

Sermon Summary #9

The Panorama of the Gospel and The Practicality of Serving Others Philippians 2:5-11

Some statements in the Bible leave you scratching your head, asking: "What could this possibly mean?" Other texts leave you wiping tears from your eyes, wondering: "Did God *really* do that for me?" Then there are those passages that blow your mind and leave you shouting: "Wow! I can't believe what I just read!" And finally there are some things in the Bible that leave you gasping for breath, struggling to maintain your composure, texts and statements and stories that quite literally drive you to your knees, in awe and wonder.

Folks, Philippians 2:5-11 is one of those rare biblical texts that does all those things, all at the same time. *I read it and scratch my head, wipe tears from eyes, shout aloud, gasp for breath, and fall to my knees in wonder and worship.*

There are three things about these verses you need to understand.

First, some things in the Bible are very narrow in their focus. They hone in like a laser beam on a particular event or person at a particular point in time. Not Philippians 2. Paul doesn't use a laser beam in this passage but rather something along the lines of a search light that casts a broad and sweeping brilliance across the evening sky. This passage is panoramic in scope. It spans eternity past into eternity future. It begins in v. 6 with the eternal glory of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, in fellowship with the Father and Holy Spirit, and then dives directly into the nitty gritty of history and the death of Jesus. From there we are led to his resurrection and exaltation and the declaration that for all of eternity future he will be praised and honored as Lord over all.

Second, and this is crucial, we must not lose sight of the fact that the reason why Paul speaks of Jesus Christ in this way is to provide us with an example of how we are to humble ourselves and go low in serving one another. Think about it: *this gloriously panoramic portrayal of the glory and humiliation and death and resurrection and exaltation and adoration of the Son of God is primarily designed to teach you and me how to serve one another!*

In other words, this is not an isolated theological statement about the person and work of Christ. The previous paragraph (2:1-4) contains Paul's appeal to put aside selfish ambition and the pursuit of empty glory and to embrace self-sacrificial humility out of concern for the interests of others, all with a view to unity in the body of Christ. Verse 5 is a transition from the exhortation in vv. 1-4 to the premier example of such a life in vv. 6-11. When Paul says in v. 5a, "Have **this** mind [or attitude] among yourselves," he has in view the mindset or attitude just described in vv. 1-4. The most perfect illustration of "this" way of thinking and acting is Jesus himself ("which is yours in Christ Jesus"), whose self-giving for the sake of others is explained by Paul in vv. 6-11.

The supreme example of humble, self-effacing, self-sacrificial, self-giving service for the sake of others is found in Jesus. Imitate him. Follow his lead. This is quite stunning: *none but God would ever have thought to direct our attention to the most transcendent and exalted of divine realities as a way of enforcing on our hearts the importance of serving others!*

Third, some have suggested that Paul constructed this hymn on the basis of his familiarity with a famous incident in the life of Jesus: the foot-washing episode in John 13. Although the verbal parallels are few, the conceptual and theological similarities are striking:

- In John 13, knowing he had come from God, Jesus rises from the table and lays aside his outer garments (v. 4). Likewise, in Philippians 2, from his position of eternal, pre-existent equality with God, Jesus, as it were, lays aside the garment of his visible glory (vv. 6-7).
- In John 13, Jesus clothes himself with a towel. In Philippians 2, Jesus clothes himself with human nature.
- In John 13, Jesus performs a menial task often assigned to slaves (washing the feet of others). In Philippians 2, Jesus takes the form of a slave and serves others.
- In John 13, when Jesus finishes, he once again takes his outer garments and puts them on. In Philippians 2, after his work on earth is finished, he returns to the visible glory with the Father that was his before time.
- In John 13, Jesus resumes his place at the table, from which he had temporarily departed. In Philippians 2, Jesus is exalted by the Father and sits down again on his heavenly throne.
- Jesus concludes by saying, "You call me teacher and Lord (*kurios*) and you are right, for so I am" (v. 13). In Philippians 2, every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is "Lord" (*kurios*) to the glory of God the Father (v. 11).
- The story in John 13 is an example of humble service. In Philippians 2, Paul uses the incarnation and humiliation of Christ as an example of humble service (see vv. 1-5).

There are also potential theological lessons to learn from what appear to be parallels between the first Adam, in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1-3) and the last Adam, Jesus Christ (Phil. 2).

- The first Adam was made in the divine *image*. So, too, the last Adam is the *image* of God (v. 6; also Col. 1:15).
- The first Adam thought it a prize to be grasped at to be as God. But the last Adam thought it **not** a prize to be grasped at to be as God.
- The first Adam aspired to a reputation. The last Adam made himself of no reputation.
- The first Adam spurned being God's servant. The last Adam took upon himself the form of a servant.
- The first Adam sought to be in the likeness of God. The last Adam was made in the likeness of men.
- The first Adam was found in fashion as a man (dust). The last Adam was found in fashion as a man (cf. Rom. 8:3).
- The first Adam exalted himself. The last Adam humbled himself.
- The first Adam became disobedient unto death. The last Adam became obedient unto death.
- The first Adam was condemned and disgraced. The last Adam was highly exalted and given the name of Lord.

Let's now turn our attention to this magnificent passage, starting with its portrayal of the Son of God in eternity past.

The Pre-Incarnate Majesty of the Son of God – v. 6

We are alerted right from the start that Paul wants us to understand the incredible *sacrifice* made by the Son of God for our sakes. He does it by saying, "*although* he was in the form of God" (v. 6a). In other words, it was *in spite of the fact* that he existed in the form of God . . . that he emptied himself.

The pre-existent Son was in "*the form of God*". The Greek word translated "form" (*morphe*) is used only twice in the NT, both instances here in Philippians 2 (vv. 6 and 7).

Many argue that the "form" of God refers to the divine essence or the very nature of God himself. The NIV translates this, "being in *very nature* God." And of course this is true: the Son is God, no less so than are the Father and the Holy Spirit. But I don't think Paul has this primarily in mind.

I believe this word points to the "glory" of God, which is to say the manifest appearance of God, his visible splendor (cf. the LXX of Job 4:16; Judges 8:18; Isa. 44:13; Dan. 3:19). Thus the idea is not so much the inner attributes of deity as it is the majestic splendor, the unapproachable brilliance and visible token of all that God is in himself (i.e., the Shekinah of God). In the OT the Shekinah was the blinding display of God's presence among his people. *Glory, then, is the majestic radiance of the divine nature.*

Since it would be impossible to possess the "glory" of God without that internal, essential character or quality of which the "glory" is the outward display, the second person of the Trinity possesses the very nature of deity. In fact, in the second half of v. 6 Paul equates being in the "form" of God with being "equal" with God.

So here we see the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, "in the form of God," entirely "equal" with God, who nevertheless did not regard this about himself as "a thing to be grasped" (v. 6b), as a prize to be held onto or a treasure to be clutched.

Perhaps a good paraphrase would be: "Be humble as Christ was humble. He, although existing before the world in the form of God, did not treat his equality with God as a prize or a treasure to be greedily clutched and selfishly displayed; on the contrary, he resigned the glories of heaven."

Or again, as Moises Silva puts it: "The divine and preexistent Christ did not regard the advantage of His deity as grounds to avoid the incarnation; on the contrary, He was willing to regard Himself as nothing by taking on human form" (113). That is to say, the preexistent Son did not regard equality with God as excusing him from the task of redeeming mankind through suffering. Indeed, it uniquely qualified him for that vocation. Thus, "the concern is with divine selflessness: God is not an acquisitive being, grasping and seizing, but self-giving for the sake of others" (Gordon Fee, 211).

The Incarnation and Humiliation of the Son of God – vv. 7-8

The one word translated "*he made himself nothing*" (v. 7a) may well be the most debated term in all of Scripture. The NASB translates this, he "emptied himself", whereas the KJV renders it, "made himself of no reputation" (KJV).

The verb used here (*keno*) is found in the NT only in Paul's writings (Romans 4:14; 1 Cor. 1:7; 9:15; 2 Cor. 9:3; and here in Phil. 2:7). A crassly literal rendering, "to empty," (as is found in the NASB), inclines us to ask the question: "*Of what* did Christ empty himself?" In spite of the fact that the "it" or "content" of which Christ allegedly "emptied himself" is nowhere stated in the text, many have insisted on supplying an answer.

The argument has often been made that he emptied himself of the divine nature or the "form of God" (v. 6). Others point to his position or status of "equality with God" (v. 6) as the content of which he emptied himself.

The theological implications of such a view must be noted. It would mean that by virtue of the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity **ceased to be God**. This view, known in history as the doctrine of **Kenosis** (hence *Kenotic Christology*), entails a form of *divine suicide*.

A more likely view is that it was the "glory" or *doxa* of God of which he emptied himself. I.e., the Son divested himself of the visible splendor and outward radiance of deity by clothing himself with human flesh. He remained God, but the glory of his deity was obscured and hidden "by the dark lantern of His humanity" (Taylor).

Clearly, however, Paul intends us to interpret this verb in precisely the way he uses it elsewhere in his epistles. In each of the other texts the meaning is "to make void," "to render of no effect," "to nullify," "to despoil," "to make of no reputation," or the like. ***The point of the word is not to specify some content of deity or divine glory of which Christ emptied or divested himself. Rather, it is designed to emphasize the radical and far-reaching dimensions of his self-renunciation.***

Again, not surprisingly (if we keep in mind the crucial role of context), the meaning of this verb is in vv. 7-8. He "emptied himself" **by taking the form of a servant and by being born in the likeness of men and by being found in human form**. In other words, Christ did not divest himself of any divine attributes or in any sense become less than God. Rather, Christ "emptied" himself, paradoxically, **by taking something to himself**.

The self-renunciation or self-emptying of Christ is the assumption of human nature. ***The second person of the Trinity "made himself nothing," not by ceasing to be God, but by becoming man!***

Christ did not empty himself of anything. He simply emptied **himself**. He poured himself out. He made himself of no reputation **not by losing anything but by gaining human nature**, by becoming a human being in addition to being God.

In becoming a man in what we call the *incarnation* the Second Person of the Trinity chose to willingly suspend the exercise of his divine attributes so that he might live a genuinely human life, subject to all the limitations and demands you and I commonly experience. That which he had (all the divine attributes), by virtue of what he was (deity), he willingly chose not to use. Thus we read the gospels and see a human being doing super-human things and ask "How?" The answer is: *Not from the power of his own divine nature, but through the power of the Holy Spirit*.

Thus the Son of God chose to experience the world through the limitations imposed by human consciousness and an authentic human nature. The attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience were not lost or laid aside, but became *latent* and *potential* within the confines of his human nature. They are truly present in Jesus but no longer in conscious exercise. The incarnation thus means that Jesus "actually thought and acted, viewed the world, and experienced time and space events strictly within the confines of a normally developing human person" (Gerald Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 210).

Jesus is also said to have been "in the likeness of men" and to have been found "in human form" (vv. 7-8). This choice of terms is not meant to suggest that Jesus was not truly man but only "like" men. Paul is emphasizing that there was no difference in external characteristics and circumstances between Jesus and other men of his day. Simply put, he *looked* human. When all of these phrases are taken together, as Paul surely intended them to be, they provide a powerful declaration of ***the reality of Christ's humanity***. In every respect, be it the inward nature (soul, spirit, mind, emotion, will) or the outward form (appearance, circumstances of life, bodily weakness), Jesus was truly human.

The climax of Paul's argument concerning the depths of divine self-sacrifice is reached in a crucial word in v. 7 – he took the form of a "servant," or better still, of a ***"slave"***! Christ Jesus didn't simply humble himself by becoming a man, he became a *slave*. Greater still, he didn't simply humble himself by becoming a slave, he became obedient to the point of *death*. Greater still, he didn't simply humble himself by dying, he died on, of all things, a **cross**! It wasn't just death, but death on a cross, a mode of execution reserved for the scum of society.

Thus, ***"EVEN death on a cross"*** is the last bitter consequence of "taking the form of a slave" and stands in the most abrupt, shocking contrast with the beginning of the hymn and its description of his pre-incarnate glory. Christ Jesus went from the highest imaginable high ("the form of God," "equality with God") to the lowest imaginable low ("the form of a slave," "even death on a cross").

The Exaltation and Adoration of the Son of God – vv. 9-11

Following the description of Christ's incarnation and humiliation in vv. 6-8 is the portrayal of his exaltation in vv. 9-11. At the heart of this is the bestowal of "the name which is above every name," to which name every knee will bow and every tongue confess for the glory of God the Father.

But what is this name? Some insist the name is "Jesus." But most likely it is the name "Lord" (*kurios*). We should read v. 10 not as telling us that at the name "Jesus" every knee should bow, but rather that at the name which is given to Jesus, the name by which Jesus is known, every knee should bow. And that name is "Lord"! Several things suggest this is correct.

First of all, no name can be more exalted than the name YHWH or Lord. Furthermore, there appears to be a progression in the paragraph to the universal confession that Jesus Christ is LORD (v. 11). In other words, in addition to every other name and title ascribed to Jesus, there is the name of Lord.

But most important of all, verse 10 is a citation of Isaiah 45:23 (vv. 20-25) where the God of Israel is alone worthy of the title Lord. Note carefully the emphasis on monotheism, that there is only one God:

"Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge who carry about their wooden idols, and keep on praying to a god that cannot save. Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: ***'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'*** "Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory" (Isaiah 45:20-25).

Do you see what Paul is saying? In its OT context the "Lord" to whom every knee shall bow and whom every tongue must confess is YHWH, God of Israel. But here in Philippians 2 Paul applies this to Jesus Christ. ***Jesus is YHWH in human flesh!***

Paul's point is that this man called Jesus, this one who subjected himself in humility to the life of a slave and willingly endured not just any death but death on a cross, this one who completely obeyed must now be completely obeyed. This one we know as Jesus is none other than the Lord God himself.

The universal dimensions of this confession that Jesus is Lord ought to be noted. Every knee, literally, "pertaining to those in heaven, pertaining to those on earth, and pertaining to those under the earth," shall bow to Jesus. In other words, all angels (heaven), all humans (earth), and all demons (under the earth) will bow to the name of Jesus.

However, not everyone will make this confession willingly. Those who deny Jesus in this life will be ***compelled*** to fall to their knees and will be ***compelled*** to acknowledge that the one they mocked and scorned and rejected is in fact none other than the one and only God whom he claimed to be. Theirs will be a reluctant confession, an acknowledgment of defeat. Ours will be a joyful celebration of love and adoration.

Conclusion

Stand back, hold your breath, and behold the unfathomable glory of the gospel, the panorama of God's grace in Jesus Christ . . .

God the Son, Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Creator, eternal and without beginning, who forever and ever existed in the same glory and divinity as the Father and Spirit, did not look disdainfully upon fallen, sinful, rebellious mankind and insist on retaining the joy of his exalted life, but made himself of no reputation by condescending to our earthly existence and took the

form of a man, indeed living the life of a bond-servant, even to the point of dying that death reserved for the outcasts of society, death on a cross.

This is the one whom God the Father raised from the dead and elevated and exalted to the throne of heaven as ruler and sovereign over all, whether angels or demons or humans. This is the one who is rightly called “Lord”, the one in whose presence every knee will bow, the one whose name every tongue will confess.

Yes, look to this one, says Paul, look and see more than transcendent beauty and power and glory; ***look and see a model for your life of what it means to set aside your rights and forego your privileges and disregard your status in society so that you might lovingly serve others and meet their needs and bring them joy.***