfort will you deliberately hold loosely this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says Christ “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (2:7). What does it mean that the Son of God truly became a servant and a real human being, and what did he set aside in order to do it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul says Christ emptied himself, and the verse itself explains how, by taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men. The emptying is not a subtraction of his deity, for he remained fully God. It is the addition of true humanity and the veiling of his glory, the willingness to take the lowest place while remaining who he is.

Notice the same word form returns. The one who was in the form of God took the form of a servant. He did not merely play at being lowly, he genuinely became a servant and a real human being, with a body that grew tired, hungered, wept, and bled. The incarnation is not a costume, it is a true taking on of our nature.

Be careful and reverent here. Scripture does not invite us to speculate about the mechanics of how the eternal Son could be born as a baby. It invites us to wonder. He set aside the independent use of his glory, the comforts of heaven, and the visible majesty that was his, in order to stand among us as one who serves.

Help your students feel the scandal and the comfort. The scandal is that God would stoop so low. The comfort is that he did, that we are not saved by a distant deity but by one who knows our weakness from the inside, who became a servant so that servants could be saved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-emptying as the veiling of glory and addition of true humanity, not loss of deity
- The reality of the incarnation, Christ becoming a true servant and real man
- The Son setting aside heaven’s comforts and visible majesty to serve
- Reverent wonder rather than speculation about the mechanics of the incarnation
- A Savior who knows our weakness from the inside (Hebrews 4:15)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ emptied himself without ceasing to be God?
- Why does it matter that Jesus became a real human being and not an appearance?
- How does a Savior who became a servant comfort you in your weakness?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus took "the form of a servant." Where is God calling you into lowly, unseen, or inconvenient service right now, the kind that brings no applause? What holds you back?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the servanthood of Christ toward the student's own willingness to serve where it costs and no one notices. The form of a servant is not glamorous, and the test of true servanthood is the unseen task.

Help students locate the hidden places of service, the aging parent, the needy member, the thankless chore at home, the quiet ministry no one will praise. Christlike service is often invisible, and that is precisely its value, since it cannot be done for applause.

Name the obstacles honestly. What holds us back is usually pride that thinks such work is beneath us, or a hunger for recognition that finds no fuel in hidden service. The same grasping addressed earlier reappears here as an unwillingness to stoop.

Encourage one concrete act of lowly service this week, done deliberately without seeking notice. Servanthood is learned by serving, and a single chosen act of hidden service does more to form the mind of Christ than hours of admiring it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The test of servanthood in the unseen and unapplauded task
- Hidden service as Christlike precisely because it cannot be done for praise
- Pride and hunger for recognition as the obstacles to stooping
- Servanthood learned by serving, one concrete act at a time

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to lowly, unseen service right now?
- What holds you back from it?
- What one hidden act of service could you do this week without seeking notice?

Question 7

Student Question:

Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2:8). What does this teach us about the place of obedience in the life of Christ, and therefore in the life of those who follow him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul traces the descent to its lowest point. Christ humbled himself and became obedient, and his obedience went all the way to death, and not merely death but death on a cross, the most shameful and degrading execution Rome could inflict, reserved for slaves and rebels. The Son of God obeyed to that depth.

Notice that obedience stands at the heart of Christ’s saving work. He did not save us by a display of power but by a life and death of obedience to the Father’s will. This dignifies obedience for us. If the sinless Son learned obedience and walked its hard road (Hebrews 5:8), then obedience is not beneath us, it is the very shape of faithfulness.

This guards us against any version of faith that treats obedience as optional or legalistic. Obedience is not the enemy of grace, it is the response of love. Christ’s own path to glory ran through obedience, and the disciple’s path is no different. We follow a Lord who obeyed.

Help students feel the cost without flinching from it. Real obedience reaches the point where it hurts, where it costs comfort, reputation, or our own will. Christ did not stop short of that point, and the call on us is to follow him into costly, not merely convenient, obedience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience at the heart of Christ’s saving work, not a display of power
- The depth of the cross, the most shameful death, as the measure of his obedience
- Obedience dignified for the disciple because the sinless Son walked it (Hebrews 5:8)
- Obedience as the response of love, not the enemy of grace
- The call to costly obedience that does not stop where it begins to hurt

Discussion Prompts

- Why did Christ save us through obedience rather than a display of power?
- How does Christ’s obedience dignify obedience in our own lives?
- Why is obedience the response of love rather than the enemy of grace?

Question 8

Student Question:

Obedience cost Jesus everything. Where is obedience currently costing you something, and are you following all the way, or stopping at the point where it begins to hurt?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the costly obedience of Christ into the student's own walk. The honest issue for most of us is not whether we will obey when it is easy, but whether we will obey when it begins to hurt.

Help students identify the point where their obedience tends to stop. For some it is forgiveness that feels undeserved, for some it is honesty that will cost them, for some it is purity, generosity, or the surrender of a relationship or ambition. Everyone has a line where convenient obedience ends.

Hold up Christ at exactly that line. He did not stop at the point of pain, he went through it to a cross. We follow a Lord who has already walked the hard road ahead of us, and who supplies grace to walk it after him.

Press for honesty and one step. Ask each student to name where obedience is currently costing them, and whether they are following through or stalling. Then invite one concrete act of obedience past the point of comfort this week, in the strength Christ supplies.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The real test of obedience at the point where it begins to cost
- Identifying the personal line where convenient obedience ends
- Christ going through the point of pain to the cross ahead of us
- Grace supplied to follow Christ into costly obedience

Discussion Prompts

- Where is obedience currently costing you something?
- At what point does your obedience tend to stall?
- What is one act of obedience past the point of comfort you can take this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul declares that "God has highly exalted him" and given him "the name that is above every name," so that "every knee should bow" and "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:9-11). What does this teach us about the present lordship and reign of Jesus, and what does it mean to confess him as Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, so give it full room. The descent reverses. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name. The way down became the way up, not as a reward Christ grasped for, but as the Father's vindication of the obedient Son. Humility was not the end of the story, exaltation was.

The language Paul uses is staggering. He takes words from Isaiah 45, where the LORD declares that to him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, words spoken there of God alone, and applies them to Jesus. To confess Jesus as Lord is to give him the honor due to God, because he is God. This is among the highest claims about Christ in all of Scripture.

Teach the present reality of his reign clearly. Jesus is Lord now, exalted at the right hand of the Father, reigning over all (Acts 2:36; Ephesians 1:20–22). His kingdom is not a distant earthly hope awaiting a future political reign, it was inaugurated in his ministry and established when his church began, and he reigns at this moment. Every knee will one day bow, willingly or unwillingly, but his lordship is already a fact, not merely a future event.

Help students grasp what it means to confess Jesus as Lord. It is not a one-time phrase but the surrender of the whole life to his rule. The earliest Christian confession was simply that Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9), and to make it is to bow the knee now, in obedient faith, rather than be forced to bow at the end. The confession that saves is the confession that submits.

Let the passage end where it aims, to the glory of God the Father. The exaltation of the Son does not compete with the Father's glory, it accomplishes it. The worship of Jesus and the glory of God are one. Lead your class to do now what every creature will do then, to bow and confess him Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The exaltation of Christ as the Father's vindication of the obedient Son
- Isaiah 45 language of God applied to Jesus, confessing his full deity
- The present lordship and reign of Christ, now, at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:36; Ephesians 1:20–22)
- Against any view that delays Christ's reign to a future earthly kingdom
- Confessing Jesus as Lord as the surrender of the whole life (Romans 10:9)
- Bowing now in obedient faith rather than being forced to bow at the end
- The worship of the Son and the glory of the Father as one

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the way down became the way up for Christ?
- How does applying Isaiah 45 to Jesus confirm his deity and lordship?
- What is the difference between bowing now in faith and bowing later by force?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, the descent and exaltation of Christ. Name one specific way Jesus is using this portrait of his own mind to form you, to make you more willing to go low in love, and more sure of the Lord you are following.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks students to let the whole sweep of the passage land personally. The passage does two things at once, it calls us to worship the exalted Lord and to walk his downward road. A good response will touch both, deeper worship and concrete humility.

Help students choose one specific point of formation. For some it is releasing a clutched right, for some a willingness to serve unseen, for some obedience past the point of pain, for some a fresh surrender to the lordship of Christ. Press past the general to the particular.

Connect formation to the pattern of the passage. The way of Christ, and therefore the way of the kingdom, is down and then up. We are being invited to trust that the same God who exalted the obedient Son will not abandon those who walk the same humble road. The descent is safe because of the exaltation.

Close the lesson in worship and prayer. Lead the class to confess together that Jesus is Lord, and to ask for the mind of Christ in the very relationships where they need it most. Invite one concrete step that puts the mind of Christ into practice this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding worship of the exalted Lord together with the call to go low in love
- Choosing one specific point of formation rather than a general impression
- The pattern of the kingdom: the way down before the way up
- Trusting the God who exalts the humble, making the descent safe

Discussion Prompts

- How is this portrait of Christ deepening your worship of him?
- What one concrete step toward humility is he forming in you?
- How does Christ's exaltation give you courage to walk his downward road?