

JESUS: THE GREAT EXAMPLE**Philippians 2:1-11****Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road****Plymouth, Michigan 48170****Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 01.18.2004**

If all else fails, read the directions. How many of us do the work first and then read the directions? After all, we want to make sure the directions are right! And what about those things called “User Manual”? Since it is for “users,” I figure you should become a user first and then read the manual. I must confess that I am one of those odd characters who always reads the instructions and always reads the manuals. Of course, it’s not because I need the help, it’s just because I like to read. The truth is I’ve broken too many things in the past and so I’ve learned the expensive way that it pays to read the directions first.

When we come to the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians living in Philippi, we encounter one of the most profound passages in the New Testament. Among the many descriptions given to Phil 2:6-11, one of my favorite is that it is the “User Manual” for Christians. We begin, then, with the opening verses of chapter 2.

¹Therefore if [as is the case] you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (TNIV).

Let’s stop here for a moment. On the basis of what they have in Christ, Paul appeals to the Philippians to behave in such a way as to “make [his] joy complete.” In verse 27 of chapter 1, Paul has exhorted the Philippians to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” So now he says, in essence, *be what you are*. “You are in Christ, so live like a body of people who are in fact the very body of Christ.” Be what you are—be the body of Christ in your common life together. Paul’s concern is crystal clear: “be like-minded.” He emphasizes the necessity of like-mindedness by repeating himself at least three times: have the same love, be one in spirit, and be one in mind. To be like-minded is to share the same frame of mind or the same mindset. Whatever else Paul

might mean by “having the same attitude of mind,” he makes obvious his concern with the practical consequences of our common life together in Christ: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Paul now proceeds to spell out, in verses 5-11, the attitude of mind that Christians must have. What Christ has done provides believers with more than merely an example to follow; what He has done is the foundation of our existence as Christians. Paul writes:

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind that was found in Christ Jesus. ⁶Who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. ⁷Instead, he made himself nothing by taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God highly exalted him and graciously gave him The Name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at Jesus’ name [of Lord] every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that “Jesus Christ is Lord,” to the glory of God the Father (RDJr.).

A possible, although not provable, background for these magnificent and magisterial words is an implicit comparison between Adam and Christ.¹ From the first three chapters of Genesis, we learn that Adam, created in the image of God, sought equality with God. Striving to become more, Adam became less. Due to his rebellion, he became a slave, subject to death. On the other hand, Christ, who was equal with God, deliberately lowered Himself and became what Adam became—a slave, subject to death. Settling for less, Christ became more. What Adam desired, Christ was willing to give up. And what Adam lost, Christ gained. Christ became like Adam so that all of us “Adams” could become like Christ. Jesus Christ became like us and died so that we might become like Him and live.

Paul presents here the essentials of the gospel story, and he uses words full of passion and poetry. *These words are not only the centerpiece of the letter to the Philippians, in many ways they are the centerpiece of the entire New Testament.* These words fall into two parts: Christ’s humiliation in verses 6-8, and Christ’s exaltation in verses 9-11.

Do not miss the forest for the trees. Yes, Christ is an example for us to follow. His

¹Whether the Philippians would have so understood such a background probably depends on whether Paul himself had used such an analogy at some point in his time with them.

actions are indeed the “User Manual” for Christians. But there is more—profoundly more. Jesus Christ reveals to us the very nature of God. By taking the form of a slave, He showed us the form of God. In Christ Jesus God has revealed His true nature; this is what it means for Christ to be “equal with God”—to pour Himself out for the sake of others and to do so by taking the role of a slave. In so doing, He not only reveals the character of God, but also reveals what it means for us to be created in God’s image, and what it means for us to have the mindset of God. It means taking the role of a slave for the sake of others.

But Christ did more than enter our world through birth, He also experienced death—death on a cross. The crucified God. The death of God. God on a cross—here is the very heart of Paul’s theology. Here is where the One who is equal with God has most fully revealed the truth about God: *that God is love and that His love expresses itself in self-sacrifice—a cruel, humiliating death on a cross—for the sake of those He loves.* God on a cross.

No one in Philippi, we must remind ourselves, used the cross as a symbol for their faith; there were no gold crosses embossed on Bibles or worn as pendants around the neck or lighted on the steeple of the local church. The cross was God’s scandal, and therefore the Philippian Christians’ scandal as well. The One worshiped as Lord by Christians was the One crucified as a state criminal by the agents of “lord” Caesar.

However, the One humiliated has become the One exalted. Paul makes two points: (1) God has vindicated Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life and death have been punctuated with the ultimate exclamation point. (2) Paul wishes to reassure the Philippians that the exalted Lord is sovereign over the entire universe—including the “lord” of the Empire, Caesar himself.

God highly exalted Christ by gracing Him with “The Name.” The name bestowed on Jesus is “the name that is above every name,” which is clearly the name of God. Perhaps the fact that this name is not explicitly specified is deliberate. By tradition, the name of God could not be spoken or written. The Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—commonly uses “the Lord” as a substitute for the divine name, so then we are not surprised find “Lord” in verse 11. Jesus Christ is now universally acknowledged to be “equal with God.” Those “in heaven” refers to all heavenly beings, angels, and

demons; those “on earth” refers to all those who are living on earth when Christ returns; and those “under the earth” probably refers to the dead. When the risen Jesus returns, those who confess that “Caesar is lord” along with their “lord Caesar” will join with all others to declare that the Lord is none other than the Jesus whom the Romans crucified and whom Christians worship.

What does it mean for Christians to acknowledge *this* Jesus as their Lord? *Because this passage reveals to us what God is like, it also reveals to us what God expects from us.* Those who confess Jesus as Lord should not be seeking status or power; nor should they be acting from selfish ambition or empty conceit (2:3). Rather, they should be humbly valuing others above themselves. And because they are concerned with the interests of others (2:4), they will be of one mind and one purpose, having the same love (2:2).

We are sometimes tempted to wish that Paul had given more precise advice on just how Christians should behave in specific circumstances. But Christian obedience does not mean living in accordance with a set of rules; rather, it means responding in the appropriate way to the self-giving love of God. What Paul does provide is, in fact, far more valuable than any set of rules. Christians in the modern world are faced with a host of ethical dilemmas, which dilemmas increase each year with advances in science and medicine. We cannot expect to find ready-made answers to these modern-day questions in the Bible! We may be thankful that Paul, in his ethical teaching, always went back to first principles. In effect, he is saying, “This is the gospel. This is what God is like. This is what God has done for you, and this is what God expects *you* to be like. Work out what that means for yourselves!” What is Christlike? What is worthy of the gospel? As we seek to answer these questions, we may not always make the right choice. What is important is that we should approach all such problems in humility (not thinking we know all the answers) and we should approach such problems in love (looking to the interests of others, and not seeking to exploit what we consider to be our rights).

Finally, the grandeur of this passage from the pen of Paul can easily cause us to miss *why* it is here. *Paul’s has but one main reason: to focus on Christ Himself, and thereby to point to Him as the ultimate model of the self-sacrificing love to which he is calling the Philippians—and us.* “Loving others as Jesus loves us.” That is the mission of the

Plymouth Church of Christ. But exactly what does that mean? How does such love express itself? It means “being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” And it expresses itself by “doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility we value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests but each of us looking to the interests of others.” Bottom line: Loving others as Jesus loves us means we must become slaves for the sake of others. It means we must act and think like God Himself.

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