

Week 4: Selfless like Christ *Philippians 2:1-11*

Hook



Main Point: We advance the Gospel through humility, service, obedience and worship.

Ask: What makes a good leader?

Have everyone name character traits that make a good leader as you write them on the white board. Depending on how much time you have, you may even want to have the group rank them or circle their top three. After they are done, say something such as:

“It might surprise you what recent leadership research (January 2014) lists as the number one characteristic in a great leader.”

If it's on the board, circle it. If not, write it in big bold letters across the top, and say something like:

Humility. I'm not joking. And this wasn't a Christian study. It's something that business leaders are seeing more and more. We tend to think leaders have to be aggressive, even kind of arrogant and the world tells us “nice guys finish last.” But research over the last 20 years keeps pointing to humility as a key factor in strong leadership. If you need a working definition, the authors of his study wrote:

Humility is manifested in self-awareness, openness to feedback, appreciation of others, low self-focus, and pursuit of self-transcendence. Humble people willingly seek accurate self-knowledge and accept their imperfections while remaining fully aware of their talents and abilities. They appreciate others' positive worth, strengths, and contributions and thus have no need for entitlement or dominance over others.ⁱ

In other words, the best leaders value their team's input and empower their team to perform, rather than lord their authority over them, as Jesus said the Gentiles do (Matthew 20:25). Jim Collins wrote the same thing in his 2001 bestseller, *Good to Great*. Collins spent years researching the truly great companies and what made them great. He wrote:

The good-to-great executives were all cut from the same cloth. It didn't matter whether the company was consumer or industrial, in crisis or steady state, offered services or products. It didn't matter when the transition took place or how big the company. All the good-to-great companies had Level 5 leadership at the time of transition. Furthermore, the absence of Level 5 leadership showed up as a consistent pattern in the comparison companies. Given that Level 5 leadership cuts against the grain of conventional wisdom, especially the belief that we need larger-than-life saviors with big personalities to transform companies, it is important to note that Level 5 is an empirical finding, not an ideological one... Level 5 leaders display a powerful mixture of personal humility and indomitable will. They're incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is first and foremost for the cause, for the organization and its purpose, not themselves.ⁱⁱ

Today we'll see that the apostle Paul discovered this truth long before 2001, as we hear him explain how humility in the Church helps us work together to advance the Gospel.

Questions:

How have you seen humility displayed in strong leaders?

Who is the humblest person you know, besides Jesus? Give specific examples of how that person has shown to be humble.

How can humility in the leadership (and in every person on the team) help bring a team together for a common goal?

When you think of humble service, what comes to mind?

Week 4, Philippians 2:1-11

Book

Main Point: We advance the Gospel through humility, service, obedience and worship.

Text Summary: Paul continues to encourage the Philippians to stay unified by pointing to Christ as their example. In the last section, Paul told them to live lives that were worthy of the Gospel, as citizens of Christ's kingdom. In this passage, he describes what that looks like. To live as Christ is to live in humility, considering others' needs before your own. Jesus gave up His position of honor in heaven to come to earth and serve His people, and even endure the most humiliating death imaginable. Paul calls the Philippians to put others first as Christ did. And in that attitude, they will find unity.

Philippians 2:1-2 [Read]

Sub-point #1: Paul again calls the Philippians to unity, to work together to advance the Gospel.

Why is it important for the Church, the body of Christ, to be unified?

What does having "one mind" imply?

Why would the Philippians' being unified bring Paul joy?

Why do you think Paul says, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, etc."? Do you think he actually doubts there is encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, etc.? If not, why does he say it this way?

In chapter 1, Paul called the Philippians to unity: *"so that... I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel"* (1:27). Standing firm, striving side-by-side, like a troop of soldiers on a mission or a football team moving together toward the goal. In Philippians 2:1, Paul connects chapters 1 and 2 with the word "so" or "therefore" in Greek.ⁱⁱⁱ With this conjunction, Paul transitions to a new section, but building upon what he had written in chapter 1. So he is still encouraging the Philippians to unity in their mission to advance the Gospel. Still focusing on joy in the midst of suffering, because the Gospel is being preached.

Although verse 1 sounds like a conditional sentence, *"if there is any encouragement..."* this doesn't mean it is optional or hypothetical or possibly not a true statement. This is a convention

of writing that is often called first class conditional—a conditional statement given with the purpose of implying that they are true, and so, if they are true, then the conclusion is also true.^{iv} Our grandfathers may have just called it one form of sarcasm – “if you want to live to see another day, you’d better...” Obviously, we want to live to see another day, so whatever was coming next was something we wanted to do. Paul is not saying, “there may or may not be encouragement in Christ.” Of course there is encouragement in Christ. Paul is saying, if you really believe that, then you will be unified. Unity flows naturally out of these things.

The same word is used for “encouragement” in Christ and “comfort” in love (v. 1). It is related to the word used for the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. (You may have heard the Spirit called the *Paraclete* in church before.). For the Philippians who were suffering as Paul himself suffered (1:29-30), comfort was needed. The word used for “participation” or “fellowship” in the Spirit was often used of the early Church in Acts, referring to how they lived as community, sharing all things in common. The words for “affection and sympathy” are the words often used throughout the Bible as the compassion and mercy of God.^v The Philippians should feel comfort from Christ’s love, unity in the Spirit, and the compassion and mercy of God. All three persons of the Trinity are included. The Trinity is the model for perfect unity.

If the Philippians have experienced any of these blessings from God, they should live in unity and work toward advancing the Gospel together. If they have experienced the comfort of Christ, they should comfort one another. If they have experienced fellowship in the Spirit, they should have fellowship with one another. If they have experienced the mercy and compassion of God, they should have mercy and compassion on one another. A community that lives this way—with comfort, fellowship, mercy, and compassion—will be unified. There will be no place for power struggles or competition or rivalry, because they will be too busy showing compassion and mercy to one another.

This means that our unity is not something we can force or create a committee to figure out. Unity among believers is rooted in God, not in us. There is not some special trick or plan or idea that will solve *disunity*. Disunity is fundamentally a spiritual problem. Our connection with one another is intimately dependent on our connection with God. So, if we want to pursue unity in our Church, we need to pursue God together. If there is a conflict in the Church, between two people or 20, the first thing we should ask is “Have you prayed about it together?” Instead of talking to other people about it, let’s talk to God. This is how the first Church was so unified. They prayed together constantly (Acts 1:13-14; 2:42; 4:23-31, et. al.).

Paul says that their unity would “*complete*” Paul’s joy (v. 2). This was all that was lacking in his joy toward them. Paul had already said that every time he thinks of them, he prays for them

with thanksgiving and joy (1:3-4). Knowing that they were truly, completely unified in Christ would complete that joy. Why? Do you remember from chapter 1 what it is that brings Paul joy?

- Their partnership in advancing the Gospel (1:4-5)
- When Christ is proclaimed, even if it hurts Paul's reputation (1:18)
- That Christ will be honored in his body, either in life or in death (1:19-20)

What brought Paul joy was the advancement of the Gospel. Even if it hurt his reputation or caused him to be imprisoned or persecuted or even killed. If they worked together as one—one mind, one love, in full accord—they would be unstoppable in their mission. On Jesus' last night on earth, He prayed that His followers would be "perfectly one" just as He and the Father are one, so that "the world would believe" that God sent Him (John 17:20-23). Think about how much more time we could devote to advancing the Gospel if we stopped wasting time fighting among ourselves. It's one of the greatest ways Satan distracts us from our mission. He knows that "*A house divided will not stand*" (Mark 3:25). Unity in the Church is something we should pursue as if the advancement of the Gospel depended on it.

Why is having true unity impossible apart from the Spirit?

How have you seen disunity damage the Church's witness in our world?

How might Christ-rooted unity affect our church?

How might unity in the Church affect our communities?

Philippians 2:3-4 [Read]

Sub-Point 2: Humility is necessary for unity.

Does Paul's view of humility match our culture's view? Why or why not?

How can you have ambition without it's being "selfish ambition"?

How can you have self-confidence without it's being "vain conceit"?

Paul has already established that unity is necessary for the advancement of the Gospel. Now he explains how we get that unity—humility. This passage explains to us what it really means to

have humility toward others—to put others’ needs ahead of our own. It’s not about putting yourself down, it’s about lifting up others. Humility before God is putting ourselves in the proper place in relationship to God—submitting ourselves to His authority, serving Him. Humility toward other people is putting them above ourselves not in authority, but in practice.

Paul combats the idea of arrogance throughout his letters. Here in verse 3, he uses the same word he had used of his opponents in chapter 1, those who were preaching out of “selfish ambition” (1:17). This was a sharp warning for the Philippians—don’t be like our opponents. He combines that word “empty glory” or “vain conceit.”

In the first century, excessive pride was condemned. Yet, there was an equal disdain for humility. In fact, the writings of Plutarch and Epictetus expressed an “ideal of Greek culture” where “great men overcome the shame of lowliness and weakness by noble acts and thoughts.”^{vi} Personal greatness was the goal and humility was incompatible. However, the Old Testament taught that humility was necessary to a right relationship with God (Job 22:29; Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 3:34; Isaiah 57:15; Micah 6:8, et. al.). Paul taught that unity was only possible through humble consideration for others.

Remember, humility isn’t putting yourself down; it’s lifting up others. Low self-esteem isn’t the same thing as humility. In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren wrote, “True humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”^{vii} So, we can have ambition as long as it’s not selfish ambition. We can have self-confidence, but not vain conceit. Remember the opening illustration? Level 5 leaders are incredibly ambitious, but their ambition is for the cause, for the organization and its purpose, not themselves.

The Christian view of humility isn’t inward focused, but outward focused (v. 4). It’s not your view of yourself; it’s your thoughts and actions toward others. Humility is about loving God and loving others *first*. It’s thinking about others’ needs *first*. It’s serving others, not demanding they serve you. It’s about building up others, not tearing them down to make yourself look better. It’s thinking about what you can give instead of what you can get, how you can help others before helping yourself. It’s looking out into the world to see what needs there are instead of what you can grab for yourself.

The ironic thing about this is that if we all had this attitude, everyone’s needs actually would get met, without all of the selfishness and demanding and grabbing for power and resources. This is how the early church worked. They shared all things in common and there was no one in need among them (Acts 4:34). If we focus on ourselves first, the powerful will get what they need

and the powerless will get nothing. The only way everyone will get their needs met is if we all look to others' needs in humility.

This passage encourages believers to be united in Christ, being of one mind and one spirit. The only way this can happen is if we have an attitude of humility. If we put others' needs ahead of our own. If we don't just concern ourselves with what kind of music we like in the worship service, but what might help connect others to God. If we don't just concern ourselves with what kind of youth group or children's ministry our kids might enjoy, but also what our neighbors' children might need to learn about Jesus and draw them into the life of the church. When we put others' needs first, we can get to the real work of the church—bringing people into a saving and deeper relationship with Jesus.

Looking at the world around you—media, pop culture, business world, etc.—do you see a lot of people showing true humility toward others, valuing others above themselves?

How would your life be different if you put other people's needs ahead of your own?

How would the world be different if everyone put others' needs ahead of their own?

Why is humility so difficult for us?

Philippians 2:5-8 [Read]

Sub-Point 3: Jesus is the ultimate example of humility and servanthood.

Why was Jesus' becoming a man an act of humility?

Why was Jesus' death on the Cross the ultimate act of humility?

How did Jesus live as a servant leader when He was here on earth?

Paul has been building a logical argument here, from the end of chapter 1 through chapter 2:

- 1:27-30: Live a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ, as citizens of His kingdom.
- 2:1-2: Unity is necessary for the advancement of the Gospel.
- 2:3-4: Humility is necessary for unity.
- 2:5-8: So, be humble like Jesus.

Do you see the bookends there? Beginning and end—be like Jesus. Jesus is our prime example in everything. He is the greatest picture of humility. Paul again uses “of the same mind” here (v. 5), which he already used twice in verse 2. Paul’s idea of “mind” involved not just good thoughts, but activity which demonstrated those thoughts. Each step of Christ’s life demonstrated humility.

We may not really think about it often, but even becoming a man at all was an act of humility (v. 6-7). Willingly emptying Himself of His honor and glory, for creatures that had been unfaithful to Him from the moment He created them. He didn’t even come as a full-grown adult. He came as a baby, completely dependent on his mother and father for provision and safety. And the way He came, born in a stable in an obscure village, with only animals and shepherds and foreigners to honor Him? What great descent He traversed to save us.

This does not speak so much to our great worth, but to the unbelievable love of God for us, even while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). In the Greek, Paul uses a play on words here—Jesus’ “emptying Himself” (v. 7) and the “empty glory” or “conceit” (v. 3)—to create a contrast. While they seek empty glory, Jesus empties Himself of His glory. The One who had all the glory of God willingly chose to lay it all aside and live a commoner’s life.

Jesus’ life was defined by service to His people (v. 7). He said it was His purpose in coming: *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45). And He commanded His disciples to follow His example of humility: *“You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”* (John 13:13-15). When they argued over who would sit in the places of honor in His kingdom, He told them: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave”* (Matthew 20:25-27). He never gained any kind of fame or glory or honor or power or wealth for Himself.

Then came His greatest act of humility, obedience to God even to the point of death, and death on a cross—the world’s most humiliating death of that time. Although Christ’s unique work obviously can’t be replicated, His mindset was to be imitated – *“have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus”* (v. 5). The ESV has a more accurate translation of the Greek here than many others. It doesn’t just mean in you (singular), it means in you (plural). Among your communities, with each other.

If God could humble Himself to become a man and die, then surely we can humble ourselves toward our fellow man. The life of a believer should not be driven by selfish ambition, but Gospel ambition. We are to take on the form of servants for others just as Jesus did for us. And we are to obey God, no matter the circumstances. At the end of verse 8, Paul reminds the Philippians that Jesus' obedience didn't save Him from death. It actually led Him to His death. Paul's own situation paralleled this picture of Jesus, trusting and obeying God in his mission even if it meant his death (1:20-21). This was the example the Philippians were to follow, and it is our example, too.

What does Jesus' humility teach us about God's love?

What are some practical ways we can serve our church?

What are some practical ways we can serve our community?

What are some practical ways we can serve our families?

How can we practice the mindset of humility?

Philippians 2:9-11 [Read]

Sub-Point 4: We advance the Gospel by worshiping the risen Lord Jesus.

What does it mean to you that God has exalted Jesus? How does it affect your life?

Why is it important that every knee will bow and every tongue confess?

Paul now makes another contrast – Jesus's humility with His exaltation. It would be easy to look at these verses and read the following conclusion into them:

- Jesus humbled Himself, so I should humble myself.
- God exalted Jesus, so God will exalt me if I humble myself.

But that would be a misunderstanding of the text. Yes, there are places where Scripture says, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you"* (James 4:10). But *this* passage is not about us; it's about Christ. God will not exalt us to the highest place and give us the Name above all names. This exaltation is unique to Christ. Paul's aim in this passage was not to say, "God exalted Jesus because He was humble." But to say, "Jesus gave up this glory and honor for

you. But now He is back on the throne.” This isn’t a divine reward. It’s divine vindication—restoring the honor and glory that Jesus had voluntarily given up.^{viii}

Remember, Paul’s overall goal in writing was to encourage the Philippians to stand firm in their suffering. To encourage them in unity and in advancing the Gospel together. A suffering community needs to be reminded of Jesus’ exaltation. That He is sitting on the throne. To remind them of their hope, their purpose, their mission.

Paul describes Jesus’s exaltation in the loftiest terms possible. Not just “exalted,” but “highly exalted” (v. 9). Not just a special name, but “the Name that is above every name” (v. 9). Every knee will bow to Him “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (v. 10). Not just living human beings, but those who have died. Not just humans, but angels and demons. This is also a reference to Christ’s superiority over Greek gods, because their mythology had gods in all three of those spheres.^{ix} “Every” knee will bow, “every” tongue confess. These are the same phrases God says about Himself in Isaiah 45:22-23: *“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.”* If the Philippians had any doubt in the One in whom they put their hope, Paul would have eradicated that here. The One who had made Himself a *servant* was really *Lord* of all.

For the Philippians, this statement, that one day everyone will confess, “Jesus is Lord,” would have certainly brought to mind the phrase said throughout the Roman Empire, “Caesar is Lord.”^x If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not Lord. The charges brought against some of the believers in Thessalonica were, *“These men who have turned the world upside down [referring to Paul and Silas] have come here also... and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another King, Jesus”* (Acts 17:7). Paul wanted to reassure the Philippian church that they were putting their hope and allegiance in the right king.

For Paul, it is all about Christ. Paul calls the Philippians to imitate Christ in His humility and worship Christ in His exaltation. Many scholars believe that this passage (2:5-11) is an early Christian hymn. The language of it is lofty and the theological concepts beyond human understanding. No one really truly understands exactly how Jesus emptied Himself or how the interplay of the Trinity really works. It is a divine mystery.^{xi} But what we do know is the God of the Universe humbled Himself and died for us. So we exalt Him. This is the Gospel that Paul and the Philippians are working so hard to advance.

How does knowing that Jesus is on the throne change what you fear?

How does it change what you love?

What does it mean to worship Jesus on a day-to-day basis, not just in church?

How does our worshipping of Jesus advance the Gospel?

Week 4, Philippians 2:1-11

Took

Main Point: We advance the Gospel through humility, service, obedience and worship.

Ask the class to split into groups of three or four people to discuss an action plan for how to practice humility in the church. If humility is putting others' needs ahead of your own, make a list of people in your church who have a need. It doesn't have to be a physical need, it can be a spiritual one, an emotional one. It can be a specific individual or a more generic group of people. For example:

- Jane Doe needs a new car.
- The elderly homebound in our congregation need people to visit them.
- Our ministerial team needs support and prayer.
- The children in our church need to feel loved and valued.
- Young couples need more time together.

Brainstorm how you can meet those needs. If you have more time, you can do the same with people in your community, in your neighborhood, in your family, at work, etc.

Of course, living a life of humility is more than just coming up with ideas like this. It's having humility in every conversation, every situation, every moment of every day. But this is good *practice*, to get ourselves thinking about other people's needs.

Challenges

Seek to humbly consider others first. We are prone to consider ourselves first and help others once we are safe and secure. This worldly logic doesn't take into consideration that God is in control. When we trust that God's will comes first, regardless of the earthly consequences, the power of the Gospel is put on full display.

Follow Jesus in sacrificial serving. One of the hallmarks of genuine Christianity is sacrificial service to others. The church has many unsung and nameless heroes throughout history. Our example is Christ, who selflessly laid it on the line for His people and His mission.

ⁱ Amy Y. Ou, Anne S. Tsui, Angelo J. Kinicki, "Humble CEOs Connection to Top Management Team Integration and Middle Managers' Responses" *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Jan 8, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (NY: Harper Business, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ Strong's, 3767

^{iv} Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1991), 165.

^v Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1991), 172-175

^{vi} G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 115.

^{vii} Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002).

^{viii} Gordon Fee, "Philippians," *IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

^{ix} Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

^x G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 115.

^{xi} G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 115.