



THE WHITBY FOUNDATION

THE ART OF THE BONDSERVANT

A Slave to Christ, a Servant to My Spouse

An Exposition of Philippians 2:3–11

PHILIPPIANS 2:3–11

TEACHING AIM

To show that Christian marriage is not a master–slave relationship, yet the gospel creates a voluntary bondservant posture: because both spouses belong to Christ, each is freed from selfish ambition, entitlement, and scorekeeping to seek the other’s good with the humility of Jesus.

MAKING FAMILIES STRONGER

Introduction

What would happen in a marriage if each spouse approached the other with the readiness of a servant, not because one spouse owned the other, but because both belonged to Christ? The question is intentionally provocative because it exposes the instinct to protect status, keep score, demand reciprocity, or resist simply because we do not want to yield.

Scripture never makes a husband the master of his wife or a wife the master of her husband. Paul says, “You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men” (1 Corinthians 7:23). Yet believers belong to Christ, and Philippians 2 presents Jesus Himself as taking “the form of a servant” (doulos—slave or bondservant). The Christian is therefore not a slave to a spouse, but a bondservant of Christ who is free to serve a spouse without making pride or self-protection the ruling principle of the relationship.

Big Idea: Because Christ is our Lord, we are free to stop fighting to be served and begin seeking the good of our spouse with the humble, self-giving mind of Christ.

Literary and Theological Context

Philippians 2:3–11 is not originally a marriage passage. Paul is addressing the unity and witness of the church. Philippians 2:1–4 confronts selfish ambition, empty glory, self-preoccupation, and disregard for the interests of others, the very attitudes that fracture life together.

Paul answers those problems with Christ. Verses 5–11 ground humility in the incarnation, servanthood, obedience, death, and exaltation of Jesus. The primary application is the church; marriage is a legitimate secondary application because husband and wife are disciples of Christ called to embody this same gospel-shaped mind toward one another.

The Text

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit ... look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others ... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”

Philippians 2:3–5

1. “Do Nothing from Selfish Ambition or Conceit” — Philippians 2:3

Paul begins by naming two enemies of gospel-shaped relationships. “Selfish ambition” (eritheia) carries the sense of self-seeking rivalry; “conceit” (kenodoxia) is literally “empty glory.” Together they expose the impulse to make the relationship orbit around my vindication, preference, comfort, or victory.

Marriage brings these impulses into close quarters. A disagreement can become a contest over who yields, who apologizes first, or whose needs control the moment. Paul attacks the root: the gospel does not merely make self-interest more polite; it dethrones it.

2. “Count Others More Significant ... Look ... to the Interests of Others” — Philippians 2:3–4

Paul does not command false self-hatred or pretend that the other person is always wiser or correct. He calls believers to deliberately give weight to another person rather than instinctively centering the self.

Verse 4 adds that we look “not only” to our own interests, “but also” to the interests of others. Biblical servanthood is not self-erasure. It means my spouse’s good becomes a real category in my decisions: What burden can I carry? What would communicate honor? What would help the person God has joined to me flourish?

3. “Have This Mind Among Yourselves” — Philippians 2:5

Verse 5 is the bridge from command to gospel. Paul does not produce humility by telling sinners to try harder; he directs them to Christ. The “mind” of Christ is a settled orientation that repeatedly moves away from rivalry and toward self-giving love.

4. Christ Did Not Use His Status for Self-Advantage — Philippians 2:6

Christ is “in the form of God.” Without resolving every nuance of the debated term in verse 6, Paul’s ethical movement is clear: Jesus does not use His status for selfish advantage. Marriage also contains roles, strengths, knowledge, money, influence, and other forms of power. The mind of Christ asks whether I use what I possess to secure myself or to seek my spouse’s good. Biblical authority is never permission to become self-serving.

5. “He Emptied Himself, Taking the Form of a Servant” — Philippians 2:7

The verb “emptied” is *ekenōsen*. Paul explains Christ’s self-emptying by saying that He took “the form of a servant” and entered genuine human likeness. The Son did not stop being divine; His emptying is expressed through incarnation, lowliness, and servanthood, not the subtraction of deity.

The word “servant” is *doulos*, commonly meaning slave or bondservant. The contrast is breathtaking: the One in the “form of God” takes the “form of a servant.” The eternal Son does not cease to be Lord; the Lord willingly takes the low place in order to save.

This is the heart of the marriage thought experiment. Christ’s servanthood is voluntary self-giving, not inferiority of worth. Likewise, taking a servant posture toward a spouse does not make the spouse lord. Security in Christ makes lowly service possible without surrendering dignity or identity.

6. “He Humbled Himself ... to the Point of Death” — Philippians 2:8

Jesus’ humility became obedience. He moved from glory to human likeness, from human likeness to the posture of a servant, and from servanthood to the cross. Gospel service is costly; it is not merely serving when convenient or when the other person has earned it.

Marriage presents many small crosses: listening when tired, initiating repair, doing unnoticed work, telling the truth gently, yielding a preference, caring when reciprocity is delayed, or refusing to answer provocation with provocation. These acts do not save us, but they can display the pattern of the Savior.

7. The Humiliated Christ Is Exalted by God — Philippians 2:9–11

The passage ends with the Father highly exalting the Son and every knee bowing to Jesus as Lord. Christ’s exaltation is unique, but the ending matters for marriage: humble obedience is not meaningless, and service does not require surrendering truth, identity, or mission. Christ—not the spouse—is the final Lord before whom our service is offered.

The Crucial Distinction: Not a Slave to My Spouse

THEOLOGICAL GUARDRAIL

The spouse is not the master. Christ is the Master. The marriage application is not human ownership; it is Christ-shaped service.

The phrase “What if I were a slave to my spouse?” works only as a thought experiment. Taken literally, it is unbiblical. Marriage is not a master–slave relationship. A husband’s headship is not ownership; a wife’s submission is not slavery; both stand directly under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Paul gives both boundaries at once. Christians are told, “do not become bondservants of men” (1 Corinthians 7:23), yet Galatians 5:13 commands, “through love serve one another.” The verb is *douleuō*, from the same slavery word family. Freedom in Christ does not produce self-rule; it produces voluntary, reciprocal service through love.

The better formulation is therefore: I am a bondservant of Christ, and because I belong to Him, I can take the posture of a servant toward my spouse. My conscience, worship, and ultimate obedience remain Christ’s alone.

Why “Slaves, Obey Your Masters” Is Not a Marriage Proof Text

The New Testament household codes address slaves and masters within an existing first-century social institution (Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1); they are not a blueprint for marriage. What does carry over is the Christ-centered motive: ordinary service can be done sincerely “as to the Lord.” Marriage work can therefore become discipleship rather than bargaining.

What Servant-Hearted Marriage Looks Like

A servant posture changes the governing question from “What am I owed?” to “What does faithfulness require of me before Christ?” It asks what obedience belongs to me even when my spouse is imperfect.

- Service without scorekeeping or reflexive contention: I do not turn good deeds into relational debt or resist merely because the request came from my spouse.
- Initiative without being chased: I look for burdens to carry before resentment has to announce them.
- Humility without self-erasure: I can yield preferences while still speaking truth about real needs and concerns.
- Repair without pride: I can confess, forgive, and pursue peace because winning is not my master.
- Strength under Christ: I use time, money, knowledge, authority, and influence to bless rather than control, while never cooperating with sin, deception, or danger.

Jesus the Servant Leader — Without Weakness or Passivity

Jesus says that the Son of Man came “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45), yet His service was never people-pleasing or passivity. He confronted sin, refused false demands, and remained obedient to the Father. So servant-hearted marriage is neither domination nor weakness: a husband can lead sacrificially without harshness, a wife can respond willingly without becoming voiceless, and either spouse can set a truthful boundary while remaining loving.

Canonical and Gospel Perspective

Philippians 2 reaches its deepest meaning at the cross. Jesus does not merely model humility; He saves sinners through His humiliation and obedience. We are not reconciled to God because we finally became good servants, but because the obedient Servant went to the cross for the selfish, proud, resistant, and undeserving.

That gospel destroys both entitlement and despair. Because Christ gave Himself to me by grace, I cannot make my spouse's performance the condition for my obedience. And when I fail through harshness, scorekeeping, passivity, or selfishness, the answer is repentance and renewed faith in the One who obeyed perfectly in my place.

Ephesians 5 gives marriage-specific commands within this gospel order: husbands love with Christlike sacrifice, and wives respond with willing submission and respect under Christ. The roles are not identical, but both spouses answer to the same Lord. The gospel therefore does not make one spouse the servant and the other the recipient; it puts both beneath Jesus and forms both in the mind of Christ.

Pastoral Application

For Husbands

- Does my leadership resemble Christ using strength for another's good, or do I use role and authority to secure my own comfort?
- Am I willing to do lowly, repetitive, unnoticed work without believing it is beneath me?
- Do I love sacrificially and pursue understanding because Christ commands me, or only when I feel respected and appreciated?

For Wives

- Do I treat ordinary requests or leadership from my husband as automatic threats to autonomy, or can I respond with willing, Christ-centered service?
- Do my words and tone make ordinary cooperation easier, or do pride and reflexive resistance make it harder than it needs to be?
- Can I serve generously while still speaking truth, refusing what is sinful or unsafe, and remembering that my responsiveness is worship to Christ—not a declaration that my husband is my master?

For Both Spouses

- Where have we turned marriage into a negotiation of equal repayment rather than a covenant of generous love?
- Where am I waiting for the other person to change before I obey Christ?
- When conflict comes, do we seek the other's good and move toward confession and concrete repair without confusing service with enabling or humility with silence?

A Marriage Thought Experiment

ASK THIS FOR SEVEN DAYS

"If I belonged completely to Christ and had nothing to prove, what would loving service toward my spouse look like in this moment?"

The question exposes the rival masters competing for our obedience: pride, convenience, resentment, fear, control, vindication, comfort, and the demand for reciprocity. The gospel dethrones them. Christ alone owns the Christian, and His lordship produces love.

Teaching Summary

Phrase	Meaning	Marriage Implication
“Do nothing from selfish ambition”	Reject rivalry and self-seeking as governing motives.	Marriage cannot become a contest over status, comfort, or who wins.
“Taking the form of a servant”	Christ willingly takes the low place without ceasing to be Lord.	Serve voluntarily from security in Christ; the spouse does not become master.
“He humbled himself ... to death”	Christ’s obedience is costly and cross-shaped.	Faithful love often costs convenience, pride, preference, and immediate reciprocity.

Conclusion

The art of the bondservant is the freedom of belonging so completely to Christ that the ego no longer has to rule the marriage. Jesus possessed the highest status and moved downward in love, taking the form of a servant and obeying to the cross; yet He remains Lord. Your spouse is not your lord, and you are not your spouse’s lord. Christ is Lord. Because He is, husband and wife can stop fighting for the throne of every interaction and instead serve, lead, respond, speak truth, repent, forgive, set boundaries, and bear burdens from gospel security. The defining question becomes not, “How little can I give and still be treated fairly?” but, “How can the mind of Christ be seen in me here?”

Primary Scripture References

Theme	Text
Primary Exegetical Text	Philippians 2:3–11
Church Unity Context	Philippians 1:27–2:4
Belonging to Christ	1 Corinthians 7:22–23
Serving One Another	Galatians 5:13
Christ the Serving Lord	Mark 10:42–45
Marriage Under Christ	Ephesians 5:21–33
Household Slave/Master Texts	Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1