A Study of the Book of Philippians

The Gold Standard for the Spiritual Life (Philippians 2:1-11)

“The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation.”

~ J. I. Packer

I. Overview

In the previous section of this letter, the apostle Paul calls for believers to live a life worthy of the Gospel. This command entails standing firm and being united. Paul now devotes this next section to the call for unity. In order to illustrate how this is to be accomplished and to stress the importance of this command, Paul utilizes Christ. Their Savior serves as an ultimate example of what it means to walk in humility and embrace self-sacrifice.

II. The Importance of Unity (2:1-11)

A. Humility Required for Following Christ (vv. 1-4)

v. 1 - English translations often fail to capture the nuance of the Greek in these four brief clauses. It would be best to render each of these clauses as an affirmative statement: “since there is . . .”. Observe these clauses:

• “encouragement in Christ” - This term speaks of a spiritual boost. In other words, Paul is stating that since knowledge of the Lord has helped in their faith, they are to respond accordingly.

• “any comfort provided by love” - Scholars debate whose love Paul is referencing? Paul’s? The saints’? It would seem that based upon the context, Paul is referring to Christ’s love. This love that has sustained them should cause them to listen and obey.

• “any fellowship in the Spirit” - “Their common sharing in the Spirit should be a decisive factor in their life together as ‘one body in Christ’ (Rom 12:5)” (O’Brien, Philippians, 174).

• “any affection or mercy” - Paul uses these terms most often to refer to God’s tender mercies and grace (see Rom 12:1; 2 Col 1:3).

v. 2 - After all that the Lord has done and is doing for them (v. 1), Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to complete his joy. What is the reference to joy in this verse?

The means of completing Paul’s joy is being like-minded, having the same love, being untied in spirit and intent on one purpose. As aptly noted by one commentator, “Thus in four different ways Paul repeats the same idea over and over again, hoping that the Philippians will get the
point. Unity is essential for the spiritual growth of the church, the progress of the gospel and the victory of believers over their adversaries" (Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 68).

vv. 3-4 - In these two verses, Paul identifies how they can subordinate their own interests to those of others. Observe the following:

- *Treat one another more important than yourself* (v. 3). Paul calls for a proper view of one’s own unworthiness before God and a readiness to rejoice in what God is doing in others.
- *Look to the interests of others.* Unlike others who are seeking solely their own well being (2:21), Paul calls for a love that is not self-seeking or possesses a selfish preoccupation.

B. Humility Displayed in the Life of Christ (vv. 5-11)

Paul now turns to the ultimate example for how they are to engage others—Jesus Christ. Through a magnificent hymn, Paul recounts the beauty of Christ's humility and His subsequent exaltation.

vv. 6-7 - In these two verses, Paul speaks to Jesus as both fully God and fully man. Note some of the important theological truths Paul stresses:

- *Jesus existed in the form of God.* The term “form” speaks of essence. Intrinsically, Jesus and God are the same (see John 17:5; Heb 1:3). Jesus is nothing less than fully God. And yet, Paul is quick to make a distinction in personhood between Jesus and God. One scholar writes concerning Jesus not grasping for equality with God: “The pre-existent Son regarded equality with God not as excusing him from the task of (redemptive) suffering and death, but actually as uniquely qualifying him for that vocation” (C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, 97).

- *Jesus willingly gave up His pre-incarnate glory.* The term “self-emptying” is “kenosis”—the name scholars give to this passage. Note that Jesus did not surrender any of His divine attributes when He came to earth. Otherwise, He is no longer God (see John 1:14; 10:30; 14:9). Instead of “subtracting,” Jesus “added” humanity (as seen by the phrase “by taking on . . . ”).

- *Jesus became a man without a sinful nature.* Appearing in the likeness of man guards against Christ being sinful (see Rom 8:3). Jesus changed in “form” not “content”.

v. 8 - If Jesus coming as a slave wasn’t awful enough for these Roman citizens in Philippi to hear, Paul stresses Jesus’ horrific death of crucifixion. The ancient writer, Cicero, states, “Let the very name of the cross be far away not only from the body of a Roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears” (*Pro Rabiro*, 5.10.16). Jesus’ death on the tree becomes the supreme example of humility and obedience (see Hebrews 10:7-10).
vv. 9-11a - Jesus’ humility and obedience leads to divine vindication and approval. Paul will apply this standard of self-humbling that inevitably leads to exaltation to the Philippian believers later in this letter.

The Lord will exalt Jesus to the position of supreme authority (see Eph 1:20-21). The purpose of this exaltation is that true honor will be given to Christ alone (see Isa 45:22-25).

v. 11b - “The whole exaltation of Christ in the present and in the future is directed toward this, that God shall be all in all” (H. Ridderbos, Theology, 89-90).

In his commentary on the Book of Philippians, Hawthorne concludes this section with these words: “Thus, in the divine economy of things, by giving a person receives, by serving he is served, by losing his life he finds it, by dying he lives, by humbling himself he is exalted. The one follows the other as night follows day, but always in this order—self-sacrifice first before the self is exalted by God" (pp. 95-96).

III. Intersect

A. Arrogance in the Church is often subtle but always lethal! It rears its head in self-righteousness and self-centeredness.

   1 Peter 5:5 -

   “The more godly a man is, and the more graces and blessings of God are upon him, the more need he has to pray, because Satan is busiest against him, and because he is readiest to be puffed up with a conceited holiness.” ~ Richard Greenham, Puritan minister

B. Arrogance is antithetical to Christ. A Christ-follower walks in humility. This is the whole idea of “taking up one’s cross”!

   Luke 9:23 -

C. Arrogance ultimately seeks to dethrone Christ in our lives.

   Acts 20:18-24 -
For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Throughout Scripture, pride is self-centeredness that ultimately strips God of His glory. Unfortunately, believers are not exempt from this green monster. How are you doing in the area of humility? Here are a few questions to ask yourself:

- Do you have to be the best of the best?
- Are you a sore loser?
- Can you take constructive criticism?
- Do you like to be in charge?
- What is your favorite thing to talk about?
- When is the last time you gave of your time to assist someone else?

What could you do this week to address the area of humility in your life? You might want to pray through Philippians 2:1-11 each day this week, ask someone close to you to share how you are doing in the area of pride (be sure that you are humble enough to listen!), or evaluate your conversations and ask yourself who has the most “air time”?

“A man can counterfeit love, he can counterfeit faith, he can counterfeit hope and all the other graces, but it is very difficult to counterfeit humility.” ~ D. L. Moody