



Philippians: Week 2

Week 2, Day 1 - Philippians 1:19-26

¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation. ²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that, by my presence again with you, your boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.

Understanding the Passage:

Cooperation and Proclamation

The Apostle Paul envisions the spiritual growth of the Philippians and his own deliverance as a team effort between their fervent prayers and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in 1:19. We highlight this idea in our Christian family of Wesleyans and Methodists. Paul (and the whole New Testament) assume cooperation between the prayers of God's people and what God wants to accomplish through the new Christian Church. These two agents, the church and the Spirit, enable Paul's proclamation of the good news about Jesus. He's bold to claim that the content and spirit of the gospel is unmoved by his or the Philippians circumstances.

Alive or Dead

Verses 21-22 have been an encouragement to Christians for centuries; however, it's easier proclaimed than practiced. Paul's argument is that if he lives, he's able to proclaim Christ, but in dying he's able to be present with Christ. In Paul's mind, and likely to encourage his readers, both are good situations for the person following Jesus. In other words, Paul knows there's plenty of work to do for the kingdom on earth, but being with Jesus is the ultimate goal.

Progressing in Faith

Paul says, for the Philippians, it's better that they stick around. They have a lot of work to do. For this reason Paul says he will "remain and continue" with the Philippians in their growth and progress. The word "remain" in Greek is *meno*. It can be translated as "remain," "abide," or even "to stick to/with." Paul is essentially saying, "this is a tough calling, but I'm with you in it and can't wait to celebrate all that God will do if we stick together."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you consider yourself as a partner with God in your faith? What might change for you if you saw God as a partner *and* a guide?
2. How can Paul be so confident even though he is facing longer imprisonment and potentially execution? Can you say, with Paul, that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain?"
3. How can you "abide" with one another in your growing faith? Can you share with a friend or group member how you may need them to stick with you in your spiritual life?

Week 2, Day 2 - Philippians 1:27-30

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ and in no way frightened by those opposing you. For them, this is evidence of their destruction but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ but of suffering for him as well, ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Understanding the Passage:

Cruciform

Paul invites the readers of this letter to live a life with a particular shape. As noted in yesterday's passage, Paul is uncertain whether he will see the Philippians again, and he's okay with this fact; however, his guidance remains the same. He wants them to live a life that reflects Jesus, so no matter if he comes to see them or he merely hears about them, their conduct will be shaped around Christ. We have a helpful term for this sort of life of a Christian – *cruciform*. It literally means, cross-shaped. That's the "manner" Paul and his readers are to strive for as it includes both victory and suffering.

Prioritizing Unity

This cruciform life is what enables Paul to frequently emphasize unity. If the Philippians ordered their life around Paul, Caesar, Peter, Timothy, or anyone else they couldn't find that unity. If their lives are animated by the Spirit of Christ (as Paul calls it in Romans 8:9) they can truly be *one*. Unity, according to Paul, can only be found if the various people can unite around a single person – that is, Jesus.

Striving

This unity threatened the common way of life of the surrounding world for these new Christians. The Church challenged the unity around the governing authorities. The Church challenged the unity around cultural customs. Paul says this shouldn't shake the unity of God's people, even if it means suffering and conflict. How? This suffering and conflict are another facet of their unity. There's mystery already in that faith is a gift, but Paul adds that unified suffering is also a gift in that it brings the community to Christ.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What parts of your life would you say are "cruciform?" What parts would you say aren't?
2. Is unity a trait that you value? How do you find unity with others? What gets in the way of unity?
3. How could you view obstacles in your life as ways to draw closer to Christ? Do you experience Christ in hardship? Do you agree with Paul that sometimes suffering can sometimes be a gift?

Week 2, Day 3 - Philippians 2:1-4

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.

Understanding the Passage:

The Big If

Paul love a hypothetical. He's set the stage for a unified, growing, thriving, and compelling Christian community in Philippi. Then he says, "if any of this works, it will unify you." Of course, following Jesus does *work* in that it transforms the lives of the people who model their lives after him, and this should encourage the Philippians. Paul says, "unify around Christ and it will confirm my work with you." In other words, the work of Christ should make the identifying marks of Christ (love, the Spirit, compassion, sympathy) obvious in the lives of believers and that is Paul's project in ministry.

With

There is no solitary Christian. Paul argues this in 2:3. One can take this literally – Christians gather in groups and worship together in a body of believers. This also describes the posture of a believer, as Paul shares, "do nothing from selfish ambition." The aim of the Christian life is to go beyond oneself, conform your life to Christ, and put others before yourself (as Christ did on the Cross). Fr. Gregory Boyle says the most important word in Christian theology is "with." Christians do things with another, with the Spirit of God, with the mind of Christ, with the needs of the world as their burden. Paul calls the Philippians to be people of "with."

Other-oriented

There is no self-interest in the life of a Jesus-follower. This is a difficult shift for many people to make, as we live in a world that demands we look out for ourselves to survive and to "succeed." Paul is not ambiguous on this point, however. Paul isn't just offering an ethical foundation, he's tying together his larger point about what it means to unify around Christ. What does it mean to be "one" as Father, Son, and Spirit are one. It means to prioritize the other. It means, as Jesus on the Cross, to pour yourself out for others and not to your own benefit or gain.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Is the good news about Jesus an "encouragement" to you? Are you energized by the love, compassion, and sympathy of others? How can we model this way of life for our community?
2. What does it mean for you to be "with" someone? In what ways can we humble ourselves on behalf of others?
3. Have you ever set aside your needs to fulfill someone else's? What was that like? What compelled you to do it? What was the result?

Week 2, Day 4 - Philippians 2:5-8

⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was^[a] in Christ Jesus,*

⁶ *who, though he existed in the form of God,*

did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped,

⁷ *but emptied himself,*

taking the form of a slave,

assuming human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ *he humbled himself*

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

Understanding the Passage: *The Mind of Christ (Humility)*

Many New Testament scholars agree that these verses (2:6-8) were an early Christian hymn unoriginal to Paul but recited by him as a potentially familiar verse for his readers. He's encircling his earlier arguments and imperatives with a song! You may hear a modern preacher do this same thing from time to time. Paul's aim is to illustrate what "the mind of Christ" is for his hearers, that they might adopt it and be unified in it.

Form of God

2:6 is one of the clearest articulations of the divinity of Christ that we have in the entire New Testament. If this is in fact a hymn of the early Christian Church, they were singing that Jesus was divine! The words, though poetic, aren't ambiguous on this point. Before the incarnation, when the Son took on flesh in Jesus, "he was in the form of God." The Greek word for "form" is the word *morphē*. It connotes a physical or substantial composition. In other words, Christ is of the same substance as God. Christians have championed this mystery for centuries and apparently even sang it in the first century.

Kenosis

While possessing this "form" in eternity past, Christ didn't consider this form as something worth touting in order to accomplish his mission. Revisit 2:4 – when we put others' interests before ourselves, we adopt the mind of Christ. That mind motivated Christ to put the interests of humanity before himself. Christ "emptied himself." Jesus, though he was and is God, took on a form that was foreign to him in a helpless human body of an infant. We call this *kenosis* and it's a model for Christian discipleship as it literally means to pour oneself out as you would a pitcher full of water. Paul uses this evocative image to model what it is he is doing and what he compels the Philippians to do. Don't harbor what you have for yourself, but pour it out for the common good.

The Curse of the Tree

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 explains that the punishment of being hung from a tree is a curse. That's what Jesus took on when he humbled himself to the point of death, and not just a "natural causes" death, but a death that is accursed. Paul, in reciting the words of this ancient hymn, emphasizes the depths God went to in order to save God's people. Christ's humility should humble the Philippians.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How do we adopt "the mind of Christ?" According to Paul, is it more than just adopting Christ's opinions and viewpoints?
2. How would you succinctly define humility? Was what Christ did in taking on human form help define it? How might it change your personal definition of humility?
3. In what ways could we "empty ourselves" for others? What does this model, given to us in Jesus, invite us to do?

Week 2, Day 5 - Philippians 2:9-11

⁹*Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name*

that is above every other name,

¹⁰*so that at the name given to Jesus*

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹*and every tongue should confess*

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Understanding the Passage:

The Name of Jesus

Paul continues his recitation and application of this ancient Christian hymn in 2:9-11. Verse 9 invites us to reflect on a topsy-turvy way of saving humanity: the exalted Christ gave himself to a curse, and in that giving and emptying was exalted. God lifted Jesus up as an exemplar and hallowed his name (as we pray in the Lord's prayer). Again we see Paul pointing back in history to a time when Christ existed before Jesus of Nazareth was born as we read in the gospels. Jesus, being the Christ, now has a name that outshines any other name because of this selfless and sacrificial life that he lived.

Every Knee?

Paul then points to the future in which every knee will bend to Jesus. Across scripture, especially in the Hebrew Bible, we see prostration and kneeling as a physical manifestation of an inward disposition. Verse 10 reflects that practice. Ultimately, all creatures, whether heavenly or earthly, will be subject to Christ. Living, dead, or angelic, everyone will worship Jesus. Remember, Paul has just highlighted the humility of this person as the means by which this person will be exalted.

Kyrios

Not only will every being worship Christ physically and in their disposition, but they will verbally confess it and this confession that Jesus is Lord (*kyrios*) will glorify God the Father. The Old Testament that the New Testament writers had access to was the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. In that Greek translation, any time God's name was used (YHWH) the Greek word *kyrios* was used. In 1st century Judaism, the name of God was not spoken, but "Lord" was said instead. Verse 11 reflects that custom, but the *kyrios* points to Jesus Christ. Again, Paul emphasizes the future confession that Jesus will be recognized as God. This scandalous confession glorifies God. In the Hebrew imagination "glory" was both the beaming light coming from God and the weightiness of this God. Paul would have had these connotations in mind and could be saying, "there is a weightiness to the confession that Jesus is Lord."

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean to exalt someone's name? How is it that Jesus' name is *above* every other?
2. Does it bother you that "every knee" will bow to Jesus? Is this done forcefully, or is it a natural reaction to being in Jesus' presence?
3. What does it mean to call Jesus "Lord?" Is it a heavy thing to say? What does this confession mean to you?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. Do you see your life as in cooperation with God (synergism) or fully in control by God (monergism)? How might the difference between these two Christian perspectives affect your day-to-day?
2. Can you relate to "to live is Christ, to die is gain?" Is that something you can say for yourself now, or is it something we should strive to grow in?
3. What's the difference between unity and superficial oneness? What's the difference between unity and uniformity?
4. Brainstorm with your group what it might mean to practice *kenosis*? How can you pour yourself out for others?

Prayer requests and other notes.