

## Lesson 11

# Look to the Interests of Others

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others, Philippians 2.3-4.

## Introduction

On the night before his death, Jesus identifies the fundamental characteristic of Christianity: *love*. He says that by it all will know that we are his disciples, John 13.34-35. This is the type of love that meets needs, often sacrificially. It is the opposite of the way the world loves, which usually loves in exchange for something it can receive. We are all familiar with the mentality: *I will love you as long as you give me something in return*. This type of love is often superficial and temporary. As circumstances and things change ... as life happens ... this type of love often evaporates like the morning dew.

In this lesson we will examine one of the mountaintops of Paul's writing in the New Testament. The passage is written in the context of togetherness inside the local church family ... which is intended to be a sweet taste of what we will experience in heaven.

In Philippians 2.2, Paul wants his readers to draw on their common experiences in Christ and his grace. He stresses that we:

- Think the same way.
- Have the same love.
- Be united in spirit.
- Be intent on one purpose.

Christians need to be together with the same values and loves. The heart characteristics described here come from the very core of our spiritual identity.

## Philippians 2.3

This verse contains a negative and positive admonition. Let's look at the attitudes we are to resist:

### ***Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit***

*Selfish ambition* is translated as "selfishness" in the NASB and refers to self-seeking pursuits. It involves strong ambition for personal success no matter the cost. Today we might describe it as an attitude of *I'm gonna get what I want no matter what it takes*. Selfishness is often the cause of envy and rivalry. It is a self-seeking spirit that leads to quarreling, hassling, haggling, fighting, arguing, and contending.

The selfish person is, more often than not, at war with everyone else because they are being dominated by the flesh. Their relationships are characterized by jealousy, strife, and conflict. Selfish people are driven to promote their cause, interests, or pet project when they allow the flesh to take over. We must, at all costs, eliminate selfish ambition from our life.

*Conceit* is a state of mind that seeks personal glory. A conceited person will do what they must do in order to make their opinion known. We might describe a conceited person as one who engages in arrogant self-promotion. The conceited person continually provokes and puts down others in order to gain the highest place. Conceit and pride go hand in hand. Someone has described pride as *camel-nosed*, i.e., “high-blown, puffed-up, stiff-necked, aloof, lofty, inaccessible, seeking to tower over others.”<sup>40</sup> Other words that go with it are “inordinate self-esteem, egotism, self-glorification, vainglory, and vanity.”

The exhortation in v. 3 is to remove these things. Conceit and pride ranks among the deadliest, most debilitating of the seven cardinal sins of Proverbs 6.16-19.

## **Be Humble**

*In humility consider others as more important than yourselves.* This is the corrective for the two previous negatives. “Humility” has an interesting history behind it. During Paul’s time, the word was used to describe the mentality of a slave, i.e., it was a term of derision. The pagan world saw a humble person as someone who was unfit, low, common, or useless. Humility was seen as a ugly quality, something never to be sought after or admired. Lowliness and weakness were seen as shameful. Great men were those who overcame those traits through noble acts and thoughts.

And yet, it is the first virtue Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs*, Matthew 5.3. For the worldly-minded person who is all about looking impressive in the eyes of others, this is like hearing nails on a chalkboard. It is the exact opposite of human nature. Notice how Paul defines the word in our text. Humility is where we make the decision to count others as more important than ourselves. It is the very opposite of selfish ambition and conceit. It is a realistic appraisal of oneself and others as being in the image of God. It is an attitude that is expressed by positive action. We allow the needs of others to surpass our own. We do this by:

- Respecting them
- Listening to them
- Serving them
- Speaking good about them
- Strengthening them
- Encouraging them.<sup>41</sup>

## **Philippians 2.4**

*Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.* This verse spells out how the previous verse works. The primary aim or goal of our life is to become involved in the lives of others and their cause. Again, this is in total contrast with the world that emphasizes the worship and

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<sup>40</sup> Cooper, Dale. “The Wardrobe of Easter: Humility.” Online. Retrieved 01/02/23 from <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/the-wardrobe-of-easter-humility>

<sup>41</sup> Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, p. 115.

promotion of self. Instead, we are to “look,” which means to pay careful attention. Paul does not mean here that we should completely neglect ourselves, but we need to reprioritize our life so that the greater share is focused on others. Their needs and concerns must pass our own.

“Interests” in 2.4 is a filler word. Youngs Literal Translation says, “each not to your own look.”<sup>42</sup> It’s an open-ended statement. Today, we would say, “Let each look not to your own \_\_\_\_\_.” (Just fill in the blank.) That blank could be your finances, property, family, reputation, success, or happiness. We are to be concerned about the things of others.

We could rightly connect v. 4 back to Matthew 22.39 where Jesus recites the second greatest commandment: *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

What are some ways you can make the good of others the focus of your life?

- Who is a widow or widower you can spend time with?
- Who is a young person you can take under your wing?
- What young newlywed couple could use some guidance and encouragement?
- Who can you go to and pray with?
- Who is going through a valley that you can join with and walk through it together with them?

When you do this, you are literally changing your life *and* the life of someone else. It is not about where they are presently in life, it is about whether you will count others as worthy of your help and encouragement? Will you serve your brothers and sisters? Will you make the time to do what builds them up?

## The Perfect Example

To learn humility all we must do is look to Jesus. *Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus*, Paul says in v. 5. Our Savior and brother, Jesus, loved us, forgave us, died for us, accepted us, justified us, and made us heirs of an eternal kingdom . . . when he owed us nothing. He counted us worthy when we weren’t worthy. He counted us greater than himself.

For who is greater, the one at the table or the one serving? Isn’t it the one at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves, Luke 22.27.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. What is the fundamental characteristic of Christianity? How does it fit in with the content of this lesson?

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<sup>42</sup> Young, Robert. *Young’s Literal Translation*. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997.

2. What is the primary context of Philippians 1.27-2.4?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. How would you define *selfish ambition* and *conceit*? While there may be some overlap, what is the difference between the two?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How was the virtue of humility viewed by the Greco-Roman world?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Is humility an attitude or action or both? Explain.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How can you express your humility?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What does it mean to esteem the interests of others more than your own?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. In what way did Jesus set the perfect example of humility?