

The Book of Philippians

Lesson 4: The Mind of Christ -- Philippians 2:5–11

There are passages in Scripture you do not so much study as stand before, the way you stand before a mountain or the open sea. Philippians 2:5 through 11 is one of them. In a few short lines Paul traces the whole arc of the Son of God, from the heights of heaven down to the dust of a Roman cross, and back up to the throne where every knee will one day bow. Many scholars believe these verses were sung as a hymn in the earliest churches. You can feel the music in them.

What is astonishing is why Paul reaches for this towering passage. He is not settling a theological debate. He is helping a church get along. He has just told the Philippians to count others more significant than themselves, and now he points to the supreme example. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. The cure for our pettiness is to gaze at the humility of God himself.

And what humility it is. The one who was in the very form of God did not clutch his rights or cling to his glory. He emptied himself. He took the form of a servant. He became obedient, all the way down, to death, and not a dignified death but death on a cross, the execution reserved for slaves and criminals. The road of Jesus runs downward, step after step, lower than we can imagine the eternal Son going.

But the story does not end in the grave. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name above every name. The way down became the way up, not as a trick or a reward earned by ambition, but as the very pattern of the kingdom. As we stand before this passage, two things should happen in us at once. We should worship the Christ who descended for us, and we should begin to walk the same downward road of love that he walked.

Group Discussion: Paul points to Jesus as the supreme example of humility and tells the church, “Have this mind among yourselves” (2:5). Why do you think the cure for a divided, prideful heart is not trying harder but gazing at Christ?

Personal Reflection: Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” but let it go for our sake (2:6). What is one right, comfort, or status you tend to clutch most tightly, and what would it look like to hold it more loosely?

Read Philippians 2:5–11

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 1:1–14, the Word who was God becoming flesh and dwelling among us; 2 Corinthians 8:9, the Lord who was rich becoming poor for our sake; Isaiah 45:22–23, every knee bowing to the LORD, words Paul applies to Jesus; Mark 10:42–45, the Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve and give his life; Acts 2:36, God making the crucified Jesus both Lord and Christ.