

**“Regard”
Philippians 2:1-13**

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¹If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Sermon

In 2009, a 7-year-old from Gaithersburg, Maryland named Julia sent a chatty and remarkably articulate letter to President Obama.ⁱ She had a number of questions for him, and she kind of sounded like she had some things on her mind, and maybe some experiences of her own that made her want to compare notes.

She asked if he ever forgot where some of the rooms are in the White House and got lost.

She said, “My Mom told me your parents got divorced when you were a little boy. Did you cry when your parents told you? Did you ever do things that you knew were wrong because you were mad about your dad leaving?”ⁱⁱ

She asked if there were any foods he couldn't eat. "My Mom can't eat gluten because she has celiac disease. Can you make a law so that there are more gluten-free foods for people with celiac disease...?"ⁱⁱⁱ

She asked if his kids ever bothered him while he was working, and if he had to send them to timeout. She asked if he could make a law so that groceries would be cheaper.

Her last question was, "Did you like to talk when you were a kid? I love to talk...."

"I hope you have a great time being the president. Write back soon!"^{iv}

I don't know where Julia is now, but she seems like somebody who would be fun to get to know. But the reason I mention the letter she wrote is because it sounds like she's writing as somebody who can relate, and is inviting the leader of the free world to relate back to her seven-year-old self; and among all of the questions she asked, the one I most appreciate came second-to-last:

She asked the president, "Do you ever feel like you have too much work being in charge of the world?"^v

That is a wonderful question, and not just for the President of the United States.

Why do we sometimes feel like it's our job to be in charge of the world?

I daresay it's because, well, we would never say this out loud, but obviously, nobody else can do it quite as well, so, reluctantly, we go ahead and do what apparently God has chosen us to do. Namely, to be in charge of the world.

As a friend of mine recently commented as a joke, inverting President Johnson's announcement in 1968, "If not elected, I will still serve."^{vi}

Why do we sometimes feel like, and sometimes behave as if, it's our job to be in charge of the world?

Joseph T. Hallinan, a Pulitzer Prize winner and former fellow at Harvard, published a book in 2009 called *Why We Make Mistakes*.^{vii}

A great deal of research revealed a number of reasons why we make mistakes: We wear rose colored glasses; we skim when we should be attending to detail; we conceptualize complex geography as simple, straight lines...

One of my favorite explanations for why we make mistakes is *we all think we're above average*.

In fact, the full title of the book is *Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way Above Average*. Hallinan quotes a researcher who concluded: ““Almost everyone is overconfident—except the people who are depressed, and they tend to be realists.””^{viii}

Corporations have “learned to capitalize on our overconfidence,” Hallinan says. Weight loss programs, for example: “Look closely at the ads, and you will notice in small print a disclaimer consisting of three important words: ‘Results not typical.’ You’d think this would be a tip-off...that losing a lot of weight through the company’s program is unlikely. But it isn’t. To prospective dieters, it doesn’t matter if the advertised results aren’t typical, because most people think they’re not typical. They’re above average—and their results will be, too.”^{ix}

Why do you have to be in charge of the world? “Well, nobody else is as capable of it as I am. I am way above average. I’m not trying to brag; I’m just facing reality.”

And the Apostle Paul, writing to the church that may have been the one of which he was fondest of all the churches he had helped to build, said:

I have a different idea—and it’s not my idea.

Jesus, the human being, fully human and fully divine, was the incarnate God, the Son of God, and the revelation of God.

And even he, who certainly *could* have, “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient
to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

What if we really did nothing from selfish ambition, or conceit?

What if each of us truly did not look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others?

I'll bet we can kind of imagine what that would look like. But maybe the most challenging idea of all of these is:

What if we all, in humility, regarded others as better than ourselves?

A lot of Christian people, church people, are pretty good—some are downright saintly—about helping other people.

Paul is inviting us to go one step further, and regard those other people, the ones whom we serve, as better than ourselves.

One of the most beautiful and Biblical things we can do is to provide or prepare or serve food for someone who is poor, or homeless, or transient. The deeper challenge is to do it with the mindset that when you feed them, you are humbly serving a superior. Because they are made in the image of God, and to serve them is to serve Jesus.

You interact in town, or go to your job, or serve on civic committees, alongside people with whom you disagree—politically, philosophically... Most of them are nice people, good people; it's just that, when it comes to questions of politics, or religion, or what's acceptable, or who's acceptable, they're just so *dumb*—

Could I see a show of hands of anybody who has *not* had that thought go through their head about somebody at least once in the last five years? I didn't think so. Me neither.

Bear in mind, Paul is not advising the Philippians to abandon what they know is right or true as a means of bowing to someone else's opinion. He's saying, even that person you can't even understand or whose ideas you find repugnant: imagine that person, for all their flawed thinking, as being better than you. Because they are still made in God's image. And Christ is still in there, somewhere.

He's also not endorsing low self-esteem. He's not saying, "Regard yourself as worse than everybody else." The people in Philippi to whom he's writing are among those for whom he has as much respect as anyone in the world. He already knows they're faithful to God. He knows they've got the covenant written on their

hearts. He knows he can trust them to keep on doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

But as he said to the church in Corinth, “strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (I Cor 12:31). He knew they were spiritually and emotionally strong enough, and that they were confident enough in God, to adopt the mindset that Jesus had modeled for his followers: not that they are unworthy worms, but also not that they are any better than anybody else.

When I was in high school, before I ever brought a church youth group up here to the Montreat Youth Conferences, I attended the summer church camps that my home church ran with pretty much the same format as Montreat, but with 120 kids as opposed to 1200. We’d have worship, a guest speaker to lead a plenary session every day, and then we’d break out into small groups which met regularly throughout the week.

Between five years of doing that as a student and then going back a few years later as a youth adviser, I picked up a number of things that I later ended up using with the backhome groups that I brought up here once I became a pastor. It was called “bombardment.”

On the last night of the week, just before everybody gathered together in the main area for communion, we would meet for one last time in our small groups. At that final small group gathering, each member of the small group would take their turn hearing from every other person around the circle who would, one at a time, tell that person all the things they appreciated, admired, respected, or loved about that person.

It was not an objective assessment. This wasn’t the time to say, “Here’s what I like; and here are some things I think you could improve on.” It was unmitigated—and had to be honest—affirmation of whatever there was to affirm about that person.

To be a teenager in high school is, almost by definition, to be spectacularly self-conscious, self-doubting, self-loathing, self-questioning... Listening to all the other kids in your group—the cool kids, the dangerous ones, the quiet ones, the scholars, the athletes, the country club kids and the ones from the other side of the railroad tracks—hearing all these other kids tell you what they liked and admired about you, and which probably never, ever would have otherwise had a chance to be

shared or even thought about—as the recipient, that experience made you want to live into that person that they had just described you as being.

And as the one telling everybody else what you appreciated about them, regardless of how much you didn't think you had in common with them, or didn't think you liked them, or didn't think they liked you—that made us better people. It made us better people to say, if just for a minute, “OK, forget everything we don't have in common and don't like about each other. Let me tell you what is great about you.

“Let me tell you about one way in which I regard you as being better than I am.”

If you want to know what it could actually look like when Paul says, “in humility regard others as better than yourselves,” you might start with an exercise like that. Look at that person who you think is so unlike you, so opposite of what you admire, so politically dumb, so socially inept, so repulsive or distasteful or unacceptable to you, and consider:

If I had to say something affirming of that person, if I had to come up with some aspect of their character, or just something I have seen them do that I felt like I could admire or appreciate or respect, what would I say?

I can't promise that you are going to respect, admire, or want to emulate that person. But I can promise you that it is possible to love that person. And if you can love even that person, then you can love even yourself. And if you can love even yourself, then you are already on God's side, because God loves you and loves that other person. Jesus died for you and for that other person. The Spirit is fully capable of doing amazing, unbelievable, gigantic, world-saving, world-loving things with you and with that other person.

And isn't it nice, every once in a while, to be able to put down all the work that it takes to be in charge of the world?

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ,
any consolation from love,
any sharing in the Spirit,
any compassion and sympathy,*

*Let us be of the same mind,
having the same love,
being in full accord and of one mind,*

in humility regarding others as better than ourselves,

looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others—

the same mind that was in Christ Jesus,

who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

humbling himself and becoming obedient

even to the point of death on a cross.

So let us work out our salvation

not with arrogant self-regard or prideful self-confidence,

but with fear and trembling,

knowing that what the things that we will,

and the works that we work,

come not from our own genius, goodness or excellence,

but from the loving, beautiful and true God

who is at work within us all.

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ⁱ Bill Adler & Bill Adler, Jr., eds. *Kids' Letters to President Obama* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 60.

ⁱⁱ Adler & Adler, *Letters*, 60.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adler & Adler, *Letters*, 60.

^{iv} Adler & Adler, *Letters*, 60.

^v Adler & Adler, *Letters*, 60.

^{vi} Johnson's quote on March 31, 1968 was in fact, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president," and echoes the statements of William Tecumseh Sherman, "...If nominated by either party, I should peremptorily decline; and even if unanimously elected I should decline to serve" (1871) and "I will not accept if nominated and will not serve if elected" (1884).

^{vii} Joseph T. Hallinan, *Why We Make Mistakes: How We Look without Seeing, Forget Things in Seconds, and Are All Pretty Sure We Are Way Above Average*. New York: Broadway Books, 2009.

^{viii} Hallinan, *Mistakes*, 149.

^{ix} Hallinan, *Mistakes*, 151.