

Riches to Rags
Philippians 2:1–11
March 24, 2019

LeBron James is left-handed. For those of you who've watched him play basketball, this might be news. Because at the free-throw line or from beyond the arc, LeBron clearly shoots the ball with his *right* hand. A couple years ago at a press-conference he explained why: "I have no idea how I became a right-handed basketball player. I think it was probably Michael Jordan, Penny Hardaway, guys that I looked up to growing up. Seeing those guys shooting righty, I was like, 'I guess I'll shoot righty.' Yeah, I'm pretty much a left-hand guy."¹

Though the poster board in Middle School attempted to inspire, "You were born original. Don't die a copy," to some degree we can do no other than learn from the example of others. After mom smiling for weeks, the little baby smiles back. The toddler plays with her dolls like she saw big sister do it. The 40-year-old, though this might've been his teenage nightmare, realizes one Saturday afternoon, "I'm turning into my dad."

Example is effective. And example is instructive. There's almost no DIY project you can think of that YouTube doesn't have an unshaved guy in a ratty t-shirt happy to demonstrate. From what I hear, the ladies in DIY videos actually brush their hair before filming. Either way, though you might love reading instructions, someone doing something correctly in front of you often proves to be even more instructive.

But example cuts both ways, doesn't it? It's not just smiles that get replicated, it's anger. It's not just putting dolls to sleep that little sisters emulate, it's what she saw big sister do when she was 17. And it's not just the positive ways sons start acting like their fathers. Example is effective, in multiple ways.

Chris mentioned this again last week, but it's helpful to think of Philippi in terms of a Rome in miniature.² That doesn't merely mean that it had a particular architecture; it also means they had a particular Roman culture and ethos. During March Madness, we're watching 18–21-year-olds sprint to block shots, dive for loose balls, and jump back up to do it again. They do it to advance in a tournament. In this Roman honor culture, males competed for acclaim.³ They obsessed over rank and titles, as "prizes to be competitively sought."⁴ The victors of titles displayed them, "in 'résumé form' on inscriptions erected throughout the colony."⁵ They hung their pedigree and degrees for all to see, chiseled in the town square.⁶

Their thoughts orbited around self and personal glory. As much as believers in Philippi might've attempted to cordon themselves off from the influence of the unbelieving, example is effective and instructive, for both good and ill. This selfish ambition crept into the Philippian Church. In this context, Paul redirects their eyes.

1. What God's Done for His People

Verse 1: *So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy*

¹ <https://www.sbnation.com/nba/2017/11/13/16644230/lebron-james-left-handed-shot-cavaliers>

² Alec Motyer, *Philippians*, BST, 15.

³ Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT, 47

⁴ Hellerman, *Philippians*, 11.

⁵ Hellerman, 4.

⁶ Archeologists have found many of these. See Hellerman, 107.

Note first the word, “so.” The NASB translates it, “therefore.” That reminds us that we must, like every other passage in the Scriptures, not separate what follows in the text from what precedes it. 1:27 functions as something of a heading for everything in our passage today (and next week),⁷ *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.* In our text today, Paul will take that language and apply it to the specifics of the Philippian church. How might their manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ?

Now, note the next word, “if.”⁸ When we use the word “if,” the matter’s generally up in the air.⁹ The language of the New Testament, however, had conditional statements that were assumed to be true, as something of a rhetorical device. This is one of those.¹⁰ As we look at these clauses, it will be helpful to think of “if” as “since.”

So, “since” *there is encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy.* In 1:29–30, Paul wrote that these saints had been “gifted” suffering, engaging in the same conflict he was part of. In the midst of that suffering, however, Christ had not abandoned them. Just as He had with Paul, He’d comforted and encouraged them. There *was* encouragement in Christ. Some of this comfort came from knowing Christ’s love. That’s the essence of the second clause, *comfort from love.* This isn’t a vague, amorphous pseudo-love. They were encouraged and comforted because they knew both His affection and His action.

The third clause, *participation in the Spirit,* should be understood to reference the third person of the Trinity. The emphasis is on the Philippians’ corporate indwelling.¹¹ There’s one Spirit. They’d all participated¹² in the very *same* Spirit. This will be key to our understanding of the instruction to come.

Since Christ encouraged and comforted them by His love, since they’d participated together in the same Spirit, and finally, *since there is affection and sympathy.* This is the same word Paul used in chapter 1:8: *For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.* Paul had the affection *of Christ* for this church, which assumes the depths of Christ’s affection and compassion for them.¹³

The Philippians had experienced all these things—encouragement, comfort, love, participation in the Spirit—from their Lord. Peter O’Brien summarizes, “The fourfold basis of Paul’s exhortation is grounded in divine certainties . . . Since they have been blessed with such riches in a magnificent way, let them hear Christ’s exhortation through their beloved apostle.”¹⁴

As is typical Pauline practice, he reminds them of what God in Christ has done *prior* to instructing them on what *they* should do. The imperative is not disconnected from relationship.

2. What God’s People Should Do

Paul instructs, v. 2, *complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

⁷ Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC, 164.

⁸ At this pace, at the close of the sermon we can transition right into the Christmas Eve service.

⁹ It’s about as certain as our bracket selections.

¹⁰ See O’Brien, 165; Hellerman, 92.

¹¹ Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar Commentary, 110.

¹² Greek word *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*)

¹³ Sympathy here might be translated “mercy,” or “compassion.” This phrase very well might serve as a summary of the previous three clauses, H. Köster, *TDNT*, 7.555.

¹⁴ . . . the Philippians know God’s comfort and salvation in Christ. They have experienced the consolation that Christ’ for them has brought in their sufferings and dangers. Theirs is a participation, a common sharing, in the Holy Spirit, and they have been blessed through his gracious ministry to their hearts and lives. . . . O’Brien, 176.

Does this mean Paul's joy was completely contingent on the Philippians?¹⁵ No. *Complete* my joy means to finish something already begun.¹⁶ But that does not mean His joy in Christ wouldn't be further stirred by the Philippians' response. What would complete his joy? While verse 1 has a four-fold rationale for their obedience; verse 2 has a four-fold result.¹⁷ The four results are unified, however, all having to do with unity itself: *being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind.*

The word for "mind" runs throughout this passage. As is often the case with words for thinking in the New Testament, the word is broader than mere cognition or intellect. It includes will.¹⁸ It's a disposition.¹⁹ More than intellect alone, it's an attitude or mindset.²⁰ Paul is saying that the Philippians ought to think, act, and feel in the same ways.

Being of the same mind is followed by *having the same love*. We saw in verse 1 that the Philippians had been comforted by God's love. This verse points back to that affection and asserts that the kind of love God had for them they ought to also have for one another.²¹ Just as Christ's love toward them was not vague and verb-less, neither should their love toward one another be.²²

Being of one mind and having the same love are followed by *being in full accord*.²³ The Apostle Paul liked to combine words to make up his own words. What he does here is take the word for "together" and the word for "soul" and he glues them. *In full accord* is literally, "souls together."²⁴

One mind. Same love. Souls together. Then, Paul continues hammering away at our obtuse hearts. By the way, *and of one mind*. Peter O'Brien writes that this refers to a group of people, "intent on one purpose . . . (it) speaks of a life directed towards a single goal."²⁵ Last week, Chris gave us an image of the offensive line moving together down the field, including the upper-class, tough, boot-wearing, lug from Nebraska and the strong, but scarred, young man from the projects of Detroit. Five men picturing 1:27, *standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel*. The offensive line is a compelling image of a group of people of one mind, intent on one purpose.²⁶ So is the image of the 16th regiment spilling out of the Higgins boats to storm Omaha Beach. So is the image of the members of an orchestra, studying the same sheet of paper, staring at the same conductor, breathing together, bowing together, all for the same purpose.

None of those images concern an isolated self. In the midst of mini-Rome, surrounded by those seeking self-glory, Paul's concerned about factions in the church. So, he instructs them to be, v.2, *of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord (souls together) and of one mind.*

But Paul knows unity doesn't just happen. It requires a certain mindset of the people united. Verse 3: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*

¹⁵ Just two weeks ago, we considered Paul's unflappable joy in the midst of writing this epistle from prison.

¹⁶ O'Brien, 177.

¹⁷ O'Brien, 165.

¹⁸ J. Goetzmann, *NIDNTT*, 2.617.

¹⁹ G. Bertram, *TDNT*, 9.233.

²⁰ O'Brien, 178.

²¹ Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 185.

²² I've always found helpful, and quoted before, from 19th century Baptist Samuel Jones' work, *The Duties of Church Members Towards One Another*. Catchy title, I know. Nonetheless, he lists 13 duties. The first one is what you'd expect: Love one another. The second is the pot of gold: "Avoid everything that tends to cool love." Read in Mark Dever, *Polity*, 150.

²³ A number of bad bible and car jokes have been made about this verse.

²⁴ Συμ (one/together) ψυχοι (soul) = συμψυχοι (See Helleman, 98).

²⁵ O'Brien, 179.

²⁶ See Chris' excellent exposition, "Together for the Gospel," here: <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/together-for-the-gospel/>

Unity demands humility. In Paul's day, in particular in the Greek world of which Philippi was deeply enmeshed, the term humility was used in derogatory fashion. It entailed weakness, shameful lowliness,²⁷ being often used pejoratively to describe the nature of inferior social classes.²⁸ We have our terms like that. In Philippi, humility was far from a virtue.²⁹

What did Paul mean by humility? Did he mean mere self-disparagement? Not necessarily. He writes, vv.3–4, *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.* The NASB translates this compound word for humility, “humility of mind.”³⁰ Paul's further describing the singular mindset—the united disposition and attitude—he'd mentioned in verse 2. Their mindset would be united insofar as they considered one another more significant than themselves. This didn't mean that others were considered “better than I am” in essence, but that as their needs arose, those needs would often take precedence over my own.³¹

Consider how revolutionary this instruction was. Verse 4's *each of you* means “each without exception.”³² In this Philippian church were both esteemed Roman citizens,³³—a number of whom might've been wealthy and influential—and there were also slaves.³⁴ The one of higher rank was being instructed to consider the one of lower rank above himself. No one in the culture would've expected this. In fact, the broader world would've heaped shame upon the one with this humility of mind. Nonetheless, Paul instructs.

3. Why God's People—Then and Now—Might Struggle to Do That

We've noted the honor culture in Philippi. Verse 3 points out some of the hindrances to humility, *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.* Conceit is a particularly clarifying term, another of Paul's compound words. Instead of “together” and “soul” however, he glues together the words for “empty” and “glory” together.³⁵ Prevalent in this culture, it'd be described as a “vain or exaggerated self-evaluation.”³⁶ They thought more highly of themselves than they ought.

Status was everything; and therefore, they did all they could to accumulate it. That's where the selfish ambition comes into play. We saw it even among the preachers of the gospel in Philippians 1. In this climate, because *self* ruled—factions and rivalry thrived.

While we're talking about competing, I think our world might give Roman self-centeredness a run for its money. Our nature is, as Augustine and Luther noted, *Incurvatus in se*, meaning curved inward on oneself. We're this by nature. Our world only exacerbates this self-focus. We'd do well to ask ourselves: Am I looking, not only to my own interests, but also to the interests of others? Am I counting others more significant than myself? Our culture is not; the question is whether the church will.

We're not alone in this struggle. The saints at Philippi were still putting to death the deeds of the flesh, including selfish ambition, conceit, rivalry, and division.

²⁷ O'Brien, 179.

²⁸ This is how Aristotle and Plato would've used the term in *Eth. Eud.* 3.3 and *Leg.* 4.774c, respectively. Quoted in Hellerman, 100.

²⁹ Hellerman, 100.

³⁰ ταπεινοφροσύνη

³¹ Fee, 189.

³² Hellerman, 103.

³³ Estimated at 36% of the congregation, according to Hellerman, 102.

³⁴ Fee, 26.

³⁵ Κενος (empty) and δοξα (glory) = κενοδοξια

³⁶ See BDAG 538d.

And because the answer to selfishness is not found within self, Paul redirects their eyes, to Someone . . .

4. Who Did It for Them

Verse 5: *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.*

Paul instructs them to have this mind among themselves—the one mind marked by humility. But then he turns their attention to One who'd actually had this disposition of mind. The NASB translates this verse: *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.* In what we know to be one of the most glorious passages on the person of Christ in the New Testament, Paul is actually giving the Philippians a model for their humility.³⁷

Verse 6: *who, though he was in the form of God.* Now, you're going to have to listen fast, carefully, and charitably.³⁸ One could preach 4–5 sermons on verses 1–11 and merely scratch the surface. But getting *in the form of God* right is crucial for understanding the rest of the passage.³⁹ Many commentators refer back to Jesus' prayer in John 17:5, *And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.* The ineffable, magnificent glory the pre-incarnate Christ shared with His Father—*The Father*—must inform our understanding of *in the form of God*. Wherever the glory of God existed, Christ existed, clothed in that glory.

We find out in the next clause that *equality with God* further describes *in the form of God*.⁴⁰ God did not share His glory with Someone lesser than Him. The highest of honors belonged to the Father *and* the Son. There was and is no higher rank. Jesus Christ shared in the Glory of God because He Himself is the embodiment of that glory.

Paul continues, v. 6, *though he was in the form of God*—one might say “equal with God,”—he *did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped*. In a passage of controversy, this might be the epicenter. And the ten thousand gallons of ink spilt concerns the translation, *to be grasped*. I'm not going to give you every possible scenario; you might start twitching like I did on Thursday. But the theological minefield concerns whether this means Jesus did or did not “hold on to” something He previously possessed. At issue is the rarity of this word, “grasped” in the original. Let me quote Peter Lewis on the Greek word for it, (*αρπαγμα*), “Now, no one is sure what *harpagmos* is, because the word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament or in the Septuagint, and is obscure in Greek literature generally.”⁴¹

That doesn't mean, however, many haven't taken great effort to figure it out. After you read for a good while, one learns that many conservative scholars have come to something of a conclusion, based on an extensive study by Roy Hoover. Hoover studied both the term translated *count* here and the word for *grasp*, in particular when both were used together. He concludes this: “The question in such instances is not whether or not one possesses something but whether or not one chooses to exploit something.”⁴² The idea, therefore, doesn't concern whether Jesus “let go” of equality with God, but instead describes how He *used* that equality and glory.⁴³ Peter O'Brien explains, “Christ Jesus, who existed in the form of God and shared his glory, did not regard his

³⁷ “What Did Jesus Do?” would be the bracelet Paul gives them in verses 6–8:

³⁸ My hope is to come back to some of this next week. I'm with Joseph Helleman, “The literature on Philippians 2:5–11 has become virtually unmanageable,” 105. Tomes have been written on single terms in this passage. Tomes *plural*.

³⁹ O'Brien, 206.

⁴⁰ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, BECNT, 101.

⁴¹ Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 248.

⁴² Quoted in Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 249.

⁴³ Lewis, 249.

equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage.”⁴⁴ Many commentators link this verse with 2 Corinthians 8:9, *though he was rich, for your sake he became poor.*⁴⁵

What Paul means by not grasping is explained in the emptying. And it’s the exact opposite of the Philippians’ conceit described earlier. When Paul described those who thought more highly of themselves than they ought, he glued the two words together: “empty–glory.” The contrast here is stark. The One of highest rank—He who cannot overstate His glory, Who can’t think more highly of Himself than He ought—empties Himself.

And what he means by emptying is explained by what follows. Verse 7, *but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.* In this honor culture, there was nothing lower or more shameful in rank than that of a slave. To go from equal rank with God Himself to this would strike Roman Philippi as “abject folly.”⁴⁶ Packer writes, “When Paul talks of the Son as having emptied Himself, . . . what he has in mind . . . is the laying aside, not of divine powers and attributes, but of divine glory and dignity.”⁴⁷ Paul would write, *Though He was rich . . . He became poor.* The One in the *form* of God empties Himself and takes the *form* of a slave.

Paul continues, v. 7, *being born in the likeness of men.* Again, the truths of the incarnation can’t be missed. Augustine wrote, “He emptied Himself not by losing what He was, but by taking to Him what He was not.”⁴⁸ Packer wrote this, “He was not now God minus some elements of His deity, but God plus all that He had made His own by taking manhood to Himself.”⁴⁹ One more from Peter Lewis, “Though He became what He was not, He did not cease to be what He was.”⁵⁰

He became man. He emptied himself, *by taking the form of a slave.* He stooped to wash the dirty feet of those He’d fashioned, those He knew would betray or abandon Him. The One of inestimable honor—the glory of God Himself—humbled Himself.

And that’s the proper way to say it. He wasn’t humbled by someone else. Verse 8, *and being found in human form, he humbled himself.*

The condescension continues, v. 8, *and being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death.* All of us will die. There’s nothing we can do about it. But this man’s relationship to death appears to be described differently. As one man noted, “Only a divine being can accept death as obedience.”⁵¹ He humbled Himself, to the point of death.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed the progression, or better—digression, of this section. I mentioned earlier that in Philippi those competing for honor would accumulate title after title and then make sure to chisel them into some section of the city for all to see. It was an honors race, marking the social climb of this or that aristocrat. What’s interesting is that the way they listed these honors were in ascending order of importance, saving the greatest honor for last.

Paul’s listing here of Jesus is seemingly exactly the opposite. He’s in the form of God. He’s equal with God. He shared God’s glory. There’s no higher rank. Yet He humbled Himself. He took the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. He became obedient to the point of death.

⁴⁴ O’Brien, 206.

⁴⁵ One commentator writes, “instead of imagining that equality with God meant *getting*—Jesus on the contrary, *gave*.” C. F. D. Moule, *Apostolic History*, 272

⁴⁶ Hellerman, 115

⁴⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 52.

⁴⁸ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. First Series. Augustine: Gospel of John, 116.

⁴⁹ Packer, 50.

⁵⁰ Lewis, 133.

⁵¹ E. Lohmeyer quoted in O’Brien, 230.

This would appear backwards. He didn't use His glory to His own advantage. He turned Rome's race of honors on its head.⁵² Hellerman writes, "Instead of gain(ing) more honors and public recognition, Christ leveraged his status in the service of others."⁵³

But He's still not even done. The crescendo—or seeming decrescendo—of this humiliating condescension is given an exclamation point at the end of verse 8, *he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

While we might wear crosses around our neck or hang them in living rooms as decor, in polite Roman society even the word "cross" was considered an obscenity.⁵⁴ No rank would be more shameful than a slave. And no death would be more shameful than the punishment of a slave, that of crucifixion. I was helped recently by one of Cliff's sermons in John 19 where he pointed out that we often wrongly picture the cross—mainly because of pictures—as a tall beam. Jesus hangs on the cross up high, away from those passing by. That's just not the case. If it was like other crucifixions of this era, the crucified one hung low enough to the ground that those passing by could be nearly face to face, hurling insults, mocking, accosting, or further shaming the shamed one in any number of ways.⁵⁵

This is the One who shared the Glory of God. He was the very embodiment of it. He emptied Himself, humiliating Himself. For others.

5. What God Does

Christ has been the subject—the one acting—since verse 6. We've seen Christ humble Himself. But in verse 9 the Father intervenes.⁵⁶ Verse 9, *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.*

In ancient thought, names carried more significance than our day. Names actually were intended to reveal the true nature of that individual.⁵⁷ Rather than permitting the humiliation Christ experienced to be the final word, God gives Him the name above every name. That would reflect His true nature.

This honor would've taken on particular significance in this culture. Those in Philippi didn't just prize praise; they sought praise from particular people. The aim of all men was to be honored by someone of the highest possible rank.⁵⁸ There can be no higher approval—or Approver—than the One who vindicates the Christ in verse 9. Though He'd humbled Himself, God highly exalted Him.

Verse 10: *So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess.* This is a clear reference to the passage we read earlier from Isaiah 45. It does not necessarily mean that everyone will do so willingly. Isaiah 45:24 even notes, *all who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.* While there's a lot of talk about being on the right side of history, Philippians 2 makes clear: those who shame the Christ will one day be shamed themselves. They *will* honor Him, maybe not by praising Him, but by acknowledging who He is. Every knee. And every tongue.

And every tongue will, v. 11, *confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.* This is probably the earliest of Christian confessions.⁵⁹ Lord (κύριος) is a significant term. In the Greek translation of the Old

⁵² Hellerman, 4.

⁵³ Hellerman, 107.

⁵⁴ O'Brien, 231, quoting F. F. Bruce. See also Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*.

⁵⁵ See the ESV Archaeology Study Bible, p. 1425 and the NIV Cultural Background Study Bible, p. 1727.

⁵⁶ "intervenes" is O'Brien's language, 232.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, 237.

⁵⁸ Hellerman, 119.

⁵⁹ O'Brien, 249.

Testament, the translators translated YHWH with *κύριος* (Lord) “at least 6,156 times.”⁶⁰ In Isaiah 45, for just one example, the One before whom all knees bow and tongues confess is God Himself. Here Paul makes plain Who that means.⁶¹ Though emperor worship was common in Philippi, Caesar wasn’t Lord; Christ is.

And, Paul concludes, this is all to the *glory of God*.

Conclusion

Jesus humbled Himself. God glorifies His Son with the glory He shared with Him before the world existed.⁶² And through this glorified Son He saves a people, including these Philippians.

If they were to have unity, they must be of one mind, living with one another in humility. And if they were going to have that, Paul teaches: they must look to the humility of Christ.

But that’s not to say it’s *merely* example. There’s even better news. Look again at verse 5: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus*. Peter Lewis glories in this truth, “The work of Christ portrayed in the passage is not so much an example to be imitated as an achievement that we already share, which has revolutionized our destinies and therefore should revolutionize our lives.”⁶³ O’Brien writes, “Christ becomes what we are—so enabling us to become what he is.”⁶⁴

We have no idea how to consider others above ourselves. But He modeled it. And He supplies it. Though we couldn’t do it, He did it for us.

Example is great. But you know what’s better than watching somebody? The Person who did it perfectly doing it in and through us.

⁶⁰ Hansen, 167.

⁶¹ Hellerman, 122.

⁶² John 17:5

⁶³ Lewis, 246.

⁶⁴ O’Brien, 261.