

02 – Imitating Jesus

Philippians 2

1. Complete my joy (2:1-4)

“If there is any encouragement in Christ”: Being a Christian is essentially about being “in Christ”. Simply put it means being joined to Jesus like a finger to a hand. It means we don’t belong to ourselves, but to Jesus. It means that Jesus takes everything away that is ours and gives us all that is his, together with himself. Being a Christian is about being in communion with Jesus and through him with God the Father. One of the many things we receive from Jesus in this union is: encouragement. But the same is true for the other things Paul lists here, he just doesn’t repeat the “in Christ” phrase: consolation of love, fellowship of the Spirit, affection and compassion.

By saying “if there is” he is rhetorically saying “**since** you have encouragement, etc. in Christ – complete my joy”. He’s expecting the Philippians to go “yes, we do have encouragement in Christ, we are consoled by his love, we have fellowship of the Spirit and affection for one another”.

- Fellowship of the Spirit: The fellowship/communion of the church is established by the Spirit. He gathers us and he unites us to Jesus and one another.

V.2-4: Four exhortations: Have the same mindset, have the same love, be of one mind, think of the one thing -> Lots of thinking

Do not: do things for your own gain and another’s loss, or out of conceit/pride, do not look for your own benefit or profit. **Instead:** be humble by considering others higher than yourself and by seeking to do good to them.

Paul simply applies the teaching of Jesus: “*You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).*”

In God's kingdom greatness is not overpowering others but serving in humility. It's not about pushing yourself through the ranks, it's about edifying your brothers and sisters in Christ. We're in this together.

Illustration: The church is to be like actors in a theatre play, working together rather than competing for one's own glory.

Unity in thinking/singlemindedness is not a goal in itself. Terrorists or Nazis work together in singlemindedness too. The unity of the church must be in line with the gospel of Jesus and aimed at him. A church that has unity of mind in pursuing something that is out of step with the gospel, is unfaithful.¹

➔ From this passage, what does walking worthy of the gospel look like?

In the next verses, Paul shows us how our common mindset is to look like. We are to imitate Jesus.

2. The condescension and exaltation of Jesus (2:5-11)

V.5: This sentence is pretty difficult to translate. I think it means this: Put on the mindset that Jesus has. You can do this because you are "in Christ". Because you are joined to him, his mindset is to be yours too. Then Paul goes on to show us what Jesus is like.

On a side note: Some scholars today think that Christians only started considering Jesus as divine around the second century, many decades after Jesus was around. But this is one of the many texts in the New Testament that clearly speak against that. It is very likely that this bit of poetry was not originally written by Paul but was something coming close what we would call a creed – a statement of faith in who Jesus is and what he has done. This was written when the apostles, the students of Jesus, were still alive and leading the church, which gives us an idea about what they thought of Jesus.

V.6: What do you think it means that Jesus was in the form of God?

Literally: being (constantly/unchangeably) in the form of God.

Being in the form of God: What we translate with "form" doesn't mean "he looks like God, but actually he isn't". It has to be speaking about his *nature* or *essence*: What God is, Jesus is. To

¹ Similarly: N.T. Wright, Paul for everyone: The Prison Letters, 99.

be equal with God speaks of the same reality: Jesus eternally shares in the same standing and in the same glory as the Father (we can imply the Spirit too, but this text is not expressively about that). That he didn't consider his equality with God the Father as something to be grasped simply means that he did not consider it as something to take advantage of. Because Jesus is humble and loving without change, he did not cling to his own glory when considering us fallen humans. Instead, he was willing to leave his glory behind for a while to make us sharers of it with him.

V.7: People have sometimes understood that Jesus "emptied himself" to mean he somehow ceased being divine and became human instead. But that is not what Paul is thinking. Paul clearly states in v.6 that Jesus existed before becoming human and in the form of God and equal to him.

Jesus didn't stop being God. However, he did not consider his divinity as something to take advantage of, so to speak. Instead, he considered his divinity to enable him to take on sinless human nature and fulfil God's plan of salvation. Perhaps it's better to say "he made himself **poor** by taking on the form of a slave". He lowered himself all the way down. Pay close attention to the words: We said that Jesus being in the form of God has to mean that he is truly God. He is God in his nature. Now, the same word is used for him becoming a servant. So "taking the form of a servant" has to mean: He became true man just as he is true God.

"being born in the likeness of men and being found in human appearance": Again, look at the words: Whereas before the text was stating that Jesus became true human, now it's about how he is not merely a human like us. As a man, he looks like he's just another guy. But he is the eternal son of God who has become man. The idea is **addition** or **assumption**, not **subtraction**. Jesus lowered himself, or made himself poor, by taking on human nature and being born as a man. Not by ceasing to be God. Jesus condescended by parting from the glory that is rightfully his for a time.

V.8: He humbled himself so far that he was obedient to God's plan of salvation and died on a cross to redeem us. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:19 "*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself [...]. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

That is what happened when Jesus died on the cross. All of our sin, our guilt and rebellion was put on Jesus and he paid it all by his death. He who knew no sin bore all of our sin so that we

who know no righteousness might have his righteousness. Here in Philippians Paul speaks about Jesus' humility: He was willing to lower himself to the most shameful and gruesome death. Jesus did not cling to his rightful majesty and glory but willingly gave it up to redeem us and make us sharers of his glory and life.

John 13:3-5: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands [...] rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments and taking a towel, tied it round his waist [...] and began to wash the disciples' feet."

➔ "What Paul describes here in the language of theology, John's Gospel portrays graphically in Jesus' humble washing of his disciples' feet in the Upper Room."²

- What is humility, then?

V.9-11: How has God exalted Jesus?

Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23: ²² *Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.* ²³ *By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'*

God says that there is no other God and that to him every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess. That is, everyone will recognise God as the only God and true king of the universe.

Paul is saying: There is only one God but more than one person: There is the Father, there is the Spirit and there is the Son, Jesus. When it says here that every knee will bow before Jesus, and every tongue confess, then that means he receives the worship and honour that belongs to God alone. After his humiliation, the father has restored Jesus to the glory and power that he had with him before he became human. One day, all humans that have ever lived will recognize this.

Notice how trinitarian this text is: The church is the fellowship of the Spirit; Jesus the eternal Son of God has taken on human nature without ceasing to be God and is now highly exalted and receives the same worship and glory as the Father. And all of this is to the praise of God the Father. The Trinity working in unity.

² Ferguson, Sinclair, Let's Study Philippians, 45.

Jesus had every right to remain in glory with the Father and the Spirit. Yet being humble as he is, he willingly condescended by taking on a human nature and by dying on the cross for our salvation. Because of this, the Father exalted him above all else and restored him to his rightful place. But Jesus takes us with him, so to say. He redeemed us from sin and death and brings us into the life he enjoys with the Father.

- By raising him from the dead on the third day (Matthew 28)
- By ascending him into heaven where he now sits at the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:6-11).
- By giving him the judgment over the living and the dead (Matthew 24-25).
- By giving him the name that is above every other name. He is the king God has placed over the universe.

V.11b: The phrase “Jesus Christ is Lord” is a very early Christian confession of faith. “Lord” and “Christ” are titles that Jesus carries. In the Greek these are three words lined up to each other: “Lord, Saviour, Messiah”.

- That he is Lord marks his kingship over all the earth as well as his divinity.
- In the time when the New Testament was written, most people used a Greek translation of the Old Testament which was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Now, the word this Greek translation uses for the Hebrew name of God “Yahweh” is “Lord”, or in Greek “Kyrios”. Put simply: This title designates Jesus as God. The one true God is three persons.
- His name “Jesus” means Saviour: Through him God fulfils his plan to save and reconcile humanity to himself.
- “Christ” or “Messiah” designates him as the one God has set apart to restore his people and to establish the kingdom of God. He fulfils God’s promises to his people. He is God’s king.

This “creed” is used in multiple places throughout the New Testament.³ Here, it’s in the context of what all people will one day recognize: Jesus is the Lord, the Saviour and the Messiah.

V.11c: How is the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus to the glory of God the Father?

³ Acts 2:36; 10:36; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5.

It reveals his character: He is so loving, merciful and gracious, that he sent his Son to die in our place in order to save us. He satisfied his perfect righteousness and showed his unending grace. He fulfils his plan to redeem and restore fallen creation through the humiliation and exaltation of the Son. God does all things to display his own glory. God is not lacking any glory, but he displays it through everything he says and does. And that's the best news.

Illustration: The Bible describes God as being “light in himself” and he is also the one who at the beginning of creation speaks light into existence. So, the first light of creation is the light that emanates from God, and it illuminates the world. Without this light there would be no life. The sun is only the secondary source of light, so to say. God is the creator of light and only because of this can we live and see. If God were to withhold his light, we would all be in utter darkness and death. So, the best thing that could happen to us is that God shines his light forth and so makes life possible.

It's similar with his glory: Take “glory” to mean the bright radiance of the perfections of God.⁴ It's the fullness of his goodness and beauty. Now, when God does things for his own glory, he displays his goodness and perfection. We were created by God to enjoy him in his goodness. In worshipping God – in beholding God in his glory - we find lasting joy and fullness.

- Like God shares his light with the rest of creation so he reveals his glory, especially through his Son Jesus, for us to live in it and enjoy God.
 - God is great and he alone is worthy of worship. And that's wonderful news to us.
- ➔ On that day when all knees will bow and everyone will recognize that Jesus is the Lord, Saviour and Messiah, they will recognize that God is glorious and perfect and that there is none like him.

Why is Paul saying all of this again?

Imitating Jesus: If we belong wholly to Jesus, then his life becomes the pattern for ours: From death to life and through suffering and humiliation into glory.

⁴ Genesis 1:1-3; Psalm 18:28; 27:1; Proverbs 4:18; John 1:5; 8:12; Matthew 4:16; 1 John 1:5; Revelation 21:9-11.22-27.

1:29: “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, [...]”

Suffering because of believing in Jesus is a privilege because we follow Jesus in his footsteps. If he suffered, we will suffer too. If he has been glorified, we will be glorified too.

- ➔ Is our suffering for the sake of Jesus exactly the same to Jesus’ suffering, or are there differences?
- ➔ What marks a Christian?
- ➔ Based on this passage, what does it look like for us to have the mindset of Christ?

3. Work out your own salvation (2:12-18)

V.12-13: What do you think it means to “work out our own salvation”?

- Do we have to put in an effort to make our salvation valid?
 - Precisely speaking, how are we saved? Jesus, by his death and resurrection? Your faith? Your validation of your faith through putting in an effort?
- ➔ **Hebrews 10:14:** ¹⁴ For by a single offering **he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.**

Jesus has saved his people once and for all when he died on the cross. He sacrificed himself and paid with his blood for our sin, rebellion estrangement. This was a one-time-thing.

It is not your faith but the object of your faith which saves you. Faith in anyone else is useless. Not strength of faith but the strength of Jesus is decisive. We are saved by faith in Christ because of what he has done: He actually dealt with your sin and has paid your debt. You can be forgiven because he really bore the punishment. He perfected you on the cross. This slowly works its way into every corner of who you are. You are being sanctified. That means, we are formed to resembling Jesus. But this is the long-term effect of what Jesus accomplished once for all on the cross.

From that follows: Working out our salvation doesn’t mean that we have to put an effort in to validate or activate our salvation. Jesus has saved us. But Paul exhorts us to be active. I think Paul means this: Implement into your lives the salvation that you have in Jesus. Let every corner of your personality, your life choices – everything – be drenched by the gospel of Jesus.

We get saved by placing our faith, our trust in Jesus. Once that happens, we get to live a new life. So, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling is to start living in obedience to God. “Fear and trembling” means not to be scared of God but to revere him and to be conscious of his majesty and greatness. It’s to be compelled by awe over how glorious God is.

We get to be active and responsible: We are to work out, what God has worked in. But in v.13 it becomes clear that God is ultimately the one doing both: He works in us a new will and a new behaviour that is in accord with his will.⁵ God does not command you to fly but only gives you legs. He commands to you fly and gives you wings and teaches you to use them. This verse is about how God is the one who saves us from start to finish. He doesn’t leave us to it. He commands us to be active, but he is also the one who enables us to be active. This is not about getting saved or staying saved by putting in an effort. This is about letting the gospel of Jesus run through every area of our lives and be sanctified. It’s about God’s salvation unfolding its full effect on us.

V.14-18:

Here is the first example for how to live out our salvation: We stop grumbling and disputing with people over all kinds of topics. Humility and grumbling or being argumentative, or quarrelsome are stark opposites. Humility is not frailness – don’t get me wrong. But it seeks to establish peace and is contend. Grumbling and disputing are expressions of pride and they sow seeds of doubt about whether God is truly good or not. If Christ is our example, then these have no place in our lives. Being blameless and pure has to do with not being grumbling and argumentative. “Working out our salvation” starts with humility: Recognizing who God is and who we are. Realising that we are not the God of this world, and our opinions are not as important as we think they are.

“Children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation, shining as stars into the world”:

➔ What does it mean to live as God’s children?

Illustration: Like stars illumine the night sky and have been used for navigation for many millennia now. Not only are the stars beautiful and awe-demanding, they also give orientation

⁵ Ezekiel 36:22-38; Jeremiah 31:31-34.

at night. Similarly, by embodying Jesus' humility in our lives we shine the light of Jesus into a dark world like stars shine in the night.

➔ What is the word of life?

The good news about Jesus. We are to cling to this message. The gospel is all we have.

➔ What could it look like for us to hold fast to the gospel?

Working out our salvation in this way will be a reason to boast for Paul on the day of Christ, not because he is such a great guy but because he didn't waste his life when he gave devoted his entire life to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. God has used Paul to save people. All the suffering wasn't for nothing. God has brought about good things through it. And this will be to Paul's joy as well as the church's joy. This is everlasting joy because we've reached the goal and are with Jesus. It's why Paul can't wait to be with Jesus.

4. Recommendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30)

When you come to read this bit, you might struggle to think about what God is saying here to us. Very clearly this a very personal part of the letter where Paul is explaining to them why he sent Epaphroditus back to them with this letter and how Timothy will come soon after.

But we can learn a lot about here.

- What do we learn about the relationship between Paul and the Philippians?
- How do Timothy and Epaphroditus embody the gospel?