

“The Name That Is Above Every Name”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Philippians 2:1–11; Isaiah 45:18–25

One of the most famous and well-known passages in all the Bible is the famous hymn to Christ (the *Carmen Christi*) of verses 6-11 of Philippians 2. Martin Luther writes in his famous essay *The Freedom of the Christian*, that this passage is a prescribed rule of life which is set forth by the Apostle Paul, who exhorts us to devote our good works to the welfare of our neighbor out of the abundant riches of faith. John Calvin tells us that anyone who reads this passage but fails to see the deity of Jesus and the majesty of God as seen in his saving works, is blind to the things of God.¹ The passage contains a very rich Christology, but is included in this letter not to settle any debate over the person and work of Jesus, but rather, to instruct Christians how to imitate Jesus in a profound and significant way. The *Carmen Christi* also speaks directly to modern Americans by reminding us that the self-centered narcissism of American culture is not a virtue, but runs completely contrary to the example set for us to follow by Jesus in his incarnation.

As we continue our series on Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi (the Epistle to the Philippians) we come to the second chapter and will work our way through this beautiful and powerful passage. I need to say from the outset that as many of you know, our system of chapters and verses are not in the original biblical text and were first introduced in the 16th century. While they are very helpful in allowing us to find “chapter and verse,” there are times when the chapter breaks seriously disrupt the flow of thought of the original author—they do so in the transition from the opening chapter of Philippians as we move into chapter two. As we go through our passage, we will see that Paul’s exhortation which opens the second chapter is really an expansion of his desire for the Philippians to stand firm (vv. 12-30) and is the basis for his introduction of the Christ hymn (which we will cover momentarily).

In expressing his candid thoughts to the Philippians, the apostle is reflecting upon the persecution which he himself had faced, particularly in the light of the news which just reached him from Philippi that the Philippians were still facing significant persecution. When Paul was first in the city of Philippi, he was arrested and thrown into jail. Paul was miraculously delivered, the jailer and his household came to faith in Jesus, and as recounted in Acts 17, shortly thereafter, Paul left the city to continue his missionary journey to the Greek cities of Thessalonica and Berea, before finally making his way to Athens. When Paul writes this letter to the Philippians about ten years later, he is in jail again—this time under house arrest in Rome. Paul knew something about persecution. He knows that the Philippian Christians are facing persecution also. The Philippians may not be in chains, but they are finding that their fellow Greco-Romans are not accepting, nor tolerant of their faith in Jesus. And then there are the Judaizers who have arrived on the scene and are now disrupting church life in Philippi.

After reflecting upon these things, in the concluding verses of chapter 1, (vv 27–30) Paul exhorts the Philippians, “*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*

¹ Cited in Graham Tomlin, ed., *Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI, Philippians and Colossians* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 44-45.

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." The Philippians are to do several things. The first is to live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel which Paul had preached to them. Their conduct in the face of persecution should grow out of their understanding of the person and work of Jesus. The second thing they are to do is to stand firm in one spirit and in one mind in the face of those persecuting them. The third is not to be frightened by anything their opponents—the Judaizers and Greco-Roman pagans—may throw at them. Jesus is more powerful than all and he will protect his church.

Then Paul reminds them in verse 29, that the only reason any of them are believers in Jesus is because God has granted them faith (he has given them faith as a gift—cf. Ephesians 2:8) and because he has, the Philippians inevitably will suffer persecution. They will suffer for the sake of Christ just as Paul has suffered because of the world's hatred of Jesus. Just as he is imprisoned in Rome because of his faith in Christ, it was the case when he had been with them in Philippi previously. If God grants the one (faith) he also grants the other (persecution).

So, here is where the modern chapters and verses break up—Paul's thought. Verse one of chapter two is the continuation of and expansion upon his discussion in verses 27-30. In fact, as Paul speaks of the inevitability of persecution and the need to stand firm in the face of it, he now points the Philippians to the means by which they might fulfill (do) those things Paul has just exhorted them to do, and to do that the Philippians need to have the same mind about these things that Jesus did (v. 5).

But before Paul includes the *Carmen Christi*—reminding them of who it is and what he has done that they are to imitate—Paul makes a very impassioned plea which includes four conditional sentences (which begin with "if"), which if true, and they are, will bring to pass the hoped for result in verse 2, that Paul's joy may be complete.² The opening verse reads, "so" (which connects this to the previous verses in the previous chapter), "*if there is any encouragement in Christ, [if there is] any comfort from love, [if there is] any participation in the Spirit, [if there is] any affection and sympathy,*" all pointing to things Paul assumes the Philippians currently possess. Yet, the force of the conditional sentence is an indication that these are things which the Philippians might be in danger of losing if they do not stand firm. We can put it like this: if there is any encouragement still present, if there is any comfort from love still present, if there is any participation in the Holy Spirit (his indwelling and his fruits), and if there is any affection and love among the brothers and sisters, then, Paul's joy will be complete.³ More importantly, the Philippians will successfully endure the persecution which they were then facing.

How do the Philippians accomplish those things necessary to make Paul's joy complete? Because encouragement, comfort, participation in the Spirit, and affection and sympathy are present among the Philippians (the implication of the conditions being fulfilled), then the Philippians can indeed accomplish what Paul has just exhorted them to do. "*Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*" If the false teachers haven't completely taken over (and the implication is that they haven't—far from it), the Philippians are to resist them by being of one mind, demonstrating love for one another, and being in full accord. This is for their good, but it will also bring

² Silva, *Philippians*, 100.

³ O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 176.

the apostle joy, knowing that the Philippian congregation—for which no doubt he feels a bit of responsibility—will survive the efforts of the Judaizers from within to distort the gospel of Jesus, and from the persecutors without, who encourage these saints to deny their faith in Jesus. But the Philippians must stand firm and be of one mind, but in order to do so, they must adopt a particular mind-set which is, as Paul is about to explain, the same mind-set as Jesus.

But being of one mind, having the same love, and being in full accord, requires that certain sinful conduct cease. Rather than focus on specific behaviors, in verse 3, Paul focuses upon the mind-set that the Philippians ought to have. He tells them “*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*” Unlike those plaguing Paul in Rome, who out of envy and jealousy seek to take advantage of the circumstances while Paul is confined, and unlike those troubling the Philippians, Christians are not to do things from the motive of selfish ambition. In English, selfish ambition means something like seeking to gain advantage over another, or further one’s own cause or circumstances, even if others are negatively impacted. But the root of the word in Greek refers to a hireling or mercenary, and in context here, it means something like “vain glory” or “vanity.” Another nuanced meaning of the term is “pretentiousness.”⁴

Paul’s discussion is like cold water in our faces. In American culture, Paul’s exhortation to put away “selfish ambition” could translate as “don’t be so narcissistic” and strive to stop foolishly thinking that everything in life is about us—that our needs and desires always come first, and are far more important than the needs of others. This is the sin of so much of modern America—how many commercials can we recount where we are told that “you deserve” something which you probably do not need or cannot really afford, but which someone wants to sell us, so they appeal to our base narcissism, “you deserve it.” In our culture ambition and conceit are virtues, but Paul calls them sin. In American life, everything centers around the self, while Paul’s exhortation is to do the opposite—make sure that everything we do flows out of a due consideration of the needs of others. Paul even says, in humility—that is lowliness, i.e., the mind-set of a slave or servant—consider others more worthy (or more important) than yourselves. These are not easy words for Americans to hear, much less practice.

Paul goes on in verse 4, to flesh out a bit further what he means. “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” Of course, it is important to care for our own needs and take care of those for whom we are responsible. It is Paul who elsewhere states that if a man does not work, he should not eat, and that those men who neglect their families and fail to provide for them are worse than unbelievers (1 Timothy 5:8). But as we look to our own interests, we must keep the needs of others in mind and always consider how what we do impacts others.

In the specific instance of which Paul is addressing are those preach Christ from envy and selfish ambition. But this may also extend to the Judaizers, who made it their aim to come to Philippi and impose their erroneous theology upon the congregation which, no doubt, brought the teachers and leaders of this group a certain notoriety and which attracted a number of followers about which they could boast. But these men never stopped to consider the ramifications of what they were doing to others—dividing Christ’s church, robbing bruised reeds of the assurance of their salvation, giving people false ideas about Christ and his gospel. In their minds, they are successful. But in Paul’s estimation they are destructive and worse, doing the exact opposite of what Jesus did—put the needs of others above himself.

⁴ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 180.

What follows in verses 6-11 is the so called *Carmen Christi* (the Christ hymn) introduced by Paul as an illustration of the mind-set of Jesus which Christians are to emulate. From the outset, we need to be perfectly clear about one thing. The incarnation of our Lord is a unique event. It cannot be repeated, nor is Paul telling us to imitate it—it is impossible to do what the second person of the Holy Trinity did, take to himself a true human nature. I recall hearing a preacher once making the application that Paul wants us all to be “little Jesuses,” “little incarnations of God.” No, no, no! We cannot imitate Jesus in his incarnation—such is a metaphysical impossibility. But Paul does exhort us to have the same mind (set) Jesus does, who in his incarnation humbled himself. It is our Lord’s attitude of humility which Paul sets forth as an example for us to emulate, not the incarnation which is a unique and unrepeatable act.

The *Carmen Christi* reveals a great deal about the person and nature of Jesus, so it is easy to see it as a free standing hymn with little connection to what has gone before. Although it is packed with Christological significance, the hymn is not introduced in the context of debate about the two natures of Christ, or the meaning of the Greek word *kenosis*—“*he made himself nothing*,” or, as it is often translated “emptied himself.” Our Lord’s mind (in the sense of “mind-set” or attitude) in doing this is set forth as an example to us—Jesus was humble, which we are to emulate. The incarnation is also introduced by Paul so that in imitating the mind-set of Jesus (regarding others as more important than oneself), those who do so, are reminded that we too will also experience the glory which Jesus now does. In other words, those who imitate Jesus’ humility, will also see in Jesus’ life the pattern which frames the New Testament’s doctrine of the Christian life—humility, persecution, and suffering are only temporary. Such things give way to the glory of the resurrection and our participation in the exaltation which Jesus earned for us by accomplishing his work of redemption.

The passage reveals itself to be a hymn (not in the modern sense of lyrics set to a discernable tune), but in the ancient sense of a natural rhythm and parallelism when the text is read—a poem or an ode. There are three distinct strophes or movements in the *Carmen Christi* which follow the introduction in verse 5. In verses 6-7a, the hymn treats of Jesus pre-existence (that he is eternally God). In verses 7b-8, the hymn speaks of Jesus’ earthly life of humiliation and perfect obedience, while verses 9-11 speak of Christ’s exalted heavenly existence. Scholars debate the precise details of the hymn’s structure, but the basics are pretty much agreed upon by all.⁵

Given Paul’s near-constant use of biblical language and categories throughout his writings, many see this hymn reflecting the so-called “servant songs” of Isaiah—specifically that of Isaiah 52/53. There is at the very least a faint echo from Isaiah 52/53, an idea reinforced by the fact that in verses 9-11, the *Carmen Christi* clearly alludes to Isaiah 45:18-23 (our Old Testament lesson). Some have found faint echoes from Jewish wisdom literature foretelling a divine sufferer who is wisdom personified. Others see an allusion here to Paul’s contrast between the two Adams (Adam and Christ) of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. There are some truth in all of these contentions, but the fact of the matter is that it is very likely that the author of the hymn, whether that be Paul or not, simply drew upon the apostolic teaching and preaching he had heard or proclaimed and which was instrumental in founding Christian churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

The author (Paul or someone else), probably meditated upon what they heard and understood about the person and work of Jesus from sermons, instruction, and their knowledge of Scripture, and then composed this hymn. Either Paul composed this hymn previously, or while composing this letter, or it

⁵ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 190.

was composed by another, was likely sung in the churches, and incorporated into this letter by Paul. Echoes from the servant songs of Isaiah, the doctrine of the two-Adams, and much reflection upon how Jesus fulfills Jewish expectations were present in much of apostolic preaching. If you were meditating upon these things it was because these things are found in virtually every apostolic sermon we have in the pages of the New Testament.⁶ Whether Paul wrote these words or not, what matters to us is that he fully agrees with them and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he includes this hymn as the reference point for the Philippians to properly understand what it means to have the same mind-set as Jesus.⁷

As we dig into the actual content of the hymn, we begin by noting, that verse 5 is the logical conclusion of everything Paul has said from 1:27 on. “*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.*” If Christians are consider others as more important than themselves—the true meaning of Christian humility—they should begin by considering the example of Jesus. Jesus is the true example of selflessness and sacrifice. He gave himself for us so as to save us from our sins. Believing this and therefore being delivered from all of those times when we did not put others ahead of ourselves (when we act like American narcissists), we turn to the example of Jesus as the source of those good works which are the fruit of saving faith. Because Jesus gave himself for sinful narcissists (such as us), we must learn to look to his example so as to stop being sinful narcissists. Paul gives us an imperative (command) here. We are to have the same attitude towards others which Jesus did—humility. Not pretentious or self-serving, or ambitious to take advantage of others. But humble, considering the needs of others.

The specifics of Jesus’s attitude toward others is found in the contents of the *Carmen Christi*, beginning in verses 6-7a (the first stanza or strophe) which treats of our Lord’s willing humiliation. “*Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.*” When Paul asserts that Jesus “was in the form of God” he is affirming Jesus’ eternal pre-existence as God—an undeniable affirmation of Jesus’s deity. The hymn begins with the declaration that before anything was created and before time began, and before Jesus took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin, Jesus shared in the eternal glory of the Triune God. The passage reflects the similar imagery of Hebrews 1:3. “*He [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*”

The second stanza (v. 7b-8) includes the key point Paul is making to the Philippians about Christian humility. The same Jesus—who experienced the eternal glory, love, and joy within the fellowship of the Holy Trinity—voluntarily “*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.*” Despite the glory which Jesus possessed and enjoyed as a matter of divine right and perfection, Jesus “emptied himself,” taking the *form* of a servant—an obvious antithesis to Jesus eternally existing in the form of God.⁸ There are several vital points to consider, and we’ll take them in the order in which they appear in the passage.

First, much mischief has been done with the *Carmen Christi*’s assertion in verse 6 that our Lord “*made himself nothing,*” or as is often translated, he “*emptied himself*” (*ekenōsen* – *kenosis*). Protestant liberals

⁶ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 188-198.

⁷ Silva, *Philippians*, 105.

⁸ Ralph Martin, *Philippians*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 98.

(especially German Protestant liberals) have contended that Jesus “emptied himself” of certain divine attributes (omnipotence, omniscience), or of all divine consciousness (he did not know he was God incarnate), or he gave up the eternal form of being (his deity). Jesus was the “form” of God, but gave up his divinity to become “the form of man (under the guise of defending Jesus’ true humanity). This is not what Paul says or means here, and the so-called “kenotic” theories collapse under their own weight. Jesus is God, but then stops being God? How does that work? What happens in the ascension? What does kenotic doctrine do to the meaning of verse 10 (the third stanza) where Jesus is exalted above all things. Does he get his deity back? What does this do to orthodox Christology which affirms that Jesus has two natures (one human, one divine), yet remains one person?

Second, when the *Carmen Christi* affirms that in the incarnation Jesus empties himself, it is clear that he does so to take the form of a servant. The divine nature and the human are set in parallel to each other. This is an obvious appeal to the language of Isaiah (specifically Isaiah 53:12) which speaks of the servant of YHWH “pouring out his soul” to death. Isaiah’s prophecy prophetically points ahead to our Lord’s death by crucifixion. Jesus emptied himself by taking to himself a true human nature, becoming “the form of a servant,” for the purpose of suffering and dying for our sins. This affirms the second point made in the hymn (as a parallelism), that Jesus remains one person, but he is both in the form of God (a divine nature), yet in the incarnation takes to himself a true human nature (and takes on the “form” of servant (a *doulos*), a slave. Jesus is God incarnate, God in human flesh.

Third, absolutely critical to Paul’s point about Jesus emptying himself is the hymn’s prior assertion in verse 6b that our Lord “*did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.*” This assertion is beyond our comprehension in light of the previous assertion that Jesus enjoyed the eternal glory and blessedness of inter-Trinitarian fellowship. Much ink has been spilt about the meaning of this and how to translate it, but a compelling case can be made that the phrase is best interpreted to mean that in the incarnation, our Lord did not use his status “in the form of God,” to “gain advantage,” or to use his divine attributes and glory to gain advantage over those humans with whom he walked and talked, except as necessary to fulfil his messianic mission and confirm his deity.⁹ To put the meaning of this in crude terms, Jesus walked where he went, he did not fly. Jesus could have instantly cooked his food, but used heat. Jesus could have avoided and overcome all manner of human weakness and limitation (like making the nail wounds not hurt), but he did not. Jesus could have performed dramatic miracles and then do what the Israelites expected the Messiah to do—claim David’s throne and lead Israel’s armies to victory over Rome.

Jesus did not do any of this, and that is the point of the second stanza of the hymn. Jesus did not use the things rightly his to gain advantage over us. His mind-set was one of humility in taking the form of a human so as to suffer and die for our sins. The suffering, shame, and humiliation of the incarnation must precede the exaltation expressed in the hymn’s closing stanza in verses 9-11. “*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.*” That one who humbled himself for us and for our salvation was also exalted and given those rights, titles, and privileges which were his all along but which are now confirmed by his suffering and obedience, and crowned in his resurrection and ascension.

The entire focus of the hymn changes in the third stanza from the eternal nature of Jesus (stanza one), to Jesus’ humility and obedience (stanza 2), to the Father’s decisive actions on behalf of Jesus, who is now

⁹ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 215.

the recipient of the Father's love and favor. It was Jesus who humbled himself. But it is the Father who exalts our Lord by giving him that name above all others, a name which is so great and exalted, that every knee will bow and confess that Jesus is Lord to the Father's glory. This reception of worship of YHWH by all the earth's inhabitants was foretold in Isaiah 45:18–25 (which we read earlier), and is applied in the *Carmen Christi* to the person of Jesus now exalted to the highest place of honor—the Father's right hand. That glory which YHWH was to reveal in the messianic age is now revealed to be the glory of the risen and ascended, the obedient and victorious servant of YHWH—Jesus. That one who created all things and who humbled himself to redeem his people will be acknowledged on bended knee by every person whom he has created—willingly or otherwise.

The *Carmen Christi* is one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. If this hymn was composed by someone other than Paul, it means that the apostolic churches from the very beginning affirmed the deity of Jesus (in the form of God), as well as the incarnation as a unique once for all event (that Jesus took to himself a true human nature—in the form of a servant). The hymn also affirms that when Jesus died he did so in obedience to the Father (his perfect obedience) and to suffer and die for our sins. And then God raised Jesus and exalted him to YHWH's right hand, giving the name that is above every name. On judgment day, when his name is proclaimed, every knee will bow.

The *Carmen Christi* is packed with theological significance, and it is beautiful in its form. It was likely sung in the early churches and we will do the same. It is cited by Paul to remind us of Jesus' attitude toward others. Jesus counted all his advantages as nothing and made himself a servant. While we cannot imitate the incarnation itself, we can adopt the same attitude toward others as Jesus. If we wish to stand firm with one mind and spirit against the secularism, paganism, and persecution of the citizens of the age in which we live, we ought do as Paul tells us to do: Follow the example of Jesus and disarm all our opponents by considering their interests and welfare every bit as important as ours, knowing that we do so in the name of that humble Savior whose name is now the name that is above every other name.