

Philippians (2:1-11)

Exhortation to Humility

Introduction

Paul begins a series of three exhortations (1:27-2:18) intended to correct misunderstanding on the nature and purpose of suffering, encourage unity through humility, and motivate godly, Christian living. In 2:1-11, Paul urges the Philippian community to unity as they live lives worthy of the Gospel (“Therefore,” omitted in the NIV at 2:1, connects the thought from 1:27). Even though the threat of persecution and suffering is present from outside the church (1:27-30), there is also a danger from within, viz., pride and the internal division that results. Pursuing unity through humility, therefore, is the burden of the passage before us.

I. The Appeal for Unity through Humility (2:1-4)

A. *Four Incentives from Experience (2:1)*

Although the NIV renders each clause conditional “if,” they are better rendered “since” and could be read “Since there is.” Paul begins his exhortation by appealing to some of the tremendous blessings that we have already experienced in our faith.

1. “*encouragement from being united with Christ*” Paul first grounds his exhortation in our status/position “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ). Specifically, because we are “in Christ” we gain support and consolation from Christ in the midst of our sufferings and trials (cf., 2 Cor. 1:3-5; 12:7-10).
2. “*comfort from his love*” “from his” is not present in the Greek (εἶ τι παραμύθιον ἀγάπης subjective genitive = “the consolation/comfort of love”). So, whose love for whom? If there are any Trinitarian allusions here, it could be God’s love for us (cf., Rom. 5:5). Otherwise, Christ’s love for us, hence the NIV rendering.
3. “*fellowship with the Spirit*” Cf., Gal. 5:22 where many evidences of God’s Spirit have a social dimension. God’s gracious activity in our hearts and lives through the ministry of His Spirit is a solid basis for expressing unity through humility.
4. “*tenderness and compassion*” Whose tenderness and compassion does Paul have in mind? Probably Christ’s tenderness and compassion as expressed in salvation. Tenderness and compassion could be one idea such as “affectionate mercy.”
5. All four incentives focus upon God’s activity in us. Rather than offer a terse command to stop being divided and prideful, Paul compassionately appeals to the wonder of God’s movement in our lives as the grounds for pursuing unity in the church. Moreover, to the extent that these blessings have been expressed to us through other believers, we are obligated to pass them along. By doing so, we promote unity.

B. *Four Corresponding Petitions (2:2)*

Paul already assured the Philippians of his joy in them (1:4). Now he says his joy will be “complete” or mature when they express the blessings of God’s activity in them to others. The following petitions necessitate a focus upon others and not self. Note the repeated (“one,” “same”).

1. “*like-minded*” This is no call for uniformity as in having the same opinions on everything. Rather, this is an admonition for solidarity of purpose; having a team spirit; having the same goal in mind.
2. “*having the same love*” Just as the Philippians have experienced comfort from Christ’s love (2:1b), so they are to comfort others with this same love. Since we all share in the same sacrificial love expressed to us at the cross, how can we not express that love to others!
3. “*one in spirit*” The overall disposition of the church must demonstrate unity. This is a kind of theoretical unity, whereas
4. “*one in purpose*” This is a kind of functional or practical unity. Not only is the church to be united on paper, but in practice!

C. *The Heart of the Philippian Concern (2:3-4)*

1. The particular brand of unity Paul insists upon can only be possible when “selfish ambition or vain conceit” is far removed from God’s people.
2. Selfishness is never an ethical option, regardless of consequences (the double negative is as strong as the language would permit (μηδὲν . . . μηδέ “Do nothing . . . never!”).
3. The imperative of v. 3 is binding on all Christians at all times.

4. In typical Greco-Roman thought “humility” (*ταπεινοφροσύνη*) was more a vice than a virtue and was “looked on as shameful, to be avoided and overcome by act and thought” (Esser, *NIDNTT*, 2:260).
5. The cure for selfishness is putting others ahead of ourselves “consider others better than yourselves,” which by definition is humility.
6. Hence, to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” necessarily entails self-denying, self-sacrificing displays of humility toward one another. The predominant trait of all believers must be humility; otherwise we face God as our opponent (1 Pt. 5:5-6, note the present tense: “God [continually] graces the [continually] humble” and vice versa)!
7. Paul is not condemning all self-interests, but a selfish preoccupation with them. The gist is to fix our attention upon others’ interest first, before our own. Indeed, the hallmark of biblical love is that it is “not self-seeking” (1 Cor. 13:5).

II. The Example of Humility (2:5-11)

It is true this passage is rich with Christological precepts and teaches us a great deal about the Incarnation of God in Jesus. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that Paul’s primary goal is pastoral not academic. God is more concerned about “your attitude” than your knowledge (though the former depends upon the latter). It is essential to understand what God is teaching us here, viz., *that there is a vital relationship between what was accomplished for us by God incarnate and our behavior toward others*. To miss this aspect is to miss the entire teaching of 2:1-11!

A. Christ’s Humiliation (2:5-8)

1. At v. 5 Paul links the previous exhortations to unity through humility by introducing Christ Jesus as our supreme example. This is the first instance of modeling (see 3:17; 4:9).
2. Verse 6: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”
 - a) This clearly points to the pre-existence of Christ with God (see, Jn. 17:5 where Jesus explicitly states that he shared the glory of God “before the world began.” See also, Heb. 1:3).
 - b) We cannot fully appreciate the last phrase “did not consider . . .” until we’ve acknowledged the magnitude of the first: *Jesus the Man was truly God and as God he did not use his divine powers for personal advantage*.
 - c) Equality with God did not mean “getting” but “giving.” In fact, being equal with God uniquely qualified Jesus for the humiliating task of suffering and the glorious redemption that followed.
 - d) Similarly, we share in the divine nature and are uniquely qualified to humbly put others ahead of ourselves (2 Pt. 1:3-4).
3. Verse 7: “but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”
 - a) The expression “but made himself nothing” (in Greek, *kenosis ἐκένωσεν*) literally means “he emptied himself.” However, this emptying does not mean that some/all of God’s attributes were removed or subtracted in order for Jesus to make room for becoming human.
 - b) Rather, “he emptied” himself is an idiomatic expression meaning Jesus voluntarily chose not to have the *continuous use* of all the divine attributes while being clothed in humanity. He selectively exercised the attributes of deity while here on earth in accordance with his Father’s will. This is the very essence of humility!
 - c) Bear in mind that being a “servant” (better “slave”) was repugnant to a community who prided itself on their Roman citizenship. This is Paul’s way of saying that “If being a slave is good enough for the Lord Who endured the cross for you, then it has to be good enough for you to assume the same attitude of humility toward one another!” (cf., Jn. 13:3-5).
4. Verse 8: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”
 - a) Christ Jesus reached the utter extremity of humiliation: Death.
 - b) That God Himself would become a nobody and endure the utter shame of public crucifixion for us who deserved to be in His place is humiliation beyond imagination!
 - c) The word “cross” was considered obscene amidst “polite” Roman society.

B. *Christ's Exaltation (2:9-11)*

If Christ's obedience meant condescension through incarnation and humiliation through crucifixion, it also meant exaltation.

1. The emphasis has been upon our need for humility and the example of Christ. Now Paul wonderfully demonstrates the intervention of God. To take the worst of evils and the absolute depths of shame (the cross) and turn it around to the greatest of all events (the exaltation of Jesus) displays the magnificent power of God over all evil in the universe (similarly, Acts 2:23-24; Eph. 2:1-5)!
2. The path to glory is humiliation and obedience.
3. Jesus holds "the name that is above every name" (cf., also Eph. 1:20-21).
 - a) In ancient times a name not only identified one person from another, but indicated the character or some attribute of the person that described his/her true nature (cf., Gen. 25:26; 1 Sam. 25:25; Acts 13:8; Heb. 7:2).
 - b) The name given Jesus is "Lord" (used in the LXX to translate "Yahweh") and denotes "ruler" and "authority" (Is. 42:8; Mt. 28:18)
4. God's purpose in exalting Jesus to the place of highest honor and bestowing on Him the Name of names was twofold:
 - a) "Every knee should bow"
 - (1) submission and reverence
 - (a) Though not all will fall down in adoration, all will fall down in submission
 - (b) Though not all will willingly submit, all knees will bend in reverence
 - b) "Every tongue confess"
 - (1) confession and acknowledgement
 - (a) This open confession is not limited to the Church. "Some will do it gladly: others because they cannot resist" (O'Brien, *Philippians*, p. 245).
 - (b) At the end of the age, everyone will admit that Jesus has the right to rule the universe (Rev. 5:13).
5. The parallels between 2:11 and Is. 45:22-25 are striking! Yahweh insists upon His uniqueness and universal triumph over "the ends of the earth."
6. While people continue to marginalize, personalize, psychologize, or sanitize Jesus, He will not be ignored forever. One day everyone will either gladly fall in humble submission and confession or face him in shame and terror as the Judge of their eternal fate!
7. "To the glory of God the Father." When we confess Jesus is Lord both with our lips and our lives, God receives glory. That is, when we live under the sovereign reign of God, submitting entirely to His care, we radiate the wonderful character of God to the world. And, the primary way in which we confess Jesus is Lord is by putting the interests of others ahead of our own.

Next lesson . . . The third exhortation (Phil. 2:12-30).