

**Zechariah 9:9 (ESV)**

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion  
    Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
    Righteous and having salvation is he,  
Humble and mounted on a donkey,  
    On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

**Philippians 2:5-11 (DHT)**

<sup>5</sup> Let this unity-of-mind be in you, which is also in Jesus Messiah <sup>6</sup> who, being in the form of God, did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.

<sup>8</sup> Being found in the appearance of man, he humbled himself, being made obedient until death, even death from a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore, God has highly exalted him, and graciously-given him the name beyond every name, <sup>10</sup> that in the name of Jesus, every knee will bow in the heavens, on the earth, and beneath the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue will confess that Jesus Messiah is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

**Introduction**

We live in a world that hates humility. Pride is plastered abound as the slogan for movements. Pride is celebrated as a virtue behind the postmodern obsession of the self. Humility is an affront to the hedonistic impulses of our culture. We hate humility. We, like the rest of humanity around us, have a natural tendency to put ourselves ahead of others. *My* needs to be addressed. *Your* needs can be addressed later; *my* needs need to be addressed now. I know you’re telling me about a book or show you really like, but I already read or watched it, so I really don’t care what you have to say or even that you’re excited about it—my opinion about it matters more than yours, so just stop talking so I can give you the right perspective. How easy it is for our minds to wander into this way of thinking rather than actually listening to another person and sharing their excitement rather than hoarding it to ourselves. We are naturally inclined to put ourselves ahead of others, which the Bible calls pride.

This morning is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate the triumphal-entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to be crowned with a crown of thorns as King of the Jews. While we’re not looking at

one of the triumphal-entry passages this morning, there is an element from Matthew’s account specifically that we are looking at this morning—an element that normally gets glossed over—and to do that we are using a different passage, the famous Phil. 2:5-11. Christ exemplifies and teaches us to be humble. Paul commands us to be humble like Christ.

### **The Vertical and Horizontal Elements of “Gospel Culture”**

New Testament (NT) ethics are invariably wrapped up in the character of Christ, for NT ethics finds their purpose in producing Christlikeness in us. NT ethics do not come in isolation; God doesn’t tell us to act without ever giving an explanation. Of course, it should be enough for us to obey simply if God commands it, but that’s not the pattern God uses. The way Christians are to live comes as a response to an example set by God himself. *How* we live is modeled after Christ. There is both a *Vertical* example and a *Horizontal* response to Gospel-centered living.<sup>1</sup> We are to love *because* God first loved us. We are to be holy *because* God is holy. We are to worship in an orderly fashion *because* God is a God of order, not chaos. We are to forgive *because* Christ has forgiven us. We are to resist temptation *because* Christ resisted temptation. We are to willingly face and endure through suffering *because* Christ willingly faced and endured through suffering.

The word “Christian” means to be “like Christ.” To be like Christ, we need to think and act like Christ. When it comes to your Christian life, are you just pretending, or are you all-in? So many people claim to be Christian, yet their lives show no fruit of Christlikeness. There is, of course, going to be areas of our lives that are not yet like Christ, for the process of becoming like Christ is a lifelong process. This doesn’t mean you don’t pursue Christlikeness at all; what I simply mean is don’t get overwhelmed or think of yourself as a failure because you don’t have your life all together. That’s not how transformation works.

Sanctification is a *lifelong* process that concludes when we enter glory. There is a sense in which we are instantaneously sanctified at our conversion when we are *declared* holy; our bodies are immediately deemed suitable to house God’s Spirit. And at the same time, we are progressively sanctified as we are gradually transformed into people whose lifestyles and mindsets *become worthy* of God’s initial declaration of us as holy. Transformation into Christlikeness doesn’t take

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Schreiner writes that the NT books are “written from a vertical and horizontal worldview: because of Christ’s enthronement as King and Lord (vertical), community life implications arise (horizontal). The conviction of all these authors was that the kingdom communities were living in the last days because King Jesus had arrived and be raised from the dead.” *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), pg. 115.

place overnight, but it does take place; the pursuit is a daily pursuit. When it comes to your Christian life, are you just pretending, or are you all-in?

### **The Vertical Example of Humility: The Symphony**

Philippians 2 fits the pattern of NT ethics in that horizontal action is commanded of us as a response to the vertical example of Christ. In vss. 1-5, Paul says we are to be humble *because* Christ was humble and then in vss. 5-11 Paul tells us *how* Christ was humble. This morning, we’re going to consider the vertical example, the humility of Jesus our King.

Philippians 2 is one of the NT Christological hymns, or songs about Christ. The three most prominent Christological hymns are found in John 1, Col. 1, and Phil. 2. The early church did not principally teach doctrine in a systematic or linear way like we do today. They chiefly taught doctrine through song. Songs are easier to recall from memory than straightforward information. Modern science proves what Christians have known for 2,000 years, and what Jews have known for even longer. Have you ever wondered how Jews teach their sons to memorize Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy by the age of thirteen? Because the entire Hebrew Bible (HB) is written with vocalization. You don’t read the HB; you sing it. This is just how God created our brains to work. As much as it pains me as a teacher and preacher, your individual theology is shaped more by the worship music you listen and sing along to than the sermons you hear. Church history had little concern for the aesthetics of worship that many churches prioritize today; Church history had *all* concern about lyrical richness, because the purpose of songs was primarily to teach.

Paul uses a song to call on us to exhibit humility. In keeping with this concept, I am calling Phil. 2:5-11 a symphony; a symphony that teaches about Christ in three movements: Movement 1 in vss. 5-7 of the humility of Christ’s incarnation; Movement 2 in vs. 8 of the humility of Christ’s death; and Movement 3 in vss. 9-11 of Christ’s exaltation as the worthy reward of humility.

#### *Movement I*

In vs. 6 we read that “being in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped.” Jesus is fully God and has never not been fully God. Even before his miraculous birth to a young mom, Jesus existed as the eternal Son of God. From the Colossian hymn, we sing that “by Christ all things were created... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:15-20). There is a popular belief today among Joel Osteen-types that

was declared heresy at the Council of Constantinople in AD 381; a heresy called Adoptionism, which erroneously teaches that Jesus was a man who became god when the Spirit anointed him at his baptism. Consequently, when the Spirit anoints us, *we* become little-g gods as well. *But this is heretical*. Jesus was not a man who became a god; he is God who became a man. The order is significant. Jesus was fully God and then became man. As Paul writes elsewhere, at just the right time, God sent his pre-existent Son to be born of a woman and born under the law for the purpose of redeeming mankind from the law (Gal. 4:4-5).

God the Father and God the Son are all eternally equal and one in essence and nature. This is an equality vs. 6 clues us into. “Being in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard being equal with God as something to be grasped.” Though Jesus did not grasp at, cling to, or rely upon his equality with God, this verse teaches that there fundamentally *is* equality between the Father and the Son. “But,” vs. 7 continues, “[Jesus] emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.” As Paul writes elsewhere, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). There is a popular belief today among Bethel-types that was declared heresy at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451; a heresy called Kenoticism, which erroneously teaches that when the Word became Flesh, the deity of Jesus was forfeited; that Jesus was no longer fully God. *But this is heretical*. Jesus is fully God and fully man; and the primary contribution of Chalcedon on this is that Jesus is not two persons, but one person; one person who is both fully God *and* fully man.

The Belgic Confession from AD 1561 summarizes the conclusions of Chalcedon like this: “We believe that by being thus conceived the person of the Son has been *inseparably united* and joined together with human nature, in such a way that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in a single person, with each nature retaining its own distinct properties...”<sup>2</sup> The Church has wrestled intensely with this passage and over the course of centuries has refined with precision this understanding. Jesus is both fully God and fully man, with both of his natures “inseparably united” in one person, sometimes called the God-man. Because of this, there was never a point in which Jesus was not God; and since his conception there has never been a point in which Jesus was not fully human. After his resurrection, Jesus ascended bodily in the clouds and was seated at the right hand of God...still alive. Jesus, who is one person not two,

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<sup>2</sup> From Article 19 of the Belgic Confession, [Belgic Confession | Christian Reformed Church \(crena.org\)](http://crena.org)

is, in fact, *still* fully God and *still* fully man. If Jesus stopped being fully God for even one second, then he is not the God of the Bible.

Verse 7 says “but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being made in the likeness of men.” So what was emptied? Verse 7 defines Jesus’ emptying as the willful refusal to grasp at, cling to, or rely upon his equality with God, even though he fundamentally remained fully God, equal with the Father. Verse 8 continues to sing Jesus’ emptying, as the taking *on* the form of men. When the Word became Flesh, the pre-existent Son *added* to himself a fully human nature. Paradoxical as it sounds, the emptying of Jesus is not the subtraction of anything, but is instead the addition of humanity to his deity.

### *Movement II*

The symphony continues in vs. 8, that “being found in the appearance of man, [Christ] humbled himself, being made obedient until death, even death from a cross.” In Hollywood, there is something called “Method Actors,” in which actors take on the lifestyle of their character even when they are not filming; they make themselves *become* the character to better portray the character on film. A recent example is Austin Butler, who took on the role of Elvis, so much so that he continues to talk like Elvis even though the film was completed two years ago. Method actors exemplify taking on a new identity, and yet they are still pretending; at some point, they still revert back to who they were. They pretend for a while, but they are still pretending.

Jesus was not pretending; he was all-in on the purpose God determined for his life, which involved Jesus laying aside his rights as the pre-existent Son of God *by taking on* human flesh and all that humanity entails. He was tempted fiercely; suffered immensely. Jesus says to Peter at his betrayal that all he had to do was ask and the Father would rescue him before asking Peter this question: “But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled?” (Matthew 26:53-54; cf. John 18:10). Jesus could have been rescued, but he refused. Jesus was not pretending; he was all-in. Jesus had every right and the ability to call on God the Father, his equal, to rescue him from suffering and to rescue him from death, but grasping at, clinging to, or relying upon his equality with the Father was something he did not do. Had Jesus called upon his Father to rescue him, then his taking on of humanity was merely pretend.

The only way for Jesus to go all-in was to take on humanity in its fullness; to live the human experience in its entirety. Jesus *had* to be tempted just like we are, otherwise it could not be said that he lived the human experience. Yet, *unlike us*, Jesus perfectly resisted every temptation. When

you face temptation, has it ever struck you that the longer you resist, the stronger the temptation gets? And then we give in and suddenly the temptations are lighter and easier to resist. Jesus never experienced that release. His temptations grew stronger and stronger. He suffered through temptation fiercer than any temptation you or I have faced, which is why Hebrews tells us he can sympathize and empathize with sure wisdom for our every need. This is why Luke tells us in the childhood narratives that Jesus learned wisdom through willful submission. This is why Hebrews tells us he learned obedience through suffering.<sup>3</sup> Jesus was made obedient until the point of death. Jesus *had* to be tempted, and Jesus *had* to die, otherwise his emptying would be emptied of its significance; Jesus would have just been pretending. But Jesus was not pretending. Jesus lived the life that we live, yet he also lived the life we fail to live because he lived perfectly *obedient* to the point of his death on the cross.

### *Movement III*

Jesus exhibited humility in his taking on of human flesh; Jesus chiefly showcased humility in his submission and obedience to the point of death. And then, the resurrection and exaltation of Christ are sung as one movement of ascent from the depths of death. Because of his humble life and humble death, the Father raised Jesus from the dead and a few weeks later raised him even further to the right hand of the Father where Jesus currently reigns as our exalted King. Verses 10-11 quote from Isaiah who also says YHWH gives the glory of his name to none other than the Messiah, and it is Jesus who receives the glory of YHWH’s name. It is Messiah Jesus who reigns as King, and what is the domain of his kingdom? Movement III sings of the three-part structure of the cosmic temple. All of creation will bow before King Jesus, all who are in the heavens above, on the earth, and beneath the earth. Paul elsewhere writes that “God’s purpose...set forth in Christ...is a plan...to unite all things in him” (Eph. 1:9-10). The point is evident: all creation will be gathered to bow before King Jesus. This will happen, and you will either bow in defeat as an enemy of God, or you will bow in worship as a child of God.

Read through the whole Bible and you will not be able to avoid this fundamental truth: God is obsessed with humility. God humbles the proud, but he also exalts the humble. Psalm 147:6 – The Lord exalts the humble and casts the wicked to the ground. Matthew 18:4 – Whoever

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<sup>3</sup> This doesn’t mean Jesus was disobedient prior; it means he learned obedience at a depth we have never known. The distinction between quantitative vs. qualitative obedience and wisdom (cf. Luke 1:52-53) is from Bruce Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), pgs. 47-58.

humbles himself like a child will be exalted in the Kingdom. Luke 14:11 – God will exalt the humble and bring down those who exalt themselves. James 4:10 – Humble yourself and God will exalt you. First Peter 1:6 – Humble yourself and God will exalt you at the right time. Jesus says in Mark 10:45 that he came not to be served, but to serve others and give himself for others. Jesus was exalted *because* Jesus humbled himself. Zechariah 9:9 prophesies that Messiah will come humbly mounted on a donkey. On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to be crowned with a crown of thorns as King of the Jews. Though he was king; though he entered Jerusalem with all the pomp and circumstance of palm branches and shouts of Hosanna, his entrance was nonetheless marked by *humility*, because *humility* is at the core of who Jesus is.

### **The Horizontal Response of Humility: Participation**

This is the vertical example of the humility of Christ. A leading expert on first century hymns writes that, “Early Christian hymns instruct as much as they praise... [This] instruction...taps into the power of poetry and elevated speech to draw an audience into *participation* in the realities it describes.”<sup>4</sup> The opening verses of Phil. 2 command us to be humble *because* Christ was humble. Paul writes that if there is anything worthwhile about being a follower of Christ, then unity-of-mind is the chief expression. In vs. 2 Paul says, “fulfill my joy by having unity-of-mind, having the same love, united-in-soul and united-in-mind.” Unity-of-mind is the result of being united-in-soul and united-in-love. This does not mean we all become the same person. To be united does not mean to be identical; it means to be devoted to one another and devoted *with* one another to the same thing.

The word for love in vs. 2 is *agape*. I define *agape* like this: “*Agape is an others-focused love typically expressed through sacrificial giving with the goal of building up the other.*”<sup>5</sup> Paul commands us to shift our mind off ourself and instead on the ‘other,’ whoever that may be. The world celebrates pride. I define pride like this: “*Pride is an unreasonable inflation of the heart stemming from a comparative mindset that favors the self over the other.*” But Paul calls us to the opposite of pride; he calls us to humility expressed through love.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance* (Downers Grove: IV Press, 2018), pg. 59, emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> For more, see my message, “What Love Is: It’s the Gospel.”

The world is the source of selfishness and boastfulness, but Paul commands us to be united by doing the opposite: “regard one another as more supreme or higher than themselves, not looking to themselves only, but also that of each other.” Do you notice Paul does not define humility as belittling yourself? Sometimes we think to be humble means we need to hate ourselves. *That’s not humility*. Charles Spurgeon defines humility as the practice of thinking rightly about ourselves. CS Lewis famously said: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”<sup>6</sup> Just as Jesus was equal with God yet did not consider his equality as something to be grasped, so also, though we are equal with one another, we are not to consider our equality with one another as something to be grasped. Humility is not a belittling of the self; it is an elevating of ‘the other.’

There are those who are loudly proud and there are those who are quietly humble, but then there are those who are so humble they need to tell you. Humility is not just about external actions; it’s first a mindset that *leads* to external action. Paul doesn’t command us to be humble by bleeding to death on a cross like Jesus. For most, if not all of us, that’s not how we will die; and that doesn’t make us bad Christians. Instead, Paul says “have this *mind* among you.” Humility is not a fake it until you make it sort of thing; it’s a way of life to the Christian because humility is the way of life to Christ himself. If we are to be like Christ, then humility ought to be the default stature of our lives. Are you just pretending, or are you all-in?

Let’s pray: “Lord, we marvel at your stunning display of humility. You, the Most High, have not refrained from taking the lowest and worst position imaginable. O Lord, how foolish all our pride seems when we remember the cross! Help us to follow your example, Lord. Teach us the pathway of humility... Lord, help us embrace these words and know them as joyful words: it’s not about us. Give us a sense of the splendor of your glory. Teach us the joy and freedom of spending our lives to make you known, and unite our hearts together with everyone else serving this wonderful cause.”<sup>7</sup> May this be a community that follows the gentle and lowly example of Jesus, in whose name I pray, amen.

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<sup>6</sup> This is attributed to CS Lewis by Rick Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life*, from a section summarizing Lewis’ teaching on humility, though there is some debate since there is no record of CS Lewis directly saying this.

<sup>7</sup> Ortlund, pgs. 7, 70.