

January 27

Lesson 9 (NIV)

## IMITATE CHRIST

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Psalm 119:65–

72

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Philippians

2:1–11

### PHILIPPIANS 2:1–11

<sup>1</sup>Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup>then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup>not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with  
God something to be used  
to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to

death—even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.



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## KEY VERSE

In humility value others above yourselves.—**Philippians 2:3**

## OUR LOVE FOR GOD

### Unit II: Loving God by Trusting Christ

LESSONS 6–10

#### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the climax of God's self-revelation.
2. Explain how Jesus' self-sacrifice defines true human existence.
3. Express ways and conviction to imitate Christ in relationships.

#### LESSON OUTLINE

##### Introduction

- A. Which Way Is Up?
  - B. Lesson Context
- I. Exhortation to Selflessness (PHILIPPIANS 2:1–4)
    - A. Christ's Selfless Gifts (v. 1)
    - B. Our Selfless Imitation (vv. 2–4)  
*Look Not Every ... Goose?*
  - II. Revelation of Selflessness (PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11)
    - A. The Divine Christ (vv. 5, 6)

- B. The Lowly Christ (vv. 7, 8)  
*Quite a Difference!*
- C. The Exalted Christ (vv. 9–11)

##### Conclusion

- A. The Christian Mind-set
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

#### HOW TO SAY IT

Caesar	<i>See-zer.</i>
Philippi	<i>Fih-lip-pie</i> or <i>Fil-ih-pie.</i>
Philippians	<i>Fih-lip-ee-unz.</i>
Zeus	<i>Zoose.</i>

#### Introduction

##### A. Which Way Is Up?

Experts offer a surprising conclusion about victims of drowning: they often die not because they cannot swim but because they do not know where to swim. Suddenly submerged deep underwater, victims often swim toward where they believe the surface to be, but in fact they are swimming deeper into the water.

We can compare that situation to a vital biblical idea communicated in today's text. Sinful human beings are swimming for their lives, trying to find the surface. But as they swim toward what they think is up—toward power, prestige, wealth, comfort—they are swimming deeper into what will ulti-

mately ruin their lives. The gospel teaches us that the true way up is the way we usually think of as down.

## B. Lesson Context

Under his own humble circumstances of Roman imprisonment, Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. This situation was addressed in the Lesson Context of last week's lesson and need not be repeated here. Paul wrote, in part, to address the church's problems with interpersonal conflict ([Philippians 4:2, 3](#)). But the core of Paul's teaching is found in today's text.

[Philippians 2:6-11](#) of our text is poetic in form in that the lines have parallel structure and build to a climax. Many scholars suggest that this is an early Christian hymn. It is easy to imagine the first generation of Jesus' followers singing or chanting these verses together as an expression of their new, revolutionary faith.

In addition to the poetic rhythm of the original text, the content of this passage closely resembles other texts that also seem to cite ancient hymns. Some possibilities in that regard are [John 1:1-14](#); [Colossians 1:15-20](#); and [1 Peter 3:18-22](#). These focus on the nature and work of Christ by highlighting his divinity and preexistence, role in creation, incarnation, painful death, resurrection, and

exaltation (although not all these passages contain all these elements). The hymn in [Philippians 2](#) includes most of these elements.

## I. Exhortation to Selflessness ([PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4](#))

### A. Christ's Selfless Gifts (v. 1)

#### **1a. Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ,**

Paul begins his exhortation by reminding his readers of what they have received as a result of Christ's selflessness. The first *if* does not cast doubt on whether the Philippians have received these gifts. Rather, this is a common way of speaking to draw attention to what speaker and listener both agree to be true. Implied at the end of each *if* clause is "and you do." The resulting list is a broad catalog of the ways that God's grace is experienced by Christ's followers.

The list begins with *encouragement*, translating a common term in the New Testament. It is also translated "comfort" (example: [2 Corinthians 1:3, 4](#)), "exhortation" (example: [Hebrews 13:22](#)), etc. The idea is being encouraged to do what is right.

#### **1b. if any comfort from his love,**

The second expression, *comfort*, has a broadly similar meaning. This comfort is

particularly associated with *love*, God's expression of his commitment to bless his people despite their rebellion and unworthiness.

**1c. if any common sharing in the Spirit,**

*Common sharing* signifies both a sense of connection between people and an openness to share their resources (see [Acts 2:42-47](#)). The fellowship is *in the Spirit*, as the Holy Spirit given by Christ to his people binds them together in a way that transcends differences that exist among them (compare [2 Corinthians 13:14](#)).

**What Do You Think?**

What techniques can we use to discipline ourselves in being mindful of the benefits of being connected with Christ in fellowship?

**Digging Deeper**

What techniques have you seen or experienced that don't work in that regard?

**1d. if any tenderness and compassion,**

The Greek word translated *tenderness* is also translated "pity" in [1 John 3:17](#). Paired here with *compassion*, it refers to attitudes and actions that refrain from exacting vengeance or punishment on others, giving generous blessing in place of the negative response that is deserved.

Christ gives his followers a transformed perspective and experience. They receive abundantly these gifts of God that they do not deserve. And receiving them together, they are drawn into a relationship with each other in which their common gifts are more important than their individual differences.

**B. Our Selfless Imitation (vv. 2-4)**

**2a. then make my joy complete by being like-minded,**

Paul now describes the right response for having received Christ's gracious gifts. If we have been drawn together as one by our humble Lord, then living as one must be our aim.

Again Paul piles up terms for emphasis. This unity can be described as being *like-minded*, or thinking the same thing (also [Romans 15:5](#); [Philippians 4:2](#)). Christian unity is expressed not as people deny their individuality but as they unite their individualities in pursuing thinking that is like Christ's—focused on humble service.

**2b. having the same love,**

This is the action part of being like-minded. The *love* that the readers have received from Christ, the love that comforts and encourages them continually, must dictate their actions toward one another. As Christ has loved them, they give as they have received.

### 2c. being one in spirit

This is a sharing in common of attitudes and perspectives. As the readers become more Christlike, this will come naturally.

### 2d. and of one mind.

It is notable that Paul begins and ends this description with expressions concerning thought. Our understanding of Christ must transform every aspect of our lives, inside and out, but it starts with thought. Paul's aim in sharing the gospel is not just to bring people to initial faith but also to see them grow to reveal God's intention for their lives together. Paul's joy is seeing that connection fully realized.

#### **What Do You Think?**

What guardrails can you put in place to ensure that your personal progress toward unity does not drift into expectations of *uniformity*?

#### **Digging Deeper**

What Scripture passages inform your response? What passages have you seen misused?

### 3a. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.

Paul draws a contrast with his previous description. *Selfish ambition* is the playing out of hostile division among people, the opposite of the Christlike,

humble life. It is paired with *vain conceit*—that is, the selfish pursuit of empty praise for oneself at the expense of others.

#### **What Do You Think?**

How would circumstances have to change for you to leave a church that is beset with strife rather than staying to help end that strife?

#### **Digging Deeper**

Secular principles of conflict resolution aside, which Scripture passages inform your conclusion?

### 3b. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

In contrast, the positive is described again, this time in terms of *humility*. We commonly use the word *humble* to describe a person who is soft-spoken and modest about accomplishments. A humble person is not a braggart. Biblical humility goes beyond this characteristic to genuine lowliness. The biblically humble person does more than avoid the spotlight. Biblical humility takes the position of servant to others.

To do so is to *value others above* oneself. But our natural instinct is to take care of our own interests first. Survival dictates that we do! But the gospel turns that order of life upside down. Having received God's promise that he will always supply what we need, and receive-

ing the fullness of his grace through Jesus' self-giving death, we are freed from the need to protect our own interests and empowered to pursue the good of others. This indeed is the very thing that Jesus did, and now we do it in imitation of him and in response to his lowly service for us.

**4. not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**

This verse restates the second half of the previous verse, but uses more challenging terms. Paul urges readers to no longer do what seems natural: pursuing and protecting their own interests. They are to abandon that in favor of pursuing *the interests of the others*. Prioritizing others must mean abandoning self-interest, or others are not our true priority.

**What Do You Think?**

In what ways can you better use your God-given privileges and blessings to serve others?

**Digging Deeper**

What might using your assets in this way cost you and your family?  
How would you justify this cost?

**LOOK NOT EVERY... GOOSE?**

It is a common sight in an autumn sky. Geese, flying south to escape the cold Canadian winter, travel in a familiar V-

formation. While we are likely well acquainted with this phenomenon, perhaps we should take a closer look. When we do, we can see an illustration of selflessness.

Bigger birds, like geese and pelicans, create a significant updraft by flapping their wings. Therefore, a bird flying behind and slightly below another receives some additional lift from the bird in front. Birds in a V-formation literally lift one another up as they fly, bearing one another's burdens on their long trip.

Another benefit of this flight pattern is increased visibility. Members of the flock can see one another, making sure that all are present. This keeps lines of communication open and ensures that all remain heading in the right direction.

Finally, birds flying in this pattern share the work and the benefits of traveling together. The bird in front is meeting the most wind resistance, while the birds farthest from the front have the easiest flight. If you watch the flock for any length of time, you will witness a graceful acrobatic maneuver. After a while the leader will drop back from the most stressful position and retire to the end of the line, while another takes the lead.

As Paul instructed the church to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit," the geese provide a clear illus-

tration of just that. “[Each goose] not looking to its own interests, but each [goose] to the interests of the others!”

—J. E.

## II. Revelation of Selflessness ([PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11](#))

### A. The Divine Christ (vv. 5, 6)

#### **5. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:**

Now Paul makes explicit the basis for this radically humble life to which Christians are called. Again he stresses *mindset*, for the humble life is first a way of thinking about ourselves and others. Then he states directly that our mind must be like Christ’s mind. This mind must govern our lives together, just as it did the life of Jesus, our king. The mindset of Christ must be adopted consciously and pursued vigorously.

#### **6. Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

This verse begins one of the most profound and memorable biblical descriptions of Christ’s actions. It needs careful attention for accurate understanding.

[John 1:1](#) helps us understand what it means for Christ to exist *in very nature*

*God*. The nature of an individual is the real status by which the being relates to other beings. To be in the very nature of God is to exist as God and be rightly regarded as God by other beings. From eternity, the preexistent Christ was fully divine, the one true Creator God. The word being translated is also rendered “form” in [Mark 16:12](#). Interestingly, if we take the Greek letters of this word and flip them to their soundalike English equivalents, the result is our word *morph*, which we use as a verb.

As God, Christ possessed *equality with God*. That is, sharing the divine nature with God the Father, Christ experienced the fullness of divine existence. In that status he was not subject to the difficulties of a temporal creature’s life. Existing eternally, Christ possessed all power. Thus he did not consider that equality *something to be used to his own advantage*.

### B. The Lowly Christ (vv. 7, 8)

#### **7. rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.**

Never using his divine prerogatives for his own advantage, Christ *made himself nothing*, or more literally translated, “emptied himself.” The gospel story shows us that this self-emptying was not the loss of his divine nature or power. During his ministry, Jesus consistently

said and did things that only God could truly say and do ([Matthew 7:24–29](#); [9:1–8](#); [12:1–8](#)). Rather it was the prerogatives — immunity from death, his glorious status, etc.—that he willingly surrendered.

As a result, his *very nature*, the status by which he related to other beings, became that of a *servant*. Paul’s word literally means a “bondslave,” someone who serves by compulsion. Though Christ took this role willingly, Paul uses the term to express his utter lowliness—focused on serving others. Paul’s words echo the terms that the prophet Isaiah used to describe the coming servant of the Lord who would willingly give his life for others ([Isaiah 53:3, 11](#)).

The servant Christ was a fully human Christ. His humanity was that of all other humans. He experienced everything, including temptation and suffering, that humans experience. But unlike other humans who seek their own interests, he led a life completely characterized by humble service for others.

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

Christ’s first self-lowering was in becoming human, what Christians call his incarnation. But the climax of his humbling was in accepting *death on a cross*

for the sake of others.

Certainly all humans experience dread as they contemplate death, fearing both the pain that accompanies it and the terrible thought of leaving behind a familiar life. But Paul emphasizes that Christ’s death was death by crucifixion. This act of extreme torture was especially painful and shameful. But we should also remember that it was a demonstration of power used for one’s own advantage by the Roman Empire. Having all power but refusing to use it for his advantage, Christ agreed to suffer this torturous death at the hands of an evil empire that used such atrocities to express its own power for its own advantage.

The first humans, Adam and Eve, owed God their submission but rebelliously sought equality with God for their own advantage, receiving a sentence of death as the consequence ([Genesis 3:2–5](#)). Christ was equal with God the Father but willingly *humbled himself* and submitted to death, never using his equality with God for his own advantage. As Paul describes Christ, we see that in Christ God has brought human existence to something it had never before attained.

### **QUITE A DIFFERENCE!**

The Greco-Roman world within which Paul ministered was familiar with Zeus, also known as Jupiter, as chief of the gods



(compare [Acts 14:12](#)). All other deities served Zeus, who assigned the roles they played in his service.

Myths tell us that Zeus would leave his throne on occasion for a visit to earth. But the purpose of his trips was often to *take from* rather than *give to* humankind. Zeus would find attractive mortal women and then take a variety of forms to seduce and impregnate them. The beautiful Helen of Troy, it is told, was born of Leda after Zeus seduced her by taking the form of a beautiful swan. The stories go on and on.

The Bible records the reactions of those who believed in such deities when Paul spoke of Jesus (example: [Acts 17:16–34](#)). Unlike the fictitious Zeus, Jesus did not flaunt his authority. He came to earth not to *take* but to *give*—a giving that included his own life. Which model will we emulate, the one that uses power to take or the one that surrenders power to give?

—J. E.

#### **What Do You Think?**

As a Christian matures in selfless humility, what will distinguish his or her ministry service from the selfless service of those who serve in secular settings? Why?

#### **Digging Deeper**

Which Scripture passages support your conclusions? Why?

### **C. The Exalted Christ (vv. 9–11)**

**9. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,**

In response to Christ's self-emptying and selfless death, God raised him from the dead—not just alive but victoriously alive. God then seated Christ at his own right hand, the position of supreme power ([Ephesians 1:20–23](#)).

Thus does the story of Christ demonstrate the real path of human life that bears the image of God. Exaltation comes not by pursuing one's own interests but by lowering oneself to serve others, surrendering one's own interests in submission to God. This is not just Christ's restoration to his *exalted* position. It is the elevation of the humble, incarnate, human Christ to share in God's rule.

**10. that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,**

Again, Paul's words echo those of the prophet Isaiah, this time in a description of God's exaltation ([Isaiah 45:23](#)). Christ's glory is the glory that belongs to God alone, the glory of the universe's supreme king. As Paul refers to *heaven ... earth ... under the earth*, he names every place imaginable and so every being imaginable (compare [Ephesians 1:10](#); [Colossians 1:18–20](#)).

Notably, it is here in the hymn-poem,

which extends from [Philippians 2:6](#) to verse [11](#) (see the [Lesson Context](#)), that Paul first refers to *the name of Jesus*. That human name suggests the entire story of authoritative deeds and words, humble service, willing self-sacrifice, and resurrection from the dead. The Jesus with that history is the Jesus to whom every creature *should* one day bow (compare [Psalm 95:6](#); [Romans 14:11](#)). He is the true king, the one who used his authority not for his own advantage but for others.

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

Again Paul refers to *Jesus* as the one to be confessed by all creatures (again, see [Romans 14:11](#)). But Paul elaborates on the content of the confession: this crucified and risen Jesus is *Christ*—that is, God’s anointed one, God’s true king. He is *Lord*, the one who rules over all.

In Paul’s time Roman subjects and citizens, including the Roman citizens of Philippi, identify themselves as loyal subjects of the empire by saying “Caesar is Lord.” But “Jesus Christ is Lord” is the greater and truer confession. Real lordship belongs not to the emperor who asserts power for his own advantage, but to the incarnate Son of God who gives himself for the unworthy. Soldiers of the Roman Empire die in battle on behalf of the emperor; by contrast, the Lord Jesus,

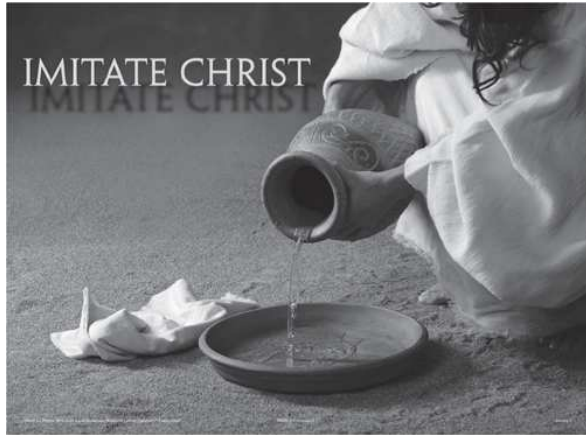
king of the universe, died on behalf of humanity. He is recognized as such by some now; he will be recognized as such by all eventually.

By this *the glory of God the Father* is realized. God achieves his purpose and expresses his true nature not by destroying rebellious humanity but by sending his beloved, divine Son to become a human, experience the pangs of death for others’ sake, and receive his life again by God’s gift. In that story, we find the real meaning and truest direction for our lives.

## Conclusion

### A. The Christian Mind-set

Think of events in Jesus’ life. He was tempted to turn stones to bread to satisfy his own hunger ([Matthew 4:3](#)). He refused. On other occasions, Jesus faced the opportunity to alleviate the hunger of others. He did so ([Matthew 14:13–21](#); [15:32–38](#)). He refused to use his divine authority for himself. He did not consider equality with God something to use for his own advantage. That mind of Christ has been present from all eternity.



Visual for Lesson 9. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, "What are the most common ways that Christians fail to imitate Christ? Why?"

How would you describe the direction of your life so far? In your career, family interactions, friendships—is your life about your own advantage or is it about others' needs? Do you follow the common path of modest selfishness that seems so culturally right, or the Christlike way of lowly, self-giving pursuit of others' advantage?

We are not the first or the worst to think that serving ourselves seems the right way to live. We can point in any direction and see lives governed by that common mind-set. But every part of the gospel story tells us the opposite. To experience life as God designed it, we need to put into action the mind of Christ.

### **B. Prayer**

Heavenly Father, the scope of your

Son's self-sacrificial gift to us is beyond our comprehension! It challenges every part of our minds and hearts. May we offer ourselves daily to be used in the service of your Son. As we do, may we serve one another in love, even at the cost of our very lives. We pray in the name of the Son, who did just that. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

The way up is down.

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)  
Student

## Into the Lesson

Have the following request written on the board as learners arrive.

*Write three things that are most important to you in relationships.*

After learners finish, form them into pairs for sharing of responses. After a few minutes, ask for volunteers to summarize their partner's (but only with their partner's permission). Sum up by saying, "A thread we've just seen is that a characteristic of a healthy relationship is each person caring about what is important to the other. This is seen when each goes out of his or her way to support, in various ways, the other person's priorities."

*Option.* To explore what can interfere with relationships, distribute copies of the "Levels of Authority" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Allow students to work on this individually for no more than one minute. Then discuss the correct ranking quickly so there's more time to discuss your students' responses to the question below the ranking.

Lead into the Bible study by saying, "Relationships best flourish when, among other things, we put our own preferences on the back burner and avoid 'pulling rank' for selfish reasons. Let's see how to do both."

## Into the Word

Divide your class in half and give each half a handout (you create) of one of the following assignments. (Groups should not exceed four or five in size; larger classes should form additional groups with duplicate assignments.)

*The Getting Along Group.* Read [Philippians 2:1-4](#). 1-How does Paul describe the characteristics of unity toward which he wanted the Philippian believers to strive? 2-What did Paul want them to avoid and to do instead? 3-What relationship do you see between [Philippians 1:4](#) and [Romans 15:1](#)?

*The Christ's Example Group.* Read [Philippians 2:5-8](#). 1-What relationship do you see between [Philippians 2:5](#) and [John 13:34](#)? 2-In what way(s) is Christ's servanthood evident? 3-What aspects of Jesus' servanthood are we to imitate in a general way ([Philippians 2:7](#)), but we should not (and need not) try to imitate him by exactly repeating what he did ([2:8](#))?

As groups work, write these on the board:

*How we are to imitate Christ in relationships:*

*Why we are to imitate Christ in relationships:*

After groups finish, draw attention to the unfinished statements. Ask, “From what you’ve discussed in your groups, how do we complete these statements?” Jot responses on the board. (Many responses that touch on being like-minded are possible.)

Wrap up with a discussion of [Philippians 2:9-11](#) as you stress the end result of verses 1-8. Note the sweeping, all-inclusive language as you ask rhetorically, “Is anyone left out?”

## **Into Life**

Divide the class into three groups and give each an index card on which you have printed one of the following three scenarios. (Note: some may be “too hot to handle” or “too hot *not* to handle”; also, names are intentionally gender-neutral.)

*Group 1:* Morgan wants to go to the beach for vacation, but spouse Taylor wants to visit parents.

*Group 2:* The seniors want to sing hymns during worship, but young adults want to sing praise choruses.

*Group 3:* Chris wants Chinese food, but

best friend Pat wants Mexican food.

Allow groups to propose solutions during whole-class discussion.

*Option.* Distribute copies of the “Hidden Message” activity from the reproducible page as a take-home exercise.