

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 7: Christ the Exemplar - Philippians 2:5-11

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Matthew S. Harman in his series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 7, Christ the Exemplar, Philippians 2:5-11.

Welcome to session 7 of our study in Philippians. We've entitled this one: Christ the Exemplar.

We'll be covering chapter 2:5-11. In our previous session, we covered chapter 2, verses 1 through 4, where we saw Paul talk about "Joy as Rooted in a Shared Life Produced by the Gospel." And we emphasized that that section really sets the stage for what we're going to find here in chapter 2:5-11.

And in fact, it really should be understood probably as one literary unit, but for the sake of convenience and being able to go a little bit deeper, we split it apart, and we're going to treat it in two separate sessions here. So Philippians chapter two, verses five through 11. Let's go ahead and read the text and follow up.

Philippians chapter two, beginning in verse five. 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 emptied himself by 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. So that's the text.

We should reflect a bit on the relationship between verses one through four and verses five through 11. So the description of Christ in chapter 2, verses 5 through 11 is intended to produce or stir in our hearts this delight, this joy, this love for Christ as a means of moving us to pattern our lives after him. And so this is not merely imitation in the sense of, you know, what would Jesus do? But it's empowerment.

It's ultimately not just here's a picture of who Jesus is and what he's done. Now, do your best to try to live up to that. It's here's who Christ is and what he's done.

And as a result of that, be empowered by that same Christ to live in that way. So another key element here as we get ready to jump in is notice that in verse five, Paul says, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. That phrase is important.

It's stressing the idea that this mindset is something that belongs to us because of our union with Christ. And it's only possible because of our union with Christ. So that's the starting point, kind of getting those two blocks of text together.

And let's now jump into Christ, the exemplar. Just a brief word about that, about that term exemplar. Exemplar is sort of the term that I'm using as the ultimate picture of the kind of life that Paul is calling the Philippians to follow and pursue.

And so we're using that term to capture that. We should also note that at points throughout this course, I've referred to this as the so-called Christ hymn. And I simply say that as a way of trying to remind us that although it's common to refer to this as the Christ hymns, we don't have direct evidence that this was an actual song that was sung by early Christians.

It's just a convenient term to use, because it appears to be an example, not quite of poetry, but of elevated prose, of this idea of a heightened level of description of prose, not quite on the level of Greek poetry, or even along the lines of Hebrew poetry. So I will refer to it as the Christ hymn, but we need to understand that that is not intended to communicate; we know that this was an actual song of sorts sung by the early Christians. One other thing that I will mention here: there's a lot of scholarly debate as to the origins of this hymn.

And a good number of scholars like to argue that Paul did not write this hymn, that someone else wrote it, and he's simply borrowing it. And that's entirely possible. And if that's the case, that doesn't really affect our understanding of it, because Paul puts it in this letter.

And so even if someone else wrote it, Paul is taking it and adopting it as his own and saying, this represents what I believe and what I think. So regardless of whether this was something Paul wrote or somebody else wrote, it is noteworthy that Paul puts this forward and doesn't expect to get any pushback from this, that these are accepted truths among the early Christians, that he's not saying anything especially controversial that he's expecting and has to kind of explain or defend. So with that in view, let's actually focus on the text.

So how does the Christ hymn break down here? We see three distinct sections. The first is the command in verse five: have this mindset, the mindset of Christ. That's the command.

And then we see in verses six through eight, this is what Christ did. And you can summarize that as humbly obeying as a servant. And we'll unpack that in more detail.

And then the third section of the passage is what God did. That God highly exalted Christ with the name above every name. And once again, we see this term mindset or mind that's introduced here in chapter two, verse five.

And so we need to be careful that we don't get so lost in the rich theology that is here that we lose sight of the fact that this rich theology is given to us for a reason. And it's not just to tickle our theological curiosity. It's to move us to live in a certain way.

It's to motivate us to live like Christ. And so we will do our best to highlight many of the key theological things in this text. But the primary purpose is not simply to give us this kind of theological treatise on who Christ is.

It's to give us that so that we will live in a certain way. Okay, so let's dive in here. In verse six, Paul refers to Christ as he says, though he was in the form of God.

So let's talk a little bit about that expression, form of God. And we might think we hear that term, wait a minute, form. Does that mean that he was, you know, somehow not fully God? And that's not how that term is used.

That term refers to the visible outward appearance of an inward reality. And we see a similar dynamic talked about in John 1:14 as well as Hebrews chapter one. So when Paul says that Jesus Christ was in the form of God, he is indicating that he was, in fact, God.

He's not drawing some sort of finer, nuanced distinction between those realities. But you may have noticed that he introduces that idea in verse six when he says, though he was in the form of God. And you might be wondering, okay, what's going on there? Well, without getting too far into the weeds of how Greek participles work, what is going on there is that there's a Greek participle, and it can have a number of different nuances.

It can communicate different types of relationships and ideas. And so most English translations understand it as introducing a concession, the although this, then that. But others have suggested that it could just be translated as who being in the form of God, just leaving it more ambiguous, undefined.

Or other scholars, and this is an interesting view, argue that no, no, no, you should actually translate that because he was in the form of God. Now that changes your conclusion as to what Paul is saying here. Because if we back up and we read it again, if it were to be translated, who, because he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, that gives a different sense than saying, who, though he was in the form of God.

What do I mean by this? So if we understand it in this concessive sense, the idea is that you would expect someone in the form of God to act a certain way. But that's not how Christ acted. If it's causal, the idea would be the reason that Christ did not act a certain way is that he was the form of God.

Now, we're not talking about the difference between heresy and orthodoxy here, so we don't need to make too much of this. But I'm convinced that the idea that Paul is communicating is, in fact, this concessive idea, that he is saying, you would expect someone in the form of God to act a certain way, but that's not how Christ acted. And so the rest of that phrase, that clause, I should say, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

And so the idea here is that Christ did not consider this to be something to seize and hold selfishly. And this is where I think having a little bit of background in understanding Greek and Roman mythology about the gods sheds some light here. Because the Philippians lived in a context in a world where they would have been brought up with these stories about Greek and Roman gods, and their number one priority was to use whatever power and abilities they had to advance their own selfish agendas.

And so against that backdrop, what Paul is saying is, you would expect someone in the form of God to maximize for their own selfish gain that status as being in the form of God. And

he's saying, that's not what Christ did. So I think the concessive idea makes the most sense here.

And that next phrase, equality with God, that's something to be grasped. Notice the repetition of the verb from chapter 2, verse 3. It's the idea of consider, to put your mind on, to grasp. Again, putting the focus on a mindset here.

And so this idea of being in the form of God, Paul equates that with being equal with God. So we see that there in the text. Now what we have to wrestle with next is this term that's translated; something in the ESV is translated as a thing to be grasped.

And that's the Greek word *harpagmos*. And the difficulty is, this is the only place in the New Testament where it occurs. It's a rare word.

And so that means translators disagree and have to try to reconstruct it from other sources, maybe the best way to render it. And so you have this suggestion here, something to be grasped. You've got something to be used for one's own advantage.

You've got something to be exploited would be an idea there. The King James, perhaps famously, translates it as robbery; it did not count it as robbery to be equal with God. And then the New Living Translation, something to cling to.

And what this is telling us is that translators are struggling to figure out the best way to bring this into English. And so I think, on the whole, I believe that the language of something to be grasped probably captures it. And although the rendering in the New Revised Standard is also something that I think could have the sense here, something to be exploited, something to be used for one's own selfish agenda.

But the idea clearly seems to be that Christ, being in the form of God, did not take his status as being equal to God as something to exploit, to grasp on, and to use for his own individual selfish benefit. But this is also a place where if you don't know or have access to the original languages, using multiple translations in English can help you get a sense of maybe some of the different interpretive issues that are going on in the text. So there we go.

That's just one verse. We've already had to dig in to almost every word and clause here. And if you're thinking, well, maybe it gets less complicated as we move on, you are sadly mistaken.

Because, when we get to verse 7, Paul writes, again reading from the ESV, that Christ emptied himself. And so again, we're met with multiple different ways of translating this particular Greek verb. And if you've ever heard of the expression, kenotic Christology, or something like that, or the kenosis, that's where that term comes from.

And so the ESV goes with, emptied himself. Other translations go with, made himself nothing. And here's part of the theological and the interpretive issue at play here.

When people hear the term, emptied himself, they are inclined to think, oh, Christ gave up something, that he gave up, say, some of his divine attributes, and that he became somehow less than God by doing that. Which doesn't really align with what the previous

clause said anyway. But there's still ambiguity, potentially, as to what that means: that he emptied himself, or made himself nothing.

And this is where I would say, well, if you actually are able to dig into the Greek text, or even just follow the flow of the passage, Paul's going to tell you what it means that Christ emptied himself. Because he's going to give you two more clauses that tell you what that meant. And the ironic thing here is that for Paul, when he's explaining this, Christ empties himself by taking something on.

Which is not what we would expect. We hear empty, we think of giving away something, or giving up something, and ironically, what is said here in the text is that Christ empties himself by taking something on. And what is that? The first thing is taking the form of a servant.

And so again, or as we could translate, taking the form of a slave. That word there, *doulos*, has the sense of either servant or slave. And as a result, there's some debate as to what precisely Paul might mean by that.

But I'm convinced that he is intentionally drawing language from Isaiah 53. The so-called servant song, the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. And we'll come back to that a little bit later to highlight the Old Testament background to what Paul is doing here.

So, what does it mean that Christ emptied himself or made himself nothing? It's that he took on the form of a servant. And this is the same word for form that we saw back in verse 6 with the form of God. And remember, we emphasized there that it's talking about the outward appearance and reality matching the inward reality.

So that they are aligned. So it's not even like, well, Christ took on the outward appearance of a servant. No, he took on the form of a servant.

Paul continues then to expand this idea when he says that Christ was born in the likeness of man. And I think Paul is being very careful in his language here. There might even be a potential allusion or echo of the language in Genesis 1:26-28 where God creates man in his own image and his own likeness.

So there might be an allusion or echo there. And it continues there in verse 8, found in human form. And stressing that when you would see Christ, you would see a full human being.

This is stressing the reality of Jesus' incarnation. That from all eternity, yes, he was the form of God. But at a specific point, he also became the form of a servant made in the likeness of men.

Yeah, in the likeness of men and then found in human form. So this language is helping us to see the full humanity of Christ. That he was both fully God and fully man.

And then you get this shocking, powerful statement here in verse 8. That Christ humbled himself to the point of death. Even death on the cross. And this is something that might seem strange to us in one sense.

Because we, of course, are in a context typically where we talk about the cross. Or Christ's death. And in the ancient world, the cross- we wear crosses around our neck as a sign, as jewelry.

In the ancient world, the cross was a symbol of execution. In one sense, it would be the equivalent today of perhaps, I'm not sure how you would do this. But wearing a necklace of an electric chair that could be used to execute someone.

That would seem strange if someone was wearing a necklace. He's like, oh, that's an interesting necklace you've got there. What is that? That's an electric chair.

You would look at them very strangely and think, why on earth would you be wearing an electric chair necklace? That seems very morbid and a little strange. You see, in the ancient world, crucifixion was a subject that was not even discussed in polite societies. As well as forbidden topics that, in polite conversation, you just didn't talk about.

It was gruesome. It was brutal. And so for the early Christians to go around and celebrate the crucifixion of the one that they think is God and man would have seemed initially very strange to the typical Greek or Roman.

And Paul is stressing here that Christ's obedience was so complete that he was willing to suffer even on a cross. And here we should also note that the suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross was more than just the physical torments of it. And you can find ancient descriptions that have been modern studies about the brutality of dying through crucifixion, about the way that the body responds and how you ultimately end up suffocating.

And sometimes in the ancient world, a person could hang on the cross for days, slowly agonizingly die. And I'm not in any way trying to take away from the physical pain and suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross. It was unbelievably brutal.

And yet, elsewhere scripture tells us that that was not even the worst of it. That as he was on the cross, he was taking upon himself the punishment that we deserve for our sins. And so Paul takes us to that point where Christ humbled himself, obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And so that's what we see there in verses 6 through 8: the humility, the obedience, and ultimately Christ giving his life for his people on the cross. Now, there's a transition that takes place starting in verse 9. In verse 9, we see the shift to this is what God did. There's an important linking word there, verse 9. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

Highly exalted him. That also picks up language from Isaiah. In Isaiah 52:13, at the beginning of the servant song that talks about the suffering servant, it introduces that servant as being highly exalted.

And that's typically language in Isaiah that is reserved for God himself, and yet it's applied to the servant in Isaiah 52, verse 13. And then this theme of he gave him the name above every name. And there's debate as to what specifically is imbued here.

Does that just simply mean that Jesus is now the name above every name? Or is Paul, in fact, saying that the name above every name is referring to Yahweh, the divine name, the divine covenant name? Regardless, the point seems to stand that Christ has been exalted to the highest point. And so here's something that we need to keep in mind as we think about this passage.

Sometimes when people talk about this passage, they think of it, and they describe it as a V pattern: Christ is in heaven, he takes on human flesh, he dies, and then he's exalted, and they're basically back at the same point. So it's just a traditional V, but that's not really what this text says. I think this text is indicating that there's sort of a V that goes down, but then the final point is higher than the initial point.

And so it's almost like a checkmark that Christ being exalted, now he is recognized as the name above every name. And so that concept of name, we don't have time to necessarily unpack all of that. But I think it's important for us to see this.

So I'll spend just a brief moment trying to help you connect some dots in the storyline of the Bible. You might remember the story in Genesis 11, where humanity, after the fall, gathered together, and they attempted to build the Tower of Babel. And there's an important statement in there.

When they state their motivation, part of their motivation is that they want to make a name for themselves. That's part of their motivation. They want to build a tower that reaches up into the heavens and so that they will make a name for themselves.

And so of course, God comes down, judges, scatters, and what's striking is in the next chapter, Genesis 12, God makes his initial covenant promise to Abraham. And as part of that, he says, I will make you a great name. And so, oh, okay, so here's what's going to happen.

Part of the issue in Babel was human beings trying to make their own name great. And God's saying, no, no, no, I am the one who makes a name great. And I'm going to make a name great through the line of Abraham.

And so as the Old Testament unfolds, you see this theme of name come up again, especially mentioned in connection with God's covenant with David, which talks about giving David and his descendants a name like the great ones of the earth. But then you get to the New Testament. And here you have Paul saying that the name above every name is the name of Jesus, who in Galatians 3 is clearly identified as the promised descendant of Abraham.

And that's not even the end of it. Because part of what you see, if you think about Pentecost- think about Pentecost- what's happening at Pentecost? You've got people from different nations gathering together, and the Spirit falls upon the apostles, and they preach the name of Jesus. And you get people from different nations believing in Jesus.

And instead of being scattered because of disobedience, they are being regathered and worshipping the one great name of Jesus Christ. And that, of course, anticipates the scenes that we see in Revelation 7, where people from every tribe and tongue and language are

gathered together around the throne, worshipping Jesus. And so this is all part of that larger biblical theological thread that Paul is tapping into here.

Now, you continue on and look at the totality of the scope. You notice that in verse 10, he says, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. So this is just a way of capturing the totality of all of creation.

All of creation will acknowledge the sovereign, universal reign of Jesus Christ as the rightful king. No creature will be left to say, no, he's not the true king. Every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And then verse 11, every tongue confess that Christ is. Now, we should stress here that this text is not telling us that every single creature will joyfully acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. It's pointing forward to the day when Christ will rule over all of creation and no one will be able to actually dispute his identity as the great king of the universe.

Now, his people will celebrate and joyfully acknowledge, yes, he is the true king. But his enemies will bow the knee out of terror and fear because their judgment has come. So that's the picture that emerges here.

I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the Old Testament background of Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 through 11. I've hinted at some of this along the way, and I'm not going to have time to unpack all of it. But I want to give you a taste, a sampler, so to speak.

One text that we have not mentioned yet is that the closest thing to an Old Testament quote or citation is actually from Isaiah 45, verses 22 and 23, where at the end here when he says that every knee will bow and every tongue confess, that language is coming from Isaiah 45, verses 22 through 23. But here's the significance of it. We might miss this unless we go back and look at what's actually happening in Isaiah 45.

You see, in Isaiah 45, Yahweh is saying, I alone am the true God. There's no one else like me, and everyone will bow before me and confess that I am the true God. And notice what Paul notes here.

He says something that is true of Yahweh in the Old Testament is true of Christ in the New Testament. And what he's inviting you to do is to draw the conclusion. If this is only true of Yahweh, and it's true of Christ, then Christ must be Yahweh.

That's the sort of theological math that Paul uses. And honestly, this is a common way that the biblical authors show us the divine identity of Christ. It shows us this, not as much.

I mean, there are direct statements, right? John's gospel has multiple direct statements about the deity of Jesus. But far more common is where a New Testament author will show you what will show you Jesus saying or doing something that's only true of Yahweh and inviting you to draw the conclusion that that must mean that Christ is Yahweh in the flesh. I can get behind that kind of math.

One last comment here on this before we show you some of the potential allusions to Old Testament texts. In the history of scholarship on this passage, what's funny to me is that

scholars have sometimes claimed that the early Christians didn't really believe that Jesus was God until the end of the first century. That not really until John's gospel comes along did the early Christians decide, hey, you know what? I think Jesus was actually God.

Well, here's how this passage fits into this picture. If you understand what Paul is doing here with this statement of taking language that is only true of Yahweh and saying it's true of Christ, then what this passage is showing us is that the early Christians, at least at this point, believed that Christ was, in fact, God. And this matters even more because even the most critical scholars believe that Paul wrote Philippians.

There's really no critical doubt or debate about that, even among the most critical of scholars. And so here we have Paul writing around the year 60 to 62 AD. And many of these same scholars would say, well, Paul's actually borrowing a hymn from somebody else, which would push the date perhaps even earlier.

And Paul's not arguing for this. He's just presenting it as accepted beliefs so that we at least see sometime in the 50s probably definitive evidence that the early Christians believed that Christ was, in fact, God. This was not a later development that only came along towards the end of the first century.

OK, I just want to show you a few. I won't have the time to go through every single one of these. But these are some of the words or phrases or concepts that have specific Old Testament parallels.

And one of the things you'll see is that you'll see a lot of Isaiah on here, and you'll see a good bit of Genesis. I haven't really talked in depth about this, but some scholars also see a parallel between Christ and Adam in this text. As Christ sort of obeying where Adam failed.

And that could be present. But I think the more dominant motif here is borrowing language from the Isianic Servant Psalms. And so language like emptying himself.

We mentioned in the previous session how Paul warns against this idea of empty glory. And so here we have the contrast to that, this sort of human effort to make much of oneself. The opposite of that is shown here in Philippians 2 verses 7 and 11, because we saw how Christ emptied himself, but that the final result of that is him receiving genuine glory.

And so that is the counterpart to the vain glory that we are to avoid. But I think Paul's language of the form of a servant, the language of founded appearance as a man, likeness of man, humbling himself. I think all of that has its roots in passages from Isaiah 53 in particular.

And then another selection here, Christ's obedience to the point of death, the description of his death on the cross, God highly exalting him. Language that we're going to see actually; we'll kind of circle back around to at the end of chapter 3 in Philippians. The language of every knee bowing- we've already mentioned that- every tongue confessing, Isaiah 45 language there, and ultimately to the glory of God.

Now, again, I know I went quickly through that, but I just want to give you a taste that this Christ hymn is the fruit of profound and deep reflection, not just on the life and death and

resurrection of Jesus, but it's reflection on that in light of the Old Testament. And this is where exploring some of those illusions and more faint echoes can absolutely provide us with a richness, a deeper texture to the picture that comes from what we see here in Philippians 2:5-11.

Okay, let's step back and let's talk about the big picture here and work on some application. What's the passage's big idea? Christ made himself low so that God would lift him high. Christ made himself low so that God would lift him high.

So two parts to this that we can see. Verses 5 through 8, Christ made himself low, and then in verses 9 through 11, God lifted him high. And as a result, we can see then just the summary: Christ not considering his identity something to be exploited, Christ outdoing himself, Christ humbling himself, and then God exalting him, highly exalting him with the highest name.

And then the two purposes so that every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord. So the glory of God. So that's the stunning, breathtaking picture of who Christ is.

But now as we circle back to application, we have to remember that the point of Paul telling us these things is not just to inform us intellectually and theologically. It's to move us to live in a certain way. So application: what does God want us to think or understand? I'd suggest that one area we could reflect on is that Jesus used his power and privileges to serve.

That is not how the ancients would have thought naturally about leadership and about positions of privilege and power. In fact, the expectation was that people would use privilege and power to advance their own purposes. That was the expectation.

And sadly, we see that still today in our own culture. So it's not like that's completely unique to the ancient world. But that's not how Christ lived.

And therefore, that's not how we should live either. But I think we need to take seriously the reality that every knee will bow before Christ. And as an outworking of that, that should motivate us to share the gospel.

Like, because even the most hardened opponent of God and of Christ will one day bow the knee before him. And the question is whether that bowing of the knee will be a joyful, enthusiastic celebration that your king is there. Or whether it will be out of utter fear and terror at the judgment that is about to be executed.

We need to believe that every knee will bow. Desire and feel. I think we should long for the day when Christ returns.

Perhaps depending on your age or your background. I don't want to overgeneralize, but my sense is, in many of the contexts that I'm in, we don't talk a lot about the return of Christ. We don't really talk about it much.

And there was a period of time in the 70s in particular, where that was a major thing that Christians talked about all the time. And then that just seemed to fade into the background. I think we need to recapture that longing for Christ to return.

I find in my own experience that the more comfortable my earthly life is, the less I am inclined to think about the return of Christ. When things are going really well for me, and my circumstances kind of align with what I want, I'm less inclined to think about Christ and his return. I would just say we need to recapture that anticipation, that eagerness, that longing for, could it be today? Could it be now? Could it be this week? Could it be very soon that Christ will return for us? And then lastly, do.

I suggest identifying one specific act of self-sacrificial service you can perform for someone else. There's just a benefit for intentionally dying to self and serving someone else. It might be sacrificing time.

It might be giving up resources that you might have thought you would devote to one thing and instead using it to serve someone else. I'm confident that the Lord can provide you guidance as you pray about that, reflect on that, and think about that. So I hope that as we've worked through this rich passage, and we've only scratched the surface, there's so much more.

My ultimate hope is that your heart has been served with fresh love and affection from God, and that that will motivate you to live a life of Christ-like self-sacrificial service to others because that's how we demonstrate the reality of who Christ is to the world around us. And so in our next session, we'll see how Paul gives the so what, the therefore that comes out of this description of the exalted Christ.

This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 7, Christ the Exemplar, Philippians 2:5-11.