

## Philippians 2:1-13

Ancient Jewish writers often employed a literary style known as *chiasm*. A chiasm is a kind of conceptual rhyme. Instead of rhyming sounds (as we are used to), a chiasm rhymes *ideas*. In a typical chiasm, the first and last sections (denoted by **A** and **A<sub>1</sub>**) are conceptually similar, as are the next-to-first and next-to-last sections (**B** and **B<sub>1</sub>**), and so on to the middle section.

A  
B  
C  
C<sub>1</sub>  
B<sub>1</sub>  
A<sub>1</sub>

In addition to being a unique poetic style, chiasms can help us to better understand what the author is communicating. For example, by comparing the conceptually rhyming sections, we can often get a better idea of the point of that section.

In Philippians 2:1-13, Paul composes a chiasm that has three parallel sections:



**A:** 2:1 *Therefore, since\* there is encouragement in Christ, since there is consolation of love, since there is fellowship of the Spirit, since (there is God's) affection and compassion,*

**B:** 2:2 *make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.*

**C:** 2:5 *Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

**C1:** 2:9 *For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

**B1:** 2:12 *So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;*

**A1:** 2:13 *for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

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\* Most English translations say "If there is any . . ." But the "if" clause is better translated "Because indeed there is . . ." Paul is not questioning the reality of the Holy Spirit's encouragement; he is affirming it.



So the first pair of sections (**A** and **A<sub>1</sub>**) describe provisions that God supplies to each Christian. We can paraphrase these two sections in this way:

- **A** (2:1): God’s Spirit provides us with His encouragement, loving consolation, fellowship with Him, and affection and compassion.
- **A<sub>1</sub>** (2:13): God is always at work in us, to give us both the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.

This leads naturally to the question: “What is it that pleases God?” The next pair of sections answer this question:

- **B** (2:2-4): It pleases God when we live in loving unity with one another, serving one another with genuine humility.
- **B<sub>1</sub>** (2:13): It pleases God when we “work out” (i.e., bring forth into view) our salvation with an attitude of “fear and trembling” (i.e., humble sincerity<sup>†</sup>). Christians are often troubled by 2:13 – it sounds like Paul is saying: “Be sure to earn your salvation by being very afraid of God.” But notice how **B** helps us to understand what 2:13 actually means.

OK, so it pleases God when we humbly serve one another, and God’s Spirit provides us with everything we need to do this. This leads to another question: “What does this have to do with Jesus?” Paul answers this question in the third pair of sections:

- **C** (2:5-8): Jesus lived out the ultimate example of humble service toward us. He freely laid aside His divine privileges to enter our world, take on our human limitations, and adopt a servant’s role, obeying His Father all the way to death on a

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<sup>†</sup> Paul uses this same phrase in this sense in Ephesians 6:5 – “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.”



cross. (We know from many other passages that Jesus did this so that we could be forgiven!)

- **C<sub>1</sub>** (2:9-11): Because Jesus was willing to humble Himself as a servant, His Father richly rewarded Him by exalting Him to the position of highest honor and authority – Lord of all humanity. (We know from many other passages that Jesus will share His honor and authority with us when He returns!)

What a wonderful passage that takes us to the very heart of biblical Christianity! Jesus has set the ultimate example of humble service by sacrificing Himself to meet our need for God's forgiveness. We look forward to being exalted with Jesus when He returns. In the meantime, Jesus' Spirit indwells us and provides us with everything we need – love, encouragement, comfort, power – to please our Father as Jesus did during His earthly life. And the main way we please God is by simply depending on His provisions and adopting a mindset to humbly serve the people He puts in our lives.

How exciting to know no matter who we are, no matter what our life-circumstances are, no matter what limitations we may have, we can all live in a way that pleases God and fulfills our hearts!

*Lord Jesus, thank You for Your humility. We cannot comprehend how You could love people like us enough to sacrifice all in order to rescue us. Thank You that through Your Spirit we have constant access to Your love and Your power to love others. Thank You that we can look forward confidently to being exalted with You in Your kingdom, and that You will richly reward us for humbly serving You in this life. Help us **this day** to adopt this mindset and lifestyle. Open our eyes to see the opportunities You are giving us **this day** to humbly serve others for Your sake.*

