

1. Humility

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we begin a new mini-series this week. We're going to have four short studies from different letters in the New Testament. And I hope to begin today by reading from Philippians, chapter 1, verse 27, to chapter 2, verse 11.

And if you have a church Bible, that's on page 980 and 981. Paul, writing from prison to the church he founded in Philippi, chapter 1, verse 27.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

[1 : 4 3] Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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.

Amen. Well, George Muller is probably a name known to you. He was the Christian preacher who managed orphanages in Bristol in the 19th century.

And in his autobiography, he writes very warmly about a European aristocrat called Baron von Kamp. And he was, I think he ran factories.

[3 : 1 2] And he was a Christian believer. And he used to help out students who were struggling financially. He would, especially theological students, he was concerned that they were all converted. And he used to help them.

And there was one student called Thomas who was in Berlin, and he ran out of money. And so he went to see the Baron. Or he arranged to go and see him. And he was very keen that he would be able to discuss philosophy and religion with him, to argue with this famous Christian man.

And so he got to the Baron's house. The Baron was out. But he'd left instructions for him to be given a room. And he was allowed to stay, I think free of charge. He was to come to dinner every night with the Baron.

And whenever the Baron was home, he was very helpful to this young man. He would help him take his shoes off. He would help him practically with all his tasks. He was really just a servant to this guy.

And after a few weeks, Thomas got a bit frustrated. And he said, I really want to discuss philosophy with the Baron. And he said to him, Baron, I just don't understand. I've come here to argue with you and you're just consistently nice to me.

[4 : 18] Why? Why is this? And the Baron said, Well, my young friend, I learned to serve from the Lord Jesus Christ. And I do wish you'd read the Gospel of John.

And he went off to bed. And George Muller comments that that young man, so touched by his love, did take up the Gospel of John, met with the Lord Jesus, and became a Christian, and was at the time of writing a believer to that day.

Baron von Kamp learned from the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, our servant King. And in this short series of four studies, I pray that we too, as we read and meditate together, will learn from the example of Christ and learn to imitate him, to walk as he walked.

I want to look at four passages in the New Testament where the writers of Scripture point our attention to a particular example of Christ. When faced with a particular pastoral problem, they respond to that problem by urging Christians to walk as Christ walked and to live as he lived.

And it's appropriate that our first reading should be about Christian service. I've entitled this Humility. It's really a passage about humble Christian service. To give you a bit of brief background, the letter to the Philippians was written by Paul from prison to the Philippian church.

[5 : 37] And the Philippian church, you'll know, is one of these sort of happy churches in a sense, isn't it? People describe it as the model church. It's the letter of joy. And Paul gives great thanks.

In chapter 1, he says, Oh, in every prayer of mine I make it with joy because of your partnership, your fellowship, your sharing in the gospel. The Philippians had not forgotten Paul when he was in prison.

They had sent people to minister to his needs. They had to continue to pray for him. And they had contributed a very generous financial gift. They had stood with him in prison.

And so Paul is delighted in this church which partners with him. And his great hope for them in chapter 1, verse 27 is that they will live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Whether he's with them or not, they might live a life worthy of the calling they have received. And in particular, that they may be united, they may be standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[6 : 41] He wants them to be united, but united around the truth of the gospel. And the reason for that, verse 28, is because they had opponents.

He does not want them to be frightened by their opponents. Paul was in prison. He was in prison for preaching the gospel. And the same persecution would in time come to the church in Philippi and indeed the whole Roman Empire.

Verse 29, he says, it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake. They were to face suffering, they were also to face false teaching, and Paul's concern is that they are united, standing together, striving, struggling for the truth of the gospel, and presenting a united front to a hostile world.

United they would stand, divided they would fall. But, of course, unity is a very fragile thing. And one of the great threats to unity in Philippi, and indeed in the church through all the centuries through to the present day, is simply human pride.

It's interesting to, I was reading last week some sort of early church history and the train journey was quite long and I had this book. But the first real split in the church, it's interesting, was attributed, it seems, to human pride.

[8 : 03] In the second century there was a man who lived in Turkey and he began to have all these wonderful prophecies they'd like to share with people. And some people told him to cool it, to calm down a little bit.

But he refused, he continued to make these prophecies, to gather around himself followers, to appoint his own bishops, and he just wouldn't listen to rebuke. And in the middle of the second century, towards the end, the church split in two.

And for 400 years there was a parallel church which bore the name of this man, Montanus. And when the writers at that time came to write about him, they described him as having an unquenchable thirst for leadership, that he was puffed up with pride, that he was self-seeking.

And he was so self-speaking, he split the entire church in two, caused great disunity. Well, the seeds of that seem to be around Philippi at the time. Chapter 1, verse 17.

Paul is speaking about some preachers who proclaim Christ out of rivalry, out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

[9 : 10] Some people were preaching Christ for their own reasons, their own ambition, perhaps their own fame, perhaps their own profit. We're not told. And in chapter 2, verse 22, Paul, describing the city and the church, perhaps at that time, they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

Timothy, he says, seeks the interests of others, but other Christians he met sought their own interests. They were selfish, not selfless. So we have in the background these two pictures, people who are pursuing their own ambitions, pursuing their own interests, pursuing their own ends.

And Paul says that is a very real danger to Christian unity. Rivalry, selfishness, selfish ambition. And so to counter that, he says in chapter 2, that he wants them to be of the same mind, in verse 2, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind.

How are they to achieve this, verse 3? By doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Verse 4, let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

They are not to be selfish, they are not to pursue rivalry, they are to actively consider the interests of others, and the secret to this, he says, verse 5, is to have this mind among you, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

[10 : 44] He points them to the attitude of Jesus Christ, and says, as Christians, as those who are in Christ, this is to be your attitude, your example. So let's look at it together, chapter 2, verse 6, down to verse 11.

Very famous passage, it seems theologians can't get enough of writing articles about this passage. One friend of mine was doing an essay on it and said there were 500 references in articles to it, but our concern is not simply to study the theology of it, but to look at the pastoral application.

And in the beginning, in verse 6, Paul reminds us that Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So Paul begins by reminding us that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the form of God. He is the firstborn over all creation. He is the first begotten son, the only begotten son of God.

All things were created for him and through him. He is the heir of all things. And yet, though being in the form of God, he was willing to take the form of a servant.

[12 : 13] He was willing to be made nothing. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He didn't use it for his own advantage, but he was willing to humble himself and become a servant.

And we see that in Mark's Gospel, of course. Perhaps superlatively in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the servant, the suffering servant. We see him teaching the people of Israel with authority.

We see him healing the sick, cleansing the leper, feeding the hungry, opening the eyes of the blind, restoring the legs of the lame. As he says to his disciples, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

We see it in John's Gospel. We think of his entry into Jerusalem and we have these marvellous crowds crying out, Hosanna, blessed be the King of Israel, riding on a donkey. And after that wonderful welcome as the true King of Israel, he takes his disciples into an upper room and he says to them, the Father has put all things into my hands.

What does he then do? Picks up a towel, kneels down on the ground and begins to wash their dirty, dusty, sweaty feet. The King of Israel taking the form of a servant.

[13 : 31] He came not to be served, but to serve and moreover to give his life as a ransom for many. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The one who at the beginning of the Gospel is beloved by the Father is willing to suffer death, to be treated like a criminal, to be executed unjustly and to be hung on a tree, to be made a curse in order to liberate others from the curse of the law and sin.

Jesus was obedient to death upon a cross. From the highest of the highs to the lowest of the lows, he who is in the form of God takes the form of a servant and gives his life for others.

That, says Paul, is humility. It's very challenging, isn't it, as I read these words and was rebuked by them. Do we have that attitude of Christ?

Let me ask you three questions that I ask myself. Are we willing as Christians to do things that we would rather not do, that we think are beneath us? You remember Nehemiah building his wall and we have that wonderful long list of all the people building the wall with him and there's that little sentence, but the nobles would not stoop to help.

[14 : 57] They would refuse to pick up their tools and their stones and help rebuild the wall because it was beneath them. Are there some things we do not stoop to do? Are there people we are not willing to associate with?

Paul reminds us in Romans to be willing to associate with people of low position. Are we willing to humble ourselves, to speak with and spend time with people who we would perhaps naturally not do so?

Well, the Lord humbled himself to spend time with each of us and he calls us to do the same. And are we willing to humble ourselves by suffering loss? Verse 7 says, Jesus made himself nothing.

Some translations have that made himself of no reputation. And we can be very precious about our reputations. And sometimes as Christians we need to humble ourselves and be willing for our reputations to suffer loss or harm on account of Christ and his gospel.

True humility taking the form of a servant. But it's not the end of the story because in verse 9 he says, Therefore, because Christ humbled himself, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so 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.

[16 : 23] Christ humbled himself therefore God exalted him and we have in these verses one of the recurring patterns all through scripture.

Jesus himself taught that to his disciples in that wonderful parable of the banquet. He said, when you're invited to a banquet I've not been invited to a banquet recently but a banquet or a dinner or a feast he says, don't take the seat of prominence don't take the seat of honour because the danger is somebody will say I'm sorry my friend that's somebody else's seat you wouldn't mind sitting down here would you?

Instead, Jesus taught when you go to a banquet take the lowest place and then someone may come up to you and say oh my friend please you come and sit up here don't sit down there come and sit here.

Those who humble themselves he said will be exalted and yet those who exalt themselves will be humbled we see it in Philippians and we see it all the way through scripture in Eden Adam striving to be equal with God eating of the fruit humbled and sent out of Eden we see it in Babel the men of Babel saying come let us make a name for ourselves and being scattered we see it in the book of Daniel Nebuchadnezzar erecting an enormous golden statue and commanding all the peoples of the earth to worship him being made like an animal and forced to eat the grass until he realized that God is the true king of heaven Christ humbled himself and therefore God exalted him to the highest place and what Paul is saying to the Philippians is don't exalt yourselves over one another humble yourselves if you are pursuing things out of rivalry out of selfish ambition out of self interest you may enjoy a temporary exaltation you may have some followers you may win the praise of men but in God's eyes you will be humbled but if you are willing to humble yourself not looking to your own interest but to those of others to take the form of a servant and to serve others

God will in time exalt you he who humbles himself will be exalted but he who exalts himself will be humbled the Philippian church needed to hear it the early disciples needed to hear it didn't they how many times Christ had to tell them and we always need to hear it I need to hear it and I'm sure the Cornhill students need to hear it as well there is a great temptation in Christian ministry to do things out of selfish ambition seeking to pursue our own reputations rather than the glory of Christ there is a temptation even if we are not in whatever form I should say of Christian service whatever form of ministry we are involved in in our churches to do things not for the praise of Jesus but for the praise of men and Paul says no humble yourselves don't come to church thinking what can I get but what can I give not thinking how will this benefit me but rather asking the question how can I benefit my brothers and sisters in Christ not how can I seek my own interests but how can I seek the interests of others and help them to stand firm and to strive side by side for the faith of the gospel well I finished just by reading from one of the earliest bits of literature in that book again

[19 : 59] I happened to read on the train but an early Christian writer no one knows who he is wrote this he was writing about the imitation of God and I wonder if he had these passages in mind do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God he can if he is willing for it is not by ruling over his neighbours or by seeking to hold the supremacy over those who are weaker or by being rich and showing violence towards those that are inferior that happiness is found nor can anyone by these things become an imitator of God but these things do not at all constitute his majesty on the contrary he who takes upon himself the burden of his neighbour he who in whatsoever respect he may be superior is ready to benefit another who is deficient he who whatsoever things he has received from God by distributing these to the needy becomes an imitator of God Christ was in the form of God he took the form of a servant

Paul says to the Philippian church and to us today have that same attitude do nothing from rivalry or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves let each of you look not only to your own interests but also to those of others Amen let's pray Father we do thank you that your ways are higher than our ways and that the values of your kingdom are so very different to the values of the kingdoms of this world we thank you Lord that Christ is so honest with us that those who would be greatest in the kingdom must be the slave of all and we do pray that as we seek to serve you in this church and other churches you will help us to have the attitude of Christ to humble ourselves under your mighty hand to have before us the interests of others and to do nothing out of selfish ambition

Lord we trust in you to exalt us in due time and pray that you will give us each a spirit of humility and of servant heartedness we cannot do this in our own power Lord so we look to you by the enabling of your spirit to humble us and we ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord thewa■ who