

Philippians 2:4–13 (NIV)

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,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹²Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Galatians 6:14 (NIV)

¹⁴May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

From Superman to the Avengers, superheroes remain as big and lucrative a business as ever, tapping into our fears and our hopes. Is there a place of Jesus in all this?

I remember where I was. The breakfast area was a bit cramped and dim. There on the table was the morning edition of the *Shreveport Times*. A grainy black and white photo jumped off the page at me. Superman was dead. Dead by suicide, no less. I was eight years old.

I was old enough to know that the man who had killed himself was an actor, George Reeves, playing the part of Superman in a TV show I devoured every time it came on. But still, this was Superman. It is odd the things that end up burned into our memories. But that moment with the *Shreveport Times* is etched in mine.

Like most eight-year old boys of my day, I was a fan (more like fanatic, actually) of all the DC comics heroes: Superman, Flash, Aquaman, Wonder Woman, even the darker Batman. Marvel superheroes such as Spiderman and Ironman had not yet arrived on the scene. It was still the 50's and Superman owned the terrain. Whenever the TV show came on my buddies and I would gather around the small black-and-white set and hear the famous introduction delivered breathlessly by the strong-voiced announcer:

Faster than a speeding bullet!
More powerful than a locomotive!
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!
("Look! Up in the sky!" "It's a bird!" "It's a plane!" "It's Superman!")

Yes, it's Superman ... strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men!

Superman ... who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands, and who, disguised as [Clark Kent](#), mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way!

Jesus would make a pretty good superhero. Jesus could still storms, change water into wine, walk on the seas, and even bring people back from the dead. Though his costume was never much to look at, he always attracted a crowd.

Jesus stands for truth. Jesus stands for justice. The American Way? I'm pretty sure that Jesus would urge us to his way; after all, he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). Still, there has been a good bit of ink spilled on the topic of parallels between Superman and Jesus.

So far as I can tell this Superman-as-Jesus stuff began with the making of Richard Donner's two Superman movies in 1978 and 1981. In a scholarly journal article, Anton Koslovic notes that Donner initially denied any Christ-figure intentions but later gladly admitted to the "Christic" subtext: "It's a motif I had done at the beginning when Brando sent Chris [Reeve] to Earth and said, 'I send them my only son.' It was God sending Christ to Earth." It was a dramaturgical decision that made good sense, for just as Superman was literally a super-man, Jesus was "the ultimate Super Jew of his day," the "Christian super-hero," the pop culture "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).¹ Koslovic goes on to find twenty parallels between Superman (in the film) and Jesus.

Stephen Skelton, in his book, *The Gospel According to the Greatest Superhero*, offers some parallels between the movie *Superman* and Jesus:

- Superman and his father have the same last name - El, which means "God" in Hebrew.
- The original first names for Superman's parents were Mary and Joseph.
- The villain Lex Luther sounds much like Lucifer of the Bible.
- Superman and Jesus both experience death, resurrection and a return, or second coming.

These sorts of parallels may be fun but they miss the point. The Jews of Jesus' day were often drawn to Jesus by the wondrous and amazing feats he performed. But Jesus knew they were coming only to see the show (e.g., John 4:48). It seems to me that today, we Christians can get too caught up in the show, whether it is Jesus' miracles or the level of entertainment provided by our worship services. Neither lies at the heart of Jesus and his ministry. To get there, to get into the very mind of Christ, Paul takes us to the moving Christ-hymn of Philippians 2. This is the center of Paul's understanding of Jesus and the contrast to the Superman, whether of my childhood or the movies, could hardly be more striking. You might turn back to the first page and read the hymn again before going on.

What it really means to be super

If you imagine Superman setting aside all of his super-abilities, humbling himself, dying an utterly undeserved and humiliating death . . . if you can imagine a Superman movie built from such material, then we could get somewhere taking about the parallels between Superman and Jesus. Of course, the problem is that no one would go to see such a Superman movie.

¹ From Koslovic's article, "Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah," in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, April 2002. Koslovic finds twenty parallels between Jesus and the Superman of Donner's films.

We just completed a months-long journey through the Gospel of John. One of the most striking moments in the gospel is when Jesus washes the feet of the disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. Several commentators have noted parallels in language and form between the story of Jesus' foot washing in John's Gospel and the Christ-hymn in Philippians. Perhaps this hymn arose from reflections upon Jesus' pointed demonstration of selflessness on the eve of his own death. Here are a few of those parallels:

	<i>John 13:3-17</i>		<i>Philippians 2:6-11</i>
1.	"Jesus, knowing . . . that he had come from God and was going to God" rises from the table and lays aside his outer garments (v 3-4).	1.	"though he was in the form of God . . . he emptied himself." Moffatt translates this as "He laid it (his divine nature) aside" (v 7).
2.	Jesus takes a towel and wraps it about himself, puts water in a basin and begins to wash his disciples feet (a menial task often assigned to slaves) (v 5).	2.	... taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form he humbled himself (v 7).
3.	When Jesus finishes, he once again takes his outer garments and puts them on, and again sits down at the table from which he got up (v 12).	3.	Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name which is above every name (v 9).
4.	Finally Jesus says: "You address me as teacher and Lord and rightly so, for that is what I am" (v 13).	4.	... that every tongue might openly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (v 11).
This table is adapted from G. F. Hawthorne's commentary on Philippians in the <i>Word Biblical Commentary</i> , 1998.			

In the context of superheroes and super-abilities, the phrase in Paul's Christ hymn that most demands our attention is this: "he made himself nothing" in the NIV (v. 7) and "emptied himself" in the NRSV. Remember the points that John drove home time and again in his gospel: Jesus was God . . . existing from God's beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But, Paul writes, he gave it all up. He didn't cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead "emptied" himself, taking on the "form of a slave . . . in human likeness." He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this; perhaps because we are too focused on super-abilities. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of "form" or "emptying," wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus' surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul's point. As Morna Hooker wrote, "Christ did not cease to be in the 'form of God' when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the 'Son of God' when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like." Here is N. T. Wright on this "emptying."

Let's clear one misunderstanding out of the way in case it still confuses anybody. In verse 7 Paul says that Jesus 'emptied himself'. People have sometimes thought that this means that Jesus, having been divine up to that point, somehow stopped being divine when he became human, and then went back to being divine again. This is, in fact, completely untrue to what Paul has in mind. The point of verse 6 is that Jesus was indeed already equal with God; somehow Paul is saying that Jesus already existed even before he became a human being (verse 7). But the decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about *what it really meant to be divine*.

Jesus retained his equality with God; the point of the cross, for Paul, is that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19). The point of verses 6

and 7 is that Jesus didn't regard this equality as something to take advantage of, something to exploit. Rather, the eternal son of God, the one who became human in and as Jesus of Nazareth, regarded his equality with God as committing him to the course he took: of becoming human, of becoming Israel's anointed representative, of dying under the weight of the world's evil. This is what it meant to be equal with God. As you look at the incarnate son of God dying on the cross the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.²

In a recent piece about Superman, Jonathan Tobin wrote, "What's the point of having superpowers if you are going to play Gandhi when the going gets rough?" I hear the crowds around the cross on that Friday afternoon, mocking Jesus shouting out that if he was really the Messiah he could use his powers to get down from the cross on which he hung (Mark 15:27-32). But Jesus doesn't rescue himself, he stays on the cross and rescues us. That is a true hero.

The Humiliation of Christ

Rome ruled the New Testament world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today's passage, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses "slave" (v.7) – the most dishonorable *public status* one could have, and then "cross" (v.8) – the most dishonorable *public humiliation* one could suffer.

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul's claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by sharing some your own memories of superheroes generally and Superman in particular. What qualities do they share, if any? I have a pretty good idea what makes them "super," but what do you think makes them heroes? What qualities in superheroes ought we to emulate? Which ones ought we not? What do you find to be Christ-like in the figure of Superman? Do you see any parallels between Superman and the Jesus of the Philippians 2 Christ-hymn?

2. A humble superhero? Humiliated? Being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with "humiliated"! Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!???) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being "humble" v. being "humiliated." Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (102–103). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Colossians 1:15-20 Another Christ-hymn from one of Paul's letters.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 13:3-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 8 Paul appeals to the Corinthians for a collection of money and uses Jesus' humbling of himself as an example(v. 9)</p>	<p>Thursday, Galatians 4:1-7 Paul reminds the Galatians that they are heirs of the kingdom because God's own Son was born of a woman and under the law.</p>
<p>Friday, Isaiah 45:23 & Romans 14:10-12 To whom will every knee bow and every tongue confess? What does it mean to proclaim that Jesus is Lord?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

