

Scandalous humility

The study of angels was well developed in first century Judaism.

There are different types of angels. There are archangels like Gabriel who stand in the presence of God (Daniel 9:20, 21; Luke 1:19) and whose name means “The mighty one of God.” There are Cherubim who have four wings and four hands (Ezekiel 10). Then there are the six winged Seraphim, who use two wings to cover their face, two to cover their feet, and two with which to fly (Isaiah 6). Then there are guardian angels who represent humans before God (Matthew 18:10).

It was known that angels had appeared in form of men (Genesis 18:2). Yet they were invisible, immaterial and capable of flying through the air (Genesis 16:13; Judges 6:21, 22; 2 Kings 2:11). Angels were known to be formed into massed force, and could carry out military action on behalf of God’s people (2 Kings 6; Matthew 26:53). And they formed a massed host in God’s throne room worshipping and praising Him (Daniel 7:10)

It was well known that when God appeared at Sinai, that He came surrounded by myriads of angels. This might be a surprise to us, because the text that formed our Old Testament, the Hebrew Masoretic text, doesn’t really say that. But the writers of the New Testament frequently read and quoted from the Greek Septuagint, and the Septuagint features angels with the giving of the law.

For the Septuagint of Deuteronomy 33 reads:

“The Lord came down from Sinai
And appeared to us from Seir;
He hastened from Mount Paran
Along with myriads at Kadesh,
angels with Him at His right hand;
And He spared His people
And all the sanctified ones under Your hands;
And these are under You,
And received the law from His words
Which Moses commanded us” (Deuteronomy 33:2–4a, Septuagint).

It is this reading that caused New Testament writers to repeatedly feature angels in the giving of the law (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2).

It was absolutely clear that angels are more powerful, more capable, more intelligent, and have a superior status to mankind.

“What is man that you remember him?
Or the son of man that You visit him?
You made him a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5, 6, Septuagint).

One who is superior to Angels

While angels are superior to humans, they are still subject to God. They are presented as created beings who serve God just as humans do (Revelation 22:8). So too, they are inferior to the pre-incarnate Word of God, for we learn from Jesus that before His Incarnation He shared in the Father's glory (John 17:5).

Paul wrote about it like this:

“Though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6, ESV).

The word “form” means the substance or essence. That is, in nature, Jesus was God. The word “grasped” means to cling and hold onto.

The New Living Translation puts it quite clearly:

“Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to” (Philippians 2:6, NLT).

The pre-incarnate Word of God was superior in every way to the angels. He was Divine. He was worshiped. He ruled. He emanated the glory of the Father. He was the Source of Creation.

Set aside his superiority

And yet He set aside His superiority.

“rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7, NLT).

The pre-incarnate Word of God became human. He laid aside His superiority. He laid aside His glory. He laid aside His rule. He laid aside everything that belonged to Him by His very nature. And He allowed Himself to be made into a created being lower than the angels who had previously served Him.

The mindset of Christ

Within Philippians, the entire point of this passage is to say that we need to have this same mindset, the same attitude within us. The attitude of humility. Paul writes,

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

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

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:1–8, NIV).

Jesus was willing to give up His superiority. He laid it aside. He didn't cling to it. He didn't insist on it. He didn't lord it over His created beings. He didn't try to force His superiority onto any created being. Instead, He became a servant of the servants.

And Paul instructs us to have this same mindset of humility. Do we have this mindset? Are we willing to put aside our inherited status? Are we willing to put aside our intellectual gifts? Are we willing to serve those who are poorer, less intelligent, less experienced, and of lower status than us? Is humility the trademark of our being? For this is how we are instructed to behave.

Giving up Australian privileges

Every Australian is born wealthy. We're born into an incredibly wealthy society. I just want you to consider all the things that Australians take for granted:

- 25% of the world's population do not have electricity
- 33% of the world's population do not have access to clean toilets
- 81% of the world's population do not have a car
- 83% of the world's population do not have a fridge
- At birth, the Australian life expectancy is 82 years, while worldwide life expectancy is 11 years shorter than that. And in Sierra Leone, life expectancy is only 46 years.
- Australian GDP per capita is around \$51,000 per annum, while in places like Uganda, GDP per capita is \$422 per annum.

Australians truly are born privileged.

So imagine that one of us, born in Australia, went to a country like Uganda. We gave up our Australian passport and citizenship. We gave up our wealth and status. Imagine we changed the colour of skin, so we were no longer a spectacle in Uganda. And then joined the poorest of the poor in that country. Even worse, we became maimed, a cripple.

Imagine all that, and we aren't even close to understanding the decrease in status that the Word of God gave up when He was born as Jesus of Nazareth.

The scandal emerges

In Jesus' life, His humility became scandalous. Just think of this: God is holy. He is pure, separate, undefiled.

In first century Judaism, there was a mechanism by which people could become holy. It was called the temple. By sacrifices and offerings, one could purify one's sins, and be holy. And there was a whole class of people who taught people that they should be holy in their own homes just like the priests were in the temple.

These were commandment-keeping people. People who kept Sabbath. People who tithed. People who knew God. People of the right heritage. People who properly respected the institution of marriage. So when the Son of God walked this world, you'd expect that He would gravitate to this kind of people.

And yet He didn't.

The scandal was that He associated with social outcasts (Luke 17:11–19). He associated with national traitors (Matthew 9:10; Luke 9:1–10). He showed mercy to a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). And He associated with a doctrinally impure, foreign woman who had been married five times, and was now living with a man to whom she was not married (John 4:1–42).

The holy God laid aside His glory, His power and His authority. And He chose to associate with people who did not have the right heritage, did not believe the right doctrine, were traitorous, impure, adulterous and immoral.

And to these people Jesus showed mercy. To these people Jesus declared the kingdom of God. To these people Jesus showed love, and grace, and mercy, and the goodness of God. Jesus said,

“Your Father in heaven ... makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45).

Jesus shared grace and love and mercy and peace and the power of God with sinners and social outcasts because His heavenly Father blesses everyone.

And Jesus commands us to have this same mindset. Should we withhold any goodness of God from anyone? No, we're commanded to share the goodness, the grace, the mercy, the love, the peace, the joy and the power of God with everyone. For this is the mindset of Jesus our Messiah.

Jesus even instructed us to intercede with God on behalf of those who are actively persecuting us.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:44).

And then Jesus demonstrated it.

When He demonstrated it, and was hanging on a cross, Jesus didn't put any limitations on His intercessory prayer. He didn't say, "Father, if they repent, please forgive them." He didn't say, "If they turn from their wicked ways, if they become acceptable to you, then forgive them." No, He said,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

This is the mindset we are to have as His followers.

Did you know that mercy is more important than holiness? Mercy is more important than holiness.

I know: It sounds scandalous.

It sounded just as scandalous in Jesus' day. But that's the import of what Jesus said. Remember, the purpose of sacrifices was to remove defilement. Sacrifices produced holiness (Exodus 40:10; Leviticus 6:18). And when Jesus was challenged about why he associated with tax collectors and sinners, He quoted Hosea, saying:

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:9–13).

That's why doing justice, loving mercy and walking in humility with God are the three key characteristics of a follower of Christ (Micah 6:8). It is these three characteristics that demonstrate what God's lovingkindness consists of.

And it is this mindset we are to have. Jesus commanded it. Paul commanded it. It is the way of humility.

It won't endear us to people who allow religion to get in the way of mercy. It certainly didn't endear Jesus to the religious leaders of His day. They placed sacrifice and holiness above mercy. And Jesus had the humility to move outside their power circles, to reap their scorn, to suffer their innuendos. He associated with a scandalous class that were not right in the eyes of religion. And He commanded us to make this our priority.

Human rights

In the last several weeks, the world has been going crazy over human rights. Human rights have been discussed all across the media. It has lit up Christian news services, Christian blogs and twitter feeds. People arguing over the rights they have, or don't have, should or shouldn't have.

And you know, this focus on what "rights" you and I have, is completely at odds with the mindset of Christ. For Christ gave up His rights. For He had the right to rule, power, glory, dominion, honour, majesty. And He gave it all up.

He gave it up that He could come down and serve a race of people who were committed enemies. He gave it up that we, alienated from the life of God, might have mercy. And He asked us to have this same mindset.

Christ didn't claim rights. He didn't enforce His rights. He gave up His rights. And He commanded that we have this same mindset.

Humility exalted

Christ's humility resulted in degradation and torture and pain. For His obedience led to Him suffering death on a cross. But it didn't end with suffering or death. For we read,

“Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honour
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:6–11, NLT).

For Christ Jesus did not cling onto His position, His status, His power. He humbly and obediently gave it all up. And because of this God exalted Him above every other power and authority. God exalted Him above all humans, and made Christ the second Adam, the second head of humanity (1 Corinthians 15). God exalted Him above all angelic powers, all rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Colossians 1:16). God exalted Him to the throne of heaven, standing at the right hand of power, being seated on His throne.

Jesus humbled Himself. God exalted Him. And this is to be our mindset. It is God who glorifies.

So we have a sufficient background to understand and appreciate the author of Hebrews' comparison between Jesus and angels.

“After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”?

Or again,

“I will be to him a father,
and he shall be to me a son”?

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God's angels worship him.”

Of the angels he says,

“He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.”

But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

And,

“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,
like a robe you will roll them up,
like a garment they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will have no end.”

And to which of the angels has he ever said,

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:3b–14).

Conclusion

Our conclusion is this:

- Christ did not grasp for what was rightfully His, and neither are we to do so.
- Christ exemplified humility, and we are to have this same humble mindset.
- Mercy is greater than sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).
- Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).
- Christ reached out to show mercy and goodness and grace and the power of God to those whom religion and society had marginalised, and we are commanded to do the same.
- And we are commanded to enter into Jesus' scandalous humility, trusting that that which we give up, and that for which we are scorned, will result in our final exaltation by the hand of God.