



(23) THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

- Focus Idea: The First Century Church, spreading outward from Jerusalem into the Mediterranean World, understood the life and death of Jesus Christ as the model for Christian behavior. In particular, the sacrifice of the Savior grounded community ethics and offered a template for sincere relationships.
- The Context: Philippians is one of the New Testament *letters*. Composed by the Apostle Paul, this relatively short (4 chapters) communication has been called "the Epistle of Joy" for its generally positive spirit and wealth of encouraging words (see especially 4:4). The letter was addressed to the church in the Greek city of Philippi, the first church to flourish on continent of Europe. Paul and his traveling companions spent extended time in city, experiencing fruitful ministry with Lydia and a local jailer (Acts 16) there on his Second Missionary Journey. The fledgling Christian community on Philippi remained dear to Paul, and he may have written the letter as many as ten years after his first visit to the town.
- The Characters: The author of Philippians is the Apostle Paul, described in detail in previous Core40 lessons.
- The Core: Potential exists in any group of people – churches included – for arrogance, ambition, and selfishness to take root. When these toxic attitudes are left unchecked, the entire body suffers.
- In Philippians 2, Paul teaches the church there to meet conceit and pride with love and like-mindedness. Self-interest, while it may serve purposes outside the church, is not the order of the day for communities of Jesus; members of Christ's family are to look to serve others before themselves (vs. 1-4). These values were at strong odds with ancient Greco-Roman virtues of power and dominance; they remain strongly contrasted with the assumptions of our own age.
- Paul's standards for Christian behavior are drawn from the life and death of Jesus. To illustrate the obedience to which the Philippians were called, Paul quotes from a well-known hymn about the "mindset" of Jesus (vs. 5-11). While the tune to this song has been lost to history, the lyrics remain a beautiful window into the way that the first believers understood the work of Christ and viewed their obligations to each other.
- While Jesus was in the very nature God – i.e., he had every reason to be prideful and autocratic – he did not manipulate his divinity for selfish ends. Instead, Paul writes, he emptied himself in order to become a servant of all. This meant that Jesus became fully human and obeyed the will of the Father. For Christ, obedience led ultimately to death on a Roman cross (vs. 5-8).
- It is only through submission that exaltation can come, Paul concludes. In the end, the one who lowered himself will be worshipped by all. The one who humbled himself will be called Lord (vs. 9-11).
- If the Philippians really desired the encouragement of union with Christ and wished to experience the comfort of Jesus' love, they would need to walk the same path that he walked. They would cease their clamoring for earthly authority. They would set aside their personal agendas. They would work for the good and uplifting of others rather than their own individual gain.
- While Christian communities have often strayed from this template for life and relationships, the sacrificial ministry of Jesus remains the ultimate model for Christian behavior and the standard toward which all believers should aspire.