

Act with Humility

Philippians 2:1-13 (September 27, 2020)

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²If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Historical Context

In the Philippian Greco-Roman context, Paul's exhortation to humility following the example of Christ would have been heard as completely counter cultural. Roman culture placed great emphasis on fortitude, self-reliance, and indifference to circumstance. On the contrary, humility would be considered a shortcoming. More to the point, Philippians felt great civic pride due to their unique status as a Roman colony, which granted them Roman citizenship and absolved them from paying taxes to Caesar. In addition, their allegiance to Rome had given them considerable political and economic privileges that translated to higher social standing.

Theme: Act with Humility

Paul tells his readers to act with humility and to consider others in their community as more important than themselves (Philippians 2:1-4). Paul aims to form a collective mind that informs collective actions. Today we may consider a collective mind to be a bad idea. Social psychologist Irving Janis coined the word "Groupthink" in 1972 to describe the phenomenon in which group pressure results in flawed or senseless decisions that may hurt others. Paul calls for a different kind of Groupthink, in which a community of people exhibits a transformed mind by following Jesus' example of humility and service to others.

The example of Jesus shows that to serve others sacrificially is not to deny our rights or status but to exercise them fully. Imitating Jesus does not only mean to follow his example of humility, but also to follow his example in exaltation. It is God who makes the promotion, not Jesus himself. So, Paul's audience must not be concerned with self-promotion, but with God's promotion of them.