**AS GOD HE EMPTIED HIMSELF**

***5Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:***

***6******Who, being in very nature God,***  
***did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,***  
***7******but made himself nothing,***  
***taking the very nature of a servant,***  
***being made in human likeness.***  
 **Philippians 2:5-7 (NIV)**

Paul now turns from the appeal in 2:2 (‘*make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose’*) and his elaboration of it in 2:3,4, to a second imperative by which he will define the mind-set he is urging on them: this mindset have among yourselves which was also found in Christ.

‘*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus’* (2:5) or more literally: ‘this think among yourselves as also in Christ Jesus.’ ‘This think’ = ‘your attitude should be.’ Paul is saying: ‘this mindset (which I’ve just described) have among yourselves.’ The phrase ‘among yourselves’ is usually used by Paul to describe what must take place in the community but the community is made up of individuals. For the mindset to be ‘in you’ it must also be ‘among you.’ Paul is encouraging the church community to learn to develop attitudes of selflessness and humility, considering the needs of others as of first importance.

This ‘*attitude’* Paul is calling for ‘*should be the same as that of Christ Jesus’* (2:5). Paul’s wording can be understood two different ways. It could mean: have this mind among yourselves, which is fitting for those in Christ Jesus. If this was the original intent, Paul is using ‘in Christ Jesus’ to mean those who are Christians i.e. Christians (those marked out by being ‘in Christ’) should have the mindset of selflessness and humility. The second and more likely understanding from the context of the verses that follow is that the call is to imitate Jesus Christ in selflessness and humility because this is how Christ expressed Himself. In a single sentence Paul goes from Christ ‘being equal with God’ to His having taken the role of a slave. All of this is to call the Philippians to similar self-sacrifice for the sake of one-another.

Beginning with Christ’s pre-existence Paul will now portray two ways of thinking, one selfish, the other selfless. He is reminding the Philippians that everything Christ did in bringing them salvation was the exact opposite of ‘selfish ambition’ exposed in 2:3.

‘*Who, being in very nature God’* (2:6). Paul chooses ‘*being’* to convey that no change has taken place in Christ’s standing as to His essence, His very nature of being God. Christ has always been. There was never a time when He was not. He existed prior to His time on earth because He has always existed.

‘*In very nature’* (2:6) translates the Greek word ‘*morphe’* which has no precise equivalent in English. Paul chose it because he wanted to describe Christ’s mindset, first as God (‘*being in very nature God’* [2:6]) and second as man (*’taking the very nature of a servant’* [2:7]). But in the transition from Christ’s ‘being God’ to His ‘becoming human,’ Paul uses a metaphor to describe the quality of that humanity: He ‘took on the form (‘*morphe*)’ of a servant/slave.’ ‘*Morphe’* is the perfect word here because it describes the form or shape, not in terms of the external features by which something is recognised, but by those characteristics and qualities that are essential to it. It is used of what really characterises something, even when it is seen or known in different ways.

The first Christians had come to believe that the One they had known as truly human had Himself known a prior existence in the ‘form’ of God – not meaning He was ‘like God but really wasn’t God’ but that He was characterised by what was essential to being God, ‘*in very nature God’* (2:6)

*‘Did not consider equality with God something to be grasped’* (2:6). Was ‘*equality with God’* something Christ did not possess but might have wanted, or something He already possessed but did not treat in a ‘grasping’ kind of way? There are legitimate varieties of meaning to both the word ‘*grasped’* and the phrase ‘*equality with* *God.*’

Paul uses a comparatively rare Greek word here for ‘*something to be* *grasped*,’ (‘*harpagmon’*). This could mean, first of all, ‘something to be held on to at all costs.’ In this case the treasure would be the possession of ‘equal things with God’ (Paul’s literal wording), the Son’s co-possession with the Father of the eternal, divine glory, that glory which, in His incarnate, earthly life, He longed to have restored (John 17:5).

Another meaning of ‘*harpagmon’* is to exploit our position to advantage ourselves. Christ did not consider ‘*equality with God’* something to grasp onto selfishly the way kings of the day used to gain greater power, but chose instead to pour Himself out for the sake of others.

This, then, is what it means for Christ to be ‘in the form of God.’ It meant to be equal with God, not in the sense that the two phrases are identical but that both point to the same reality. ‘Equality with God’ is not something which was desired but which was not His, but precisely something which was always His.

Paul is setting up the contrast between Christ’s ‘being in the form of God’ and the main, coming clause ‘he emptied himself.’ Equality with God was something inherent to Christ in His pre-existence. Nonetheless, God-likeness, contrary to common understanding, did not mean for Christ to be a ‘grasping, seizing’ being, as it would be for the ‘gods’ and kings whom the Philippians had previously known. It was not something to be ‘seized upon for His own advantage,’ which would be the normal expectation of worldly power and obvious selfishness. In contrast, His ‘*equality with God’* found its truest expression when ‘he emptied himself.’

Paul is reinforcing to the Philippians his view of the crucifixion, that in the cross God’s true character, His lavish expression of love, was fully revealed. This is what Paul is calling them to by way of discipleship. Christ, as God, did not look out for His own needs and neither should we. Just as he had just appealed to them to have a singular mindset which would express itself in humility (by considering one another better than themselves), so nowhe has repeated the call to have this mindset which they see in Christ, who did not consider being equal with God something to be taken selfish advantage of, something to further His own ends.

Elsewhere in Paul’s letters there is a contrast between Adam and Christ. Adam, who ‘being in God’s image,’ considered his ‘equality with God’ as something to be seized. Christ, in contrast, disdained such grasping and did the opposite. As Adam tried to become ‘like God,’ Christ, as God, became ‘man.’

‘*But made himself nothing*’ (2:7) is literally ‘but emptied himself.’ In context Paul’s thinking is: in contrast to His considering His equality with God as something to seize on to His own advantage, Christ emptied Himself. The debate over what this ‘emptying’ (‘*kenosis’*) entailed has unnecessarily centred on the assumption that Christ emptied Himself of something. Not only does the grammar of the sentence not need a qualifier but Paul answers the seeming dilemma in the next part of the same verse.

Christ emptied Himself by ’*taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness’* (2:7). The question has become: ‘what did He empty Himself of?’ not because the verb ‘*kenoo’* demands it but because our English word ‘empty’ does. This verse says nothing about Christ divesting Himself of divine attributes. The ‘kenosis’ or self-emptying was His ’*taking the very nature of a servant.’* The real question is not: what did He empty Himself of? The real question is: what did He empty Himself into? Christ Jesus brought the whole of His divine nature, undiminished, into a new and previously unimaginable state – humanity.

When Paul has used ‘*kenoo’* elsewhere in his writings, it has had the meaning of ‘become powerless’, or, ‘to be emptied of significance’ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:17; Romans 4:14). In the Philippian context, Paul is using Christ’s self-emptying in antithesis to the ‘empty glory’ of 2:3. Rather than doing anything on the basis of ‘empty glory,’ Christ ‘emptied Himself’ or as the NIV says, ‘*made himself nothing’* (2:7).

Christ emptied Himself by ’*taking the very nature of a servant’* (2:7). ‘*Nature’* here is the same Greek word ‘*morphe’* used in 2:6. In His earthly existence He took on the ‘essential quality’ of what it means to be a slave (probably in the sense of performing the duties of a slave).

Christ entered our history, not as ‘*kyrios,’* (Lord), though this was later declared over Him in His vindication (2:9-11), but as ‘*doulos*’ (slave), a person with no rights or privileges, but a servant to all.

The first phrase, ‘*taking the very nature of a servant’* (2:7) sharpens the contrast with ‘*being in very nature God*’ and reflects the quality of His incarnation. The second phrase, ‘*being made in human likeness,’* reflects the factual side. Christ came ‘*taking the very nature of a servant’* by ‘*being made in human likeness.’*

Paul probably used the word ‘likeness’ here because of his belief that in becoming human, Christ did not cease to be divine. The word allows for ambiguity, emphasising that He is similar to our humanity in some ways but dissimilar in others. The similarity lies with His full humanity. The dissimilarity, which in Romans 8:3 had to do with His being sinless while in the ‘likeness’ of sinful flesh, in this case has to do with His never ceasing to be ‘equal with God.’ He came in the ‘likeness’ of humanity in that He totally identified with us, but in becoming human, He was not ‘human’ only. He was God living out a truly human life.

In ‘pouring Himself out’ and ‘humbling Himself to death on a cross,’ Christ Jesus has revealed the character of God Himself. Here is the epitome of God-likeness: the pre-existent Christ was not a ‘grasping, selfish’ being, but One whose love for others found its ultimate expression in ‘pouring Himself out,’ in taking on the role of a slave, in humbling Himself to the point of death on behalf of those He loved. There is a final vindication for the one who goes the way of the cross; but for believers the vindication is eschatological, not present. Discipleship in the present calls for servanthood, for self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

Paul concludes the passage with a further call for obedience on the part of the Philippians (2:12), which will take shape as God works out His salvation in them for His own good pleasure (2:13). But for this to happen, they must stop bickering (2:14) and get on with ‘having the same love’ for one another (2:2) as Christ portrayed in this passage.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

*Paul’s letter to the Philippians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) by Gordon Fee (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995)

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*The Prison Letters* (Paul for Everyone) by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)