

“Christ did not regard equality with God ...”

~ Pastor Zhang Cheng ~

Philippians 2:6-11

"... who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Other than John 1, this is the main passage used to prove that Jesus was God. It says here that Jesus Christ *"existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men..."*, which seems to prove what the Trinitarian says - that Jesus Christ was originally God but he gave up that identity and status of God and chose to become a man.

When we read this passage, we must ask a key question: did Paul mean to tell us that Jesus was God? If not, what was he concerned with?

Let's read the context before this, such as vv. 1-4. What was Paul's concern? It was the relationship between the believers. He talked about encouragement, consolation, fellowship, affection, compassion and love, followed by reminders of some negatives, *"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit..."*. At least from the beginning in vv. 1-4, we can see that Paul's concern in this passage was the relationship among the believers. He wanted them to learn to encourage, console, fellowship with one another in Christ and relate to one another with kindness and compassion; immediately he also mentioned the need to be humble and consider others as stronger than oneself.

Such then, does vv. 5-11 have anything to do with the context preceding it? Obviously, it does. It is because all the life qualities mentioned in the context before it can be seen in the life of Jesus, that's why he reminded the apostles that they should imitate Christ and to have the heart of Christ; we can see how v5 is closely linked to vv. 1-4.

We can come to the conclusion from here: Paul's concern was not in some theological topics, but in the life interactions of the believers and how to maintain and strengthen the relationship with one another in Christ.

vv. 6-8 is the actual content of imitating Christ. There are several key words, which require further examination of their actual meanings. Several words that appear to be synonyms: "form" appeared twice, referring to God's form and a servant's image; there are also words such as *"appearance"* and *"likeness"*. To put it simply, these three words are basically synonyms. It says here that Christ had the form of God, yet it followed by saying that he also

had the form of a servant and the likeness of man, what did Paul want to say?

Jesus did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped

The preceding verse mentions the need to *"have the same heart as Christ"*, why is it then followed by saying "he had the form of God"? This phrase seems to say that Jesus was God. Yet, do not forget that we all are also God's image (1Co 11:7, Jas 3:9). So how then did Jesus manifest the image of God? Look at the next sentence: "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped". Why did Paul have to emphasize that Jesus "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped"? Can we say that *"Jesus was equal with God"*? How are we to understand this sentence?

First, note the word *"equality"* (*isos*), Jn 5:18 also used this word:

"For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father, making himself equal (isos) with God."

Why were the Jews so negative towards Jesus making himself *"equal with God"*? Was it because they thought Jesus was declaring himself as God? Certainly not! It has already stated the reason here: it was because *"not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God his own Father"*. Jesus' words upset the Jews a lot, to the point that they even wanted to kill him. Jesus addressed God as his Father was as good as proclaiming himself as the Son of God - that he was Christ ^[1]. He then had become God's authorized representative. Coupled with his breaking of the Sabbatical rules, the Jews felt that he was arrogant and regarded himself as being equal with God.

Let's read Jn 6:15.

So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take him by force to make him king, withdrew again to the mountain by himself alone.

It says here that they wanted to make him king *'by force'* (*harpazo*). Note this word and we will talk about it later. From Chapters 5 and 6 of John, we can see how carnal men see Jesus. Despite the fact that all the miracles Jesus performed were carried out by God through him, from the perspective of a carnal man, all these were done by Jesus' own power. Therefore, they were very happy to exalt him, glorify him, and even to hail him to become king. You can see how great a temptation that Jesus was facing.

Returning to Phi 2:6, was Jesus capable of *"making himself equal with God"*? Obviously, he was. He could choose to *"exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God"* (2 Thes 2:4). The antichrist exalts and calls himself as God. Is he God? He is not but he has the ability to perform miracles, so he can deceive people.

The Bible tells us that Jesus had this pre-requisite because everyone witnessed the miracles he did, thus making all the effort to make him king. However, Jesus was not willing to accept

the worship of the people, he did not want to walk the path of the antichrist. He chose the path of humility, self-emptiness and obedience.

"Not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped", how to understand the word *"grasped"* (*harpagmos*). This word comes from the same family of the word *"by force"* (*harpazo*) in Jn 6:16, which means attaining the goal by forceful means. Thus, this word carries the meaning of "snatch". That is why the Chinese translation of Phi 2:6, “强夺” (*"snatched by force"*), as in the Union Version of the Chinese Bible was correct^[2].

We can ask a very simple question: if Jesus was God in the first place, did he have to *"grasp"* or *"snatch"* such that he could be equal in status with God? Not necessary! Only the antichrist would adopt such an approach to attain his own purpose.

Paul said, *"Jesus had the form of God"*. He certainly did and he was also the most perfect image of God because Yahweh God dwelled in Jesus with His fullness; speaking and acting through him. Jesus was more qualified than anyone else to be able to snatch this "equality with God", accepting worship by people. Yet, he did not do so.

How was Jesus' heart like? V7 says that Christ chose 'the form of a servant', to become 'the form of man'. Was Paul saying that Christ was God in the first place but had chosen to be in the likeness of man? Why did he have to emphasize that Jesus took 'the image of a slave'? We cannot explain the Bible without referring to the context and we must read this verse in accordance with the context. What does V3 say? *"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves"*. Would this not be the parallel to *"not... grasped"* in v6? Besides, v3 talks about being humble while v8 also mentions about Christ *"humbled himself"* which is closely linked to the preceding text.

Let us resolve the most fundamental issue first: Can image be seen? Of course it can be. If not, what is the use of the image? Why does the Bible often mention the image of God? It is because God cannot be seen, so God must use another way for us to know Him and that is through His image.

That is the use of an image. Although you cannot see God in person, God can help you know Him through an image; and God chose the most perfect image, that is, Christ. That is the use of an image.

Therefore, when the Bible says that man has the image of God, the Bible has a very high expectation on us. We must live out the image of God; manifesting God's glory so that the people of the world can know God through us.

Image is something that can be seen and we can only imitate images that can be seen. We cannot imitate God because He cannot be seen but we can imitate servants of God who manifest the image of God. This is the function of an image. Such then, what kind of image does Jesus manifest? It is the image of a slave. Hence, the latter part talks about him

humbling himself and in full submission to the point of death.

The verses about the image of a slave, the form or the likeness of a man, are all actually emphasizing the fact that although Jesus Christ was a man like us, he chose to be a slave. Paul precisely wanted us to imitate the image of Christ being a slave. Christ did not become a slave because he did not have a choice; he could be a king and accept the glory and worship of people. However, he did not do so; he chose to be a slave. That was what Paul wanted us to imitate. It is because everyone is not willing to humble oneself but always wants to elevate oneself; and that's the sparks of the problem in human relationships.

To have the same attitude as Christ

Paul wanted us to have the same attitude as Christ. Are you imitating Christ and having the same attitude as he did? Or are you walking in the path of the anti-Christ? 2The2:4 tells us that the Antichrist '*... exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.*' Note this phrase, '*displaying himself as being God*'. Do not think that this sentence is very strange; human beings truly have this tendency. As long as he has some slight achievements, some power, he would think that he was God. It is because power will give people an illusion, thinking that they have become God. The kings of old had the control over life and death; it is indeed very hard for people with such authority to humble themselves. Hence, kings of many ages would often elevate themselves to the position of God, taking themselves as God. If we were to have the pre-requisites of Jesus Christ, had the power to perform miracles, loved by the multitudes, we would be very likely walking the path of the antichrist. Hence, you have to take note of your attitude. What kind of attitude do you have in your heart? Let's return to Phi 2:3.

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves...”

Here, it asks us not to be after “*empty conceit*”. What is that? Have you ever thought that the glory in this world is all temporal and transient? When people sometimes praise you, do not be too happy. Perhaps, a few days later, when you do something that they do not like, they will criticize you.

Notice that Paul talks about “*selfishness*” with “*empty conceit*” at the same time. If you do not go after empty conceit, you would not be selfish. People with selfish ambitions all want to receive support from others. If you like to associate with people who praise you and ostracize those who criticize you, that is the beginning of your selfish ambition. If you do not covet empty conceit, you would not be involved in any selfish ambitions.

Examples of having Christ's attitude

Phi 2 is not to declare that Jesus was God, that's only our presumption which has totally deviated from the meaning of the passage. Paul's concern was how to imitate Jesus Christ,

which can be seen more clearly as we read on. After citing the example of Christ, Paul cited three more examples.

The first one is in Phi 2:17.

“But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.”

You will know from studying the Old Testament laws in detail that the priests would pour wine to the sacrifices (Num 15:7). The wine adds fragrance to the sacrifices but once it is poured out, it vanishes and only a fragrance is smelled. Paul said, *“I am glad to be your drink offering”*, what did he want to say? Very obviously, Paul was imitating Christ to pour out himself for others (ie. empty himself). Paul did not care about himself and he was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the Church. That is the spirit of total selflessness and self-denial; just as how Christ humbled himself and obeyed to death for the sake of our salvation.

Another example is in Phi 2:19-21.

“But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus.”

Paul cited the example of Timothy who was truly someone that imitated Christ. Paul lamented over how many preachers “sought after their own interests and not that of Christ”. Contrasting this with v4, ***“do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others”*** (the original text does not have the word ‘merely’. This word has weakened the strength of the sentence.), you will see the link of the two. Paul lamented that Timothy was the only one among the many preachers, who have Christ’s attitude in his heart. May it be that we can be people like Timothy.

The third example is in Phi 2:29-30.

“Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.”

For the sake of doing Christ’s work, Epaphroditus “nearly died”; he imitated Christ’s example of “undo death”. He was the other person who was concerned about the interests of Jesus Christ, a servant with Christ’s attitude in his heart. For the sake of Christ’s matters, he could neglect his own life.

A practical example...

Let me share a real life example as well. Many years ago, I knew of an old brother who migrated to Hong Kong. He was already 70 years old then and his health was not very good. He was staying at a very small church premise in Hong Kong. This church required someone to do some cleaning up here and there and he wanted to participate in such a

ministry, so he decided not to stay with his own son (his son was also staying in Hong Kong), and chose to stay in the church.

The church gave him some allowances every month. He would use the money to buy some spiritual books and sent them to the preachers in mainland China. Although this brother had migrated to Hong Kong, his heart still remembered the church of God and the needs of the church in China. He did not save up treasure for himself. Rather, he gave all he had. That was why I was very touched and he was really an example for me to follow.

You want to know what is *“having the same attitude of Christ”*? This is a real-life example. This old brother did not look after his own interest and he regarded other’s interests more important than his own. I thought if I were him, perhaps, I would save up some money for my medical needs which would also be very reasonable. He, however, did not think like that. This old brother truly had Christ’s attitude which should be the example for us to follow eagerly.

Jesus Christ chose to humble himself and God would elevate him to the highest

By studying the meaning of Phi 2 seriously, it would not be difficult to see that Paul’s concern was not about theology and it was also not to proclaim or preach that Jesus was God. Rather, it was to remind the believers to imitate Jesus Christ and to have his attitude and heart in relating to one another. We do not only need to imitate Jesus Christ, but also the servants who imitate Christ.

Paul said, *“Christ had the image of God”*. This sentence is not hard to understand since Christ was truly God’s image and it is the most perfect one. Abba Yahweh dwelled in him and manifested Himself to the world through Christ’s form and body. Hence, Jesus said,

“He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9)

“The Father abiding in me does His works” (Jn 14:10)

“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also” (Jn 8:19, 14:7)

“for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (Jn 5:19)

“For I did not speak on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak.” (Jn 12:49)

Jesus could speak like that, all because he had totally obeyed the Father and let Him do the work through him. His speech and actions manifested the perfect image of Father God. It was no wonder that the apostle John described Jesus Christ as the *“only begotten son in the Father’s bosom”*, *“he has explained Him (the Father)”* (Jn 1:18).

Despite the fact that Jesus was God’s beloved and the authorised representative of God (that’s why we had to listen to him (cf. Mt 17:5), Jesus was not willing to take over God’s place and

accept the worship of others. He had rather chosen *'the image of a slave'* willingly – as God's slave, to be everyone's servant, sacrificing himself for us.

The Lord Jesus also taught his disciples this way: *"If anyone wishes to be first, he would surely be the last among all, and be everyone's servant"* (Mk 9:35). This is what Paul wanted us to imitate and that's the spirit of Philippians 2. Regrettably, the carnal man could only see the glory and power of Jesus. They could not see that Father God of Jesus Christ manifest Himself through Jesus. Hence, we embrace and lift up Jesus. We replace Yahweh God and even worship Jesus as God.

In Phi 2:9-11, Paul has taught us a very important spiritual principle: Those who are humble will be lifted up on high. It was precisely why Jesus chose to be humble to the lowest; then Yahweh God let him come alive again and lift him up on high, such that *"all those above, on ground, under the sea, will all have their knees bowed because of the name of Jesus"* (Phi 2:10). It was because Yahweh God had already instituted him as Lord and Christ (Ac 2:36; 10:42, 17:31).

True spiritual greatness is to imitate the humility of Christ and be the servant of all men. Only those who are willing to be humble will be used by God and are able to glorify God. If you were willing to humble yourself, God would naturally lift you up. Such an honour is not to be snatched or grasped, it is an honour given by God Yahweh, so that you could live out the glorious image of God, *"that the glory all belongs to God Yahweh"* (Phi 2:11).

^[1]If you wish to understand why the Bible addresses Jesus as Christ, the Son of God, please refer to the earlier article entitled "The Son of God".

^[2]The New Translation Version Bible translated *"harpagmos"* as *"insist"*, which resulted in Christ "not insisting himself as having the equality with God". Such a translation carries a meaning which is totally the opposite of the Union Version. The New Translation Version Bible has assumed that Jesus was God, such that he did not 'insist' his own equality status with God. However, *"grasped"* carries an opposite meaning and that is, to grasp/grab something that does not belong to him for himself. According to the section on the definition of *"harpagmos"* with the strong number 0725 of the Hebrew dictionary, the translation of Chinese Union Bible is the correct one.