

Learning to live like Jesus

A study of Philippians 2

By Mike Morrison

Paul may have done more good in prison than he did in visiting his churches. That's because he used his jail time to write some letters that have served the church for nearly 2,000 years. One of those "prison epistles" is Philippians.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi (northern Greece) to thank them for some gifts they sent, to encourage them as they faced their own difficulties, and to give them pastoral advice to help them deal with some petty disagreements.

Being considerate

In chapter 2, Paul reminds them of blessings they have been given by Christ: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion..."—he assumes that they have enjoyed all of these—"then make my joy complete by being *like-minded*, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (Phil. 2:1-2).



“If we follow the way of the world, we’ll have nothing to offer it. But if we become more like Jesus, we’ll make the gospel attractive.”

How can the congregation be "like-minded"? As Paul will soon explain, they should think *like Christ*—to be encouraging, comforting, sharing, tender and compassionate (v. 1). Paul wants them to have the *love* of Christ. That is the only sure way to be united in spirit and purpose.

The key, he says, is to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (v. 3). Selfishness and pride weaken unity, so we need the opposite: "in humility consider others better than yourselves." Paul does not say that others *are* better—only that we consider them more worthy of honor.

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (v. 4). We can have interests of our own, but we should also look out for others. This is the way of Christ.

Humility

"Your attitude should be the same as that of

Christ Jesus," Paul writes. Then he describes that attitude: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (vv. 5-7).

Scholars call this passage "the Philippian hymn," because its style and rhythm in Greek are like a song, perhaps a hymn the Christians sang to praise their Savior. Paul uses these words to remind his readers of the example they should follow: As the divine Word of God, Jesus had the greatest of honor, yet he did not cling to his rights and privileges. He gave up his advantages and humbly became a human to serve our needs.

The Word of God became flesh, as John 1:14 says. Since the Latin word for flesh is *carnis*, theologians call this the Incarnation. A classic Christmas carol describes it this way: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the Incarnate Deity."

The Word's willingness to give up his privileges was not a temporary change—it is the way God is all the time. God is love, and love means a devotion to serving others, to putting their needs above one's own. As the Holy

Spirit works within us to make us more like Christ, we follow his example of humility.

Paul saw in Jesus the solution to the petty disagreements that were going on in Philippi. Even today, the Christmas story reminds us that we have a Savior only because he was humble enough to be born as a helpless baby. For those who claim to follow Jesus, humility is the answer to relationship problems, the best way to deal with disagreements.

Jesus' humility did not stop with his birth. Paul tells the next step in the story: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (v. 8). He endured the most painful and most shameful form of death, just to serve us.

Eternal glory

The story does not stop with the crucifixion, either. Jesus was raised from the dead and given great

glory: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 9-11).

What is the name above all other names? The name of God. In Isaiah 45:23, God says, “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.” Paul is saying that Jesus should be given the same honors as God. When we bow to Jesus, God gets the glory.

Jesus is in the highest place, worthy of worship, worthy of the name “Lord.” Because he was humble, he is now exalted. The reward will come for us, too, but it begins now with following the example of Jesus.

Contentment

How should we respond to Jesus’ humility and service? Paul pleads for action: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12).

The Philippians have been responsive, eager to do what is good. Paul is asking them to take one more step, applying the humility of Christ to their interpersonal relationships. They are united with Christ, so they work not to *get* salvation (salvation is a gift they already have), but to live out its meaning in their lives.

We work because Christ lives in us, which means we are not working alone: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (v. 13). When we put aside our selfish ambition and conceit, we can trust God fully to do his work in us, and we give him all the credit.

This applies to all aspects of Christian behavior, but Paul’s concern at this point is the squabbling that is disrupting the church in Philippi (see 4:2). So he writes, “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure” (vv. 14-15).

The results will extend beyond their own congregation: “In a crooked and depraved generation...you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (vv. 15-16). In other words, as you share the gospel, your example says a lot. If you are content and peaceable, you will be seen as points of light.

People are looking for the key to peace and contentment, and Christ offers it—but how will people know that he does, unless they see it in our lives? If we follow the way of the world, we will have nothing to offer it. But if we become more like Jesus, we will make the gospel attractive.

Timothy

In the first century, behavior was commonly taught

by example. Paul has just pointed them to the example of Jesus, and Paul sets a good example even in prison. Now he refers to someone else the Philippians know: “I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you” (v. 19). Paul hopes to send a friend to them, who will (if we read between the lines) report on whether the Philippians put Paul’s exhortations into practice.

Timothy is already doing what Paul wants—he “takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ” (vv. 20-21). Timothy does not act from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility he looks to the interests of others, of Jesus and the gospel. He is a good example.

“Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (v. 22). He is living the way that Paul wants, so the Christians in Philippi should look to him, and listen to what he says. “I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me” (v. 23)—that is, as soon as I find out whether I will get out of prison, I will send him to help you. “And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon” (v. 24).

Epaphroditus

But Paul did not wait. He sent his letter with someone else: “But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs” (v. 25). Epaphroditus, apparently one of the leaders in Philippi, had come to help Paul in prison. Now Paul is sending him back with special praise:

“He longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill” (v. 26). In other words, he is looking out for your interests. He is distressed not because he was sick, but because he doesn’t want you to be worried about him.

“Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him” (v. 29). He is setting a great example, and if you honor people who serve, more people will serve. Humble yourself for Christ, and he will exalt you! ●

Questions for discussion

1. In my own experience, what role does self-interest play in squabbles?
2. What rights and privileges do I have? Can I give them up to help others?
3. If I can’t complain (v. 14), what can I say about things that are wrong?
4. Can I trust God to do his work within me? Does he sometimes seem to work too slowly?
5. What examples of humility do I know locally? Do I honor them?