
Have This Attitude (Philippians 2:5–11)

Our text contains one of the greatest challenges in the New Testament—and one of the greatest doctrinal sections. The challenge is to have the attitude of Jesus: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). “Have . . . attitude” is translated from *phroneite*, which means to “think” or “form/hold an opinion.”¹ The KJV has “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Weymouth rendered the phrase, “Let this disposition be in you which was in Christ Jesus.”

Paul had urged the Philippians to be united (2:1, 2). He had emphasized that a key to unity was to think not of self, but of others (vv. 3, 4).

Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart

¹Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1065.

that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self.²

To help his readers comprehend what true selflessness entailed, he pointed to the definitive example: Jesus (vv. 5–8). Paul, in effect, said, “If you have the Lord’s disposition of heart, you *will* be united; you will enjoy peace and harmony.” The challenge given to the Philippians is also ours: We need the attitude of mind possessed by Christ. Some of us have a hard time following the footsteps of Jesus (see 1 Peter 2:21) because we do not have the mind of Jesus.

The great challenge of verse 5 is followed by the grand message of verses 6 through 11. These verses compose one of the most significant statements ever made regarding Jesus. Gerald F. Hawthorne called the passage “the most important section in the letter” to the Philippians and declared it to be “a christological gem unparalleled in the [New Testament].”³

Many believe that Philippians 2:6–11 is an early hymn. It has been called “the Christ-hymn.” The passage divides naturally into two parts: the humiliation of Christ (vv. 6–8) and the exaltation of Christ (vv. 9–11). The first section illustrates what it means to have Christ’s attitude; the second suggests why it is important to have such an attitude.

Be warned: This is not only the most important passage in Philippians, but also the most controversial. One writer remarked, “The diversity of opinion prevailing among interpreters in regard to the

²Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 38.

³Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 43, *Philippians*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983), 76, 79.

meaning of this passage is enough to fill the student with despair, and to afflict him with intellectual paralysis."⁴ Commentators struggle over the meaning of the Greek words translated "form," "a thing to be grasped," "emptied," and so on. Although there is controversy over the *meaning* of the words, there is little controversy over the *message* of the passage: Jesus loved us so much that He was willing to leave heaven to come to earth to die for us!

CHRIST'S ATTITUDE REVEALED (2:6–8)

Selfless & Self-emptying

"The Christ-hymn" begins with Jesus' preexistence in heaven: "He existed in the form of God" (v. 6a). That is, Jesus existed in heaven with God before He came to earth. Other passages relating to His preexistence include John 1:1, 2; 17:5; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Colossians 1:15–17; Hebrews 1:2, 3a. Two Greek words for "form" are used in our text: *morphe* (vv. 6, 7) and *schema* ("appearance"; v. 8). The Greeks often used the words interchangeably, but in our text they are contrasted. In context, *morphe* refers to the essential nature of a person or thing that does not change, while *schema* refers to *the outward appearance* that can and does change.⁵ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., wrote that "the form of God" refers to "the sum of those qualities that make God . . . God."⁶ A number

⁴A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1900), 11.

⁵One source for study on these words is William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1962), 104.

⁶Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., notes on Philippians, *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 1805.

of translations have “the nature of God” or “divine nature” or something similar, including the NEB, Phillips, Goodspeed, and Moffatt. The NCV says, “Christ himself was like God in everything.” Paul further asserted that Jesus possessed “equality with God” (v. 6b). The wording of verse 6 is the apostle’s way of affirming that Jesus was really and truly God!

Consider what it meant to exist “in the form of God,” to be equal with God in heaven. Try to imagine the honor bestowed on Christ, the adoration He received, and the wonders He enjoyed. In Jesus’ prayer to His Father in John 17, He referred to “the glory which I had with You before the world was” (v. 5). We can never comprehend the unselfishness of the Lord until we understand what He had to give up.

Though Christ must have enjoyed the blessings of being “in the form of God,” He “did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.” In the original language, “a thing to be grasped” is the Greek noun *harpagmon*. It is derived from the verb *harpazo*, which means to “seize . . . ; take away by force, snatch away.”⁷ *Harpagmon* can refer to “a thing retained with an eager grasp.”⁸ I believe the meaning of this passage is that Jesus did not “tightly grasp” His position of heavenly honor. According to J. B. Lightfoot, “This is the common and indeed almost universal interpretation of the Greek fathers, who would have the most lively sense of the requirements of the language.”⁹

⁷*The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, Ltd., 1971), 52.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul III: The First Roman Captivity I: Epistle to the Philippians* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1913), 134–35.

Preachers have used the illustration of giving a bone to a hungry dog. The dog will grasp that bone with all his might. If you try to take the bone from him, though you tug and pull, he will not turn loose. Why? He is afraid of losing the bone! Jesus was not like that. Instead of "holding on" to His heavenly status, Christ was willing to "turn loose" of it so He could come to earth to die for us. In recent days, a variation of this idea has gained popularity: Jesus "did not think equality with God was a thing to be grasped *for His own advantage.*" As we read of the Lord's unselfishness, we need to make personal application. Ask yourself, "Is there anything I am holding on to, clutching tightly, that I need to turn loose so I might better serve God and man?"

"But," instead of holding on to His heavenly position, Jesus "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (v. 7). The phrase "emptied Himself" has captivated scholars. Controversy has raged over the question "*Of what* did He empty Himself?" The Greek word for "empty" (*kenos*) gave rise to the so-called "kenotic" theory of Incarnation which teaches that, when Jesus came to earth, He "emptied Himself" of His basic deity (all or most of His divine qualities). This position reads into the words "emptied Himself" something that is not there, and contradicts plain passages elsewhere which teach that, on earth, Jesus was still God.

John declared that God "became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). The angel told Joseph that Jesus would be called "'Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23). Thomas called Christ "my Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). The

doctrine of the Incarnation declares that Jesus was fully man, but also fully God. When Jesus came to earth, He did not give up something (deity) as much as He took on something (humanity). Paul Rees used this illustration:

Many years ago, when the Duke of Windsor was the Prince of Wales, he one day left Buckingham Palace, journeyed west into the coal mining country, put on a miner's cap, and went down into the dingy tunnels to see for himself the conditions in which men toiled in a difficult and dangerous branch of British industry. As a member of the royal family he was as much a prince in the coal mine as he was when he lived in a palace in London. But, while his essential equality with royalty was unchanged, there was no longer an equality of experience. He had consented to enter into the experiences that never came to him amid the elegances and immunities of the palace.¹⁰

Let us return to the question "Of what did Jesus empty Himself?" Guesses have abounded. The KJV translators evidently thought that He emptied Himself of His heavenly "reputation." The margin note in the NASB has "laid aside His privileges." Lightfoot wrote that He stripped Himself of "the glories, the prerogatives of Deity."¹¹ Since the passage does not specify the qualities of which Jesus divested Himself, we accomplish little by speculation. It is probably better to take the last part of verse 7 as the explanation for the first part of the verse: He "emptied Himself" by "taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." The CJB says that "he

¹⁰Paul Rees, *The Epistle to the Colossians, Philipppians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1964), 44.

¹¹Lightfoot, 45.

emptied himself, *in that* he took the form of a slave” (emphasis mine).

Serving & Sympathetic

“Bond-servant” in verse 7 is translated from *doulos*, the Greek word for a slave. The term translated “form” in that verse is the same as that used in verse 6. In heaven, Jesus had all the qualities of God; on earth, He took on all the qualities of a slave. Jesus was not actually born into the slave class of His day, but He made Himself a slave in that He was totally dependent on God and obedient to Him. As a result, Christ was also a slave to the needs of mankind—especially the need for salvation. Many passages speak of Jesus’ servanthood (see Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27). An excellent illustration of Jesus as a servant is when He washed the disciples’ feet (John 13:5). The contrast is vivid: Jesus had gone from being equal with God (the highest position imaginable) to being a slave (the lowest position imaginable). We are reminded of Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor.”

Christ’s downward trip began with His “being made in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7b). Before the end of the first century, some tried to use the word “likeness” to teach that Jesus was “like” men, but not really a man—in other words, that He was never really human. John was combating that kind of erroneous thought when He said that Jesus “became *flesh*” (John 1:14; emphasis mine) and when he wrote, “. . . every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God” (1 John 4:2; emphasis mine). Many passages stress that Jesus’ humanity was not illusionary, but real. For instance,

the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said that He was “made like His brethren in *all things*” (Hebrews 2:17; emphasis mine). “Made like” in Hebrews 2:17 is translated from the same Greek root as the word translated “likeness” in Philippians 2:7. We cannot be sure why Paul used the word “likeness” in 2:7.

Some think that the emphasis is that, in one way, Jesus was “like” other men because He was fully human, but, in another way, He was “unlike” them because He was also fully God. Here is a simpler explanation: Note that the word translated “being made” in verse 7 (Gk.: *ginomai*) can mean to “be born.”¹² The RSV has “being born in the likeness of men.” The phrase “being made in the likeness of men” probably refers to Jesus’ entrance into this world: He was born as all human beings are.

It is not Jesus’ dissimilarity to man that is emphasized in verse 7, but His similarity. Christ could have come “in the likeness” of an angel, and mankind would have marveled. He could have come “in the likeness” of God, and mankind would have worshiped. If, however, He was to fulfill His mission, He had to come “in the likeness” of men (see Romans 8:3). Since Jesus was made like us, He can sympathize with us and help us (see Hebrews 2:17, 18; 4:15, 16). More, important, He could die for us (1 Corinthians 15:3).

Why did Jesus have to become flesh before He could die in our place? One writer suggested the illustration of a man who has to get down in the mud before he can pull someone else from the mire, or a man who has to get into the water before he can

¹²Bauer, 197.

save another from drowning¹³—but any illustration is inadequate. We can never fully understand why it was necessary for Jesus to come “in the likeness of men”; but that is what the Bible teaches, and we accept it by faith.

Christ’s identification with mankind continues in verse 8. The verse begins, “Being found in appearance as a man. . . .” The Greek word translated “appearance” (*schema*) is the second word used in our text for “form.” As previously noted, this word refers to “the outward appearance that can and does change.” Jesus’ essential nature (*morphe*) never changed, but as He grew from infancy to childhood to manhood, His appearance (*schema*) changed. We are reminded of Christ’s life and ministry as He walked among men as a Man—as He embraced the pain and sorrow of being human (see Isaiah 53:3).

I pause to reflect once more on what Jesus gave up to come to this earth. In my mind, I try to draw parallels: What would it mean to a world-class athlete to lose the use of his legs? What would it mean to an artist to lose the use of his eyes? What would it mean to any of us to become a quadriplegic, no longer able to use our arms and legs? Even as I ask these questions, I realize that any comparison is woefully inadequate. I cannot begin to understand what it would mean to enjoy the glories of heaven and then, suddenly, to find oneself encased in the weak and corrupting flesh of humanity. I can only thank God that He was willing to make such a sacrifice for me!

Why did my Savior come to earth,

¹³Manford George Gutzke, *Plain Talk on Philipppians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Lamplighter Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 89.

And to the humble go?
 Why did He choose a lowly birth?
 Because He loved me so!

Why did He drink the bitter cup
 Of sorrow, pain and woe?
 Why on the cross be lifted up?
 Because He loved me so!¹⁴

Submissive & Sacrificing

“Being found in appearance as a man” was not the end of Christ’s downhill journey. He still had to travel the road to Calvary. “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).

Jesus did not *have* to die. Others had left this earth without dying—Enoch (Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11)—and Jesus could have (see John 10:18). However, He had to die *if* you and I were to have the hope of everlasting life (1 Corinthians 15:3). He was therefore willing to humble Himself “to the point of death”—and not just any death, but the most despicable death man could devise. Death by crucifixion had been borrowed from the Phoenicians and Persians and perfected by the Romans. It was an instrument of shame to the Jews (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13) and disgraceful foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23). “In polite Roman society the word ‘cross’ was an obscenity, not to be uttered in conversation.”¹⁵ The cross was “the ulti-

¹⁴J. G. Dailey, “Why Did My Savior Come to Earth?” *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

¹⁵F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, Good News Commentaries series (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 47.

mate in human degradation,"¹⁶ "the bottom rung in the ladder from the Throne of God."¹⁷

What made Jesus willing to suffer such a humiliating and painful death? We have already suggested that He did it because He loved us (Galatians 2:20). Philippians 2:8b adds another reason: submission to the will of God. He became "obedient to the point of death" (emphasis mine). During His personal ministry, Jesus said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, He struggled with what was ahead but ended His prayer with these words: ". . . yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). In the end, He "walked the path of obedience to death—his death on the cross" (Philippians 2:8; TEV). Because of submission to God, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for us.

Why did Paul emphasize that Jesus was selfless, self-emptying, serving, sympathetic, submissive, and sacrificing? Was it merely to help us appreciate Christ's love and care for us? The message should have this effect on us—but Paul's purpose was not to teach theology; it was to change lives. He wanted the Philippians to know that, in order to have harmony, peace, and unity, they needed to be like Jesus. He called on them to "tread the path already trodden by Christ himself."¹⁸ The Holy Spirit wanted us to know that we, too, must embrace the attitude of Jesus. The Lord's challenge to His disciples is a

¹⁶Hawthorne, 90.

¹⁷Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4, *The Epistles of Paul* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 445.

¹⁸I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 55.

universal challenge:

. . . whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:43–45).

Jesus also said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Unfortunately, many of us want the crown without the cross—or, as one writer put it, we want the blessings without the bleeding.¹⁹ How hard it is to learn to turn our thoughts outward!

One of the most challenging songs I know is titled “None of Self and All of Thee.” The song begins,

O, the bitter pain and sorrow
That a time could ever be,
When I proudly said to Jesus,
“All of self, and none of Thee.”

Stanza two has “Some of self, and some of Thee,” while the third stanza progresses to “Less of self, and more of Thee.” Finally, the last verse says,

Higher than the highest heavens,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, Thy love at last has conquered,
“None of self, and *all* of Thee.”²⁰

Singing this song should encourage us to examine

¹⁹J. H. Jowett, quoted in Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1989), 75.

²⁰Theodore Monod, “None of Self and All of Thee,” *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

our hearts: Where are we on the pathway to unselfishness? I need God's help to make Christ's attitude my own. Perhaps you do too.

CHRIST'S ATTITUDE REWARDED (2:9–11)

Exaltation

We turn from Christ's attitude revealed to Christ's attitude rewarded. Verse 9 begins, "For this reason also [because Jesus was willing to humble Himself], God highly exalted Him. . . ." Jesus did not exalt Himself; a slave could only be exalted by another. "Highly exalted" is translated from a compound Greek word (*huperupsosen*, from *huperusoo*) that combines the preposition for "over" or "above" (*huper*) with the word for "exalt" (*hupsoo*). The Latin equivalent for *hyper* is "super." God "super-exalted" Jesus! He was restored to the lofty position He had enjoyed before He left heaven to come to earth. His humiliation came in stages—but He was exalted in one grand act! The exaltation of Jesus includes His resurrection, His ascension, and His glorification—but the emphasis in this text is on His glorification on God's right hand. "He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19b).

In heaven, God "bestowed on Him the name which is above every name" (v. 9b). "Above" is translated from the preposition for "highly" (*huper*) in the first part of the verse. We cannot be sure what name was bestowed upon Him. Some suggest that it is a name only God knows at present. This is possible, but since Paul evidently intended to exalt Christ in the minds of his readers, such a conclusion seems impractical for the apostle's purpose. The next verse may lead

us to believe that Paul meant “the name of Jesus” (v. 10). Many writers think that the word “name” is used here in the sense of “designation” and prefer the idea that the title was “Lord” (v. 11).²¹ Others favor the full title “the Lord Jesus Christ” in verse 11. In the Greek, there is no verb “to be” between “Jesus Christ” and “Lord”; the original simply has “Jesus Christ Lord.” It is unnecessary for us to identify the “name”; we need simply to know that it is “above every name” (v. 9). On earth Jesus was humiliated; in heaven, He is exalted. On earth, He was the lowest of servants; in heaven, He has the name above every name!

Since God has exalted Jesus, He should be acclaimed by all creation: “So that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (vv. 10, 11a). To bow the knee at the name of Jesus is to worship Him (see Ephesians 3:14). To confess Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge Him openly and frankly as the Ruler of all. The expression “those under the earth” probably means “the dead” (see Romans 14:9). The threefold listing of “those . . . in heaven and on earth and under the earth” is a striking way of saying that, since the Lordship of Jesus is “cosmic and universal,”²² everyone everywhere should confess Him. Today many refuse to do so, but “ultimately all will acknowledge him as Lord . . . , whether willingly or not.”²³

The passage closes by saying that all this will be

²¹F. F. Bruce, 48, 50; Robertson, 446; Loh and Nida, 63. These writers and others make persuasive arguments for the title “Lord.”

²²Loh and Nida, 62.

²³Gaffin, 1805.

“to the glory of God” (v. 11b). “The glory of God is ever the goal, the final purpose, of all things.”²⁴ It will be to God’s glory because when Christ is glorified, God is also glorified. Further, God is glorified because, by His divine example, Jesus showed that God’s true nature is not one of getting but of giving.

Encouragement

What lesson or lessons were the Philippians to learn from verses 9 through 11? The fact that Jesus is Lord should have been a powerful reason for them to follow His example. I believe another incentive is also implied in these verses: “Since Jesus was exalted after humbling Himself, if you humble yourself and put others first as He did, in the end, you too will be exalted!” Fred Craddock gave this terse summary: “Last now, first later!”²⁵ Some object to such a conclusion, decrying the “shallowness” of such a motivation. However, the concept of reward is found often in the Scriptures (see Matthew 25:21), along with the specific promise that exaltation will follow humiliation (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14; 1 Peter 5:6).

As we go through life, as we face problems, and as we make decisions, the Lord wants us always to consider “the E factor.” What is “the E factor”? The *eternity* factor. This life is short and uncertain (Job 14:1; James 4:14). In struggling with choices, we should ask ourselves, “What will be the consequences in *eternity*?”

Why should you and I do our best to have the

²⁴Hendriksen, 118.

²⁵Craddock, 42.

“attitude . . . which was . . . in Christ Jesus”? We should do so to obey our Lord, to be all we can be as Christians, and to promote peace and harmony in the body of Christ. At the same time, how wonderful it is to realize that, if we humble ourselves, someday we too will be exalted!

CONCLUSION

Philippians 2:5–11 can have a powerful impact on our lives—if we will let it. Someone has compared these verses with the powerful rays of the sun.²⁶ The sun can bless our lives, or we can hide from it in a closed and darkened room. The sun will still be there, but we will know only the gloom and the cold. I pray that you will not ignore the wondrous truths of Philippians 2:5–11, but will embrace them. They can change your life.

²⁶Gutzke, 96.