

Standing for Truth or Causing Strife? Paul's Message to the Philippians

An exegesis of Philippians 2:1-11

By Ron Cantor

Introduction

Causing a schism was once considered a severe sin.¹ Where division is found, pride is close by.² And both existed in the Philippi congregation. While Euodia and Syntyche are only mentioned once,³ everything Paul writes is leading to a confrontation with them over their rivalry,⁴ in this friendly letter of exhortation,⁵ thanking the Philippians for their support.⁶

Exegesis

The heart of Philippians is the chiasm⁷ in 2:6-11, setup by 2:1-5. It feels poetic, until one looks deeper into Philippian culture and sees, Paul is *exposing* them.

¹ 1 Cor. 1:10-12

² Mark 10:35-45

³ Phil. 4:2

⁴ That he names them at all is evidence of friendship since one of the marks of enmity in polemical letters is that enemies are left unnamed, thus denigrated by anonymity. Fee, G. D. (1999). *Philippians* (Vol. 11, p. 167). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.

⁵ Of the many types of non-formal letters, Fee concludes that "Philippians is rightly called 'a hortatory letter of friendship.'" (Stowers 1991:107; White 1990:206) ⁵ Fee, G. D. (1999). *Philippians* (Vol. 11, p. 20). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.

⁶ Phil. 2:25, 4:10ff

⁷ <https://bibleproject.com/blog/philippians-bible-study/>

A chiasm is a common literary device in biblical poetry that uses repetition to highlight the writer's main idea, make comparisons, and connect the main idea to other subtopics. Chiasms have a symmetrical structure that can look like this:

The "honors' race"⁸ was a system whereby elites competed for status. Humility (Ταπεινός) *wasn't* a virtue. Paul injects the Hebraic understanding of humility (positive),⁹ to combat how Roman culture viewed it (negatively, connected to servitude¹⁰).

A

B

C

D: The center of the chiasm is often a really important idea

C2

B2

A2

⁸ Paul's encomium to Christ, however, unfolds in a way that would have directly subverted the expectations of a Roman colonial audience. Elites in Rome competed with one another to ascend what was known as a *cursus honorum*, an "honors' race" that marked an aristocrat's social climb through a series of prestigious public offices. The titles accumulated along the way were, in turn, publicly proclaimed, in order of importance, by means of inscriptions erected either (a) by grateful recipients of elite benefaction or (b) by the aristocratic benefactors themselves. The *cursus honorum* was replicated throughout the empire, where local aristocrats competed for offices and honors in the smaller confines of their own provincial towns and municipalities. Still further down the pecking order, nonelites mimicked their social betters by adopting a race of honors in their various trade associations and religious groups.

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⁹ Proverbs 3:34, 11:12, 15:33, 16:19, 18:12, 22:4

¹⁰ Ταπεινός ("humble") was used negatively in ancient literature to describe the mentality of a slave, or the servile nature of inferior social classes (H-M 88; "servile" [Aristot., *Eth. Eud.* 3.3]; "not free" [Plato, *Leg.* 4.774c]; "low-born, ignoble" [Arrian, *Epict.* 1.3]). The negative associations related primarily to social rank. The evaluation of persons according to social class was exacerbated among the Romans, particularly in a colony like Philippi, where humility would have been anything but a virtue.

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It is well known that "humility" (*humilitas* in Latin; *tapeinos* in Greek) was not a virtue in Graeco Roman ethics. In fact, the word meant something like "crushed" or "debased." It was associated with failure and shame. (How Christian humility upended the world, John Dickson, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-christian-humility-upended-the-world/10101062>)

Octavian conquered Philippi¹¹ in 42 BCE and 30 BCE.¹² He turned it into a colony for Roman army veterans, with special status, "Jus Italicum,"¹³ and many perks for its inhabitants. The city's vain culture kept believers from understanding pride's demonic nature.¹⁴ It was causing divisions, and Paul addresses this.¹⁵

From the outset, Paul projects humility.

- He doesn't use the word *apostle* in his greeting.¹⁶
- He's not ashamed of his chains, mentioning it four times.¹⁷
- He holds no grudge against his opponents and finds good from their opposition.¹⁸

¹¹ Octavian became Emperor Augustus.

¹² Our interest in the city stems from 42 B.C.E., when two major battles were fought nearby in the plain—between Cassius and Brutus (the assassins of Julius Caesar) and the victors, Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) and Mark Antony. Following these victories Octavian honored Philippi by “refounding” it as a Roman military colony, thus endowing its populace with Roman citizenship

Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, p. 25). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.

¹³ Just like Italy

¹⁴ Pride resulted in Lucifer being excommunicated from heaven. (Is. 14:12-15)

¹⁵ Phil. 2:2, 5

¹⁶ By (1) deemphasizing his own status (δοῦλος sans ἀπόστολος) and (2) honoring the congregation's leaders with their titles (ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους), Paul intentionally subverts the honor culture of Philippi, where rank and titles were viewed as prizes to be competitively sought and publicly proclaimed, in order to enhance the holder's social status. Paul thus begins, at the outset of the letter, to model a relational ethos he will later (1) commend to the Philippians (2:5) and (2) vividly portray in his remarkable narrative of the humiliation of Christ (2:6–8) (Hellerman 117–21).

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¹⁷ The idea of being in chains to the Roman mind was unthinkable. In this city of elites, surely one would not be proud of being in jail. But now some had come to faith, maybe many. And some may have been embarrassed for Paul's predicament. But Paul is willing to not only go to jail for Yeshua, but die (1:21). He equates *not being ashamed* with *seeing Jesus exalted in his life*. He is not worried about being ashamed before man or embarrassed from his chains, but potentially being ashamed of not fulfilling his duty before God as a herald (Luke 9:26). Paul joyfully has lost all things for the gospel (Phil. 3:7-11).

¹⁸ Phil. 1:18

This is counterculture to the Philippians.

The climax is in Chapter 2. In v. 1, he makes a four-clause plea for them to *hear him*. Each sentence begins with *if* (εἰ).¹⁹ In v. 2, he expresses in three clauses the need for them to be "like-minded,"²⁰ and he's not merely asking them to *agree*, but to embrace Yeshua's *humility-posture*. He uses the same Greek words in v. 5 in asking them to "have the *same mindset* as Yeshua."^{21 22}

In v. 3, he starts defining this *Jesus-mindset*. "Selfish ambition" and "vain conceit" were entrenched in the Philippian culture. Rivalries like the one between Euodia and Syntyche were commonplace.^{23 24} Instead, Paul suggests that they "consider others better than themselves." The goal of the "honors' race" was for others to consider *you* as better.²⁵ Paul is flipping the script. He

¹⁹ Four statements form the basis of Paul's appeal to the Philippians. The statements are introduced by "if" in both Greek and English. Although the word "if" brings doubt to mind, these clauses express little hesitancy. They should be translated "assuming ... then make my joy complete." Melick, R. R. (1991). [Philippians, Colossians, Philemon](#) (Vol. 32, p. 93). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²⁰ Only the deliberately blind could possibly miss what concerns Paul. Just as he rhetorically compounds the basis of his appeal, so here at least three times he repeats: be *like-minded*; have *the same love*; be *one in spirit* and of one mind. Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, p. 86). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.

²¹ αὐτὸ φρονῆτε—same mindset... in v. 5 he is referring back to the mindset he described in 1-4.

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²² Col. 3:1-4, Romans 8:5-7

²³ Individuals in Philippi's highly stratified honor culture were deeply embedded in patronage networks that operated across the social classes. An ambitious local aristocrat would expect support from his friends, clients, and persons in his extended household. Preoccupation with one's own social advantage naturally led, therefore, to factions and rivalry (Oakes 181–82).

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²⁴ Ἐπιθεία is "a party spirit generated by selfish ambition" (H-M 87; O'Brien 180).

²⁵ Refer to note 8, on how Roman citizens sought praise for themselves (not others). Title and honors were proclaimed in public. Thus, what Paul is suggesting here, and modeling, is completely counter to how they were raised. Only by embracing the cross and the Jesus-mindset, can they be free.

properly explains *biblical humility*, not as self-degradation or "false modesty"²⁶ but in the way you treat others, looking to *their* interests (v. 4).²⁷ In fact, he uses a compound word, ταπεινοφροσύνη, that some think he invented to change the mentality toward *humility*.²⁸

V. 5 reveals the original "WWJD" and implores the Philippians to “*let the same kind of thinking dominate you as dominated Christ Jesus.*”²⁹ And the *thinking that dominated Jesus* is in the chiasm. Paul reveals, the way to attain honor is not through the *cursus honorum*³⁰ but through the cross.³¹

A. Yeshua, as God, released his Godhead rights, v. 6

B. He "emptied himself" and became a "slave"³², v. 7³³

²⁶ Fee, G. D. (1999). [Philippians](#) (Vol. 11, p. 88). Westmont, IL: IVP Academic

²⁷ ταπεινοφροσύνη “humble mindset” has nothing to do with self-disparagement but is “the resolution to subject oneself to others and to be more concerned about their welfare than one’s own” (W. Grundmann, *TDNT* 8.21–22; H.-H. Esser, *NIDNTT* 2.262).

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²⁸ Some cite our passage as the first occurrence of the compound ταπεινοφροσύνη in Gk. lit. (cf. Epictetus 3.24.56; Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.494). Perhaps Paul coined the term precisely to subvert the cultural values and social codes of the relational context in which the Philippians found themselves.

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²⁹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature](#) (3rd ed., p. 1066). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁰ Honor’s Race

³¹ Luke 9:23, Gal. 2:20

³² Doulos is better understood here as slave, not servant. BDAG defines it as being under someone’s *total control, slavish, servile*. Paul uses this in Romans 6:19, when speaking about being a “slave to sin.”

³³ I used the CJB here.

C. He "humbled himself", v. 8 and "considered others better than himself"³⁴ v. 3 and looked to our interests v. 4 by becoming human.

Paul's strategy here is to show that Yeshua already did what he expects of them.

D. Jesus becomes a crucified slave.

How did the Philippians perceive *Jesus, the crucified slave*: The worst way to live was as a slave³⁵; the worst way to die was crucifixion.³⁶ That God would choose both for his son was a paradox to the Philippians. As this was read aloud to the Philippian congregation, they were surely stunned.³⁷ But next, Paul shows them the results of having the humility mindset of Yeshua.

C2. *God* exalts him to the highest place. V. 9a

B2. He gives him the name above all names. V. 9b

³⁴ Imagine that, the Son of God considered you, better than himself; the creator serving the creation.

³⁵ "There is no position higher than being God and there is no position lower than being a slave." (Hellerman pg. 114)

³⁶ And crucifixion (v. 8) was the most degrading act of public humiliation conceivable. The striking difference is that the humiliation of Christ did not issue from passive inability, as in the case, for example, of the oppressed poor, or of a powerless slave who had no other option. Christ willingly chose weakness, servility, and subjection, and he did so in the service of others—a choice at odds with ancient social sensibilities. (Hellerman 100)

³⁷ The words of Josephus at the beginning of his autobiography reveal what was acceptable at that time, and how haughty it would sound today:

"My family is not an ignoble one, tracing its descent far back to priestly ancestors. Different races base their claim to nobility on various grounds; with us a connection with the priesthood is the hallmark of an illustrious line. Not only, however, were my ancestors priests, but they belong to the first of the twenty-four courses - a peculiar distinction - and to the most eminent of its constituent clans. Brought up with Matthias, my own brother by both parents, I made great progress in my education, gaining a reputation for an excellent memory and understanding. While still a mere boy, about fourteen years old, I won universal applause for my love of literature; insomuch that the chief priests and the leading men of the city used constantly to come to me for precise information on some particular in our ordinances."

A2. All creation will submit to him. V. 10³⁸

In the *cursus honorum*, the highest honor was to be praised by Caesar himself; "to be praised by a praised man."³⁹ Paul goes much higher than Caesar; for it is God himself⁴⁰ who praises Yeshua. Yeshua receives the highest honor possible, and he did it through *ταπεινοφροσύνη*—the *humility mindset*.

Paul then does the unthinkable (3:4-11), by listing his accomplishments in true Roman fashion, only to renounce them in favor of knowing Messiah.⁴¹ He compares his impressive

³⁸ Paul does not write anything new. All of his revelation is based on Scripture, and the idea of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing comes right out of Isaiah 45. Like in Isaiah 45, which speaks of God hiding himself until the right time v. 15, Yeshua lived amongst us in plain sight, but we did not recognize that he was the moshia (savior), moshiach (messiah) and goel (redeemer) of Israel (Is. 53:1). God will save Israel (Is. 45:17) even as Yeshua saves all who call upon his name (Is. 45:22).

Either way, "Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear." The enemies will be put to shame (Is. 45:24) but Israel (household of God, including the nations who believe, post resurrection) will be saved.

But the way most people read Phil. 2:10 is that the world will be forced to worship Jesus and confess him, where in Isaiah 45 it can be interpreted that the nations turn to him and confess him. They come embarrassed *בבוש* that is translated put to shame, but it could mean that they are embarrassed as they are in Zech. 12:10 (the Jews when they recognize Jesus as Messiah). My point is that it may not be speaking of a forced acknowledgement but a willing acknowledgement at the beginning of the millennial age. Although it's more probable that he is referring to every living being because of the next statement: "in heaven and on earth and under the earth"

So, I would see it as an invitation for salvation at the outset of the millennium, but also an acknowledgement from all those who refuse salvation or refused it before they died that Jesus Christ is Lord. Hellerman concludes that all creation will ultimately acknowledge either voluntarily or under compulsion this fact. (Hellerman 123)

³⁹ Among Roman elites, to be honored by another aristocrat augmented one's own status "in proportion to that aristocrat's prestige" (Lendon 48). The ideal, in every case, was "to be praised by a praised man" (Symmachus, *Ep.* 9), that is, to be honored by someone of the highest possible social rank. The concern is reflected in inscriptions from Philippi, where several individuals specifically cite the emperor as the one who bestowed an honorific title or office upon them, in order to emphasize the legitimacy of the claim.

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⁴⁰ Luke 9:23, Gal. 2:20

⁴¹ Paul has structured his catalogue of Jewish privileges (vv. 4–6) like the honor inscriptions found in the forum and cemeteries of Philippi, thereby setting up his Roman audience for the startling rejection of honor seeking and social posturing reflected in the verses that follow (vv. 7–8).

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achievements, to excrement.⁴² The apostle is sending a message to Euodia, Syntyche and the Philippian congregation:⁴³

- Their infighting is worthless.
- Prestige has no value.
- God may use someone low in social status for leadership.
- They must imitate Jesus by serving others.

In doing so, they'll find the unity Yeshua desires,⁴⁴ and God's *corporate* blessing, even as Yeshua's example brought blessing.⁴⁵

APPLICATION

When believers cause schisms, they often do so with *seemingly* just causes. They're "standing for truth," "exposing incompetence," or "not allowing the enemy to rob them of their destiny." But in actuality, as in Philippi, most splits are rooted in jealousy, competition, and pride. There's no place for petty rivalries in God's Kingdom, not for the dead man⁴⁶ who embraces Yeshua's cross daily. If we could embrace Yeshua's *humility mindset* from Philippians

⁴² σκύβαλον, ου, τό useless or undesirable material that is subject to disposal, *refuse, garbage* (in var. senses, 'excrement, manure, garbage, kitchen scraps' ... τὰ σκύβαλα specif. of human excrement ... "to convey the crudity of the Greek ... : 'It's all crap'.")—DELG. TW. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). [*A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*](#) (3rd ed., p. 932). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁴³ To be clear, he is also confronting the false teachers, who were pressuring them towards circumcision. Paul is saying, "I am more *Jewish* than all of you, and 'I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.'" (Phil. 3:8)

⁴⁴ "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity." (John 17:22-23b)

⁴⁵ Phil. 2:9-11

⁴⁶ Romans 6:11

2, we'd eliminate over 99 percent of divisions. Before taking divisive steps, study Philippians 2 afresh. If one is looking for recognition and success, it starts by getting in the grave with Jesus.