

Pepperdine University

HAVING THE MINDSET OF CHRIST:
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

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by

J. Brian Craig

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Philippians 2:1-11: Imitating the example of Christ's mindset is key to Christian unity.

I. Humility unites us: humility in mindset is the way to unity (vv. 1-4)

- A. Why be united - all that we have in Christ (v.1)
- B. The call to be united - by having the same mindset (v. 2)
- C. How to be united - by emptying self and considering others first (vs. 3-4)

II. He who unites us: the example of Christ's mindset exemplifies humility (vv. 5-11)

A. Jesus emptied (vv. 6-8)

- 1. Jesus let go of deity, emptied himself (v. 6)
- 2. Jesus became a slave in nature, human in appearance (v. 7)
- 3. Jesus died a slave in death on a cross (v. 8)

B. Jesus exalted (vv. 9-11)

- 1. God gave Jesus highest place, greatest name (v. 9)
- 2. All creation will call him Lord (v. 10-11)

Philippians 2:1-11 constitutes the heart of Paul's epistle to the disciples at Philippi. While imprisoned for his faith, he wrote this letter to the church he had established a decade earlier, inspiring them to courage in the face of opposition, presenting a vision of fighting a spiritual battle side-by-side in complete unity.¹ To obtain such unity will require humility, and a mindset Paul argues is best exemplified by Christ's example. His emptying of personal value results in glory to God and exaltation by God. Paul's argument is one that is counter to worldly thinking: The way up is go down. The way to conquer is to surrender. The way of galactic greatness is found in servitude and slavery. And the ultimate example we have of such a mindset is in Christ Jesus himself who was willing to take on the essence of a slave.

Cultural, Sociological, and Historical Context of Philippians 2:1-11

To understand Paul's argument, it is helpful to know a bit about the background of the church in Philippi, a few details about slavery and crucifixion, and what it means for Jesus to be called "Lord." Paul the Apostle brought the gospel to this Greek city on his second missionary journey, in response to a vision from a "man of Macedonia" (Acts 16:9). Named for Philip of Macedonia, Philippi was Roman colony that was a center of wealth and culture, whose inhabitants took great pride in their Roman citizenship² (significant as Paul emphasizes citizenship in heaven in his argument for a Christ-centered mindset, Phil 3:20). Paul began his ministry there with the Sabbath conversion of Lydia and her household, whom he encountered at the riverbank outside the city (Acts 16:13-15). Shortly after, another household to be converted was that of the jailor

¹ Frank Thielman, "Philippians," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 3; Romans to Philemon*, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 343.

² Steven Notley, *Carta's New Century Handbook and Atlas of the Bible*, (Jerusalem: Carta, 2007), 243.

responsible for guarding Paul and Silas (Acts 16:22-34). These early conversions are relevant to the context of Paul's argument in Philippians 2 because we see from the very beginning a church in Philippi made up of households as disparate as that of a Roman soldier and a prominent Jewish woman, perhaps making unity of mindset a formidable challenge.

Paul will use an argument of mindset in Philippians 2 that references Christ taking on the form of a slave (Phil 2:7) and submitting to death on a cross (2:8). Philippi would have had a large slave population³ and although first-century slavery was different than our image of American slavery (not race-based, many gained freedom, education was encouraged⁴), still slavery was brutal, and slaves held the very lowest places in the social structure of Roman society. This will be important to Paul's argument of Christ's example of humility, leading ultimately "even to death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), seen in the ancient world as the "slave's punishment" (*supplicium servile*).⁵ Beyond physical suffering, crucifixion was designed to be a public spectacle, for purposes of intimidation.⁶ The executed were subject to "savage ridicule by passersby,"⁷ as crosses were lifted up in a well-traveled locations or crossroads to assure public shaming.

Instead of shame however, Paul argues that this death brings Jesus glory from God and the title of Lord (Greek *kyrios*). This confession of Jesus as *kyrios* is fundamental to Christian faith,⁸

³ Thielman, 343.

⁴ S. Scott Bartchy, "Slavery (Greco-Roman)," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:66.

⁵ Thielman, 356.

⁶ Jouette M. Bassler, "Crucifixion," *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. by Mark A. Powell (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 162.

⁷ Joel B. Green, "Crucifixion," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. by Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 199.

⁸ Iain S. Maclean, "Confession," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed by David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 274.

and Paul's argument is that this honor comes from Jesus' willingness to empty himself. Since in the Roman empire "Cesar is Lord" was in common use as a pledge of loyalty and worship for the emperor, a public statement of faith that "Jesus is Lord" was counter-cultural in Roman society and could have even been considered subversive.⁹ Paul turns the public shame and ridicule of the cross upside down, and with the title of *kyrios*, Jesus goes from the nature of slave to "Lord" of the universe carrying the connotation of all the attributes of God.¹⁰

Exegesis of Philippians 2:1-11

The text of Philippians 2:1-11 is broken into two sections: (1) a call to unity amongst the Philippians, humility being key to that unity; and (2) the example of Christ in his humility and subsequent exaltation. More specifically Paul makes an appeal to have the same mindset (Greek *phroneo*) as that of Christ. Because this mindset forms the crux of his argument (one which is also found in the greater discourse), it would be valuable to first consider the meaning of this word before we approach the passage in depth.

Phroneo - Alignment of Mindset

The word *phroneo* is found 26 times in the New Testament. A survey of all these uses reveals a meaning of attitude, view, thinking, or mindset usually with a consideration as to how this thinking is aligned. In Acts 28:22 local Jewish leaders in Rome tell Paul, "We want to hear what your views [*phroneo*] are," as if to say, "We want to know where you are coming from, how you align your thinking." *Phroneo* is the word used in the gospels when Jesus rebukes Peter for having

⁹ E. Theodore Mullen Jr, "Lord," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 6 vols., ed by Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 3:687.

¹⁰ Larry W. Hurtado, "Lord," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. by Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 565.

a mindset aligned with the “things of men” rather than the “things of God” (Matt 16:23 / Mark 8:33). Paul uses the word in Colossians 3:2 to encourage a mindset aligned with “heavenly things” rather than “earthly things,” and in Romans 8:5 contrasting a mindset aligned with what the “Spirit desires” versus what the “flesh desires.” It seems clear from our text that this is an intentional mindset, as Paul commands the believers to have the same mindset (*phroneo*) as Christ (Phil 2:5).

Immediate Context of Philippians 2:1-11

Philippians 2:1 begins with the words “If then...” (NRSV) or “therefore” (NIV). This appears to point back to his encouragement for the readers to live their lives in a manner “worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind” (1:27). The word “therefore” signals a shift into specifically how to fulfill this vision. Looking at the immediate context, Paul has been discussing his own struggle (Phil 1:12-26), and then his relationship and shared struggle with the Philippians (1:27-30). He now turns to their relationship with each other (2:1-4). He points to the example of Christ (2:5-11), then back to their relationships with each other (2:12-15), their relationship with him (2:16), and finally back to his own struggle (2:17-18). This forms a chiasmic structure in the flow of Paul’s thought, with Christ’s example taking the center of the pattern:

- a* Paul’s struggle (Phil 1:20-24)
- b* Paul’s relationship with the Philippians (Phil 1:25-30)
- c* Philippians’ relationships with each other (Phil 2:1-4)
- d* Example of Jesus (Phil 2:5-11)
- c*’ Philippians’ relationships with each other (Phil 2:12-15)
- b*’ Paul’s relationship with the Philippians (Phil 2:16)
- a*’ Paul’s struggle (Phil 2:17-18)

Each of these sections also contain a hint of the suffering of Christ (to which we will turn in a moment). Paul sees himself as being poured out in sacrifice (2:17), suffering which produces exaltation of Christ (1:20). He wants the Philippians to understand that they too have been called to

share in suffering and struggle (1:29-30), but that such emptying of self will produce God's pleasure (2:13) and glory, like stars shining in a dark sky (2:15).

Humility Unites Us - Philippians 2:1-4

As we move into our text, Paul seems to use a bit of sarcasm by repeating "any" four times, as if to ask the readers, "Is there anything good about being a christian?" He asks, "Have you received any encouragement? Any love? Any fellowship? Any tenderness and compassion?" (2:1). This technique calls attention to all that they had indeed been given by God and in their relationships with each other; it puts their focus onto the blessings of belonging to Christ, motivation for the suffering that is involved if there is to be unity. Paul asks the Philippians to make his joy "complete" (2:2a), indicating something is yet lacking. We can infer from the "incompleteness" of his statement and from what follows that there are issues of unity present in the church at Philippi (and even between specific individuals as we will see later).

Paul then urges the Philippians towards unity with repetition of the word "same" and a list of objectives: "same mind, same love, full accord, one mind" (2:2b). The word for "same" is *autos*, found many times in the New Testament, most often used as a pronoun stand-in for something else, like "him" or "it." Paul uses the same word elsewhere in similar context when making arguments for unity (such as six times in 1 Corinthians 12). It's clear Paul is calling them have identical mind, love, and spirit. The last objective of unity, translated "one mind" (NRSV) or "mindset" (NIV), is *phroneo*, as we discussed earlier, an intentional alignment of thinking. He is calling on them to align their mindsets with one another, even though they have differences. The verb tenses Paul uses here are present tense, state-of-being verbs, as if to emphasize this issue of mindset as being one of identity and view of self. He calls on the Philippians to let go of their differences by letting

go of self, and by giving the interests of others a higher priority than their own (2:3-4). This forms Paul's prescription for unity: in a word, humility. We can infer that in Paul's argument, without humility, unity is impossible.

He Who Unites Us - Philippians 2:5-11

To review, we have shown that much of the surrounding context speaks about suffering, pouring out of self, and the good that is produced from such sacrifice. Here this idea comes into crystal clear focus as Paul directs the Philippians, "In your relationships with each other, have the same mindset [*phroneo*] as that of Christ Jesus..." (2:5). What follows (vv. 6-11) is sometimes called a "Christ hymn"¹¹ and is probably from an earlier source the Philippians are familiar with that Paul is using as the centerpiece of his argument: Christ himself. This might have been a song that was sung in the early church, or piece of rhetoric that was meant to be memorized.¹² It has two parts: (1) Jesus emptied and (2) Jesus exalted. This two-part concept is central to the entire book of Philippians (as we will see in the discourse analysis below) in the idea that though we may suffer, God will provide in the end.

The passage begins with Christ's divinity (v 6). It claims that he was "in the form of God" (NRSV, ESV, HCSB, NASB), or in "very nature God" (NIV), or simply "He was God" (NLT). The Greek word here is *morphe*, meaning in very essence yet taking a different shape. Yet it says he didn't hold on to this divinity, which emphasizes Paul's argument for letting go of self. Jesus didn't see this divinity as something "to be exploited" (NRSV), "to be used to his

¹¹ J. Albert Harrill, "Slavery." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 6 vols., ed by Katherine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 5:306.

¹² Thielman, 355.

own advantage” (NIV, HCSB, “something to cling to” (NLT), or “a thing to be grasped” (ESV, NASB). Instead, Jesus emptied himself.

The word “emptied” (or “made...nothing” in the NIV) is *kenoo* (v. 7), and carries the idea of becoming hollow, and the loss of value, clearly a reference to his divine nature. Interestingly, when it says he instead took the form of a slave (v. 7), the same Greek word is used as in vs. 6, *morphe*. He was in very essence God, but become in very essence a slave. (A different word is used for his humanity, *schema*, which means “appearance,” as if to say he took even more the essence of a slave than the essence of a human.) Considering that slavery was an every-day part of urban society¹³ for the Philippians, this would have been a striking thought. The verb tense at this point shifts to passive verbs, as if to emphasize Christ’s trust and humility: “being born” as a human, “being found” as a man. His action in the passage is to “humble himself” and “become obedient to death.” It is probably hard for “christianized” Western contemporary readers to properly grasp what the weight of the exclamation, “even death on a cross!” (v. 8) would have meant to the Philippians, who celebrated their Roman citizenship and as such would have been precluded from even the prospect of such a death. The idea that Jesus, God in nature, emptied himself so completely as to die such a lowly death would have been remarkable to their perspective.

The word “therefore” signals the shift to the second part of the Christ hymn, Jesus exalted. The result of Jesus’ humility was immeasurable glory. Whereas death on a cross was to bring about public shame, this is turned upside down and instead Jesus gains a name above every other name. While beginning with dark and somber imagery, the passage closes with cosmic, dramatic,

¹³ Harrill, 5:304.

glory-filled language. The Christ hymn declares boldly that true spiritual reality is one in which every person living and who has ever lived will bow a knee and publicly declare “Jesus is Lord.” As stated above, the Greek word *kyrios* is a powerful title, carrying with it a claim of divinity and the subversive message that Jesus being Lord means “Cesar is not.”¹⁴

Greater Discourse Context of Philippians 2:1-11

We find this idea of the mindset (*phroneo*) of Christ throughout the letter of Philippians, even beyond what has already been mentioned in the passages surrounding 2:1-11. Paul puts himself into the Christ hymn in chapter 3, emptying himself of his credentials (3:7-8), saying that he wants to align completely with Christ, sharing in his suffering/death (Jesus emptied) in order to also share in his resurrection (Jesus exalted) (3:10-11). Paul says this mindset (*phroneo*) is one that every mature christian should have (3:15), one of which Paul himself is a model (3:17). He contrasts this mindset with those who are completely opposed to the cross-centric point of view and focused on earthly things (3:18-19). “But our citizenship is in heaven!” Paul argues, of significance to the Philippians who celebrated their Roman citizenship, reminding them of the second part of the hymn, and the reign of Christ that is to come.

Paul brings the argument to real-life application in chapter four, appealing publicly Euodia and Syntyche to share the same mindset (*phroneo*) (4:2). He says these two sisters “contended side by side” in the gospel with him (4:3), using language virtually identical to earlier in the letter referring to the Philippians as a whole (1:27), as if these two become a stand-in for the whole church at Philippi and the call to unity through humility. Finally, he says that through their gift-giving the Philippians have aligned their mindset (*phroneo*) with Paul (4:10, translated “concern”),

¹⁴ Reginald H. Fuller and Mark A. Powell, “Lord,” *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. by Mark A. Powell (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 565.

allowing them to share in the same struggle with him (4:14-15), one which will result in God providing for their needs (4:19), just as he does those of Paul (4:12-13). Though we may suffer, God will provide.

Theological Reflection

A theological principle that is found in Philippians 2:1-11 is this: humbly emptying ourselves and aligning our mindset with that of Jesus will bring unity among believers. Several elements are present in the passage: (1) Christians who have been given grace, (2) the call for unity despite different interests, and (3) the need to focus on the example of Jesus.

A contemporary application with similar elements would be the challenge of unity in a diverse church congregation when it comes to issues of race and culture. A recent Pew Research survey found a great disparity in the way blacks and whites view race relations in the United States. While the great majority of blacks surveyed felt that the country has much more work to do for blacks to achieve equal rights with whites (88%), a much lower percentage of whites surveyed felt this way (only 53%).¹⁵ There were similar disparate perspectives in many other aspects of the survey. It is natural for this same gap of thinking to be present in the church, as each of us comes from different cultural backgrounds and perspectives (whether we realize it or not).

As a white person, when I'm presented with the horrific history of the treatment of blacks in the country, and how this may shape views of current events and postings on social media, I might have perspective like, "Well, I didn't do it. I don't show racial discrimination. Stop trying to make me feel guilty." This would be a very selfish perspective and one unhelpful to unity,

¹⁵ "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart," *Pew Research Center*, Washington, DC, June 27, 2016, accessed October 14, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/on-views-of-race-and-inequality-blacks-and-whites-are-worlds-apart/>

according to Paul's Philippians argument. To put it in a different perspective, If I share with my wife about a painful or frustrating experience, it does me little good if her reaction is, "Well I didn't do it. I am not responsible for that happening to you. Stop trying to make me feel guilty." What I want from her in that moment is empathy and support: "Oh wow, I am sorry that happened to you. I imagine that must have been really frustrating. Tell me more." So when it comes to issues of racial inequality in our nation's history and in current events, I should employ a similar posture. I should not look to my own interest or perspectives, but rather empty myself as Philippians 2 teaches, considering others' perspectives above my own. To those that may have different experiences and perspectives regarding racial inequality, I should say, "Tell me more. Help me understand." Looking to the example of Jesus and his humility should be ample inspiration for any sacrifice of self I might make for the sake of unity. And if everyone in a diverse congregation is similarly following this principle of emptying self and imitating Christ's mindset, surely this will lead to a community whose unity will bring glory to God.

The jewel, the heartbeat, the essential core of Paul's ministry and message is contained in the magnificent passage of scripture, Philippians 2:1-11. There is a paradox we find here of a mindset that is so foreign to the every-day human struggle. And yet it is a mindset that will bring unity to the church, glory to God, and make the followers of Christ shine like stars in a dark world (Phil 2:15).

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