

Series: What God Was Thinking. . . The heart of God at Christmas

Humility

Philippians 2:1-11

When you think about Christmas what is the first word that comes to your mind? If the first word that comes to your mind is Jesus, we have a mug for you in the foyer (jk). . . On the one hand, for some of you words of joy come to mind: family, traditions, presents, and music. That last word comes to mind for my daughter Rose; she's already been listening to Christmas music for two months. On the other hand, for others of you, no doubt, words of sorrow come to mind: loneliness, grief, regret. When everybody else is celebrating, your mind naturally goes to some loss.

Whatever the case for you, we hope that this year's Advent series puts some other words on your heart and mind, words that you might not normally associate with Christmas. These words/truths can give us perspective whether this season is full of joy or sorrow.

This Advent we are going to explore several passages in the New Testament that reveal the heart of God at the first Christmas. It's interesting how the birth narratives in the gospels focus on what was happening on earth (trip to Bethlehem, shepherds, angels, Jesus being born in a manger). But when the epistles (letters written to churches and church leaders) speak about Jesus becoming one of us they focus on what was happening in heaven in the heart and mind of God. They tell us about the motives and rationale and attitude of God when Jesus came to earth.

Each passage we are studying this Advent season will, in essence, give us a word that was on the heart of God at the first Christmas. Today we consider the passage that we just read, Philippians 2:1-11. This passage reveals that **humility** was on the heart of God the Son at the first Christmas. In light of this passage, I hope that humility will be one of the first words that comes to our minds when we think about Christmas this year.

Context. Allow me to set the context for this passage because it's really important for understanding what Paul writes in Philippians 2:1-11. We learn in chapter 1 that Paul had a deep affection for the church at Philippi (which was in northern Greece). Paul had brought them the gospel years earlier. From day one they had participated with him in sharing the gospel, the message about Christ. Even though they had seen Paul and Silas publicly beaten and imprisoned they never abandoned him; they had stood with him and remained faithful to the gospel.

When Paul wrote this letter to them he was in prison in Rome. Again, Paul was overjoyed that the Philippians still supported him. They had sent him a trusted friend, Epaphroditus, to encourage him; and they sent Paul money even though they were very poor themselves (see 4:10-20). Paul was full of joy when he thought of the Philippians.

In the midst of all his joy, Paul was concerned about the Philippian church. Why? Because there was an internal threat that had the potential of sabotaging their

partnership in the gospel. That threat was **disunity**. The main challenge in the body of this letter is found in Philippians 1:27ff.

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

Living “worthy of the gospel of Christ” meant “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” Without unity their witness for the gospel would be sabotaged. With unity, they would continue to stand firm and even “suffer for [Christ’s] sake” just as Paul did. **Because Paul was passionate about the gospel, he was passionate about their unity.**

On some level we all want unity in the church. We all want a sense that we’re all walking together in the same direction, encouraging and supporting each other. Like the Philippians we need to understand that true unity is based on **a common commitment to the mission of proclaiming the gospel**. It’s not enough for us to have unity about the facts of the gospel (Jesus died for our sins and rose again); that’s essential, but it’s not enough for true unity. True unity is based on a common commitment to the mission of sharing Christ so that others in our friends and family and others in our community can experience freedom from their sin and eternal life. A church won’t have genuine biblical unity with lesser commitments.

So how can we have such unity? What is required of us? Paul tells us in the familiar and amazing passage read earlier. In the first four verses of Philippians 2, Paul challenges us to *pursue unity through humility of mind*. This is rather counterintuitive unless you’ve experienced it.

Our unity requires great humility. (Philippians 2:1-4)

In verse 1 Paul appeals to the Philippians experience in the body of Christ. He piles up phrases to remind them how rich their fellowship had been.

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,

The sense here is, “Since you’ve experienced such great encouragement in Christ. . . since the love you’ve experienced in Christ has brought such deep comfort, since you’ve participated in the Spirit’s work in such powerful ways, since there’s such affection and sympathy/compassion in the body of Christ. . .” this is Paul’s appeal in verse 2. Since you’ve experienced such rich fellowship in Christ:

2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

It’s really striking how Paul unashamedly wanted his joy to be complete (without gaping holes in it). Since joy is a deep satisfaction in God and his will, there is nothing selfish

about wanting joy. Rather, joy was a God-given spiritual emotion that nourishes our souls. Joy is one aspect of the fruit that the Spirit produces in our lives.

Paul's joy would be complete if the Philippians were fully united for the sake of the gospel. Notice how he picks up the terminology from chapter 1 when he challenged them to unity for the faith of the gospel: ". . . *being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*" When it came to the things that mattered most - the unity of the church and the eternal destiny of people - **they were to have the same mind**. Of course, like us, when it came to peripheral issues they might be all over the map, but when it came to **unity** and **participating in the gospel** they were to be exactly the same.

Notice in verses 3 and 4 how all-in Paul wants the Philippians to be in their unity. In both verses he first gives a negative command (what to avoid) and then a positive command (what to embody).

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

Paul had experienced the ugliness of selfish ambition when he was in prison in Rome. In chapter 1 he uses that term to describe the motives of a group of fellow Christians in Rome who "preached Christ from envy and rivalry." For some reason they viewed Paul as a rival; they were competitive when it came to sharing the gospel. Amazingly, Paul's attitude was, "Even though their motives are wrong, since they're preaching Christ, so be it."

But Paul didn't want such selfish ambition or conceit to poison the Philippian church. So he commanded, "Do **nothing** from selfish ambition or conceit." What does this mean for us? It means that we are **never** to look down on others in the church with an air of superiority and conclude, "I am justified in talking down to them, in slandering them, in writing them off as worthless." Even if we are morally or spiritually or intellectually their superior, we are to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. We'll see why this is the case when we read what Paul wrote about Jesus' humility.

"But," Paul says, "in humility count others more significant than yourselves." Instead of conceit/pride, treat others with humility. Humility involves believing (not merely pretending) that others are more significant than we are. Paul elaborates on this in verse 4:

4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

We instinctively look to our own interests. When we have needs and wants, we are instinctively on the lookout for ways to meet those needs and satisfy those wants. We naturally look out for our own interests. Paul is saying that we should also be on the lookout for the interests of others. Don't merely look out for yourself, but also for others.

You probably noticed that there was nothing weak or half-hearted about Paul's challenge to the Philippians or to us. He didn't say, "Just try to be a little nicer to each other . . . sometimes. . . if you feel like it." No, he is challenging us to have a fierce, sacrificial humility toward one another: the same mind and the same love . . . no selfish ambition or conceit. . . in humility of mind, count others more significant than yourselves. . . looking out for the interests of others.

The tendency in the church, I think, is to agree in principle with what Paul is saying here, but in practice to find all sorts of exceptions and qualifications and loopholes. If we're not careful we'll conclude that we're supposed to be humble and considerate toward our friends and that it's okay to be insulting and unkind to our enemies. That, of course, is the opposite of what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:43-48). Paul isn't saying that we should never set boundaries. Or that we should never confront bad behavior, bad motives, or bad doctrine. Or that we should let people bully and manipulate us. We can address all of those things humbly, genuinely wanting the best for those who have wronged us. But too often we address those issues in a spirit of pride; and the casualty is always our unity and our witness.

Why is Paul so insistent that humility is at the heart of unity (which is essential for our mission)? Beginning in verse 5 we see that Paul believed that:

Jesus is the standard for our humility. (Philippians 2:5-11)

In these verses Paul tells us that humility was uppermost in Jesus' mind at the first Christmas. Verse 5 speaks of the pre-incarnate humility of Jesus - the humility he had before he took on a flesh and blood body. Humility is an attribute of God that's often overlooked.

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

Being "in the form of God" means that Christ had the very attributes of God. The NIV translates it, "being in very nature God." Even though Christ had this exalted nature, he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" in the sense of holding onto that status and equality to be used for his own advantage.

Rather, we read in verse 7:

7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Paul doesn't say that Jesus emptied himself ***of something*** (he didn't empty himself of his divinity, for example); Jesus emptied himself ***by doing something***, namely, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. Jesus himself said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

This is the mind of Christ at the first Christmas: humility. He was not merely looking out for **his own** interests; if he were, he never would have left heaven. Rather, in humility of mind, he was looking out for **our** interests. Namely, our desperate need for a Savior - someone to save us from our sins. Dr. Greg Lanier wrote, "At Christmas God the Son became God the man" so that he could die for humanity. That was an act of pure humility.

Verse 8 speaks of the incarnate humility of Jesus - the humility he had as he lived in a flesh and blood body.

8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Going to the cross on our behalf was the ultimate expression of humility, considering us as more significant than himself, looking out for our interests above his own. The cross was the most painful and humiliating way to die. The gospels make clear that Jesus wasn't a victim who was put to death against his will. Rather, Luke 9:51 tells us that Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem to suffer and to be crucified for our sins. **That** is the humility of mind that we are to "have among ourselves" (v. 5).

In a sermon on this passage, David Camera, a pastor in Orlando, said that "the greater the height the more impressive the plunge." He points out that cliff diving is impressive; I've never cliff dived, but I did jump off a 30-foot-high rock into a river once and swore I'd never do it again. Skydiving is more impressive; some of you have jumped out of a plane (on purpose). There's a thing called space diving is even more impressive; the world record is a jump from over 25 miles above the earth. The greater the height the more impressive the plunge. But Jesus plunged from the highest of heights (equality with God in heaven) to the lowest of lows (being crucified between two criminals). And he took that plunge on purpose, willingly for our sakes.

Paul says, "Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus." Our Lord and Savior and Shepherd took the greatest plunge possible **for us**. If we call ourselves his disciples, we need to learn from him how to take the plunge for each other. Since he was legitimately superior to us in every way and yet put our interests above his own, we are never justified in being prideful to each other. Why? Because **Jesus is the standard for our humility**.

Remember why the effort and the sacrifice of humility is "worth it": because our unity gives credibility to the gospel. And that humility is at the heart of the gospel: In humility God the Son became God the man who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, death on a cross. Since the humility of Christ is at the heart of the gospel, those who share the gospel must live in humility with each other. We are a glaring contradiction if we don't have humility of mind toward each other.

Paul doesn't stop with Jesus' humility. He goes on to describe God's response to Jesus' humility in verses 9-11.

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

God responds to Jesus humble servanthood by exalting him to the highest possible status. He gave him “the name that is above every name.” What name is that? It is his very name. Verse 10 is a reference to Isaiah 45:23 in which YHWH, the God of Israel, says that “to me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear allegiance.” Paul is telling us that God has bestowed on Jesus his very name, YHWH.

Therefore at the end of time there will be universal acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord. There will be no exceptions. The implication for us is that since every tongue will confess Jesus as Lord **then**, surely we should submit to him as Lord **now**. And that submission includes imitating his great humility.

Jesus’ exaltation illustrates that no expression of humility goes unnoticed by God. Jesus himself said (Luke 14:11):

11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

God the Father noticed Jesus’ humility; he also notices our humility.

This year when you think of Christmas, I hope that one word that comes to your mind is **humility**. And when it does, let your mind go a couple different directions. First, let your mind go to worship. Worship Jesus himself because of his great humility. He took the greatest plunge possible - from equality with God to death on a cross - willingly, for us. Through all eternity, we will never tire of worshiping him for that act of humility.

Second, let your mind go to your own habits of humility (or lack thereof). Notice whether you instinctively and habitually look out for the interests of others. Or notice if you mainly look out for yourself. Notice whether you have humility toward your family, your friends, others in the body of Christ. . . people you enjoy and people you find hard to be around.

When you find yourself deficient, don’t condemn yourself; there’s no value in that. If you are convicted about a lack of humility, fix your eyes on Jesus to gain a deeper appreciation for his humility. Let his humility melt your heart and motivate you to learn humility in deeper and deeper ways. As you do, notice the unity you experience in your family and in the church.