

Philippians: Thought Flow

The first question we will deal with in this lesson is very challenging, and the second one is equally so. The first question is this: Philippians 1:6 seems to be recklessly quoted as an absolute guarantee that God will perfect in every Christian the work He began. Is it not more accurate to apply this verse only to believers who are “participating” in the Gospel? I would say that if we recklessly apply this verse saying, “I can please myself; I can do what I want; God has begun a good work and He will carry it to completion.” If we see this as a kind of an automatic foregone conclusion, then I completely agree. That is not the intent of Philippians 1:6. It is an affirmation and encouragement for those who are troubled in their hearts, who wonder how they will grow in the Lord, and how this kind of maturing and steadfastness in humility will happen. It is an affirmation not for those recklessly taking it for granted, but for those who are searching for the ways of the Lord and saying, “God has begun a good work and He will bring it to conclusion.” It is an affirmation.

The second thing I want to point out about this verse is that it is formulated in the plural: “...being confident of this, that He who began a good work in [or “among”] you [plural: “all of you” or “the group of you”], will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” He is not referring to an individual but to the church of Philippi as a group. It is very much that partnership in the faith, but also the fellowship of growth that He works among you and He will grow and bring that to completion, with perhaps the necessary exhortation or encouragement of one to another. Thus there is much more implied here. And when he says, “[He] will carry it on to completion,” he is literally saying, “bring you to the goal.” I think, with those points, we should never sit back and take God's work for granted; rather, we are called to participate in and search out God's ways. As we do so, this is a statement of affirmation and encouragement.

The second question we will look at in this lecture is “What does this partnership in the Gospel (Philippians 1:5) look like between churches with widely varying doctrines?” In other words, how much do we agree to disagree and still remain in fellowship with those we disagree with? It is all nice and fine to talk about partnership, but what happens when it comes to the practical details and we actually are challenged in this way? I would advocate, as a rough approach to this, the pyramid of cooperation. I believe that there are some with whom we need to be partnering very closely and others with whom our partnership can be looser and allow for more disagreements. I see some of the division between Paul and Barnabas to be, in some ways, an acceptable separation. Within a local church there needs to be a high degree of really being able to partner together in terms of doctrine and clarity of what you understand from Scripture. However, the partnership in the Gospel is not only limited to that. We have had evangelistic outreaches in Germany where we work with various denominations in that city. That is what I mean by the pyramid of cooperation. Those whom you work with most closely, especially within your local church, you ought to be able to read and appropriate Scripture in fundamentally similar ways. But on certain, broader levels, you can live together in prayer, evangelism, and presenting the Gospel, because there is a broad evangelical consensus that you can find for evangelism—even when you do not agree on finer points of doctrine. And then, if there are major outreaches of a social nature, that pyramid becomes even wider and you can cooperate, associate, and be involved with other Christians with whom the main thing you share is a love for Jesus. Together you can be salt and light in your community by acts of mercy, etc. That would be my answer to that question of partnership. It is not an absolute on every level or in every situation. It is not that type of a partnership, but it kind of grows out in this way. Just as in relationships, there are some partnerships that are very close and others that are a little wider. And so I would say there is room for doctrinal difference when you evangelize and reach out. It is harder when you work together in leading a local church and there are major differences. That would be my simple answer, although there is certainly need to become more specific there.

Let us turn to the description of having the mind of Christ in Philippians. This is in the section of 2:5-11, the second main exhortation area. However, there is a phenomenon that we need to realize first: Paul does not intend to teach us doctrine about Christ in 2:5-11. The teaching about Christ serves an exhortational purpose. We need to understand that the description of Christ's deeds, on our behalf, is in the context of exhortation and encouragement. I am using exhortation here not necessarily only in the negative sense of correcting something wrong, but in the sense of encouraging toward a certain goal. Thus, it is in the context of an attitude, mind set, and approach to life to which Paul is encouraging the Philippians that we find the reference to the great deed of Christ on our behalf. I think it is very important that we realize and understand that. We also need to think about the examples. Let me read the introduction, the encouragement, in Philippians 2:1-5. This was one of the central passages in our wedding when my wife and I got married.

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, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better [or, "more important"] than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Then Paul begins to explain what Jesus did on our behalf. I think you see herein the challenge concerning humility. There is a warning here—small but clear—not to pursue selfish ambition and vain conceit, not to pursue yourself, but rather to seek the antidote to seeking yourself: humility. Thus we have already seen in our study of Philippians the importance of humility. And we will learn it even more as we look at what is called the Philippian hymn, concerning Christ. Humility is not weakness. Humility is a certain form of strength that has the courage and the ability to perceive and pursue the interest of somebody else. It is actually a great strength. Humility does not mean that you just kind of have your head slightly turned down and you say, "Please do not look at me; I am not really important." That is not humility. Humility is not noticeable at first. When you are interacting with someone who is very humble, you just feel that they are very interested in you—not in a wrong way, but in a beneficial way. They are interested in your good and in your growth. That is how you experience humility—with someone who is not busy with him or herself. Humility is a strength. This is very clear from the way that humility is contrasted with seeking yourself, pursuing your own ambition and vain conceit, demanding and emphasizing that you are somebody. The opposite of humility, self-seeking, is based on a sense of only being able to feel good about yourself through another recognizing how important you are; that is when you will feel good. And you will make that other person recognize your worth. For instance, in Germany the culture that has developed there is based on titles. You have to beware if you do not address the right person with the right title; this shows the attitude of needing to be recognized, and needing to make others feel inferior—needing to make others feel that they are receiving something from your generosity. It is that conceited, blown up sense of self. Here Paul encourages the Philippians to see something else, to see the other.

This is the big question: in what way does Paul employ and introduce Christ into his encouragement toward humility? In some Bibles the heading for the section we are studying, 2:5-11, is, "Imitating Christ's Humility." I would sharply differ with this description of Paul's intention. We are not encouraged here to imitate Jesus. Not, at least, in that unguarded sense. Are you God? Are you able to let go of your status as God, of your place as God? Have you ever been incarnated into human flesh, being God? Have you ever suffered to the point of death, not only willingly, but as a substitutionary atonement on behalf of mankind? Have you ever been exalted to the right hand of God? Is the purpose

for your life that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father? You are not to imitate Jesus. We have to interpret this text carefully—this text of what Paul says about humility and when he points to Christ. We will need to be careful as Paul moves from the admonition toward that kind of humility that seeks the good of the other to seeing what Christ did. Many people have struggled with that enormously and we will need to struggle with that a little now.

Philippians 2:5 still belongs to the admonition part: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,” and then in verses 6 to 11 Paul shifts to pointing to Christ in the Philippian hymn:

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.
 And being in found in appearance as a man,
 He humbled himself
 and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
 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.

Thus, starting in verse six, Paul breaks out into a description of what Christ did. And the question is: How does that description of what Christ did relate to the exhortation of humility that certainly should be part of the life and the growth of the Christian? How does Paul relate those two? Is it imitation? I am using imitation as meaning that you see Jesus do something and you copy it. Is that really what is intended here? What is Paul’s intention? We need to think and listen carefully to the connection. Perhaps we can understand Paul to mean, “Your attitude, your mindset, your approach to things should be the approach Jesus took to His particular, unique, and unrepeatable deed on our behalf.” We are not to imitate Jesus. We are to have the attitude that led Him to a unique, unparalleled deed on our behalf. There is something of how Christ approached His unique task that is transferable. That is different from imitating Christ. I am not speaking about imitation of Christ. Rather, I am saying that, with Paul, we are to extract a mentality or a principle of approach that is transferable from Christ to us. I hope that is clear: we are not called not to imitate Christ, but we are called to have that same mindset. As a Jew and a Jewish teacher and preacher, Paul would know that if this principle applies to the greatness of Christ, it certainly applies to the smallness of my life: from the greater to the lesser, from the wide to the small and narrow. If the one, who is coequal with God, who shares the divine nature with God the Father, who eternally exists as the Son with the Father—if He did not hold on to His place and status as being God, but rather released His privilege, right, and place, and let go and emptied Himself in the way of becoming a human being, and was willing to die on the cross for the sake of others, then how much more should we let go of the little petty status, dignity, or greatness that we claim? The little petty recognition that we get from our jobs and relationships, the little bit of notice we get from others? If He who is so great released that grip, how much more ought we to have that same mindset—not to imitate Jesus, but to have the mindset—that whatever we hold on to, whatever bone we still growlingly protect like dogs in order to retain some sense of place, to defend our spot, to work for the range of independence that we must have so that no one can get too close to us, how much more is that to be released? Having the attitude of Christ, we ought to let go and take a place in our lives that is not so

recognized or noticed, that is not so respected, that is not so rewarded, that is really only hopeful in one sense: that God would meet us in our vulnerability and weakness.

There is no absolute guarantee here. We must not make this into a formula of “If you let go of what you value, then God will surely bring you into a great place of righteousness, recognition, etc.” But there is this assurance that God will be your portion in His time, in His way, and on His grounds—not on yours. The “therefore” which begins verse nine is magnificent; at the very point of greatest vulnerability and exposure, the Father enters and vindicates the Son who has let go of everything, of all dignity on our behalf. He exalts Him, raises Him up, and gives Him a place of honor, love, and significance. Again, we must be careful that we do not make this into a formula. But let us look at the story of Joseph, a type of Christ. His story is an illustration of a man who is willing to count on God when he is being sold into slavery, when he is tempted by an attractive woman, when he is forgotten in jail, and when he is forgotten by people whom he had helped once they got out of jail. He is a man who is then vindicated and brought to a place of exaltation, dignity, and honor. But I think we would be understanding humility completely wrongly if we focused on the reward and said, “You know what, I think that is the greatest deal possible. I will let go for awhile and then I will be even better off; I will be more recognized and dignified, so I will pay the price for the sake of having that.” If that is our focus and attitude, we have lost it. We must surrender unconditionally. We must let go. We must be vulnerable. We cannot depend on ourselves and define, determine, and demand our position; we must let go. Then it is God's part; it is God's way.

It is fantastic in this hymn that there are two major active verbs attributed to Jesus, and two major active verbs attributed to God. The two major active verbs attributed to Jesus are, “He made Himself nothing,” and “He humbled Himself.” These are two terms of letting go, of surrendering, of giving over—not giving up, but giving over. The humility of Christ never is in an empty space. It is always based on the fact that He serves and obeys His Father. The two major verbs attributed to God are, “He exalted Him,” and “He gave Him a name above all names,” so “exalted” and “gave” are the two verbs. Here is this verb pair of letting go and this verb pair of exaltation and raising up. I think it is the most beautiful testimony we can hear—that kind of openness and humility—that a person was vulnerable and exposed to God and that God met in His way, in His time, and in His circumstance. You see, when we defend and pursue ourselves, when we push our way through, either in a legalistic way of keeping the law, or in an antinomian way, we rob ourselves and God of the wonderful fruit of His intervention, which He promises: He will exalt the lowly. We see this in the wonderful story of Mary in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. When we refuse to humble ourselves, that beautiful fragrance of God meeting a humble heart is robbed.

Therefore, what Paul is saying here is not, “Do as Christ did,” but rather, “Have that same mindset that is transferable. Have that mindset to approach your situation.” I want to say it again; I fear that when we think of humility, we think of weakness, of giving up the battle before it starts. But I think humility is not that. It is this: “I am focused on you, I am focused on a group of people, and I want to serve them; I want to do them good.” Christ did not humble Himself just to look humble. He did it for the purpose of reaching you. Thus there is a relational, outward-bound vector to that letting go process. You are looking out and pursuing the good of someone else or of a group of other people as you learn that humility. Being truly humble, you seek that there would be something good coming for that person in that situation. So it is anything but weakness. It has nothing to do with just surrendering and giving up. Rather, it has a sense of concentrated strength to pursue the other, to pursue the relationship, to pursue that which is painful and difficult, and to count on God's intervention.

Now let us look a little at the details in this wonderful hymn: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.” This is the translation of the New International Version of the English Bible. I think it is better to say, “something to hold onto,” or “something to retain.” That verb is very difficult to interpret, but I think it is perhaps best to translate it as “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be retained, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.” This phrase, “made Himself nothing,” literally means, “poured Himself out.” Many people have debated what that really refers to. When this issue is debated it is called “the emptying of Christ.” “What is it that Jesus emptied Himself of?” many people ask.

Through the history of interpretation, some have said that Jesus emptied Himself of certain attributes of God: the so-called relative attributes of deity, such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, but He retained the essential or communicable attributes of holiness, love, and righteousness. So they argue that He emptied Himself of the relative attributes of God. That is possible. I do not think, however, that the Philippian hymn is as specific as that. And I think from what follows after the phrase, “He made Himself nothing,” which is the phrase, “taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness,” that the emptying is not so much an emptying of something, but it is an emptying into something. He confined Himself to being an incarnate human with real flesh and blood. You cannot read this as if Christ only seemed to be in the form of man—He was really in the form of man. It is very clear that someone who is in the form of man cannot die if they are not really human. You must understand this as a real incarnation; Christ was a real human being. Thus the emptying is more emptying into, into the confinement, into the fact that He is living as a human being, although He is God. It is a description of the unimaginable—that the creation mediator, Jesus, the Son of God, would actually become a human being. It is the stone of stumbling; it is the challenge of all belief that Christ would actually become a human being. But I think that is the action Christ is taking in emptying Himself. He is not so much emptying Himself from something, but into something. He let go of the privilege, the right, and the status of being God for our sake. In the end, I do not think we can fully understand what is being described here except that we do have a sense of fitting into some confinement that is so alien to Him, being God. He is infinite to have power and wisdom over everything, and He was willing to confine Himself to that, and to the pain, limitation, and confinement that this brings with it—for the sake of reaching you and me.

I am sometimes amazed by what rigors astronauts go through. We do not know half of the problems they go through to be able to swing around the earth a few times and do a few tricks out in space. It is enormous. I have seen one program on space travel and it is incredible; even the question of how toiletry is handled in space is complicated; it is a whole science. But space travel pales completely when you think of the confinement of the exercise of letting go that Jesus, the Son of God, undertook on our behalf. This is the most eloquent description and presentation of what humility means: letting go of greatness in order to reach someone else. I would venture to say that none of us has ever exhausted that kind of dimension when we were asked to reach somebody. We think, in some situations that we are really crawling very low and we are willing to connect and not put ourselves first. But I am afraid I have not really begun to know what humility is. I have not begun to see what I should be willing to let it cost me in order to reach, really reach, somebody else, or to reach into a church situation or whatever the challenges of looking outward are. But as I reflect and meditate on that type of mentality that brought Jesus to be the incarnate Son of God on our behalf, I start to see that what I do, and what I am asked to do, is pretty meager, simple, and small.

Thus Paul brings in Jesus not to be imitated—we cannot imitate Him—but for us to see His mindset of letting go and of confining Himself for the sake of reaching out to somebody. Paul presents us with His presentation of Jesus so that we would be willing to take on limitation for the sake of reaching

somebody rather than pursuing what we please, such as recognition. Some people have noticed that this process of humility echoes John 13:3-17. In this passage Jesus arises and takes off his outer garments, takes a towel and wraps it around Himself, and takes some water and washes His disciples' feet. Once He is finished, He takes His outer garments and sits again at the table and says, "You address me as teacher and Lord [*kyrios*], and rightly so, for that is what I am." There is a certain parallel structure here to humbling Himself, which serves to illustrate that which marks His entire life and perspective on becoming a human being. I think that looking at John 13 helps us see that humility is not only taught about Jesus, but it is also done by Jesus, and it is demonstrated in this foot washing. Therefore, I believe that it is significant for us to see that demonstration of the mindset of Christ that is found in John 13.

It is true that we have the hope of vindication, and I think that is where we have great challenges, because God does not seem to meet us in the way we would expect Him to meet us. Even concerning Jesus it says in Hebrews 5:7 that God completely answered his prayers after death. Jesus prayed "to the one who could save him from death," and God did save Him—by raising Him from death. There is a mystery in the way God vindicates. We can see the life of Joseph; we can see what God has done with His son. And we can see that He will vindicate the ones who surrender to Him and seek His power in their willingness to let go. But I think we need to be very careful that we do not attach specific expectations to our hope for vindication from God because what we see from the hymn is that our goal in our service is that He would be glorified, exalted, and honored. Whatever confinement we find ourselves in, our goal of the honor of Christ should grow and be visible, that every tongue would confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We want to be part of the movement of worship of Christ to the glory of God the Father as the culmination of all of creation. That should be our driving force, not that we would be recognized or vindicated, but that the honor of Christ would be growing and expanding as we let go, serve, and live out this attitude of considering each other more important than ourselves. Be outward bound; be aware of someone else in another situation rather than being so busy with yourself. This is a challenge for every single one of us, and I think we are asked to lean into this encouragement and exhortation of Paul, this partnership in the Gospel, and trust the Lord as He would lead us into knowing where we need to let go. He will show us where we need to be humble in this sense that we have defined it in this lesson. He will enable us to trust that God will lead us, see us through, uphold us, and give us the strength to hold still. I think that is a challenge, and also an opportunity, for everyone.

Paul goes on in 2:12 to say, "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, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." Here there is the challenge of seeing that this exhortation to steadfastness, and particularly this reference to humility, is part of the process of sanctification. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling [not with fear and trembling because you are afraid that you may lose your salvation, but with a sense of awe and respect for God], for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." It is very real and practical. It has nothing of this esoteric sense, this elusive humility sense; rather, it is very simple and very practical.

I think we are challenged in our lives to reflect by asking, "What areas am I holding on to? Where do I seek my own?" I think I can think of 10 areas in my own life right now, and 20 more in a few minutes. Thus I do not think we have to look very far or be very esoteric. I think this challenge is very direct and close to our own lives and experiences. With this church that is growing wonderfully, Paul has, led by the Spirit of God, put his finger on an area where the Philippians need to grow. They are very willing to serve. They are growing wonderfully. But they need to continue to grow in that humility. Now I ask you to think about this last question: "How does this message relate to your personal and professional life?" May the Lord bless and strengthen you. Thank you.