

“Consider Others as More Important than Yourselves”: Is Philippians 2:3–11 for Everyone or Just for Women?

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“By nature we yearn and hunger for honor, and once we have glimpsed it, as it were, some part of its radiance, there is nothing we are not prepared to bear and suffer in order to secure it.”¹ Philippi was a distinctly Roman colony, its citizens bent on securing honor and public praise above all else. Cicero, a Roman politician and orator, summed up the reality for citizens in Philippi with the above quotation, referring to the unquenchable thirst for public honor prevalent throughout the Roman Empire.

The Philippian Christians would have faced the same temptations to assert their own prominence over one another that the culture around them widely celebrated. However, Paul audaciously called the believers to live opposite that norm. In one of the most famous passages in Scripture, Philippians 2:3–11, Paul asks the Philippian Christians to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves” (Phil 2:3 NIV). He then exhorts them to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, who profoundly upended all the norms of social status and hierarchy. Though fully God, he became fully human. Not only did he become one of us, but he also became the least of us. Becoming what Paul called a slave, Jesus willingly identified with a group whose symbolic identity itself was shameful.²

Tragically, this radical call to mutual humility for *all* Christians has been co-opted by complementarians to do the very thing Paul wrote boldly against—secure status and power for some over others. For the purposes of this article, despite the traditional break between vv. 3–4 and 5–11, we will examine the social context of Philippians 2:3–11. We shall see how the call to consider others as higher than yourself and to adopt the same attitude as Jesus was a call to *all* Christians to subvert the power plays and status structures in their cultural context. Then we can examine how this passage has been used in complementarian spaces to unequally call women to adopt the selfless attitude of Jesus while at the same time allowing men to adopt the attitude of Rome and grasp for the very power Paul wanted them to give up.

Cultural Context of Philippi

While we may be tempted to read our own cultural desire for wealth and comfort into our study of the Bible, the reality is that those in the Roman Empire desired status and public honor above all else. Public recognition of social standing was of utmost importance, and those who had acquired some honor went to great lengths to both maintain their status or to garner more.³ Believing that honor was a finite resource, this pervasive desire for it led to continual competition.⁴ Bruce Longenecker has aptly said, “the world of the first urban Jesus-followers was a world enmeshed in the quest for status. . . . The people of the Roman age saw status as the essential commodity of life.”⁵

If status was the essential commodity of life, how was status delineated among social groups? According to Joseph Hellerman,

the Romans devised several ways to readily recognize someone’s social standing. Clothing was specifically used and designed to distinguish their place in the social strata, with certain outfits or accessories indicating various levels of elite status. Another place where status and honor were publicly demarked was where one was seated at public and/or private events. Those with the most status received the places of honor at both public and private events, often inviting those with lower status to private events to make themselves appear more superior.⁶ And finally, the judicial system doled out consequences specifically according to one’s status in society, with those on the bottom receiving the harshest and most shameful punishments.⁷

While clothing, seating arrangements, and the judicial system all signaled social status, citizens on the upper end of society sought out certain political positions that would secure the most honor. In general, the social system of the Roman Empire divided into two groups: elite and non-elite. The elite competed with one another for status-enhancing political offices. The *cursus honorum* or “race for honors” created a pyramid of power that clearly delineated a pathway to prominence.⁸ At the bottom of this political pyramid was the office of *quaestor* (responsible for state finances and taxes). Then came *aedile* (responsible for building projects), then *praetor* (court judges), then finally *consul* (executive leadership). On top of the pyramid stood the emperor, considered only slightly less powerful than the gods themselves and worshipped as such.⁹

This idea of dividing elite society into levels of political power with ascending levels of honor became so prevalent that even non-elite organizations and communities replicated this stratification.¹⁰ The one constant in all social stratification was that slaves were always on the bottom, existing as a class by themselves. While the treatment of slaves varied greatly depending on the prominence and character of the owner, slaves were the property of someone else and this determined their lack of social standing.¹¹

Given the desire for public honor and status that pervaded Philippian society as a distinctly Roman colony, let us turn our attention to Paul’s desire for the mindset of the Philippian Christians as evidenced in Philippians 2:3–11.

In Philippians 2:3–4, Paul commends an opposite mindset for the Philippian Christians. In contrast to Roman society that prized competition for greater status, Paul commends a life that is empty of selfish ambition or conceit for all who follows Christ.¹² “In humility, consider others more important than yourselves” (Phil 2:3) has sometimes been taken to mean total self-abnegation in favor of tending to the others’ needs completely. However, Michael Bird and Nijay Gupta argue that a better translation for this verse would keep in mind the social stratification and race for honors. “There is a typical Greek word for ‘better’ (*kreitton*) and he does not

employ it here. Rather, he uses *hyperechō*, which means *superior*, as in, *higher in status*.¹³ They go on to explain, “If everyone treated the other as superior in status (and vice versa), then this subverts the entire system.”¹⁴

As an example to the Philippian Christians on how to internalize the countercultural mindset of humility, Paul writes what could be considered an ode to Jesus Christ. This ode was written in a “legendary manner for vividness and literary effect.”¹⁵ Paul portrays Christ inverting the *cursus honorum* by existing at the top of the pyramid of power, then voluntarily descending not just a few steps, but entirely to the bottom, taking on the form of a slave.

The NIV translates *morphē* in verse 6 as “Who, being in *very nature* God,” but according to Hellerman, this misses the idea that *morphē* refers to one’s outward appearance. Since the outward appearance was one way social status was visible to others, Jesus’s outward appearance is important for this passage.¹⁶

In a move no one would make, Jesus exchanged his deified outward appearance with the outward appearance of a slave, the very bottom of the social hierarchy in the Greco-Roman world.¹⁷ Not only did Jesus take on the outward appearance of someone with no social status, he died a death that was reserved only for the lowest on the social strata. A cross was the Roman system of execution meant to torture and shame those with little to no social status or public honor. It was so commonly associated with death for slaves that it became known as *servile supplicum* (“slaves’ punishment”).¹⁸ Jesus was portrayed as moving from equal status with God to becoming a slave. “There is no position higher than being God and there is no position lower than being a slave.”¹⁹ And there was no more shameful death God could have died than execution on a cross. This was what Paul considered true humility.

These actions have led many to equate Jesus’s incarnation and humble obedience with submission to the Father, even though the word “submission” does not appear in this text.²⁰ Often, submission is associated only with obedience, which inherently implies hierarchy within relationships. However, Mi Young Sydney Park claims there is much more to Christ’s submission as portrayed in Philippians 2:5–11 than obedience from a subordinate to a superior.

According to Park, Christ’s submission is portrayed in the following ways: refusal to claim equality with God or forsaking one’s rights; servanthood and obedience; humility and humiliation; suffering; and finally, volition—actively choosing submission. These elements together add up to the submission featured in Philippians 2:5–11. Paul wants the Philippians to have this same mindset of humility and service, as something they choose, just as Jesus chose submission and humiliation of his own accord. “Submission for Christ is, from beginning to end, the willingness to give primacy to the concerns of another over and above his own legitimate rights, even at the risk of humiliation, suffering, and death.”²¹ Park affirms that true submission is borne not out of or for oppression; rather it stems from a place of true equality; it cannot be thrust on one from someone else.²² It was an attitude Jesus chose for himself, and therefore all who follow him must also choose. It cannot be demanded of someone at the bottom of a hierarchical structure, or it is not true Christlike submission.

Unequal Submission

What if only one side seeks to consider the other as higher than themselves? Would that truly embody Jesus’s example of submission in Philippians 2:5–11? What happens when you have two parties and one decides it is the other party’s permanent role to take on Christ’s self-emptying for the good of the other person? Despite Paul’s call to all Jesus followers to have the same mindset as Jesus, how did submission become “central to the identity of women as Children of God?”²³

Tim Keller, noted pastor and theologian, along with his wife, Kathy, used Ephesians 5 as the basis for their widely popular book on marriage. They cite Philippians 2 at the outset when speaking to all Christians, stating, “That is how all believers should live with each other.”²⁴ However, this train of thought leaves mutuality at the station when Kathy writes her chapter on wifely submission.

The opening passage for Kathy Keller’s chapter on submission is Ephesians 5:22–23, 25. Here she shares how she came from a relatively gender-neutral upbringing, attended seminary with Tim, and felt on equal footing with her classmates. But when they got married, she had to reckon with what it meant to be a woman in a marriage in which distinct gender roles were important. In Kathy’s words, “Though Tim and I have been both clumsy and clueless at times, we have found that in submitting to our own divinely assigned gender roles that we discovered one of God’s great gifts for getting in touch with our deepest selves. . . .”²⁵

How did Kathy come to such a conclusion on her divinely assigned gender role in their marriage? She had teachers and mentors who pointed her directly to Philippians 2:5–11. In Kathy’s understanding, as Jesus emptied himself of his glory and assumed the role of servant, submitting himself to God the Father, God showed her the example to follow as a subordinate wife. This gave her great hope as she played “out the ‘Jesus role’” in her marriage, which she referred to as the ‘*ezer*-subordinate.”²⁶

Despite beginning with claims that Jesus’s humility as exemplified in Philippians 2:3–11 is an example for all Christians to follow, Kathy repeatedly refers to the subordinate role Jesus played in this passage as an example for her to follow. She writes,

In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul says directly what is implied in Philippians 2—namely, that the relationship of the Father and the Son is a pattern for the relationship of husband to wife. The Son submits to the Father’s headship. . . . The Father’s headship is acknowledged in reciprocal delight, respect, and love. . . . We are differently gendered to reflect this life within the Trinity. . . . The Son takes a subordinate role, and in that movement, he shows not his weakness but his greatness.²⁷

When talking about the husband’s role, Kathy says the husband’s act of submission is to submit to his role as a servant-leader but fails to mention Philippians 2:3–11 as part of that role. The Jesus role that the husband plays is the one who has the authority (albeit sacrificial and servant authority, but authority nonetheless).

Despite the dressed-up hierarchy and perilous views on the Trinity, the Kellers’ teachings are widespread in many evangelical spaces

and denominations. An article published on The Gospel Coalition's website titled "Leading and Submitting like Jesus," by Erik Raymond, is one example. Raymond addresses husbands and says they are to *lead* sacrificially because "that reflects the humility of Jesus."²⁸ To the wife, he says, "The Christian wife should consider her Savior when she considers her calling to submit to her husband in the Lord. She is to think much upon the submission of the Lord Jesus himself as he left heaven's throne to himself put on the apron of service in his submission to his Father's will."²⁹ Raymond does not quote Philippians 2:5–11 directly, but the implication is there all the same. It is this joyful submission that a wife should think on so that she can, "with gospel gratitude, embrace [her] calling to submit to [her] (imperfect) husband because this is the path of Jesus."³⁰

Likewise, in her book, *Disciplines of a Godly Woman*,³¹ Barbara Hughes begins with the framework that all Christians should live their lives in submission to God's will. However, a Christlike submission is unequally yoked onto a woman's neck as part of her subservient identity in Christ. This subordination is tied directly to the Trinity for Hughes, and she boldly claims it has always been this way. "We know from the very first book of the Bible that 'intimacy through subordination' is not only possible, but it is God's plan for us—modeled after the intimacy that exists in the Godhead."³²

Despite claims of equality and voluntary submission, what the Kellers, Hughes, and their many complementarian counterparts describe is merely hierarchy living under a façade. If the wife is always subordinate, and the husband is always in authority over her, equality is not, and never was, present. Since the subordination of the Son within the Trinity is often used to subordinate women, let us see what Millard Erickson has to say about subordination and ontological equality:

If the Father's authority over the Son and Spirit and the Son's and Spirit's subordination to the Father is a part of the very structure of the Trinity, so that it could not be otherwise, then this superiority and subordination are not contingent, but necessary, characteristics of each of the persons. That means that they are not accidental but essential qualities, and the essence of the Son is different from and inferior to that of the Father. In other words, invariable and inevitable differences in authority imply ontological, as well as functional, subordination.³³

In other words, hierarchy and subordination cannot exist among true ontological equals. Therefore, one cannot say both men and

women are equals, but one needs to exist in a state of subordination, just like the equal but subordinate Son.³⁴

Keeping the Philippians 2:3–11 passage in mind, we must see that Jesus voluntarily taking on the form or likeness of a human, being "obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8), is not speaking of his ontological subordination to the Father. As seen before, Paul uses the concept of submission to show the Philippians the way of Christ's kingdom is the way of the cross. The King of the universe stooped down, reversing the *cursus honorum*. Jesus willingly became the lowest on the social strata to model the way for all believers to move about in the world, unconcerned with social hierarchy, and this was not only for wives to emulate in their hierarchical marriages. What the complementarian marriage advice fails to draw attention to is the latter half of the passage where Jesus was exalted above every name (Phil 2:9). He did not exist in an eternal state of subordination, and neither should women.³⁵

As Beth Allison Barr says, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing Christians that oppression is godly. That God ordained some people, simply because of their sex or skin color (or both), as belonging under the power of other people. That women's subordination is central to the gospel of Christ."³⁶

Conclusion

Most of the commands for women to submit to their husbands originate from the portion of Paul's household code addressed to wives in Ephesians 5:22, yet the widespread use of Philippians 2:3–11 in many of these arguments, either implicitly or explicitly reveals a lack of understanding of the context and purpose of Paul's words to all Christian Philippians. In a Greco-Roman culture obsessed with public honor, Paul commanded everyone to consider others as higher than themselves. What would he say to those using his words today to elevate men and diminish women?

We end how we began, with Cicero's quotation: "By nature we yearn and hunger for honor. . . ."³⁷ Today's yearning for honor may not look like it did in ancient Rome, but when an entire theological system is created to give men places of honor (leadership) and keep women subordinate, the men who have glimpsed honor are still grasping for its radiance today. Unfortunately for them, the women they oppress are formed more into the likeness of Christ than the oppressors themselves since they, the men, claim the name of Christ but follow the rule of Rome.

Notes

1. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.24.58, quoted in Bruce W. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Baker, 2020) 14.
2. Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Kregel, 2013) 147.
3. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 65.
4. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVP, 2014) 560.
5. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story*, 14.
6. Richard Saller, "Status and Patronage," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Dominic Rathbone, vol. 11 (Cambridge University Press, 2000) 830.
7. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 34, 49.
8. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 66.
9. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story*, 43.
10. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 72. Hellerman says, "The Philippians had been socialized from infancy to publicly promote and proclaim their own honors and titles, in order to position themselves as high as possible along the relational hierarchy, relative to others in their social networks." Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 127.
11. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (IVP, 2000) 1002.

12. Lynn H. Cohick, *Philippians*, Story of God Commentary (Zondervan, 2013) 85.
13. Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *Philippians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2020) 70.
14. Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 70.
15. Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 74.
16. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 39–40.
17. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story*, 183.
18. Jeannine K. Brown, *Philippians*, TNTC (IVP, 2022) 114, 121.
19. Mi Young Sidney Park, “Submission within the Godhead and the Church in the Epistle to the Philippians” (dissertation, ProQuest LLC, 2004) 156.
20. Park, “Submission within the Godhead,” 151.
21. Park, “Submission within the Godhead,” 158.
22. Park, “Submission within the Godhead,” 158.
23. Barbara Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Woman* (Crossway, 2001) 34.
24. Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (Penguin, 2011) 51.
25. Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 193.
26. Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 196, 198. See R. David Freedman’s research on *ezer kenegdo* in *Woman, a Power Equal to Man Translation of woman as a “fit helpmate” for man is questioned* By R. David Freedman.
27. Keller and Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 198.
28. Erik Raymond, “Leading and Submitting like Jesus,” *The Gospel Coalition* (Oct 22, 2014), <https://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/leading-and-submitting-like-jesus/>.
29. Raymond, “Leading and Submitting Like Jesus.”
30. Raymond, “Leading and Submitting Like Jesus.”
31. Originally published in 2001 and updated in 2013, *Disciplines of a Godly Woman* has sold over 100,000 copies. Each chapter covers a different discipline for women to live godly lives. The overall theme for women in each discipline is submission to God’s will, with each chapter containing a subheading emphasizing submission. However, the partner book, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, written by her husband, Kent Hughes, lacks an equal emphasis on submission for men wanting to live a godly life.
32. Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Woman*, 148.
33. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Baker, 2013) 308.
34. Eternal Subordination of the Son is the belief that Jesus exists in an eternal state of subordination in a hierarchical relationship with God the Father. This theology of the Trinity departs from orthodox Trinitarian beliefs expressed in the Nicene Creed in AD 381. The Council of Nicaea was held in part in response to Arius’s belief and teaching that God the Father and Son exist in a hierarchical relationship where the Son is always under the Father’s authority. This modern version, known as Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son stems from complementarian theologians Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem who adopted such views in order to further their social agenda of placing women within a hierarchical system underneath men in both home and church. See Kevin Giles, “Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit,” CBE International (Apr 30, 2021), <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/simply-trinity-unmanipulated-father-son-and-spirit-2/>. See also Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism; The doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (IVP, 2002).
35. In 1 Cor 7:22, Paul notes that the status of being in Christ outranks any earthly social status and should be the primary identity marker for any Christian, slave or free. I would argue this applies to the social hierarchy of male and female as well. See further Elizabeth Mehlman and Laura J. Hunt, “Paul’s Rule in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24: Contemporary Limitations and Challenges for Existing Identities in Christ,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 8/2 (2019) 103–18.
36. Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* (Brazos, 2021) 173.
37. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.24.58, quoted in Longenecker, *In Stone and Story*, 14.



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