

Imitating Jesus' Humility

Philippians 2:1-11

I recently read about an incident that happened in the mid 1930s. One day three young men got on a bus in Detroit and “tried to pick a fight with a lone man sitting at the back” of the bus. When they insulted him, he didn’t respond. When they made the insults uglier and meaner he said nothing. Eventually this man reached his bus stop. When he stood up he was much bigger and stronger than the three young men anticipated. The man reached into his pocket, handed them his business card, and got off the bus without saying a word. As the bus drove off, the three young men gathered around and read the card which said: *Joe Lewis. Boxer.*

Joe Lewis would become the Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World from 1937 to 1949. John Dickinson cites this incident in the life of Joe Lewis as an illustration of one aspect of humility (*Humilitas*, pp. 26-27). Being humble doesn’t mean that you have no power or status. Humility involves refusing to use your power and your status solely for yourself; a humble person will restrain his/her power and status for the benefit of others. Those three young men were very fortunate that Joe Lewis didn’t use his power and skill to defend his honor. That’s a core aspect of humility.

In a few minutes we’ll see that this willingness to lay aside His status and to restrain His power for our good is at the heart of Jesus’ humility. Today’s passage is Philippians 2. Paul will challenge us to imitate Jesus’ humility, to have the same humility of mind toward each other that Jesus had (and has) toward us.

If you’re able, please stand with me to hear God’s word.

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As you may have noticed, this passage is very dense; it is rich conceptually and theologically. Instead of trying to discuss every single word, we’ll try to follow Paul’s train of thought so that we get the heart of what he’s saying here. I first want us to see the central challenge of this passage in verse 5.

A challenge to the Church: *Adopt the humility of mind which was in Christ Jesus.*
(Philippians 2:5) This is a challenge to the entire church, not only a select few:

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

The ESV translates verse 5 this way: “*Have this mind among yourselves. . .*” This is a corporate command to the entire church: adopt the humility of mind which was in Christ Jesus. If you and I both have the mind of Christ concerning humility, we are well positioned to have humility toward each other and unity with each other. If an entire church has the humility of Christ, that entire church is well positioned to experience deep, substantive unity.

Before we look at Paul’s specific commands related to our unity in verses 1-4, let’s consider Paul’s description of Jesus’ humility in verses 6 through 8.

Jesus’ humility. (Philippians 2:6-8) These verses are the heart of the book of Philippians. If Jesus really is the person described in these verses, then it makes sense that Paul would write, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). . . that he would write that he gave up everything to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering (3:10).

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

The NIV captures the sense when it says that Jesus, being “in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” From eternity past Jesus had the status and power of God Himself. Yet He refused to use His equality with God to His own advantage. Remember that this was before Jesus became one of us; His humility wasn’t an attribute that Jesus assumed in His humanity. Jesus has been humble from eternity past.

Instead of thinking only of Himself, verse 7 tells us that Jesus. . .

7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

People have long debated what it means that Jesus “emptied Himself”: Did He empty Himself of His divinity? Or some of His divine attributes? Paul doesn’t say that Jesus emptied Himself **of** anything; rather he says that Jesus emptied Himself **by** doing something, namely “taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” Paul uses the same term for “form” that he did in verse 6; just as Jesus from eternity past existed in the form of God (i.e., in very nature God), he took the form of a bond-servant (He became in **very nature** a bond servant). Jesus told His disciples that He didn’t come to be served, but to serve. Without ceasing to be God Jesus was “made in the likeness of men.”

8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Having fully identified Himself with humanity by taking on flesh and blood, Jesus “humbled Himself by becoming obedient.” Humility always involves obedience; pride always leads to disobedience. In Jesus’ case, obedience meant giving His life as a substitute for ours; it meant obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross. The Roman Empire had three official forms of capital punishment: crucifixion, decapitation, and burning alive. Crucifixion was “the most shameful and brutal” (Dickinson, p. 105). Jesus humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

The most practical thing that you and I can do to cultivate humility is to fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising its shame. Unless we are smitten with the humble love of Jesus Christ, we’ll never catch a vision for cultivating humility in our lives. Humility will seem unreasonable and impossible and maybe even irresponsible at times. “God can’t expect me to be humble toward **that** person. . . because that person deserves my condemnation, not my compassion.”

But all of our arguments melt away when we truly understand the humility of Jesus **for us**. Carl Henry asked, “How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?” One of the most practical things we can do to cultivate humility is to dwell on the cross of Christ.

The most humble people I know are absolutely enamored by Jesus Himself. They cannot stop talking about what He has done for them. With conviction in their voice (and sometimes tears in their eyes), they talk about various ways that Jesus has shown them mercy and grace they didn’t deserve. Some of the people I have in mind have experienced some painful and tragic things in their lives; but those things don’t define their lives. The humble love of Jesus defines their lives. They treat others the way they’ve been treated. They have this attitude within themselves that was also in Christ Jesus. Humility of mind is more obvious and more reasonable than any other way of living.

Since we looked at verses 9 through 11 on Easter morning (April 21st), we won’t take too much time with them here. But in these verses Paul writes that since Jesus humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, God “highly exalted Him” and enthroned Him as Lord. Throughout the Bible we read that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble. That dynamic was certainly at play in relation to Jesus: Because Jesus humbled Himself as fully as possible, God exalted Him as fully as possible. God “highly exalted Him.”

Let’s return to verses 1 through 4 to see how Paul urges us to imitate the humility of Jesus in some very specific ways.

Our Humility (Philippians 2:1-4)

In verse 1 Paul mentions four things that believers commonly experience in Christ. Sometimes we experience these things directly through the Holy Spirit; many times we experience these things through others in the body of Christ. His logic is that our experience of these blessings should compel us to live in such a way that others experience them too.

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,

Let me highlight the first thing Paul mentions here: “If there is any “encouragement in Christ”. . . If you are a believer you have certainly experienced encouragement in Christ. You’ve experienced the encouragement of knowing that your sin is forgiven; God has said to you, “You have offended Me and insulted Me and misrepresented Me times without number. And yet because My one and only Son has paid the penalty for your sins, I am never going to make you pay for those sins.”

We would not experience any of the things Paul mentions in this verse without the humility of Jesus. If He hadn’t humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death we wouldn’t experience encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness, or compassion. Paul’s argument is that those who have received these blessings should give them to others.

Look at Paul’s challenge in verse 2. In light of what you’ve experienced in Christ:

2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Paul could have expressed himself in many different ways. And so it’s striking that he wrote, “make my joy complete” by the way you treat each other. He wanted them to know how satisfying it would be for him to hear that they had shown each other the type of humility he’s describing.

Paul says that his joy would be complete if they were “of the same mind.” This doesn’t mean that they agreed on every detail of every issue; it means that they all had the mind of Christ (in the sense of thinking the way Christ did). This is the same term Paul used in verse 5 when he said, “Have this attitude/mind in yourselves which is in Christ Jesus.” If you and I each have the humility of mind that was in Christ Jesus, we will “be of the same mind” toward each other.

They were to “maintain the same love” in the sense of having a common commitment to treating each other with patience and kindness and forgiveness. They were to be “united in spirit and intent on one purpose.” This is the type of radical unity we’ve been talking about the last couple of weeks - the type of unity that exists in a gospel-centered church in which everyone is seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness.

In verses 3 and 4 Paul urges Christlike humility:

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

I'm aware that some might hear these verses and think, "If I don't look out for my own personal interests, people will trample all over me and my life will be miserable." Let me quickly affirm that humility of mind **doesn't mean** that:

- * you have no boundaries
- * you have to do everything other people want you to do
- * you don't pay attention to your own well-being (emotionally, spiritually, and physically)
- * you can never say "no"

Humility of mind **doesn't mean those things**. But it does mean something. I think we'd all agree that it's possible to have great boundaries, to pay careful attention to yourself, and to get really good at telling other people "no". . . and become a selfish, conceited person. So what **does** humility of mind mean?

It means that in specific circumstances you **willingly** regard others as more important than yourself. This is very unnatural for most of us. We naturally ask the question, "What is best for me (or me and mine) in this situation?" That's why there's so much road rage; that's why our political discourse is so toxic; that's why people hold grudges for years and years. We very naturally become obsessed with what's best for me and mine. Like toddlers we are outraged when we don't get our way.

But when we have humility of mind - the same radical humility of mind that was in Christ - we ask the question, "What is best for **that** person?" We don't merely look out for our own interests, we also look out for the interests of others. You're driving down the road and two lanes are about to merge. Instead of racing the person next to you, you think, "Maybe they're having a tough day; I think I'll drive the speed limit and let go ahead of me." That's sort of a trivial example, but what if we carry that humility of mind into our homes and into our places of work and into the church?

This type of humility Paul is advocating here is an expression of **strength**, not weakness. Think of Joe Lewis on that bus; think of Jesus on the cross. Genuine humility involves **willingly** refusing to use our power and status merely to further our own personal interests. Like Jesus Himself we seek to serve, not be served.

Let me encourage you to "test drive" humility of mind in two ways this week. First, adopt humility of mind toward one specific person. Identify one person, probably someone you see about every day - someone in your home, a friend, a co-worker. Make it your ambition in specific, everyday circumstances, to ask, "In this specific circumstance, what are his/her personal interests? What are their deepest needs in this situation?" Answering those questions will require discernment and wisdom. Experience how difficult it is to imitate Christ and His humility; allow yourself to become desperate for His grace and power.

Second, test drive humility of mind in one specific context (your neighborhood, in your family, on a ministry team, or in your workplace). Seek to demonstrate genuine, radical,

Christlike humility in one context. Again, experience how much discernment and wisdom it takes to even know what humility of mind means for your team or family or coworkers. What does humility look like when you have a conflict? When you legitimately disagree on what is good and right? When you've been wronged? Notice what is stirred up inside you when you try to be humble - self-righteousness, anger, bitterness, etc. Cry out to God for the desire and the ability to live as a humble person.

Can you identify one person and one context in which you can test drive humility? As you do, I'd encourage you to share your experience with another person or two. Talk about the tensions, the joys, the frustrations of trying to be humble in a "culture of rage" as it's sometimes called. I would also encourage you to take the long view: sustained humility bears fruit over time.

Almost 300 years ago, William Law wrote this (in *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*):

We may as well think to see without eyes or live without breath as to live in the spirit of religion without the spirit of humility. Although humility is thus the soul and essence of [the Christian faith], it is generally speaking the least understood, the least guarded, the least intended, the least desired, and the least sought after, of all virtues.

Personally, many times I would have to admit, "Guilty as charged." I don't want the reputation of being prideful/arrogant; but am I passionate about cultivating humility in my life?

But I say, ***let's the the exception***. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus and become enamored with His sacrificial, compassionate humility. Let's clothe ourselves with humility toward one another. Then we will have the type of likemindedness and unity that honors God and allows us to represent Jesus in our community.