

REASON TOGETHER STUDY

Equal with God?

Philippians 2:5–11 KJV



*Who, being in the form of God,
thought it not robbery to be equal with God:*

Philippians 2:6 KJV

Sermon & Pastor's Commentary

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REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

www.ReasonTogether.Church

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Equal with God?

What Does “Thought It Not Robbery to Be Equal with God” Mean?

Philippians 2:5–11 KJV

Sermon Transcript

by Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Aloha, church family.

It is good to gather with you today in the house of the Lord.

Whether you have studied the Bible for many years or you have only recently begun opening its pages, you are welcome here.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Today we are going to slow down and examine one sentence from the King James Bible.

It is a sentence many Christians have read.

It is a sentence many Christians have quoted.

But it is also a sentence that many of us have passed over without being entirely certain what it means.

"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God."

That is Philippians chapter 2, verse 6.

Equal with God?

What does that mean?

What is the "form of God"?

Why does the King James Bible use the word "robbery"?

Was Jesus taking something that did not belong to Him?

Was He refusing to take something that He might have seized?

Or was Paul telling us something even greater about who Jesus already was and what He willingly chose to do?

Before we reason through those questions, let us pray together.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank You for the privilege of gathering around Your Word.

We thank You that Your Word does not fear our questions.

We ask You to help us lay aside assumptions and listen carefully to what the Scripture says.

Give us wisdom as we examine familiar words.

Give us humility when the answer challenges our pride.

Help us see the glory of Jesus Christ, the wonder of His incarnation and the depth of His sacrifice.

And when we leave this place, may the mind that was in Christ Jesus be seen in us.

We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Please open your Bible to Philippians chapter 2.

We will begin with verse 5 and read through verse 11.

Listen carefully to the direction in which the passage moves.

It begins with the highest possible position.

Then it descends to the lowest possible death.

Then it rises again to universal worship and glory.

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Before we continue, let me take a moment to explain how giving is handled at Reason Together Church.

We do not pass an offering plate and we never want anyone to feel pressured to give.

If you are visiting with us and you have a home church, we encourage you to support your home church faithfully.

Donations and love gifts to this ministry are greatly appreciated, but they are never required to attend our church or to download any of our free online studies.

The Gospel is not for sale.

The Word of God is not placed behind a price tag.

If this is your first time with us, our guest card asks only for your first name and email address.

We will not single you out or place you on the spot.

We simply want to welcome you and let you know that you have a place here.

After the service, please join us at the Reason Together Café for locally grown coffee, warm conversation and free refills on both.

Now let us return to Philippians chapter 2.

It is tempting to pull verse 6 out of the passage and treat it as a theological puzzle standing by itself.

But Paul did not place it there merely to give the church a vocabulary test.

He was addressing a problem in the church.

He was addressing pride.

He was addressing selfish ambition.

He was addressing the tendency we all have to protect our position, defend our importance and insist upon our own way.

Listen to the verses immediately before our primary text.

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Then Paul says:

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”

Paul is not wandering away from the subject of humility.

He is giving us the supreme example of humility.

To show us how far humility can descend, Paul first shows us how high Jesus was.

You cannot understand the distance of His descent until you understand the height from which He came.

If a servant kneels to perform the work of a servant, we may respect his faithfulness.

But if the King removes His royal robe, kneels before the servant and washes the servant’s feet, we see something extraordinary.

The humility of Jesus is not remarkable because He was insignificant.

It is remarkable because He possessed the greatest glory and willingly took the lowest place.

So let us examine the sentence one portion at a time.

The first word is “Who.”

“Who, being in the form of God...”

Who is the “Who”?

Verse 5 identifies Him.

“Christ Jesus.”

Paul is speaking about Jesus Christ.

But notice that Paul begins before Bethlehem.

He begins before the manger.

He begins before Mary held the infant Jesus in her arms.

He begins with Christ already existing in the form of God.

The life of Jesus did not begin at Bethlehem.

His human life began there, but the eternal Word existed before the world was made.

John opens his Gospel with these words:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

John does not say, “In the beginning the Word was created.”

He says, “In the beginning was the Word.”

When the beginning began, the Word already was.

Then John gives us two truths that must be held together.

“The Word was with God.”

That tells us there is personal distinction.

The Son is not the Father.

The Father is not the Son.

Then John says:

“And the Word was God.”

That tells us the divine identity of the Word.

He was with God and He was God.

Not one or the other.

Both are true.

John continues:

“All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.”

If everything that was made was made by Him, then He cannot belong to the category of things that were made.

The Creator is not one item within His creation.

And then, in John 1:14, we read:

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

The Word did not begin to exist.

The Word became flesh.

The eternal Son entered the human condition.

That is where Philippians begins as well.

“Who, being in the form of God...”

Now notice the next word.

“Being.”

That word matters.

Paul does not say Jesus was trying to become equal with God.

He does not say Jesus was working His way toward the form of God.

He does not say that Jesus lived such a righteous life that God finally promoted Him into deity.

He begins with what Christ already was.

“Being in the form of God.”

Jesus did not climb from humanity into deity.

He descended from heavenly glory into humanity.

In John chapter 17, as the cross approached, Jesus prayed:

“And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.”

Jesus speaks of glory with the Father before the world existed.

He did not receive His first glory at Bethlehem.

He did not receive His first glory at His baptism.

He did not receive His first glory after the resurrection.

He possessed glory with the Father before creation.

That is why the word “being” is important.

Christ did not become something He had never been.

He acted from the reality of who He eternally was.

Now we come to the expression “the form of God.”

Some people hear the word “form” and think only of outward shape.

They imagine a costume.

They imagine an appearance that may or may not correspond with reality.
But Paul is not saying Jesus merely looked like God while being something less.
The form properly expressed the reality of who He was.
We should notice that Paul uses the same word a few moments later.

“And took upon him the form of a servant.”

Was Jesus only pretending to be a servant?

No.

His service was genuine.

He truly took the servant’s position.

He truly stooped.

He truly obeyed.

He truly suffered.

In the same way, His existence in the form of God was not a disguise.

It corresponded with His true identity.

Colossians 2:9 says:

“For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

Not a small portion of deity.

Not a reflection borrowed for a season.

“All the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

Hebrews 1:3 calls the Son:

“The brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person.”

The Son reveals the Father perfectly because the Son fully shares the divine nature.

This does not mean Jesus is the Father.

It means Jesus is not a creature standing beside God and pretending to look divine.

He is the eternal Son.

He is personally distinct from the Father and fully divine.

Now Paul says that Christ “thought.”

“Thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”

The word points us toward deliberate consideration.

Jesus knew who He was.

He knew the glory that belonged to Him.

He knew what awaited Him in the world.
He knew there would be hunger.
He knew there would be exhaustion.
He knew there would be misunderstanding.
He knew there would be rejection.
He knew there would be nails, thorns and a cross.
His descent was not an accident.
His suffering did not catch Him by surprise.
His death was not the triumph of circumstances over a helpless victim.
Jesus said in John chapter 10:

“No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself.”

He willingly laid down His life.
The decision to serve was deliberate.
The decision to humble Himself was deliberate.
The decision to go to the cross was deliberate.
This was not weakness imposed upon Him.
This was love chosen by Him.
And now we arrive at the word that creates the question.
“Robbery.”

“Thought it not robbery to be equal with God.”

When we hear the word “robbery” today, we think of someone taking property that belongs to someone else.
We may picture a thief entering a home.
We may picture someone threatening a cashier.
We may picture something stolen by force.
So a modern reader may hear Philippians 2:6 and think Paul is saying:
“Jesus did not believe He was stealing when He claimed to be equal with God.”
That traditional way of hearing the KJV sentence contains an important truth.
Jesus’ equality with God was not theft.
He was not a created being attempting to take God’s throne.
He was not an angel demanding worship that belonged only to the Creator.

He was not a righteous man who eventually decided to promote Himself into deity.
Equality with God was not an illegitimate claim because He was already in the form of God.
But the expression translated “robbery” also carries the idea of something seized, grasped or treated as an advantage to be used for oneself.
That allows us to see more of what Paul is saying.
Jesus did not have to seize equality with God because it already belonged to Him.
And Jesus did not use equality with God as a selfish advantage.
He did not clutch His privileges in order to avoid serving us.
He did not exploit His position for personal comfort.
He did not say, “Because I am equal with God, I refuse to enter their suffering.”
He did not say, “Because I am equal with God, I will never permit human hands to touch Me.”
He did not say, “Because I am equal with God, I must be served every moment.”
Instead, He came into our world.
He permitted Mary to wrap Him in swaddling clothes.
He entered a family.
He grew.
He became tired.
He became hungry.
He walked dusty roads.
He touched lepers.
He welcomed children.
He washed feet.
He allowed soldiers to arrest Him.
He allowed men to mock Him.
He carried the cross.
He gave His life.
Here is the central truth we must not miss:
Jesus did not have to grasp for equality with God because He already possessed it.
And He did not use that equality for His own selfish advantage because He came to save us.
It was not stolen.
It was not seized from another.

It was not a false claim.

And it was not selfishly exploited.

Now let us ask what “equal with God” actually includes.

The exact expression appears in another important passage.

Turn to John chapter 5.

Jesus had healed a man on the sabbath day.

When His opponents challenged Him, Jesus spoke of His Father’s work and His own work.

John 5:18 says:

“Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.”

Some might say, “That was only an accusation made by His enemies. Perhaps they misunderstood Him.”

But listen to what Jesus says next.

He does not respond by saying, “No, no, I am merely one servant among many.”

He explains His unique relationship with the Father.

In verse 19 He says:

“What things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.”

That is an extraordinary claim.

In verse 21 He says:

“For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.”

The Son gives life.

In verse 22 He says:

“For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”

The Son exercises divine judgment.

Then verse 23 says:

“That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.”

Do not rush past those words.

“Even as they honour the Father.”

Not merely respect the Son as a good teacher.

Not merely remember Him as a courageous martyr.

Not merely place Him beside other religious leaders.
Honor the Son even as they honor the Father.
No created being may properly demand the same honor that belongs to God.
An angel refuses worship.
A faithful apostle refuses worship.
But Jesus receives worship because divine honor belongs to Him.
Equality with God includes divine nature.
It includes eternal existence.
It includes divine glory.
It includes divine works.
It includes divine authority.
It includes divine honor.
But equality does not mean that the Father and Son are the same person.
Jesus speaks to the Father.
Jesus is sent by the Father.
Jesus loves the Father.
Jesus obeys the Father.
Personal distinction is real.
Neither does equality mean that the Son is a second God competing with the Father.
There is one God.
The Father and Son are not rivals struggling over one throne.
The Son does not possess deity by stealing it from the Father.
The Father is glorified in the Son and the Son is glorified with the Father.
When Scripture calls Jesus equal with God, it is not describing a contest between two gods.
It is revealing the divine identity of the Son and His relationship with the Father.
Perhaps the most important word in Philippians 2:6 is not “form.”
Perhaps it is not “robbery.”
Perhaps the most important word is the first word in verse 7.
“But.”

“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation...”

The word “but” turns the passage.
Verse 6 tells us what Jesus possessed.
Verse 7 tells us what Jesus chose.
He possessed equality.
But He made Himself of no reputation.
He possessed heavenly glory.
But He took the form of a servant.
He was above creation.
But He entered creation.
He was the giver of life.
But He accepted death.
And not merely death.

“Even the death of the cross.”

The passage descends step by step.
He made Himself of no reputation.
He took the form of a servant.
He was made in the likeness of men.
He was found in fashion as a man.
He humbled Himself.
He became obedient unto death.
He accepted even the death of the cross.
Some people read “made himself of no reputation” and imagine that Jesus emptied Himself of deity.
But Paul does not say Jesus stopped being God.
He tells us how Christ made Himself of no reputation.
He took the form of a servant.
He was made in the likeness of men.
He did not empty Himself by surrendering His divine identity.
He humbled Himself by taking what He had not previously possessed, a genuine human nature and the genuine position of a servant.
He did not subtract deity.

He took humanity.
He did not cease to be the Son.
The Son became man.
The One who created human hands accepted human hands.
The One who created the human mind accepted a human mind.
The One who gives breath to every creature breathed the air of this world.
The One who upholds all things permitted His mother to hold Him.
The One who feeds creation knew hunger.
The One who gives rest knew weariness.
The One who is the source of life tasted death.
This is not the story of a man becoming God.
This is the Gospel wonder of the eternal Son becoming man.
And He did it without ceasing to be who He was.
There is a powerful contrast between Jesus and the temptation in the Garden of Eden.
The serpent said to Eve:
 “Ye shall be as gods.”
The temptation was to reach upward.
It was to seize wisdom and position through disobedience.
Humanity wanted to take what God had not given in the way God had forbidden.
Adam reached upward and fell.
Jesus descended downward and saved.
Adam was not equal with God, but the temptation invited him to grasp.
Jesus was equal with God, but He did not selfishly grasp His privileges.
Adam disobeyed and brought death into the human story.
Jesus obeyed unto death and opened the way to life.
Adam took.
Jesus gave.
Adam sought elevation.
Jesus chose humiliation.
The world says, “Climb higher.”
Jesus took the lower place.

The world says, "Make sure everyone knows your importance."

Jesus made Himself of no reputation.

The world says, "Use power to protect yourself."

Jesus used His power to rescue others.

We see another striking contrast at the Tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:4 records the words of the people:

"Let us make us a name."

That sentence captures the ambition of fallen humanity.

Let us make ourselves a name.

Let us build something that proves our greatness.

Let us rise so high that no one can overlook us.

Let us create our own glory.

But Philippians says that Jesus:

"Made himself of no reputation."

Humanity said, "Let us make a name."

Jesus made Himself of no reputation.

Humanity tried to rise toward heaven.

The Lord of heaven came down.

Humanity exalted itself and was scattered.

Jesus humbled Himself and gathered the redeemed.

Then notice what happens after Jesus humbles Himself.

"Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name."

Humanity tried to manufacture its own name.

Jesus trusted the Father with His name.

Humanity tried to exalt itself.

Jesus humbled Himself and the Father exalted Him.

That pattern speaks directly to our pride.

We spend so much time trying to make sure people know what we have done.

We want our name attached to the contribution.

We want our effort recognized.

We want someone to notice that we arrived early, stayed late or carried the burden.

And if no one notices, something inside us begins to complain.

But the mind of Christ says, “I can serve even when no one applauds.”

The mind of Christ says, “I can take the lower place without becoming less valuable.”

The mind of Christ says, “I do not have to make my own name great. I can make the name of Jesus known.”

Philippians continues:

“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.”

Those words reach back to the prophet Isaiah.

In Isaiah 45:23, the LORD declares:

“Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.”

In Isaiah, every knee bows to the LORD.

In Philippians, every knee bows at the name of Jesus.

Paul is not lowering Jesus beneath the identity of God.

He is placing Jesus within the honor that belongs to the LORD.

The One who took the form of a servant will be confessed as Lord.

The One who knelt to wash feet will receive the bending of every knee.

The One whose name was mocked will possess the name above every name.

The One who was rejected will be universally acknowledged.

The One who was crucified will be confessed as Lord.

And all of it will be:

“To the glory of God the Father.”

The exaltation of the Son does not compete with the glory of the Father.

It displays the glory of the Father.

The Father is glorified when the Son is rightly confessed.

The Son is not a rival deity stealing worship.

He receives the honor that rightfully belongs to Him and that honor glorifies the Father.

Now let us return to the question with which we began.

What does it mean that Jesus “thought it not robbery to be equal with God”?

It means His equality was not stolen.

It means His claim was not illegitimate.

It means He did not attempt to seize a divine position belonging to someone else.

He already existed in the form of God.

But it also means that He did not clutch His divine privileges for selfish advantage.

He did not use equality as an excuse to remain distant from us.

He did not use glory as a shield against suffering.

He did not use power merely to protect Himself.

He came.

He served.

He obeyed.

He suffered.

He died.

He rose again.

And He is Lord.

Now we must allow Paul to bring the truth into our own lives.

Remember how the passage began:

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”

Paul does not permit us to admire the humility of Jesus from a safe distance.

He tells us to possess the same mind.

We cannot share Christ’s deity.

We cannot become equal with God.

We will never become objects of divine worship.

But by the grace of God, we can learn His humility.

We can stop grasping for recognition.

We can stop measuring every relationship by what we receive.

We can stop treating service as something beneath us.

We can stop believing that submission automatically makes us inferior.

The world often defines equality as the right never to yield.

The world says, “If I am equal, no one can ask me to serve.”

The world says, “If I am important, I should receive the best seat.”

The world says, “If I have authority, other people should make my life easier.”

Jesus reveals something entirely different.
He possessed the highest dignity and took the lowest place.
His service did not make Him less divine.
His humility did not erase His worth.
His obedience did not turn Him into a created being.
He could stoop because He knew who He was.
There is a lesson there for us.
When our identity is secure in Christ, we do not have to prove our importance in every room.
We can listen without controlling the conversation.
We can apologize without feeling destroyed.
We can perform an unnoticed task.
We can help someone who cannot repay us.
We can carry a chair.
We can pour a cup of coffee.
We can sit with a person who is hurting and give that person our time.
Sometimes the mind of Christ is displayed more clearly at a small café table than behind a large pulpit.
Sometimes serving God looks like listening while someone tells a story we have heard before.
Sometimes it looks like making room for a person whose background is different from ours.
Look around the family God is building.
We come from different places, different cultures and different experiences.
That is not an inconvenience to overcome.
It is a small glimpse of the redeemed people who will one day bow before the Lord together.
Every tribe, every people and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
There will not be a special row for the people who believed they were more important than everyone else.
Every knee will bow.
The ground is level before the cross.
So let me ask you a few questions.
What position are you protecting?
What recognition do you believe you deserve?

What task have you decided is beneath you?

What personal right are you grasping while someone near you needs your help?

Are you trying to make your name greater or make the name of Jesus known?

These are not comfortable questions.

But Philippians 2 was not written to make pride comfortable.

It was written to give us the mind of Christ.

Perhaps you have been faithfully serving and no one has thanked you.

The Father sees.

Perhaps you carried a burden that no one else noticed.

The Father sees.

Perhaps you chose not to defend yourself when doing so would have wounded someone else.

The Father sees.

Perhaps you are caring for a family member and your daily work receives no applause.

The Father sees.

Jesus did not entrust His reputation to the crowd.

The same crowd that cried “Hosanna” later cried “Crucify him.”

Crowds are not reliable guardians of a name.

Jesus humbled Himself and entrusted His vindication to the Father.

And God highly exalted Him.

We can entrust our reputation to God as well.

We do not need to seize every opportunity to defend our importance.

We can obey.

We can serve.

We can love.

We can trust the Father with the result.

There is also a warning in this passage.

Every knee will bow.

Every tongue will confess.

The question is not whether Jesus will finally be acknowledged as Lord.

The question is whether we will bow willingly in faith or face Him after a lifetime of resistance.

Jesus came into the world for sinners.

He did not remain distant from our need.

He took the form of a servant.

He lived the righteous life we have failed to live.

He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

He bore our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

He is Lord.

Salvation is not found by making our own name great.

Salvation is found in the name above every name.

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

If you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you can come to Him today.

You do not have to climb your way into heaven.

The Lord of heaven came down to save you.

You do not have to manufacture a reputation worthy of God.

Jesus made Himself of no reputation and carried your sin to the cross.

You do not have to pretend that you have never failed.

You can confess your sin, receive His mercy and confess Jesus Christ as Lord.

And for those of us who already know Him, the command remains:

“Let this mind be in you.”

Not only on Sunday.

Not only when someone is watching.

Not only when the service will be recognized.

Let this mind be in you at home.

Let this mind be in you at work.

Let this mind be in you when you are tired.

Let this mind be in you when someone else receives the credit.

Let this mind be in you when you have the right to insist but the opportunity to serve.

The One equal with God made Himself of no reputation.

May we never believe that we are too important to follow Him downward into service.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we stand amazed before the humility of Jesus Christ.
He existed in the form of God.
His equality was not stolen and His glory was not illegitimate.
Yet He did not use His position for selfish advantage.
He came into our world.
He took the form of a servant.
He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.
Forgive us for grasping after recognition.
Forgive us for protecting our pride.
Forgive us for believing that some acts of service are beneath us.
Place the mind of Christ within us.
Teach us to serve when no one applauds.
Teach us to love when nothing is offered in return.
Teach us to trust You with our name while we make the name of Jesus known.
For anyone who has not trusted Christ, draw that person to the Savior today.
May every heart bow willingly and every tongue confess with faith that Jesus Christ is Lord.
We ask these things in His wonderful name.
Amen.
Before we say goodbye, do not let this message remain inside this room.
Carry three questions with you into the coming week.
First, what am I grasping that I need to release?
It may be recognition.
It may be control.
It may be the need to win every disagreement.
It may be the belief that everyone must understand how much you have sacrificed.
Ask the Lord to show you what you are clutching.
Second, whom can I serve without receiving recognition?
Choose one person.
Choose one practical act.
Do it quietly.
Do it joyfully.

Do it because the mind of Christ is becoming visible in you.

Third, am I trying to make my name greater or make the name of Jesus known?

That question can change the way we speak, give, work and serve.

You may also share this passage with someone during the week.

You do not need to begin with a long theological explanation.

Simply ask:

“What do you think it means that Jesus thought it not robbery to be equal with God?”

Listen to the answer.

Open Philippians chapter 2 together.

Then show how the One who possessed the highest glory chose the lowest place in order to save us.

That is a conversation worth having.

If you have questions about today’s study, please remain after the service.

There is no embarrassment in asking.

Questions are welcome here.

Please join us at the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free and so are the conversations.

To our first-time guests, Aloha Nui Loa.

We are grateful that you chose to worship with us.

And to the entire Reason Together Church family, remember:

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let’s Reason Together the Word of God.

Aloha.

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

Equal with God?

RTS-031 | Philippians 2:5–11 KJV

A reader's companion to the sermon

Reason Together Church

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible.

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About This Commentary

The Pastor's Commentary is a readable public companion to the sermon. It explains the principal Biblical reasoning, translation questions and pastoral applications behind RTS-031. It is not a second sermon and it is not the internal Study Vault. Readers may use it for personal study, group discussion or careful follow-up after hearing the message.

This study concentrates upon one difficult sentence in the King James Bible: "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." The words are familiar, but "form," "robbery" and "equal" can raise more questions than a quick reading answers.

The purpose of this Commentary is not to replace the KJV wording with a modern slogan. It is to let the verse speak inside its paragraph, explain why responsible readers sometimes express its meaning differently and show how the whole passage reveals both the deity and extraordinary humility of Jesus Christ.

The governing principle is simple: Christ did not seize a divine position that did not belong to Him. He already existed in the form of God. Yet He did not use His rightful status for selfish advantage. He took the servant's place and went to the cross for us.

Commentary in Brief

Philippians 2 begins with a call to unity, lowliness of mind and concern for the things of others. Paul then points to Jesus Christ as the supreme example. The passage moves from the form of God to the form of a servant, from heavenly glory to human likeness, from obedience to crucifixion and then from the cross to the name above every name.

The KJV phrase "thought it not robbery" teaches that equality with God was not an unlawful or stolen claim for Jesus. The underlying Greek word is rare and belongs to the language of seizing, plunder, grasping or advantage. That is why other translations may say Christ did not regard equality as something to grasp or exploit.

Those renderings are not identical, but they need not be preached as enemies. The larger passage supports two related truths: Christ was no usurper trying to become God, and Christ did not use His divine position selfishly. He made Himself of no reputation by taking servant form and becoming obedient unto death.

Equality with God does not mean Jesus is the Father. The Father and Son are personally distinct. It means the Son fully shares deity and rightfully receives divine works, glory, authority, honor and worship.

The final purpose is practical. Paul begins with "Let this mind be in you." The One with the greatest right to glory took the lowest place. Christians therefore cannot use position, knowledge or dignity as an excuse to avoid humble service.

1. Read the Entire Movement

A difficult Bible phrase should never be separated from the movement of its paragraph. Philippians 2:6 belongs to a passage beginning with the mind of Christ and ending with every knee bowing before Him.

Verse 6 begins with Christ in the form of God. Verse 7 says He made Himself of no reputation and took the form of a servant. Verse 8 carries the descent to “even the death of the cross.” Verses 9–11 then reverse the movement: God highly exalts Him, gives Him the name above every name and receives glory as every tongue confesses Jesus Christ as Lord.

The verse is therefore not merely answering whether Jesus is divine. It is showing what the divine Son chose to do. The height explains the wonder of the descent, and the descent explains why Paul uses Christ as the model of humility.

If we discuss “robbery” but never reach the servant, cross and bowed knee, we have explained a word without following Paul’s argument.

2. Paul Was Addressing Pride in the Church

Philippians 2:3 says, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory.” Strife seeks victory over another person. Vainglory seeks recognition for oneself. Both place personal importance above the wellbeing of the church.

Paul answers that spirit with “lowliness of mind.” Believers are to look not only upon their own things but also upon the things of others. This is not a command to deny every personal need or permit abuse. It is a command to stop treating self-interest as the controlling center of Christian life.

Then Paul says, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” The passage that follows is not a detached theology lecture. Paul presents the truth about Christ so that the church will begin acting like Christ.

Correct doctrine should produce humble conduct. If a person can argue fiercely about the deity of Christ while treating other believers with contempt, that person has defended verse 6 while disobeying verse 5.

3. Who Is the “Who”?

Philippians 2:6 begins with “Who,” and verse 5 identifies the person as Christ Jesus. Paul then speaks of Christ before describing His entrance into human likeness and servant form.

This agrees with John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Jesus did not begin to exist at Bethlehem. His human life began there, but the eternal Word already was.

John continues, “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.” The Son cannot be placed among the things created by Him. He stands on the Creator side of the distinction between Creator and creation.

Then John 1:14 says, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” Bethlehem is not the promotion of a man into deity. It is the incarnation of the eternal Word.

4. Why the Word “Being” Matters

The KJV says, “Who, being in the form of God.” Paul begins with what Christ already was. He does not describe Jesus struggling to enter the form of God or earning equality through exceptional obedience.

The sequence moves from existing in God’s form to taking servant form. Jesus did not climb from ordinary humanity into deity. He descended from preexistent glory into genuine humanity.

In John 17:5, Jesus prayed, “O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.” He speaks of glory with the Father before creation.

The word “being” should not be forced to carry every doctrine by itself. Its importance lies in the story Paul tells. Christ begins in a divine condition before He takes what He had not previously possessed, a real human life and the real position of a servant.

5. What Is the “Form of God”?

Modern readers sometimes hear “form” and think only of shape or costume. If someone appears in the form of a king during a play, that person may have no royal identity at all. That is not an adequate way to read Philippians 2.

The word translated “form” can concern manifested appearance or condition. Responsible interpreters differ over whether the emphasis falls upon nature, glory, status or visible expression. We should not pretend that one English definition settles every question.

Paul uses the same word again when Jesus takes “the form of a servant.” His servanthood was genuine. He did not merely dress like a servant while refusing every servant’s task. He humbled Himself, obeyed and suffered.

In the same way, His existence in the form of God was not a deceptive costume. The form corresponded to the reality of who He was. Colossians 2:9 says, “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.” Hebrews calls Him the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of His person.

The safest conclusion is neither that “form” means only outward appearance nor that the single word by itself proves every detail of Christian doctrine. Paul describes a genuine divine condition that makes Christ’s acceptance of servant form astonishing.

6. “Thought” Does Not Mean He Was Unsure

The phrase “thought it not robbery” describes how Christ regarded or considered equality. It does not picture Jesus wondering whether He might be divine.

He knew who He was. He knew the glory He had with the Father. He also knew the suffering that awaited Him. His movement toward the cross was deliberate.

Jesus said, “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself.” His enemies were morally responsible for what they did, but they did not surprise the Son into an unplanned sacrifice. He willingly laid down His life.

The humility of Jesus is therefore not weakness forced upon Him. It is love chosen by Him.

7. Why Does the KJV Say “Robbery”?

Today robbery ordinarily means taking property that belongs to someone else. Read with that sense, the verse says Jesus did not consider equality with God to be an act of theft.

That explanation protects an essential truth. Jesus did not steal deity from the Father. He was not an angel attempting to seize God’s throne. He was not a righteous man who later claimed a divine status that had never belonged to Him.

The wording also stands in a long English Bible tradition. Tyndale wrote that Christ “thought it not robbery to be equall with god.” The Geneva Bible used substantially the same expression before the KJV continued it.

The sentence therefore teaches that equality was no unlawful usurpation for Christ. He could not be accused of taking a position belonging only to someone else because He already existed in the form of God.

8. The Difficult Word Behind “Robbery”

The Greek word translated “robbery” is *harpagmos*. It appears only once in the New Testament. It belongs to a word family involving seizure, snatching or plunder. Because it is rare, interpreters examine its relatives, grammar, ancient usage and immediate context.

Some understand it as an act of robbery or a thing seized. Others translate it as a prize to grasp. Still others understand an expression meaning an opportunity or advantage to exploit.

This explains why one Bible may say “not robbery,” another “not something to be grasped” and another “not something to be used to his own advantage.” The translators are not merely exchanging easy synonyms. They are making judgments about a difficult expression.

A responsible Commentary should admit that difference. It should also notice the direction shared by the passage. Christ does not act as a usurper. He does not pursue selfish elevation. He moves toward service and sacrifice.

9. Do the Translations Contradict One Another?

At first hearing, they can sound opposite. “Not robbery” may suggest Jesus already possessed equality. “Not a thing to be grasped” may sound as though He refused to acquire equality. “Not something to exploit” assumes a status that He refused to use selfishly.

Those differences should not be hidden. Yet the entire doctrine of Christ does not depend upon choosing one English gloss. The opening statement places Him in the form of God. The wider New Testament presents Him as eternal Creator, the fullness of the Godhead bodily and worthy of the same honor as the Father.

The KJV may therefore remain the controlling text while other renderings help us hear an aspect of the movement into verse 7. Equality was not theft. It was also not an excuse for selfish privilege.

We should not create a bitter translation war inside a passage written to cure strife and vainglory. The humble approach is to state the differences honestly, preserve the whole Biblical witness and refuse to treat specialized knowledge as a means of spiritual superiority.

10. What Does “Equal With God” Mean?

Equality with God means far more than two individuals holding similar rank. No created being is equal with God in divine nature. God says in Isaiah that there is no God beside Him.

The New Testament presents Jesus as possessing what belongs properly to deity. He exists before creation. All things are made by Him and for Him. He gives life, exercises final judgment, receives worship and bears divine names and glory.

Equality does not mean that Jesus is the Father. The Word was with God and the Word was God. Jesus speaks to the Father, is sent by the Father and is exalted by the Father. The relationship is real.

Neither does equality mean that Father and Son are two independent Gods competing for worship. Biblical monotheism remains. The Son’s lordship glorifies the Father rather than diminishing Him.

A helpful summary is this: the Son is personally distinct from the Father and fully shares deity. Equality of divine nature does not require sameness of person or sameness of assigned role.

11. John 5 Explains the Equality

John 5:18 contains the other direct KJV use of the expression. Jesus called God His Father in such a unique manner that His opponents understood Him as “making himself equal with God.”

That accusation alone would not settle the question. Opponents can misunderstand. The important evidence comes in what Jesus says next. He does not reduce Himself to one ordinary messenger among many.

Jesus says the Son does the works of the Father. He says the Son gives life to whom He will. He says the Father has committed all judgment unto the Son.

Then John 5:23 states the purpose: “That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.” No faithful angel or apostle may demand the same honor as God. The Son properly receives equal honor.

John 5 also preserves relationship and order. The Son acts in perfect unity with the Father and receives from the Father. Dependence in relationship is not the same as inferiority of nature. The Father and Son do not compete. Their works and honor are united.

12. Equal Does Not Mean Interchangeable

The Father did not become incarnate. The Son became flesh. The Son did not send the Father to die upon the cross. The Father sent the Son. Distinct actions belong to distinct persons.

This is why Christians should avoid saying simply, “Jesus is the Father.” Jesus reveals the Father perfectly, but He is not the same person as the Father. When He prays, He is not performing a conversation with Himself.

At the same time, the Son is not a lesser species of deity. Colossians does not say a portion of divine fullness dwelt in Him. It says “all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.”

Biblical equality is therefore richer than interchangeability. Father and Son share divine glory and nature while remaining personally distinct and acting in perfect unity.

13. The Most Important Word May Be “But”

Verse 6 tells us what Christ possessed. Verse 7 begins, “But made himself of no reputation.” The word “but” turns the passage from divine status toward the servant’s path.

He was in the form of God, but He took the form of a servant. He possessed heavenly glory, but He entered human likeness. He is the giver of life, but He accepted death.

This is the great surprise. Paul does not merely announce that Jesus is equal with God and then move to an unrelated subject. He shows what the One equal with God did with His position.

Human power often protects itself. Christ used His position to rescue others. Human pride demands recognition. Christ made Himself of no reputation. Human ambition climbs. Christ descended.

14. What Does “Made Himself of No Reputation” Mean?

Many translations express the underlying verb as “emptied himself.” That raises an immediate question: What did Jesus empty out of Himself?

Paul does not list divine attributes that disappeared. Instead, he explains the movement: Christ took the form of a servant, was made in the likeness of men, was found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself and became obedient unto death.

The safest explanation is that He made Himself of no reputation by taking the servant's place and entering genuine humanity. His self-emptying is seen in what He took and how He served, not in a statement that He ceased being God.

A common summary says, "He did not subtract deity; He took humanity." That sentence is not a separate Bible translation, but it protects the truth that the eternal Son became man without ceasing to be the eternal Son.

His humanity was not pretend. He experienced hunger, weariness, sorrow, temptation, suffering and death. Full deity must never be used to make His human life unreal, and genuine humanity must never be used to erase His deity.

15. Adam Reached Upward; Jesus Descended

Genesis 3 records the serpent's promise, "Ye shall be as gods." The temptation invited humanity to reach beyond the boundary God had given and seize wisdom through disobedience.

Philippians does not explicitly mention Adam, so the comparison should be presented as a Biblical contrast rather than an undisputed quotation. Nevertheless, the difference is illuminating.

Adam was not equal with God and reached upward. Jesus was in the form of God and descended. Adam disobeyed and brought death into the human story. Jesus obeyed unto death and opened the way to life.

Adam took. Jesus gave. Adam sought elevation through disobedience. Jesus accepted humiliation through obedience.

The contrast exposes the instinct of sin. Fallen humanity tries to secure identity by grasping. Jesus acts from secure identity and therefore is free to serve.

16. Babel Made a Name; Jesus Made Himself of No Reputation

Genesis 11 records the ambition of Babel: "Let us make us a name." Humanity builds upward in order to secure its own fame, unity and security apart from obedient trust in God.

Philippians says Jesus "made himself of no reputation." After His humiliation, God gave Him "a name which is above every name."

The original languages do not make this a simple word-for-word quotation, and Paul does not name Babel. It remains a powerful canonical contrast, especially in the KJV wording.

Humanity says, "Let us make our name." Jesus entrusts His name to the Father. Humanity exalts itself and is brought down. Jesus humbles Himself and is highly exalted.

The application is direct. We can spend our lives attaching our name to every accomplishment, defending our recognition and resenting unnoticed service. The mind of Christ releases the need to manufacture greatness.

17. The Name Above Every Name

Philippians 2 does not leave Jesus in humiliation. “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name.”

The exaltation does not turn a merely human Jesus into God for the first time. The passage began with Him in the form of God. The Father publicly vindicates the obedient Son and reveals His lordship before all creation.

The words about every knee bowing reach back to Isaiah 45:23. In Isaiah, the LORD declares, “Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” Paul applies that universal homage to Jesus.

This gives the conclusion enormous divine weight. The One who knelt to wash feet will receive the bending of every knee. The One mocked as a false king will be confessed as Lord.

The confession is “to the glory of God the Father.” The honor of the Son does not steal glory from the Father. It glorifies the Father. Once again, equality and relationship stand together.

18. The Cross Reveals the Character of the Son

People often imagine deity only in terms of distance, invulnerability and raw power. Philippians does not deny God’s majesty. It reveals that the divine Son uses His power in self-giving love.

The cross is not the moment when Jesus became least like God. It is where the humility and love of God the Son are displayed in the act of saving sinners.

This does not make crucifixion pleasant or reduce divine holiness. The cross remains judgment upon sin and the costly sacrifice of the sinless Savior. Self-giving love does not excuse evil. It bears the cost of redemption.

The One equal with God did not remain distant from human need. He entered it. He did not merely send instructions to servants. He took the form of a servant.

19. “Let This Mind Be in You”

Christians cannot share Christ’s deity. We do not become equal with God, objects of worship or members of the Trinity. But by grace we can share the mind of Christ described by Paul.

That mind does not require us to deny the value God has given us. Jesus did not serve because He believed He had no worth. He served from the security of who He was.

Secure identity makes humble service possible. We can listen without controlling every conversation. We can apologize without believing our life has ended. We can perform an unnoticed task without demanding public credit.

No one is too important to carry a chair, pour coffee, welcome a stranger or sit with a hurting person. Sometimes the mind of Christ is more visible at a café table than behind a pulpit.

Our church family includes people from different places, cultures and experiences. That diversity is not an inconvenience. It anticipates the day when every tongue will confess Jesus Christ as Lord. No culture receives a superior seat at the cross.

20. What About “My Father Is Greater Than I”?

John 14:28 is sometimes placed against Philippians 2:6: “My Father is greater than I.” Scripture should not be forced to choose between the two statements. Jesus is equal with God, and Jesus speaks of the Father as greater.

In John 14, Jesus is speaking during His incarnate mission and preparing the disciples for His return to the Father. He has taken the servant’s position. Equality of divine nature does not prevent the Son from occupying a humbled role and obeying the Father.

Other passages describe the Son doing nothing “of himself,” learning obedience and eventually subjecting the kingdom to God. These are real Biblical statements and deserve careful study. They should not be used as shortcuts to deny the many passages affirming the Son’s deity.

RTS-031 does not attempt to answer every question about submission. Its focused conclusion is that willing obedience does not automatically mean inferior nature. Jesus’ submission is part of the humility Paul commands us to behold.

21. What This Study Does Not Teach

It does not teach that Jesus and the Father are the same person. It does not teach that two Gods compete for equal rank. It does not teach that Jesus was a creature who earned promotion into deity.

It does not teach that Jesus stopped being God when He became man. It does not teach that His humanity was only an appearance. It does not teach that Christians can grow until they become equal with God.

It does not teach that the KJV is wrong because another translation says “grasped” or “exploited.” It does not teach that every version expresses precisely the same grammatical judgment.

It does not teach that knowledge of Greek makes one Christian spiritually superior to another. A person may pronounce every word correctly and still miss Paul’s command to reject vainglory.

The Final Answer

What does “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God” mean?

Jesus Christ already existed in a genuine divine condition before taking the form of a servant. Equality with God was not a stolen position, an unlawful claim or the ambition of a creature trying to take God’s throne.

The rare Greek expression also opens the question of how Christ regarded that equality. In the movement of Philippians 2, He did not use His rightful status for selfish advantage. He made Himself of no reputation, became genuinely human and obeyed unto the cross.

The Son is distinct from the Father and fully divine. His voluntary humility does not make Him less than God. It reveals the astonishing love of the One who came to save us.

Paul's final question is not whether we can win a translation argument. It is whether the same mind will be seen in us.

Questions for Personal or Group Reflection

- Why must Philippians 2:6 be read together with verses 3–11?
- What does the word “being” contribute to the movement of the passage?
- Why is “form of God” more than a temporary costume?
- What truth does the KJV word “robbery” protect about Jesus' equality?
- Why do some translations use “grasped” or “exploited”?
- How can different translations emphasize different aspects without making the deity of Christ depend upon one English word?
- What does John 5:18–23 reveal about the Son's works and honor?
- Why does equality with God not mean that Jesus is the Father?
- How does verse 7 explain Christ's self-emptying?
- What is useful about comparing Jesus with Adam, and what caution should accompany that comparison?
- How does Babel's desire to make a name contrast with Philippians 2:7–9?
- Why is Isaiah 45:23 important for understanding every knee bowing to Jesus?
- What position, recognition or personal right are you presently grasping?
- Whom can you serve this week without receiving recognition?

Interpretive Cautions

- Do not isolate Philippians 2:6 from Paul's command concerning humility and unity.
- Do not reduce “form of God” to an outward disguise unrelated to Christ's true identity.
- Do not claim that one Greek word alone proves every part of the doctrine of Christ.
- Do not say harpagmos has one universally uncontested English equivalent.
- Do not accuse the KJV translators of hiding the “exploit” meaning or accuse modern translators of deliberately denying deity.
- Do not say every translation means precisely the same thing when real interpretive differences exist.
- Do not teach that Jesus surrendered deity or ceased to possess divine nature.
- Do not confuse equality of nature with sameness of person or role.
- Do not present Adam or Babel as explicitly named in Philippians 2.
- Do not make human submission a universal excuse for control, coercion or abuse.
- Do not suggest that believers will become equal with God in deity.

Do not let Greek vocabulary become a means of vainglory in a passage condemning vainglory.

A Personal Invitation to Christ

The message of Philippians 2 is not that human beings can climb high enough to reach equality with God. It is that the eternal Son came down to save human beings who could never climb to Him.

The Bible says, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23 KJV) Our greatest problem is not lack of recognition. It is sin before a holy God.

Jesus Christ took the form of a servant, lived without sin and became obedient unto the death of the cross. He died for our sins, was buried and rose again.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” (Romans 10:9 KJV)

You do not have to make yourself a name worthy of heaven. You do not have to pretend that your record is clean. Come honestly to Christ, confess your sin and trust the Lord who humbled Himself to save you.

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:13 KJV)

Pastoral Note

Some readers may feel unsettled when familiar translations appear to say different things. That concern is understandable. Scripture is precious, and no faithful reader wants an essential truth to disappear because of technical vocabulary.

Pastors can help by refusing two extremes. We should not pretend the translation question does not exist. We also should not imply that ordinary Christians possessed the wrong Bible until someone with Greek training rescued them.

The proper posture is calm honesty: “The KJV protects the truth that equality was no robbery for Christ. The underlying word is difficult. Other translations emphasize grasping or selfish advantage. The whole passage and the wider Bible establish both His divine identity and His willing humility.”

The application must also be handled carefully. Christlike humility does not authorize an abusive person to demand that a victim remain silent or surrender safety. Jesus willingly chose the servant’s path. Christian service is never permission for another person to treat someone as less than human.

Our congregation’s racial and cultural diversity offers a beautiful application. At the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. The church should practice now the unity and mutual honor that belong to that coming day.

Any donations or love gifts are appreciated, but they are never required to attend Reason Together Church or to download our free online studies. The Word of God is not placed behind a price of admission.

Selected Scripture and Study Resources

All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

Philippians 2:1–11. The controlling passage, moving from humility through Christ's descent to universal confession.

John 1:1–18. The Word with God, the Word as God and the Word made flesh.

John 5:17–30. Equality with God, divine works, life, judgment and equal honor.

John 10:30–38. "I and my Father are one," the accusation of blasphemy and mutual indwelling.

John 14:9, 28; 17:5. Christ's revelation of the Father, humbled relation and preexistent glory.

Isaiah 45:18–25. The one God before whom every knee bows.

Colossians 1:15–20; 2:9. Christ as Creator and the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

Hebrews 1. The Son as the brightness of divine glory, Creator, recipient of worship and One addressed as God.

Revelation 5. The worship of God and the Lamb.

Standard Greek lexicons for *morphē*, *harpagmos*, *hēgeomai*, *kenoō* and *isos*.

Roy W. Hoover, "The Harpagmos Enigma: A Philological Solution."

N. T. Wright, "Harpagmos and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11."

Denny Burk, "On the Articular Infinitive in Philippians 2:6."

Major Philippians commentaries by Peter T. O'Brien, Gordon D. Fee, Moisés Silva and G. Walter Hansen.

The RTS-031 Study Vault for detailed translation comparisons, decision records and alternate interpretive paths.

A Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for revealing Jesus Christ in Your Word. Thank You that the eternal Son did not remain distant from our need but took the form of a servant and became obedient unto the death of the cross. Give us wisdom when familiar words are difficult. Protect us from pride in our knowledge and fear in our questions. Help us honor the Son even as we honor You. Forgive us for grasping after recognition, control and importance. Place the mind of Christ within us. Teach us to serve without applause, love without repayment and trust You with our name. Draw every unbelieving heart to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. May our lives bring glory to You. In Jesus's name, amen.

Carry This Study Into the Week

Reopen Philippians 2 during the coming week. First read verses 1–4 and notice every command concerning unity, vainglory and the interests of others. Then read verses 5–11 and trace the movement down to the cross and upward to universal confession.

Carry three questions with you. What am I grasping that I need to release? Whom can I serve without receiving recognition? Am I trying to make my name greater or make the name of Jesus known?

Choose one quiet act of service. Carry something, prepare something, listen to someone or help a person who cannot repay you. Do not announce the act. Let it remain between you and the Father who sees.

Share Philippians 2:6 with one person. Ask, “What do you think it means that Jesus thought it not robbery to be equal with God?” Listen before answering. Then read through verse 11 together and let the full movement explain the difficult phrase.

Until We Reason Together Again

The lasting lesson is not merely that harpagmos is a difficult Greek word. It is that Jesus Christ possessed rightful divine glory and chose the servant's path for us.

Equality was not stolen. Glory was not selfishly exploited. The Son came. The servant obeyed. The Savior died. The Father exalted Him. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5 KJV)

Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Reason Together Church
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