

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 13: Philippians: The Fellowship of the Kingdom**

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By now, we’ve explored enough of Paul’s letters that we’ve seen a general pattern. The first section is the gospel doctrine; the second is gospel application. And the application only makes sense—and is only possible in light of the gospel.

But this morning, as we get to the book of Philippians, we’ll see a wonderful twist on this. Because the letter isn’t just centered around the gospel; it is centered around gospel *humility*. And it is gospel humility that is the key to unlocking the many famous imperatives in this book. We’ve seen so far how the gospel upends the applicative commands in Paul’s letters so far. How does humility do the same thing? And what would be missing if we attempted to live in the way Paul describes with an understanding of the gospel, but not an attitude of humility? Those are the questions we’ll address as we get into Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

**Background**

The early church was unanimous in its testimony that Philippians was written by the apostle Paul. It says so right at the beginning of the letter, and the many personal references of the author fit what we know of Paul from other NT books.

We don’t know when this letter was written in large part because we don’t know from where it was written. It is clear that Paul is in prison [Phil 1:13-14], but whether this is his Roman imprisonment, as many have thought, or another imprisonment, in Ephesus or elsewhere, is not clear. So the best we can nail down the date of this letter is to say that it was written sometime in the mid 50s to early 60s AD.

Though we don’t know when he wrote his letter, we do know quite a bit about the people Paul wrote his letter to. He wrote it to the church in the city of Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony at the north end of the Aegean Sea (today is Northern Greece). It was a strategic city in Macedonia. It was a major stop on an important road called the Egnation Way, which led from Byzantium (Istanbul), all the way across modern Greece to the Adriatic Sea. [route that Paul would follow from Neapolis to Philippi to Thessalonica on his second missionary journey as you can see from map]. It was also a popular place of retirement for former Roman soldiers and officials.

Paul founded the church in Philippi around 50 AD during his second missionary journey with Silas. You may remember from Acts 16 that Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia begging him to come over and help. So Paul went to Macedonia, and stopped in Philippi. As an indication of just how Roman this city was, Paul didn’t find a synagogue there. Rather he found a place, just outside the city, where a few Jewish women gathered to pray. God used Paul to lead at least one woman to Christ, Lydia, who, as it turns out, wasn’t from Phillipi. [Acts 16:12-15]. Paul also healed a demon-possessed slave girl, which caused a riot and led to his and imprisonment. Miraculously, God freed Paul and Silas, and this led to the conversion of the Philippian jailor and his household to Christ. Paul didn’t spend a long time in Philippi. So, the church in Philippi was largely Gentile, born in the midst of suffering and persecution, and quickly bereft of its founder. This was the beginning of the Philippian church.

So, as we go through this letter, keep in mind these circumstances: Paul is writing from prison, suffering for the sake of the Gospel, and in fact speaking of the very real possibility of imminent death. And yet, despite this uncertain future, his letter to the church is filled with joy. Paul makes reference to joy or rejoicing many times through the letter.

Also, keep in mind that he’s writing to a group of Christians who are probably fairly new Christians; who are scared and discouraged because of Paul’s imprisonment and their own suffering and danger of persecution.

So why did Paul write this letter?Given the circumstances, we might expect that the Philippian Christians were falling prey to some sort of heresy. But in fact, that doesn’t seem to be the case. Rather, it would seem that Paul had a number of practical reasons to write this letter.

First, he had apparently received a gift from the Philippian church and he wanted to thank them for it. (**4:10-19; read v. 18**). So the book of Philippians is a thank-you letter!

Second, Paul is writing to update them on his circumstances, and to encourage them for fear that they might be discouraged because of his chains and imprisonment. (**1:12-30**) So this book is a good book to turn to for encouragement if you are struggling with anxiety, fear, or discouragement.

Third, not only does he want to encourage them about his condition, he also wants to reassure them about Epaphroditis, who the Philippians had sent to Paul with their gift, but who had become ill and almost died. The Philippians had heard of this and were concerned, so Paul writes to reassure them and to send Epaphroditis himself with the letter. (**2:25-30**). In this context Paul talks a lot about service for the gospel, so this is a good book to turn to if you need to remind yourself why we should be more involved in service and ministry at church.

But the main theme of the letter is above these circumstantial elements. Above all else, Paul writes to deliver a powerful description of the humility of Christ in going to the cross, and urges his readers to grow in Christ-like humility. And so this is a good book to turn to for all Christians to be reminded of our basic purpose: to model Christ to others in all ways, including in how he humbled himself to serve his people. You can see the outline of the book under point IV on your handout, but the main thing we’ll be talking about is our main theme—humility, which is under point V.

We’ll be criss-crossing the letter thematically, looking at what gospel humility is, and then four different ways that this letter applies it to our lives. So first: **Gospel Humility**

When Paul tries to put his finger on the heart of what it means to imitate Christ’s love, he chooses to talk about humility. And the place where he does this most powerfully is in the well-known passage at the beginning of chapter two (2:1-11).

“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 interest, 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.”

* To understand Christ’s humility more fully, we should remind ourselves of Jesus’ rightful majesty, and what he gave up or laid aside to become a servant. He is “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9). He is the one “like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” who “was given authority, glory and sovereign power” so that “men of every language worshiped him.” Whose “dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away” (Daniel 7). “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” (Colossians 1)

Jesus is King, heir of David, rightful ruler of Israel and all creation. He is more than an earthly King; he dwells with the Ancient of Days and receives worship and everlasting dominion. He is nothing less than God Himself. And he has a mission. He is the head of his people, the church, the Conqueror of Death, the Alpha and Omega, the firstborn and judge of creation. Yet this same Jesus “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.” He became a mortal man, a squalling infant, the son of a carpenter in an unimportant backwater province. He went unrecognized by almost everyone, had few followers, left no writings and established no school, was unjustly accused, wrongfully arrested, and executed as a criminal. That is the extent of Jesus’ humility. And he humbled himself *to save us*.

How much less are we called to? Jesus, who was and is God, became a man. We, who are not divine, must only acknowledge our actual human failings. Jesus was and is perfect, yet *became sin for us*, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21. We, who are sinful, must only acknowledge and turn from our own sinfulness. Our humility is ultimately a reflection of Christ’s perfect attitude. We are called to **sacrifice our own interests** for the sake of others, just as Christ did for us.

This humility isn’t theoretical or merely an internal feeling. Paul talks about obedience. He exhorts us to do everything without complaining or arguing. It seems that grumbling and complaining is one of the most common ways that we give away our lack of humility. As the saying goes, everyone wants to be thought of as a servant, but no one wants to be treated like one. How do you respond when you are, or feel like you are being treated like a servant? Does your response reveal humility?

Our humility is not only a reflection of the love that Christ has shown us, it is also a demonstration that we have understood and grasped the good news of the Gospel. Paul warns the Philippians and us from taking pride in anything other than Christ and his work on our behalf. He call all things “rubbish,” in comparison with “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus.” Humility, then, is not just a moral virtue we pursue, but rather the evidence that we have met, and been loved by Christ! So, how does this humility display itself? First, by our patience in suffering.

**A. Humility as Patient Suffering**

Paul tells the Philippians that one of the ways Christians show humility is by enduring suffering for the sake of Christ with patience.

Paul models patient suffering in chapter 1 when he reflects on his circumstances. He is able to see that his imprisonment “has really served to advance the gospel” because “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” and “most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (1:12-14). It didn’t matter that he had been wrongfully accused and unjustly imprisoned because God glorified himself and spread his gospel even through Paul’s hard circumstances. Paul is even able to rejoice at rival preachers! “What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

Paul goes so far as to say that he is equally happy with life or with death because with life he can continue working for the gospel and in death he is united with Christ. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,” he says in 1:21, a key verse in Philippians and perhaps the whole Bible, which might be the most succinct summary of the meaning of life and the Christian attitude towards death in the Bible. He goes on to say “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” (22-24)

Think about this for a moment. Isn’t it quite amazing? Even amid thoughts of his own death, Paul is concerned for the Philippians. We tend to think our suffering justifies at least a little bit of selfishness. No sign of that here. Paul’s chief concern, even when his own life is threatened, is the furtherance of the gospel. In this he shows to the Philippians a model of laboring for the Gospel in difficult circumstances. How is that? Humility. Paul saw himself as he ought. As deserving of nothing, and yet gifted with the blessing of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. That is how he can rejoice in God’s purposes even as his circumstances turn bleak.

Paul returns to his theme of patience in all circumstances at the end of the letter. The Philippians had given him aid during his travels, and he wants to thank them but also to teach them that God cares for his people regardless of their circumstances. “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4:11-13).

In 1:27-30, Paul turns the attention to his readers and exhorts the Philippians to follow this model of patience in the midst of suffering and adverse circumstances. As he says:

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”

Paul wants the Philippians—and, by extension, us—to be prepared to be in want, to be hungry, and to be suffering by knowing how to rely on God’s provision of strength. How will we do that? By “not considering ourselves to be better than we ought.” Humility. We deserve nothing but have received all things. And so we rejoice. These are helpful passages to turn to if you or a fellow believer are going through hard times. Whether you are unemployed or lonely, struggling against temptation, or mocked for your faith, Paul’s reminders to the Philippians to rest in God’s strength and glorify God in your sufferings is a message for you.

**B. Humility as Unity and Support for One Another**

So—the humility exemplified in Christ displays itself in patience amidst suffering. But there is another way it shows up in this letter—the third theme that we’ll look at: humility drives a church to be united and to support one another when in need. The two virtues—unity and generosity—are flip sides of the same coin. When Christians are united, they are moved to care for one another—and caring for one another builds and reinforces gospel unity.

Recall again how Paul begins his famous passage on Christ’s humility (2:2): “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Christians imitate Christ’s humility by putting disagreements aside and being like-minded, by having the same love, by cooperating together for the gospel and being one in spirit and purpose. He says earlier (1:27) that he wants them to “stand firm in *one spirit*, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” Again, Paul’s presumption is that acting in a manner worthy of Christ involves unity with other believers, both in our hearts and minds (spirit) and in action (contending as one man).

Paul applies the call to unity to the Philippians’ specific circumstances. In 2:14 he tells them to “Do all things without grumbling or disputing,” and in 4:2-3 Paul urges two women in the church who had been destructively arguing to agree with each other, and for the church to help them resolve the dispute. To all of them he says, “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” (4:5). Paul’s exhortations suggest that complaining, arguing, disagreements, unkindness and sharp words are the clearest indications of a lack of unity in the body.

Have you ever heard someone griping about church or someone in the church? Complaining about the music, the pews, the preaching, or some relationship? Or simply showing a lack of gentleness and using sharp words? Paul models the right response: he prays to God for unity and exhorts the church to intervene and work for unity. Unity is not automatic: it must be worked for and deliberately sought. And the church has a definite role to play in fostering unity among its members.

Paul sums this up well as he begins the passage on Christ’s humility in chapter 2 (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.” Which is exactly what the Philippians had done by looking to Paul’s interests before their own.

And Paul concludes the letter by reemphasizing his thanks to the Philippians for their partnership in the Gospel and the way they had looked out for his interests. He thanks them for their concern for him and for their generosity in providing financial support. The Philippians’ recent gift was evidently only the most recent in a long-standing habit of generosity, and Paul praises them for their habit of provision, and in fact in verse 15 commends them as the only church that shared in earlier days and for sending aid “again and again when I was in need.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Paul says that in sending gifts the Philippians “share my trouble” (4:14), suggesting that giving support and experiencing suffering are related—indeed, they are different ways of living out gospel humility.

**C. Humility as Dependence on God**

So—humility displays itself in unity and generosity. But ultimately, we cannot imitate Christ’s humility on our own. None of us are able to suffer patiently, work for unity, or partner for the gospel solely by the strength of our will or our character. Paul reminds the Philippians that we can make no progress without relying on God and his gracious aid for our salvation and spiritual maturity. This is another aspect of gospel humility: recognizing our sinfulness and limitations and learning to depend on God in faith for his righteousness and his provision and support.

Paul holds himself out as an example of dependence on God. It was not as if he was humble because he had no reason to think himself great in the world’s eyes. He had the perfect religious resume. “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (3:4-6) But Paul insists that Christians “put no confidence in the flesh,” (3:3) that is, that they do not depend on themselves for salvation or spiritual growth. Paul recognizes that he does “not hav[e] a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.” Rather, he is pursuing a righteousness “which comes through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” (3:9)

This is the crux of the gospel. The Philippians had surely already heard this—they were, after all, Christians—but Paul does not shrink from repeating it to them, because it is so important. Christians believe that we are lost and dead in our sins, totally unable to approach God of our own accord or achieve spiritual good on our own. We cannot find peace with God on the basis of our own spiritual resumes. Attending church, giving a tithe, helping the poor, and reading the Bible will not fundamentally alter my spiritual state, make me righteous, or appease God’s just wrath against me. The one single thing that can do that is Christ’s death on the cross. That is a difficult thought because of our natural (sinful) pride. We want to earn God’s favor by our own effort and merit. It takes gospel humility to recognize our complete inability to effect God’s mercy towards us. Christ’s death on the cross opens up the way for God’s mercy. Only if we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, God will forgive our sins and grant “the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

But our humble dependence on God does not stop with our salvation. It continues in our sanctification—that is, our growth in spiritual maturity and holiness. And while that work most certainly involves our own effort, even that is a gift from God and requires continued humility.

Paul tells the Philippians in 2:12-13 “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” What a magnificent statement. All in one sentence Paul captures the Philippians’ responsibility right alongside of God’s sovereignty. He commands them to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” by which he means that they must work and toil for their sanctification and growth in holiness, but that ultimately “it is God who works in you,” and so they can rest in his promises and humbly give him the glory. There is no room for pride or boasting in our spiritual growth.

Finally, Paul shows that we are dependent on God not only for our salvation and sanctification, but for daily provision in all things. He says in 4:6-7, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” *In everything* we should turn to God in prayer. And God is faithful to provide for his people. If he does not give us exactly what we think we need, he still provides what he knows we need: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:7) Once again, do you see how humility changes all of this? We depend on God not because it’s the right thing to do, but because, having honestly taken stock of ourselves, we desperately have no other option. We cannot help but depend on God, to his eternal glory.

**D. Humility as Modeling Christ’s Example for One Another**

Our last them, then: counter-intuitively, humility drives us to be an example of Christ for one another. Paul points to himself as an example of the Christian life and exhorts the Philippians to be an example for each other.

This might sound prideful. Normally, if someone walks around saying “I’m an example. Everyone should be like me!” it would sound arrogant, not humble. But that is not what Paul is saying. He is saying “Christ is an example. Follow him! If you see Christ in me, follow him!” Paul is not pointing to himself, but to Christ’s work in his life. It takes gospel humility to hold up anything exemplary in your life that others admire and want to emulate—and credit it to someone else. But that is what Christians do.

And that is what Paul does. He tells the Philippians to “join in imitating me, wand keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.” (3:17) Note that the example he is talking about is not his religious resume, all his worldly accomplishments that earned him praise from me. No, he specifically holds out his dependence on God (2:4-10), his perseverance (2:12-14), and his teaching (2:15) as models for the Philippians.

Paul does not only point to himself as an example for the Philippians to follow; he urges the Philippians to be an example for others. He tells them “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ,” (1:27) as they anticipate future suffering. He exhorts them to be “blameless and innocent,” so that they will “shine as lights in the world,” amidst a “crooked and twisted generation,” (2:15). And he instructs them to “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” (4:5)

Paul’s exhortation is similar to Jesus’ instruction to his followers that “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” The point, as Jesus says, is to “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and *give glory to your Father who is in heaven*.” (Matthew 5:13-16). The goal is glory to God, not to ourselves. Being an example of Christ is part of or witness to the gospel to unbelievers and part of how we encourage one another in the church.

Note also how Jesus and Paul describe the Christian life. Stars and cities don’t have to be special to be shiny: it is in their nature to be so. It doesn’t take a special kind of Christian to be an example of Christ. Every Christian is one. Christians’ holy lives should stand out and be a noticeable contrast to the world. If you—or, better, your friends and family—examine your life and do *not* find examples of Christ’s attitude of love and humility, then you may want to carefully examine your heart and your faith.

**Conclusion**

That is a good place for us to end. Philippians is a beautiful and uplifting depiction of Christ’s humility. And it is an exhortation for followers of Christ to emulate his humility. We are called to follow Christ in suffering, in service and unity with one another, in practicing dependence on God, and in modeling Christ to the world. Let’s pray.

1. 2 Cor. 8 – Paul commends the “Macedonian churches” who gave out of their extreme poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)