

Bible Study: Letters of Paul
Central Presbyterian Church
December 7, 2025
Session 14/16: Philippians: "Christ's Humility"
Reading: Philippians 2:5-11
English text taken from the Lexham English Bible
Greek text taken from SBLGNT (Society of Biblical Literature Green New Testament)

Philippians 2:5–11: The Christ Hymn – Descent into Humility and Ascent to Glory

Broader Context Epistle:

Composed during Paul's imprisonment (likely Rome, ca. 61–62 CE), emphasizing joy, unity, and perseverance amid suffering.

Audience:

The church in Philippi, a Roman colony founded by Augustus (42 BCE), populated by military veterans. Citizens prized Roman citizenship (Acts 16:21), status, and honour in a hierarchical society.

Literary Role:

This passage is a pre-Pauline hymn (possibly liturgical), inserted as an ethical exemplar to promote selfless unity (2:1–4) against division (4:2–3).

Structure:

Chiastic (descent vv. 6–8; ascent vv. 9–11), echoing Isaiah's Suffering Servant (Isa 52–53) and Adam's fall (Gen 3).

Key Theme:

Kenosis (self-emptying) as the path to exaltation, subverting Roman imperial ideology.

Verse 5

Greek (SBLGNT):

τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,

LEB:

Think this in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

Gloss:

| Τοῦτο | φρονεῖτε | ἐν | ὑμῖν | ὃ | καὶ | ἐν | Χριστῷ | Ἰησοῦ |
| This | think | in | you | which | also | in | Christ | Jesus |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

Τοῦτο φρονεῖτε – Present imperative: ongoing mindset (not mere opinion);
φρονέω draws from Stoic ethics (practical wisdom, disposition).

ἐν ὑμῖν...ἐν Χριστῷ – Prepositional phrases: corporate sphere; implies union with Christ (mystical participation).

ὃ καὶ – Relative clause with emphatic καί: "the very same thing that also [was] in Christ."

Discourse:

Transitional hinge from exhortation (2:1–4) to hymn; imperatival tone sets ethical framework.

Historical Context:

Philippian Society: As a Roman colony, emphasis on social harmony (concordia) but via status hierarchies; Paul inverts this with Christ-modeled humility.

Hellenistic Philosophy:

φρονέω echoes Epictetus/Seneca on virtuous mindset; Paul Christianizes it.

Synthesis:

Call to imitation: Believers must adopt Christ's self-giving attitude for community unity, countering selfish ambition (2:3).

Verse 6

Greek:

ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ,

LEB:

who, existing in the form of God, did not consider being equal with God something to be grasped,

Gloss:

ὃς	ἐν	μορφῇ	θεοῦ	ὑπάρχων	οὐχ	ἄρπαγμὸν	ἡγήσατο	τὸ	εἶναι
ἴσα	θεῷ								
Who	in	form	of-God	existing	not	something-to-be-grasped			
considered	the	to-be	equal	with-God					

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ὃς...ὑπάρχων – Relative pronoun + present participle: timeless pre-existence (not "became").
- μορφῇ θεοῦ – μορφή = outward expression of inner essence; divine glory (cf. LXX Exod 24:16).
- οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἡγήσατο – Aorist indicative: decisive non-action; ἄρπαγμός = "prize to seize/exploit".
- τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ – Articular infinitive: abstract equality with God.

Historical Context:

- Jewish Background: Echoes Adam's temptation to "be like God" (Gen 3:5); Christ as Second Adam refuses grasp.
- Imperial Cult: Emperors like Nero claimed divine equality; Christ relinquishes privilege.
- Greco-Roman Myth: Gods like Zeus "grasp" power; Christ subverts.

Synthesis:

Pre-incarnate Christ held divine status but chose not to exploit it—voluntary renunciation as anti-type to human/imperial hubris.

Verse 7

Greek:

ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων
γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὗρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

LEB:

but emptied himself by taking the form of a slave, by becoming in the likeness of
people. And being found in appearance like a man,

Gloss:

| ἀλλὰ | ἑαυτὸν | ἐκένωσεν | μορφὴν | δούλου | λαβών | ἐν | ὁμοιώματι |
ἀνθρώπων | γενόμενος | καὶ | σχήματι | εὗρεθεὶς | ὡς | ἄνθρωπος |
| but | himself | emptied | form | of-a-slave | having-taken | in | likeness | of-
men | having-become | and | in-appearance | having-been-found | as | man |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἀλλὰ...ἐκένωσεν – Adversative + aorist middle: voluntary self-emptying (kenosis); not loss of divinity, but concealment/addition.
- μορφὴν δούλου λαβών – Instrumental participle: means of kenosis; parallel to μορφῇ θεοῦ (v.6)—status exchange.
- ἐν ὁμοιώματι...ὡς ἄνθρωπος – ὁμοίωμα = genuine similarity (not illusion; cf. Rom 8:3); σχῆμα = outward form.

Rhythmic:

Poetic parallelism emphasizes descent.

Historical Context:

- Slavery in Philippi: ~1/3 population slaves; δούλος evoked degradation (Aristotle: "living tool").
- Isaiah 53 LXX: Servant (παῖς) "poured out" himself; Paul adapts to δοῦλος.

Incarnation:

Contra Gnostic/Docetic views (1 John 4:2); full humanity in Roman world of body-soul dualism.

Synthesis:

Incarnation as kenosis: Christ assumes slave-humanity without ceasing divinity—solidarity with the lowly.

Verse 8

Greek:

ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν γενόμενος ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, θανάτου δὲ σταυροῦ·

LEB:

he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, that is, death
on a cross.

Gloss:

| ἐταπείνωσεν | ἑαυτὸν | γενόμενος | ὑπήκοος | μέχρι | θανάτου | θανάτου | δὲ |
σταυροῦ |

| humbled | himself | having-become | obedient | to-the-point-of | death | death | but
| of-a-cross |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἐταπείνωσεν ἑαυτὸν – Aorist middle: climactic self-humiliation.
- γενόμενος ὑπήκοος – Participle: obedience as mode of humility.
- μέχρι θανάτου...σταυροῦ – Emphatic repetition + genitive specification: "even cross-death" (ultimate shame).

Historical Context:

Crucifixion: Roman penalty for slaves/rebels (Cicero: "most cruel"); Jews: cursed (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13).

Obedience:

Echoes Adam's disobedience (Rom 5:19); Roman military valued subordination.

Philippi:

Site of battles; veterans knew honour in victory, not death.

Synthesis:

Culmination of descent: Obedient crucifixion—reversal of power, fulfilling
Servant prophecy.

Verse 9

Greek:

διὸ καὶ ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν, καὶ ἐχαρίσατο αὐτῷ τὸ ὄνομα τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα,

LEB:

Therefore also God exalted him and graciously granted him the name above every name,

Gloss:

| διὸ | καὶ | ὁ | θεὸς | αὐτὸν | ὑπερύψωσεν | καὶ | ἐχαρίσατο | αὐτῷ | τὸ |
ὄνομα | τὸ | ὑπὲρ | πᾶν | ὄνομα |
| Therefore | also | the | God | him | highly-exalted | and | graciously-granted |
to-him | the | name | the | above | every | name |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- διὸ καὶ – Causal + emphatic: God's responsive exaltation.
- ὑπερύψωσεν – Superlative compound aorist: "super-exalted" (resurrection/ascension).
- ἐχαρίσατο – Grace verb: gift, not earned.
- τὸ ὄνομα...ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα – YHWH's name implied (Kyrios, v.11).

Historical Context:

- Imperial Titles: Emperors "exalted" with names (e.g., Augustus = "exalted one").
- Psalm 110:1: God exalts the Lord; early Christian vindication motif.

Synthesis:

Divine reversal: Humility rewarded with supreme name—grace over merit.

Verse 10

Greek:

ἵνα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ πᾶν γόνυ κάμψῃ ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων,

LEB:

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and of those on earth and of those under the earth,

Gloss:

| ἵνα | ἐν | τῷ | ὀνόματι | Ἰησοῦ | πᾶν | γόνυ | κάμψῃ | ἐπουρανίων | καὶ |
ἐπιγείων | καὶ | καταχθονίων |
| so-that | in | the | name | of-Jesus | every | knee | should-bow | of-heavenly
| and | of-earthly | and | of-under-earth |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

ἵνα...κάμψῃ – Purpose subjunctive: eschatological bowing.

Tripartite cosmos:

Universal scope (heaven/earth/underworld).

Historical Context:

Isa 45:23 LXX: Applied to YHWH; monotheistic subversion.

Proskynesis:

Bowing to emperors (refused by Jews/Christians).

Synthesis:

Cosmic submission: Jesus receives YHWH's worship—high Christology.

Verse 11

Greek:

καὶ πᾶσα γλῶσσα ἐξομολογήσεται ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ πατρός.

LEB:

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gloss:

| καὶ | πᾶσα | γλῶσσα | ἐξομολογήσεται | ὅτι | κύριος | Ἰησοῦς | Χριστὸς | εἰς
δόξαν | θεοῦ | πατρός |
| and | every | tongue | should-confess | that | Lord | Jesus | Christ | to | glory
| of-God | Father |

Grammatical & Lexical Notes:

- ἐξομολογήσεται – Public confession (LXX Ps 41:5).
- κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός – Creedal formula (Rom 10:9).
- εἰς δόξαν – Telos: Father glorified through Son.

Historical Context:

"Kyrios": Caesar's title; anti-imperial (Acts 17:7).

Early Liturgy:

Hymn ends in doxology, like synagogue prayers.

Synthesis:

Universal acclamation: "Jesus is Lord" honours the Father—Trinitarian unity.

Summary of Philippians 2:5–11

Verses	Movement	Key Contrast	Mindset Call
5	Ethical Frame	Human vs. Christ-like	Descent
6-8	Kenosis & Death	Divine Privilege → Slave Shame	Ascent
9-11	Exaltation & Worship	Cross → Cosmic Lordship	

Theological Center:

Christ's voluntary humiliation leads to divine exaltation, modeling cruciform life while affirming pre-existence, incarnation, and lordship—subverting Roman power with gospel humility.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does Christ's self-emptying reveal about God's nature?
- How does this passage challenge our attitudes?
- How can we imitate Christ's humility in relationships?