

LESSON 8

They Humbled Themselves

How low was the one we follow?

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. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.

— Philippians 2:3–8

Introduction

Last week, our eyes opened. We learned to see the *kairos* moments, the appointed opportunities the Lord sets in our path. We closed with a charge to look up, refuse weariness, and walk through the opportunities already arriving. The reach of that command depends on something deeper, which Paul names next.

The eye sees what the mind has been shaped to see. A heart fixed on itself will notice only the rivals between itself and the next promotion. A heart that has surrendered the contest can finally see the room. Paul writes Philippians 2:3–8 to a congregation he deeply loves, one already showing the small fractures of self-regard, and the cure he prescribes is an attitude: the mind of the Lord who did not grasp at his rightful place but stepped down into ours and obeyed all the way to a cross.

This lesson is the heart of Part 2 of this study. Welcome, gifts, opportunity, generosity, and honor each rest on a single underlying disposition that verse 5 names directly: "the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus." Where that attitude is missing, the rest of the list stalls, and where it is present the practical love of the New Testament becomes possible in a real congregation.

The Setting Behind Paul's Charge

Paul writes Philippians from prison, almost certainly in Rome, to a congregation he loves more visibly than any other. The letter is warm from start to finish. The opening prayer thanks God for "your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:5). Warmth, however, is not the same as ease. By chapter 4 Paul will name two sisters in the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, and plead with them "to agree in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). Christians who have walked with Paul for years are still being tempted to push for position.

Paul responds to the friction not by scolding but by lifting their eyes. He hands them the highest possible Christology and tells them to live inside it. The doctrinal height of Philippians 2 does the practical work of curing the small frictions of a real church.

Do Nothing from Selfish Ambition or Conceit

1 PHILIPPIANS 2:3A

Two Appetites, One Disease

ἐριθεία
ERITHEIA

Selfish ambition — angling for personal advantage. **It wants to win.**

κενοδοξία
KENODOXIA

Conceit — "empty glory," craving praise with nothing behind it. **It wants to be admired.**

Not *manage* them. Not *balance* them. Do nothing out of them.
The first move of humility: refuse the two appetites that keep a church small and noisy.

Verse 3 begins on the negative side of the line. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit." The Greek behind "selfish ambition" is *eritheia*, the political angling for personal advantage that drives factions and rivalries. The Greek behind "conceit" is *kenodoxia*, literally "empty glory," the appetite for praise that has no substance behind it.

Both words name the same disease from two angles. *Eritheia* wants to win and *kenodoxia* wants to be admired, one reaching for power and the other for applause. Paul does not say to manage these instincts or balance them with better motives, but to do nothing out of them. The first move of Christian humility is to refuse the two appetites that keep a congregation small and noisy.

Consider Others as More Important Than Yourselfes

2 PHILIPPIANS 2:3B

The Insult They Turned Inside Out

ταπεινοφροσύνη
TAPEINOPHROSYNE

"lowliness of mind"

Not thinking badly of yourself — counting the other as more significant.

IN PAGAN GREEK

Lowly, base, of no account. Aristotle's vice.

IN CHRIST

His need wins. She gets the seat. A deliberate kindness, not a passing feeling.

The insult, turned inside out, became one of the *most beautiful words* in Christian speech.

The flip side of verse 3 is the heart of the command. "In humility consider others as more important than yourselves." The Greek word is *tapeinophrosynē*, "lowliness of mind," a word the Greco-Roman world had used as an insult. To be *tapeinos* in pagan Greek meant to be lowly, base, of no account. Aristotle treated the trait as a vice. The New Testament took the insult, turned it inside out, and made it one of the most beautiful

words in the Christian vocabulary.

To be humble is not to think badly of yourself but to count the other person as more significant than yourself. When a brother needs help and you need something else, his need wins; when a sister wants the seat you also want, she gets it. The "consider" in the verse is an act of deliberate kindness, not a feeling that drifts in on its own.

The command runs counter to almost every instinct the surrounding culture teaches. Where the world counts the loud and the visible, Paul tells the church to count the other.

Look Not Only to Your Own Interests

Verse 4 says, "Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others." Rather than abolishing self-interest, Paul widens the field of vision. The verse does not tell us to look only to the interests of others, but to look not only to our own.

3 PHILIPPIANS 2:4-5
See the Room, Share the Mind

VERSE 4 • THE WIDENED EYE
Look *not only* to your own.
 Paul widens the field of vision. A heart still calculating its angle cannot see the person in front of it.

VERSE 5 • THE SHARED MIND
φρονεῖτε
 PHRONEITE — think, settled and ongoing
 The church's mind must match Christ's. Everything hangs on the word **same**.

The bridge from the church's situation to the *Savior's example*.

The eye and the mind work together. The Christian who has been counting himself less important than the brother beside him has room to see him. A heart focused on its own advantage cannot see the person in front of it, while a heart that has dropped that focus can. The opportunity for good stays invisible to the person who is still calculating his angle.

Adopt the Same Attitude as Christ Jesus

Verse 5 carries the command. "Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus." The Greek verb is *phroneite*, a command to think in a settled, ongoing way. Paul is not asking for a mood that will rise and fall, but for a mind, shared across the body, that matches the mind of the Lord.

Everything hangs on the word "same." The mind in the church is to match the mind in Christ. Whatever the mind of Christ has done, the mind of the church is called to do. Verses 6–8 are about to spell out what Christ has done. The command in verse 5 is the bridge from the church's situation to the Savior's example.

The Descent of Christ

4 PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8 • SEVEN STEPS, ONE DIRECTION
The Descent of Christ

- 1 In the form of God** *μορφή*
- 2 Did not grasp equality** *ἀρπαγμόν*
- 3 Emptied himself** *ἐκένωσεν*
- 4 Form of a servant** *μορφή*
- 5 Likeness of humanity** *John 1:14*
- 6 Humbled himself** *ἐταπείνωσεν*
- 7 Death on a cross**

He did first what he now asks the church to do.

Verses 6–8 trace the downward movement of the Son of God in steps that must be walked one at a time to feel their weight.

He existed in the form of God. The Greek word translated "form" is *morphē*, the genuine and outward expression of the inward reality. Rather than merely looking like God, the Son *was God* in his very nature, sharing fully and eternally in the divine glory.

He did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. The Greek behind "exploited" is *harpagmon*, the language of seizing or clutching at what is already yours by right. The translation reads softly, though the picture is sharper: the Son did not grip at the privilege that was rightfully his, but held it open-handed.

He emptied himself. The verb is *ekenōsen*. He poured himself out. The emptying was not the loss of deity, since he did not stop being God when he came among us. What he laid aside was the rightful exercise of divine prerogative, keeping the nature while surrendering the privilege.

He assumed the form of a servant. The same word, *morphē*, appears again. He did not pretend to be a servant, but took on the genuine and outward expression of servanthood. The Lord of glory wore a slave's garment.

He took on the likeness of humanity. The eternal Son entered the line of Adam. He knew real flesh, real exhaustion, real hunger and grief and friendship. He was no divine visitor in a costume, but the Word made flesh, dwelling among us (John 1:14).

He humbled himself. The verb is *etapeinōsen heauton*, the same root as the *tapeinophrosynē* Paul commanded in verse 3. The Lord did first what he is now asking the church to do. The command in verse 3 is not a foreign virtue Paul is making up, but the family resemblance of the people whose Lord is named in verse 8.

He became obedient to the point of death, even to death on a cross. Here is the bottom of the descent, where the end of the staircase is not death itself but the kind of death he died. Crucifixion was the public, shameful, accursed execution Rome reserved for slaves and rebels. The eternal Son of God ended the descent on a Roman cross.

Seven steps, all in one direction, each a refusal to grasp and a deeper participation in the lot of the people he came to save. This is the mind Paul says is to be in the church.

The Engine of Every One Another

Part 2 of this study (*The Hands: What Does Love Look Like in Action*) has been building toward this passage and outward from it. Lesson 5 was welcome, Lesson 6 gifts, and Lesson 7 opportunity; Lesson 9 will be generosity and Lesson 10 honor. Each of those lessons describes a particular shape that Christian love takes in action. Each of them depends on the same hidden disposition that Philippians 2:3–8 names.

5 THE HEART OF PART 2		
The Engine of Every "One Another"		
	WITH THE MIND OF CHRIST	TAKE IT OUT, AND...
Welcome	Counts the stranger above the insider's comfort	<i>hospitality for insiders only</i>
Gifts	Used for the body, not the giver	<i>gifts become platforms</i>
Opportunity	Eyes on the neighbor's <i>kairos</i>	<i>opportunity becomes networking</i>
Generosity	Gives with open hands	<i>generosity becomes a transaction</i>
Honor	Outdoes the other in deference	<i>honor becomes a credit ledger</i>
Philippians 2:3–8 is the <i>floor</i> the other five stand on.		

Welcome counts the stranger as more important than the comfort of the insider. **Gifts** are used for the body rather than for the display of the giver. **Eyes** alert to the *kairos* of a neighbor are not fixed on the agenda of the self. **Generosity** gives the way the Lord gave, with open hands. **Honor** outdoes the other in deference rather than logging credit for itself.

Take humility out of Part 2 and everything else seizes up. Welcome is reduced to hospitality for the people who already matter. Gifts become platforms, opportunity becomes networking, generosity becomes a transaction, and honor becomes a credit ledger. Philippians 2:3–8 is the floor the other five

stand on. The mind of Christ is what makes every other "one another" command possible. Without that mind, the church is doing the same actions for different reasons, and the difference always shows.

Looking to Jesus

The pattern Paul commands was first walked by the Lord himself.

LOOKING TO JESUS	
6 He Refused Every Chance to Grasp	
The Basin JOHN 13:4-5 <i>He took the towel no rabbi would touch.</i>	The Children MARK 10:13-16 <i>He made room for the ones others pushed aside.</i>
The Tomb JOHN 11:33-35 <i>He wept — no stoic distance.</i>	The Betrayer JOHN 13:11 <i>He washed the feet that would betray him.</i>
Servant's Kingdom MARK 10:43-45 <i>"Not to be served, but to serve."</i>	
Garden & Cross LUKE 22:42; 23:46 <i>"Not my will... into your hands."</i>	
In every scene, <i>he refuses the chance to grasp.</i>	

He laid aside his garments at the supper and took up a towel that no rabbi would have touched. "He got up from supper, laid aside his outer clothing, took a towel, and tied it around himself. Next, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet" (John 13:4-5). There was the Lord of glory in the position of a slave, on the night the world's salvation hung on his obedience.

He received the children the disciples were trying to keep from him. He rebuked them and put his hands on the ones no one else had made room for (Mark 10:13-16). The mind of Christ has time for the people everyone else has pushed aside.

He made himself the servant in his own kingdom. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). Greatness in the kingdom is not the absence of descent but descent itself.

He wept at the tomb of Lazarus even though he knew he was about to raise him. He refused the shortcut of stoic distance and entered the grief with the sisters who loved him (John 11:33-35). The mind of Christ does not stand above the sorrow of his people.

He washed the feet of the man he knew was going to hand him over. "Jesus knew who would betray him" (John 13:11), and he washed those feet anyway. The descent did not stop at the gate of the unworthy.

He prayed in the garden, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Here is the seventh step of Philippians 2 set into syllables. The mind that emptied itself in eternity past was the same mind that surrendered itself in Gethsemane.

He stayed on the cross when one word would have called twelve legions of angels to his rescue (Matthew 26:53), and the last word he spoke from it was the word of a Son still obedient to a Father all the way down: "Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

In every scene, he refuses the chance to grasp.

A Final Encouraging Word

The mind Paul commands is one the Lord himself has already lived; he is not asking us to invent a virtue he has not walked. He went first, all the way down, from the form of God to the form of a slave, from

equality with God to a Roman cross. The descent is not a story the church admires from a safe distance, but the path the Head of the church walked so that his body might walk it after him.

The encouragement is not to try harder but to look longer. The longer we gaze at the descent of Christ, the more the appetite for *selfish ambition* loosens its grip and the more the *lowliness of mind* that once felt unnatural begins to feel like home. No one talks himself into humility. Instead, he grows into it by looking at the Lord.

The practical love we have walked through this study hangs on this mind. Your local church is already showing it in a thousand small refusals to grasp: the brother who took the harder seat without comment, the sister who let the credit go to someone else, the deacon who carried the trash bag no one saw, and the teacher who let the question linger past the bell because the visitor needed an answer. Each one was the mind of Christ on quiet display.

The call this week is one more layer of the same surrender, in the confidence that the Lord who descended is the same Lord who supplies the strength to follow him down. To the glory of God.

For Discussion

1. Paul names two appetites in Philippians 2:3: selfish ambition, the angling for position, and empty conceit, the appetite for praise without substance. Where do those two appetites show up most often inside a healthy congregation, and why are they so easy to miss?

2. The Greco-Roman world used *lowliness of mind* as an insult, but the New Testament made it a virtue. What does it mean to "consider others as more important than yourselves" without sliding into false modesty or self-loathing?

3. Verse 4 says to look not only to your own interests. Paul widens the field of vision rather than abolishing self-interest. What is the difference between proper concern for one's own life and the self-focused mind Paul is correcting, and where does the line run in daily life?

4. Verses 6–8 walk the descent of Christ in seven steps: form of God, no grasping, emptying, servant form, human likeness, humbling, death on a cross. Which step strikes you the hardest when you slow down over it, and why?

5. Part 2 of this study has been about love in action: welcome, gifts, opportunity, humility, generosity, honor. Pick one of the other five and describe what it begins to look like when the mind of Philippians 2 is taken out from under it.

6. The mind of Christ is not a feeling but a settled, ongoing way of thinking. Where in your own life this past month did you grasp at something Christ would have laid down, and what would it look like, in concrete terms, to follow him one step further down this week?