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## MEEKNESS

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*'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus'*  
(*Phil. 2:5*)

We are not entirely sure how Paul planned his letters. We know that some were written to answer questions. The letters to Thessalonica deal largely with the Second Coming, answering questions that the Christians there had asked. Similarly, to the Corinthians, Paul answers one question after another. When he wrote to the Galatians he had to deal with the specific problem of the Judaisers. We know that much about the way he wrote: he often responded to actual questions or areas of difficulty of which he was aware.

The question is, did he know all that he was going to say or did he think of it as he moved along? It is interesting to ponder whether he always knew what he was going to write. Did Paul not rather compose sometimes as he went along, inspired by what immediately preceded? With regard to this section which we are about to consider, I could not help but wonder.

### DID PAUL COMPOSE THIS SECTION?

The verses, Philippians 2:5-11, comprise one of the most magnificent sections in the New Testament. So arresting and full are these verses that I am bound to ask, did Paul



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plan this section from the beginning of the epistle or was it a sudden burst from the heart when he exclaimed, 'Ah, your attitude should be the same ...' stirred up by what he wrote in the first four verses.

It is widely accepted that verses 6-11 were an early Christian confession, that they were virtually a poem. Some translations, you will notice, translate it like a poem. It is thought therefore that Paul incorporated it into his letter. Some think it was a hymn which was part of the liturgy of the church in Palestine; that it was originally written in Aramaic and sung as a hymn there. In other words, verses 6-11 say some, were not really written by Paul at all but he simply included this hymn in the letter. There is no way to know for sure. In heaven, we can ask Paul. It probably will not be the first question we will want to ask him, but we can ask him then.

Some scholars are of the opinion that I Corinthians 13, the Love chapter, was also a kind of liturgical hymn in the church. A friend of mine completed a PhD at Cambridge on I Corinthians 12-14 and his conclusion was that I Corinthians 13 was in fact Paul's own words and that he wrote it then. And that is what I think is true about Philipians 2:5-11. I do not believe that he merely incorporated it. He could have done so, there is nothing wrong with that if he had chosen to do it, but I suspect that Palestinian Christianity, from what we know about it, was too simple, if I may put it that way, to have come up with such a depth of theological thought as is found in these verses.

The passage begins with Paul's appeal to the example which is set by Christ. Because of this he calls the church to humility, the means by which it will obtain greatness (these are words used interchangeably by Paul). It is also in

following the example of Christ that the church will suffer for its belief. Nevertheless he uses the example of Christ to show how to handle this suffering. In all he pleads for unity in the church before beginning this passage, verses 5-11, which explores the example which Jesus sets us and to which he appeals.

Yet Paul does not use the word 'example'. He might have done so, just as Peter did in 1 Peter 2:23 where he refers to Christ leaving us an example. But Paul did not say it like that; he did not say, 'Let this example be your example' but rather he said, 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,' or as the Authorised Version translates it and which I will use when quoting this verse, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.'

He said in verse 3, 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in *humility* [lowliness of *mind* AV] consider others better than yourselves.' So in verse 5 he says, 'Let this mind be in you.' Some scholars believe that verse 5 should be translated, 'Let this *mind* be among you' as if appealing that there might be a collective consensus with the mind of Christ. Well, there is certainly nothing wrong in wanting that, but that is not what Paul says. Clearly, he writes, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.' He wants them subjectively to experience something, namely, the mind of Christ on an individual level.

What does he mean therefore by the mind of Christ? Well, it can be seen in two ways: objectively and subjectively. Objectively, Paul tells us that the mind of Christ was, 'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he

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humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.’ Objectively, that is what caused the events of Christ’s Incarnation to happen.

Subjectively, that mind of Christ is to be ours in experience. In short, it is to give up what we thought was rightfully ours. Thus when Paul says, ‘Let this *mind* be in you,’ he does not mean brain, he does not mean intelligence, he does not mean, ‘let the IQ that Jesus had be in you.’ He does not mean his intellect or his learning. Then what does he mean? We need to get closer to understanding this phrase ‘the mind of Christ.’

### A.I.M.

The mind of Christ can be understood in relation to three things: attitude, initiative, motivation. The acrostic which heads this section, A.I.M. helps to remind us what is entailed.

#### (i) Attitude

By attitude, I mean perspective. Paul said, he took upon himself ‘the very nature of a servant.’ This is the way Jesus saw himself, as a servant, the whole time he lived. But it was not only a self-image, it was a passion with him. You could call it a preoccupation. It was all he thought about, a certain kind of attitude. In a word: meekness. Quiet obedience, making no protest. It was a lifestyle. It was his pursuit. He followed it through again and again. This brings us to a question: do we want the mind of Christ to be in us? How much do we want it? For Jesus it was a perspective, a passion, a pursuit. He lived this way.

Now, some may say, ‘Well, I did that once, I know what that is.’ But with Jesus it was an ongoing lifestyle and this is the way that we are called to be from now on. It is one thing to have a week of living like this. Perhaps you think that you

will try living like this for one week – perhaps to see what it is like. Others want to do it for a while, but then they want to take a holiday. They say, ‘I don’t have to live this way now, I have paid my dues. I have been living like that. Now I will live another way.’ We will never have the mind of Christ in us until this becomes a perspective which is a passion and a pursuit, a lifestyle with which we are going to live twenty-four hours a day, every day of our lives. No change!

### *The content of the attitude*

To get a little closer to the meaning we must look at what this attitude involves. Essentially, it is a self-emptying attitude. In later chapters we will look at verse 6 where we read that Jesus relinquished what rightfully belonged to him. The Authorised Version captures the self-effacing quality in the following verse: he ‘made himself of no reputation.’ What kind of an attitude would be like that, to make ourselves of no reputation? Are we like that? Do we not think rather that what people think of us is so important? We are always concerned for our reputation, yet here is one who made himself of no reputation.

Involved in this is the attitude of *self-expendability*: ‘being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.’ What does this mean? Paul is talking about Jesus who never took himself seriously. This is an amazing virtue. Most of us know what it is to take ourselves seriously. It is one of the most refreshing things you can ever come across, and it is an exceedingly rare thing, to meet someone who does not take himself seriously.

We think ourselves so important – ‘Well, I’ve got to be there,’ ‘I’m needed,’ ‘What will happen if I’m not there?’ – and we become sensitive and easily offended. Our egos are

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on our shirt sleeves. Anything can upset us. This is because we do not think of ourselves as being expendable. But Jesus, who was the greatest gift there ever was to the human race, made no such claims. He humbled himself even to death on a cross. Greatness is having this conviction of self-expendability.

### (ii) Initiative

Three things sum up what I mean by this initiative of Christ's. First, it is a *conscious* commitment: we count the cost and we know exactly what we are doing. It is not what the Existentialists call the 'leap of faith', a leap in the dark. That is not Christian thinking. No, we count the cost; we know exactly what is at stake. With Jesus, this was an acknowledgement of a possession: he 'did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.' Moreover, he was in the form of God. He knew that, yet we are told that he did not cling to it.

So we are told to have the same kind of initiative. We look carefully at what we feel is rightfully ours, and we let it go. The difference between Jesus and us, is that we merely *think* it is rightfully ours, but with Jesus, it was rightfully his. He was in the form of God. With us, we only impute to ourselves this right. You may say, 'Ah, just a minute, it is mine because God gave it to me.' But I answer, Godhood and all the glory that goes with it was intrinsically his yet he did not see it as something onto which he should hold. The point is that he let it go. Therefore, 'Let this mind be in you.' This was the initiative.

As well as being a conscious commitment, and it was also one which was *irrevocable*. You see, here is the difficulty with us. As a pastor, this has in many ways been my greatest

dilemma: seeing how people claim to be committed, and then in a matter of weeks or months, they are not committed any more. A commitment is a commitment yet we do not want to inconvenience ourselves and we can think of every reason to change. Circumstances must never change the commitment. So often with us circumstances cause us to reassess. But with Jesus it was a conscious, irrevocable commitment and he let it go and he never looked back: 'Let this mind be in you.'

It is also a *courageous* commitment. Ronald Reagan said once, 'The future doesn't belong to the faint-hearted, it belongs to the brave.' There are two reasons why taking the initiative in this way requires courage, one of which follows from the other.

First, it is because it is a call to *leadership*. You see, the mind of Christ means initiative and that means not only a voluntary conscious decision but it is taking the lead. You may say, 'Well, I am not a natural leader. I am not a born leader,' but would Paul put anything on us that is impossible? I make you a promise, God will never ask you to do what you cannot do. He will never ask you to elevate yourself to the level of your incompetence.

But you see, courage is not a natural endowment. Nobody has courage like this, except by the Holy Spirit, and when Paul says, 'Let this mind be in you,' he is saying, 'If you will take the initiative, grace will be there.' So it means taking the lead. Perhaps you wait to see if others do it. Instead, you must do it, because it is between you and God and God sees you. Many difficulties arise today because of a lack of commitment and a dearth of real *greatness* in the world. Most leaders are followers, did you know that? What they do is they wet a finger and hold it up in the air to see which way

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the wind is blowing, and then they run out in front and say, 'I am leading this group,' trying to get the credit. A true leader is one who is not looking over his shoulder to see who is following. If he does look over his shoulder, he might find there is nobody following him.

It requires courage also because this call to leadership involves a call, secondly, to *loneliness*. Taking the lead is the loneliest position in the world, and you cannot look back and see who is following you. You do not have that luxury. Jesus put it like this,

No-one, who puts his hand to the plough and looks back,  
is fit for service in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).

Let this mind be in yours which was also in Christ Jesus'. Imitating Christ's initiative is never an easy task.

### (iii) Motivation

What do you suppose motivated Jesus? First of all it was reverence. It was reverence for his Father. If you want to know something about the mind of Christ, I challenge you just to make a study of the Gospel of John and look at the relationship Jesus had with his Father. He put it like this, for example, in John 5:30:

By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgement is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

And then later in that chapter he said this, a verse that many years gripped me and I hope will grip you:

How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)



If that kind of thinking will grip you, then you are a candidate to think about the mind of Christ.

All this will only make sense once there is embedded in you a true fear of God. All that a preacher or writer may say or expound will only become relevant if this is so. And that has got to happen between you and God. As long as you are looking at someone else and hoping that you will be noticed by this person and are thereby getting your motivation, then your motivation is phoney and it will not last. Perhaps you want your church leaders to notice your endeavours and this drives you to carry on. But this cannot work. Something, sooner or later, has got to happen so that your honour comes from God. That is all that matters. Then you are not looking to see who else notices you: you are consumed with the passion of wanting God to notice you, taking your orders from above. A preacher may preach his heart out, but he can only pray that God, somehow, will get through. Then suddenly, you will be aware that it is not his voice you are hearing, but the Spirit giving you no rest.

Jesus' motivation was reverence. It was also *righteousness*. He said in Matthew 5:17: 'I have not come to abolish [the Law] but to fulfil [it].' Hebrews 10:7 quotes from a Psalm, 'I have come to do your will, O God.' Jesus humbled himself and actually put himself under the Law. Now, we are not under the Law. Christ fulfilled it for us, but we are under the Law of Christ which is far grander and loftier (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

I do not blame those who want to put us back under the Law. It is a substandard way to live and it is an easy way out: you can have hate in your heart and live like that; you can lust and live like that. But put yourself under the Law of Christ. You do not need to worry about the externals, you

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will be moral, you will be clean, you will be godly, but in your heart there will also be a mellowness and a brokenness and a spirit of self-effacement and self-expendability. May God help us to see it. And that was the motivation of Jesus, who was above the Law, but went under it for us, fulfilling it for us. Now we are under him who did it all that we might be saved.

But there is another thing that motivated him and this may surprise you. Did you know that Jesus was motivated by reward? I hear people say, 'Don't talk to me about reward. It is another way of becoming Uriah Heep. I don't want reward, I don't want recognition. I am just a humble servant of God. I am going to do it because it is right.' By saying such things you are trying to upstage Jesus. And I marvel at this. Jesus as a man was motivated by reward.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:2).

He knew there was joy out there and he was waiting for it. He knew too that he would get it then, not now.

For, you see, the reward is not here below. Sometimes God does reward us on earth. He can do it, but if that is your motive, then again it is not right. The reward that motivated Jesus was that which was beyond this life, and he was willing to wait until he got to heaven. And this mind of Christ, the motivation of Jesus, was waiting for the reward in heaven.

Do we know what kind of reward it will be? Well, I cannot be sure; this matter of reward is a great mystery to me. It certainly meant a lot to Paul. He said, '... there is in store for me the crown of righteousness' (2 Tim. 4:8).

In 1 Corinthians 9:27, he had some uncertainty whether he would get the prize. He said,

I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

That was the most abhorrent thought that Paul could imagine: that he himself could be rejected in terms of not getting the reward. Yet just before he died, he said to Timothy, 'I have fought the good fight ... I have kept the faith' (2 Tim. 4:7).

I do not know whether it is a literal crown that Paul spoke of receiving. There have been songs written, focusing on this aspect e.g. 'Will there be any stars in my crown?' I do not know, but I suspect the grandest moment of all would just be to hear Jesus say, as we find in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, 'Well done.' I want that 'Well done.' I cannot imagine anything greater than that. I will do anything I know to get it.

It is like my friend, Sergei Nicolaiev, who walking with me, late one night in Estonia, said, 'When I get to heaven, I only want one thing: I want to hear from the lips of Jesus, himself, one word – "Good, good."'

Jesus endured the cross, he despised the shame because of the joy set before him. I want that and that is the motivation contained in this verse, 'Let this mind be in you.' Do you want to hear Jesus say, 'Good'? I can tell you how it will happen: if you let this mind be in you.