

# Philippians 2.5–18

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## *Shining like stars*

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Finding Joy in the Journey (4)

### **Learning by example**

Little Johnny was caught swearing by his teacher. ‘Johnny,’ she said, ‘you shouldn’t use that kind of language. Where did you hear such talk, anyway?’ ‘My daddy said it,’ he responded.

‘Well, that doesn’t matter,’ explained the teacher. ‘You don’t even know what it means.’ ‘I do, too!’ Little Johnny retorted. ‘It means the car won’t start.’

My parents used to walk Guide Dog puppies. For years they had a procession of little Labrador and Retriever puppies.  We had to house-train the dogs and teach them some basic skills.

It’s hard work. But when we had an older dog, it was much easier, because the puppies wanted to do whatever Peter did. Most of the time that was a good thing, because he was well-trained, and so he was a good example for them to follow.

Learning by example – that’s the best way to learn.

Paul knew that, and that’s what our passage today is all about. So far in Philippians, Paul has told his friends that they are **[partners] in the gospel** (1.5), that they should **conduct [them]selves in a manner worthy of the gospel** (1.27), that they *are* **united with Christ** (2.1) and so should *be* **one in Spirit** (2.3).

Now Paul holds up Jesus as the example we should follow. What does it look like to live out the Christian faith? What does it look like to be a Christian? Simple, Paul says: it looks like Jesus.

## His Example (5-8)

Let’s look at these famous words then. Please turn to page \_\_\_\_ in your Bibles, and find Philippians 2, beginning at verse 5.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

*Philippians 2.5 (NIV pre-2011)*

This is actually quite a difficult verse to translate. ¶ Some different versions are on-screen now. Paul is trying to tell the Philippians, this should be your way of thinking; whatever situation you face, you should have this in mind; whomever you meet, your attitude should be the same; your mind should be set on Jesus (v6):

who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be... [grasped, used to his own advantage, exploited, held onto at all costs].

*Philippians 2.6 (NIV, expanded)*

Paul is in no doubt who Jesus is. He says it quite forcefully: ‘who, being really and truly God’. This is who Jesus is, by right, from eternity: he is the equal of God the Father, God’s perfect image, his unique and only Son. This is who Jesus is, by right: the one to whom every knee *should* bow.

But exploiting that, grasping it, using it **to his own advantage**, is not the mindset or attitude of Jesus. **Rather**, Paul says (verse 7):

rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant [slave],  
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death –  
even death on a cross!

*Philippians 2.7-8 (NIV)*

Paul is in no doubt who Jesus is. He says it quite forcefully: ‘who, really and truly taking the form of a slave. This is who Jesus is, by choice: he made himself nothing, like humanity in every way, except uniquely without sin. This is who Jesus is, by choice: the humble God-Man, **obedient to death**.

‘Tis mystery all: th’Immortal dies:  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine. ...  
  
He left His Father’s throne above  
So free, so infinite His grace—  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.

*Charles Wesley*

¶ ‘In vain the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine’ – that is the eighteenth century way of saying, ¶ ‘Huh?!’ Friends, I cannot tell you *how* the immortal God, the one through and for whom the Father made the universe, the only Son of God, could lay all that aside and become like one of us, even dying!

But he did. And he did it willingly.

That is such an important point, because when we forget it, the cross becomes something it is not: ‘a form of cosmic child abuse’.<sup>1</sup> Look at verse 7: **he made *himself* nothing**. Look at verse 8: **he humbled *himself***. This is not the Father doing something terrible to his helpless Son, but Father and Son *together* reaching down, lifting us up, and giving us a new life, a fresh start.

§ Jesus’ life: not subservience, but *willing obedience*:

What did Jesus have, that he didn’t give up for us? What did Jesus have, that he kept for himself? Nothing – in willing obedience, he left himself with nothing, so that we might have everything. That is the wonder of the cross: that is what true love looks like.

## God’s Response (9-11)

Are you the sort of person who likes to make lists? My life is run by an app called Todoist, which contains various lists, reminding me of things to do. It puts the most important or urgent things at the top of the list, helping me to prioritise.

Have you ever seen those TV shows – the 100 ‘greatest moments on TV’, or the 100 ‘greatest films’, the or 100 ‘funniest moments’?

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p182.

The greatest, the funniest, the most popular, the biggest-selling, always comes at the top of the list, never at the bottom.

For some reason, up (or high) is good, down (or low) is bad. Top is best, bottom is worst. Highest is most important, lowest is the thing to ignore.

Therefore God exalted [Jesus] to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name ...

*Philippians 2.9 (NIV)*

**Therefore** tells us that this is what God's response to Jesus is. God **exalted [Jesus] to the highest place**, not because he did this or that specific thing, but because his *whole life*, from **making himself nothing**, being born to a peasant family, to living **as a man**, to his death – even death on a cross – was one of willing obedience. God **exalted [Jesus] to the highest place**, not because of what he did, but because of the kind of person Jesus was.

## **Our Response (12-18)**

That was God's response – so what is ours? What is your first response to these words, describing what Jesus did, describing the depths of his love, when you realise he did all that for you?

I find it overwhelming.

My song is love unknown,  
my Saviour's love to me;  
Love to the loveless shown,  
That they might lovely be.  
O who am I,  
That for my sake  
My Lord should take  
Frail flesh and die?

*My song is love unknown, Samuel Crossman*

My first response is to hold out my hands and say thank you for so great, so precious a gift as the love and life of God, love I don't deserve, a life I did not earn.

Friends, if you do not know the life and love of God, I beg you, look at Jesus. He is the one. You often see sportsmen holding up their index finger: 'I'm number one!' they are saying. But no: *he* is number one. And his gift is the most precious and most wonderful thing you could ever be given, please don't turn it down.

When Jess finished her finals this year, I bought her this picture *hold up the Hannah Dunnett picture*. Imagine how hurt I would have been if she had unwrapped it, and then shoved it in the bottom of some cupboard, underneath a pile of old clothes.

Thankfully she didn't do that – instead she is going to put it on the wall somewhere she will see and enjoy it.

We all know how to make the most of a gift like this *hold up the picture* – but how do we make the most of the gift of life that Jesus gives to all who believe? Paul has the answer ¶:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act in order to fulfil his good purposes.

*Philippians 2.12-13 (NIV)*

These are two of the most important verses if you want to follow Jesus and make the most of his gift of life.

¶ **Therefore** – whatever we *do* is always in *response* to what Jesus *has already done*. This is important to remember, because it stops us from thinking that we need to *earn* the gift. **Therefore**, Paul says – because Jesus is *this* kind of person, so we should like *that*.



‡ **Dear friends** – I love the warmth and depth of feeling that comes across in this letter. Paul addresses them as **friends**, because they are, and should be. You simply cannot be a Christian on your own; we need each other's love, support and encouragement.

‡ **You have always obeyed** – this is the key. In the same way that Jesus isn't subservient but willingly obedient, so we should be also. As we pray those words from 1.9-11, that we **might discern what is best** – so also we must obey.

‡ **Work out your salvation** – not work *for* your salvation, but work *out* your salvation: carry it out, make the most of what you already have, or as I said last week: be what you are.

I like to think of it like a marriage. After all, Paul does say **work out your salvation *with fear and trembling*...**! Forty years ago Allan and Anne made their declarations, joined hands, said their marriage vows to each other, and exchanged wedding rings.

In that moment they were married. But a marriage is so much more than the wedding: every day since then they have had to **work out** those vows in their daily lives. I'm sure that some days that has gone better than others! But still, the wedding day is the beginning of a lifelong journey of discovery and faithfulness.

Salvation is like a wedding day. It is an event that *happened* in the past, it can never be altered or taken away or removed. Jesus died on the cross, and rose to new life on the third day – winning salvation for all who believe in him.

But, as a married couple must **work out** their vows daily, so we must **work out** our **salvation**. That is how we respond to the gift of life in Jesus: by making the most of it, following Jesus' example, living it out, every day and in every way.

But Paul doesn't stop there (verse 13):

For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

*Philippians 2.13 (NIV)*

**Work out your salvation... ] for it is God who works in you to will and to work.** Even here, God helps us out. We are only able to **work out** our **salvation**, because **God works in [us]**.

Remember what Paul said back in Philippians 1?

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

*Philippians 1.6 (NIV)*

I find that hugely encouraging, but challenging too! God is at work in me, helping me to **work out** my **salvation**, so that who I am bubbles up to the surface so other people can see.

If you're a Christian, what difference does your faith make in your life? Is it obvious? Paul says:

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' ¶ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.

*Philippians 2.14-15 (NIV)*

In other words, we must be different. Following Jesus makes a difference, and it should be obvious, like stars shining against the black emptiness of space. The world is self-centred; we should be humble and put the needs of others before our own. The world is fragmented and divided; we should *be* one, because we *are* one.

Paul planted many churches, which is why he said **do everything without grumbling or arguing** (14). Friends, I want none of that here. Last week, we saw Paul tell us to **do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit** (3). Selfish people grumble and argue when they don't get their own way. That is how the world behaves.

But it is not how *Christians* should behave. We must be different, because Jesus shows us a new and better way.

Did he grumble? Did he argue? Was he full of selfish ambition or vain conceit? Not even close: **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross** (8).

God responded to Jesus' lifelong obedience by exalting **him to the highest place** (9). But how will we, how will *you* respond to Jesus?

This series is about *Finding Joy in the Journey*. True joy is found, not when we make our lives about me, myself and I, but when we follow the example of Jesus, with humble, willing obedience. Paul is **glad** and **rejoices** when he sees **the sacrifice and service coming from** the Philippians' **faith** (17).

Because that is what God wants. Do you want to know what God's will for your life is? It is humble, obedient service. It might not sound spectacular, but you cannot imagine the difference we can make if we live like this, if we live like Jesus.

Outreach flows from obedience – because, as we live like Jesus, as we work out what God is working in us, so together we will shine like stars shine in the night sky. And other people will see and want the one who makes us shine: Jesus Christ.