

The Humility of Christ

Philippians 2

In 1728 William Law wrote a book entitled *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. In one of his chapters on humility, Law wrote:

We may as well think to see without eyes or live without breath as to live in the spirit of religion without the spirit of humility. Although humility is thus the soul and essence of all religious duties, it is generally speaking the least understood, the least guarded, the least intended, the least desired, and the least sought after, of all virtues.

Personally, I would have to admit, “Guilty as charged.” I don’t normally have a burning passion to cultivate and seek after humility. If you asked me if I wanted to be humble, I’m sure I’d say, “Of course I want to be humble. . .” (nobody’s going to say, “I really want to be arrogant and puffed up and proud. . .”). But if you asked me, “If you want to be humble, then what are you doing about it?” most of the time I’d have to say, “Not much.” That’s William Law’s point: humility is one of the least desired and least sought after of all virtues. Everybody wants to be thought of as humble, but not many people seek after it.

This reality is rather sobering in light of Jesus’ comment in Matthew 23:12: “. . . whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” Jesus is advocating that we *intentionally* humble ourselves in this life through servanthood. The alternative is to exalt ourselves in this life and end up being humbled, and nobody really wants that.

This morning we begin a sermon series on the topic of humility. We thought it would be especially appropriate to think about humility during Advent since Jesus becoming one of us is the ultimate expression of humility. Today we consider the humility of Jesus. The next three weeks we’ll discuss, humility before God, humility before others, and being humbled by circumstances.

Before we jump into our first passage I feel like I need to let you in on a little secret: I am assuming that pride is as huge a problem for you as it is for me. This is more of a theological conviction than an observation. At the same time, I think it’s observable that pride is pervasive in our lives and shows up in many different ways.

I was talking with a friend recently who told me that he has a terrible habit of judging other people. This was news to me because he’s a rather quiet, introverted guy who doesn’t come across as judgmental because he doesn’t say much. But he told me that he continually finds himself judging people. I asked him, “What types of situations do you find yourself judging people?” He said, “In every situation” – in traffic, in stores/restaurants, in church, watching the news, etc. His judgmentalism is pervasive. And he freely admits that that’s a form of pride since judging is God’s job, not his.

Of course he’s not the rare exception. Your pride may look very different than his, but it’s there. Your pride may show up in some area of disobedience (you’re acting like God in that area of your life) or in some area of neglect (you really don’t care about the things God does). But I’m

assuming that pride is pervasive in your life. Therefore, I'm assuming that this study is incredibly relevant to your life as it is to mine.

The Humility of Jesus (Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 11:28-30) In the first four verses of Philippians 2 Paul is challenging the believers at Philippi to pursue genuine unity in their fellowship. There is a type of superficial unity that can exist within a church in which everybody gets along with everybody else (as long as you don't talk about anything very substantive). That type of unity is an insult to the Holy Spirit who dwells within every believer. Paul was advocating the type of unity you have when you "maintain the same love" (you share a common commitment to treat each other with patience and kindness and forgiveness) and the type of unity you have when you are intent on one purpose (instead of pushing their own agenda and forming factions, everybody is seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness). That type of unity honors the Holy Spirit who binds all believers together in unity.

Paul said that the way to maintain and pursue this unity is through humility:

3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

If I have humility of mind toward you, I actually think that your interests are more important than my own. In Paul's mind, the ultimate example of this type of humility was Jesus Himself. More than anybody who ever lived, Jesus regarded others as more important than Himself. In verse 5 Paul says:

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

If we want unity, we need humility, and if we want humility, we need to understand the humility of Jesus. In a couple of weeks we'll come back to the issue of expressing our humility toward each other. But today we are going to focus in on the humility of Jesus. If we look long and hard at Jesus' humility we will see that the type of humility we are supposed to have requires a radical change of heart – a change of heart that only God can produce.

Jesus' Pre-incarnate Humility (Philippians 2:6-7)

This first thing we need to wrap our minds around is that Jesus' humility was on full display **before** He came to earth. Jesus has always been and will always be humble; He has never been and will never be arrogant. Paul doesn't use the term humility explicitly, but he is describing the preincarnate humility of Jesus when he writes this:

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

From eternity past Jesus existed in the "form" of God in the sense that He shared the same divine substance as God the Father. Although the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each had distinct roles in the accomplishment of our salvation, there was no sense of competitiveness or strife. Jesus was

completely content to allow God the Father to fulfill His role; Jesus was completely content and willing to fulfill His.

Paul's comment was that Jesus "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." Basically Jesus refused to cling to His heavenly prerogatives and say to the Father, "I'm not going down there while you stay up here!" No, He willingly left heaven to come to earth. In verse 7 Paul says that Jesus did just the opposite of grasping for "equality with God":

7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

Jesus didn't empty Himself of His divinity; He certainly limited Himself by taking on humanity, but He didn't cease to become divine. Rather, He emptied Himself *by* "taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." Jesus often reminded His disciples that He didn't come to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many.

A core aspect of humility is *absolute submission to the will of the Father*. Jesus demonstrated that by becoming one of us. Even though it is true to say that God "sent His one and only Son" (John 3:16), it is also true to say that Jesus willingly took on flesh and blood. He willingly became one of us so that He could die for us. In relation to God the Father, Jesus demonstrated humility because He demonstrated absolute submission. He wanted what God the Father wanted.

When we bow in absolute submission before God we are only imitating Christ who willingly laid aside His heavenly prerogatives and become one of us. If you want a glimpse of your own pride, one of the things you can do is ask, "What area(s) of my life are not submitted to the will of God?" There was no pride in Jesus because He fully submitted to the will of God.

Jesus' Humility on Earth (Philippians 2:8) This verse describes the ultimate act of Jesus "considering others as more important than Himself."

8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Having fully identified Himself with humanity by taking on flesh and blood, Jesus "humbled Himself by becoming obedient." Humility always involves obedience; pride always involves disobedience to the will of God. In Jesus' case, obedience meant giving His life as a substitute for ours; it meant obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross (with its' shame and excruciating pain).

Remember that we're not merely supposed to admire the humility of Jesus; we are supposed to have this same attitude in ourselves that we see in Him. When Jesus spoke about discipleship – being apprenticed to Him as a learner in the kingdom – He spoke in these very terms: taking up the cross daily and following Him. Discipleship involves denying our own desires and will in favor of God's. Since discipleship involves radical obedience, discipleship is really an expression of humility. Instead saying, "I am lord of my own life and I'll think whatever I want,

say whatever I want, and do whatever I want,” a disciple humbles him/herself by becoming obedient. We see that type of obedience in Jesus.

Let’s read verses 9 through 11 because they tell us the “rest of the story.”

9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In a unique sense Jesus was exalted after His earthly humility. He was declared the Son of God through the resurrection. He was declared the Lord of Lords by being exalted to the right hand of the Father. One day every single person who has ever lived anywhere will acknowledge Jesus as such – whether through willing submission or through forced submission. Jesus’ exaltation is unique, but at the same time His experience illustrates that God humbles those who exalt themselves and exalts those who humble themselves.

Let’s consider one more expression of Jesus’ humility:

Jesus’ Humility toward Us (Matthew 11:28-30) In Matthew 11 Jesus makes a comment about His own humility that should both draw us to Him and make us want to be like Him (in relation to humility).

28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. 30 "For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

This is an invitation to discipleship. Jesus invites weary, burdened people to learn from Him how to live in the Kingdom of God. People are weary and burdened by many things: their own sins, the sins of others against them, and the normal disappointments of this life. You can probably think of things that have worn you down, things that make it hard for you to enjoy this life.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t promise, “If you come to Me, all your problems will disappear and you will never be weary and burdened again.” No, Jesus promises, “I will give you *rest*.” As you know, rest is different than sleep; you can sleep and sleep and sleep and not experience rest. Rest is a deep, abiding peace/shalom. Jesus claims that weary, burdened people can find rest when they become His disciples. The imagery is of yoking ourselves to Jesus. Just like two oxen are yoked together so that they pull together in the same direction, when we take Jesus’ yoke upon ourselves, we learn from Him and go His direction. The rest that Jesus offers isn’t inactivity; it’s a type of peace that comes from a rather strenuous lifestyle of discipleship.

Jesus makes the offer of discipleship so very inviting when He says, “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” The Pharisees who were harsh and self-serving; if you took their yoke upon you you’d become more weary and burdened. Not so with Jesus’ yoke because He is gentle and humble in heart. He doesn’t just act humble on occasion. He wasn’t merely humble for 33 years and now He’s harsh and arrogant toward us. He is humble *in*

heart. And Jesus' heart is the command and control center of His life. He is humble by nature. He always looks out for our personal interests (Phil. 2:4) in this life. In that sense He is a good Shepherd for our souls.

In **summary**, we've seen the humility of Christ from three different angles. First, we've seen the pre-incarnate humility of Christ; as an act of humility Jesus was willing to leave perfect fellowship with the Father and become one of us. Second, we saw the humility of Jesus on earth; He humbled Himself through obedience, even death on a cross. Third, we saw the ongoing humility of Jesus in the way He relates to His disciples; He is gentle and humble in heart.

Jesus' humility is the benchmark for our humility. Paul wrote, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." If we take seriously Paul's directive, it would be a huge mistake to think, "I need to **act** a little bit more humble. . ." or "I really shouldn't let my pride show through quite as much. . ." No, at the center of our being we actually need to be "gentle and humble in heart." We need the Spirit of Christ to produce the humility of Christ within us.

As I've studied and thought about the humility of Christ, I've noticed my own pride like never before. I've noticed how **conditionally** I submit to God at times, how I often don't really consider others as more important than myself, and the tendency to be critical and harsh instead of gentle and humble in heart. Once it's on your mind, it's not that hard to notice your pride. But noticing your pride doesn't mean that you're humble.

As William Law's comment (quoted at the first of the message) suggests, we need to understand, desire, guard, and pursue humility. Here are two suggestions in light of the Scriptures we've considered today. First, ***Dwell on the humility of Jesus (especially the cross)***. John Stott wrote:

Every time we look at the cross Christ seems to be saying to us, "I am here because of you. It is your sin I am bearing, your curse I am suffering, your debt I am paying, your death I am dying." Nothing in history or in the universe cuts us down to size like the cross. All of us have inflated views of ourselves, especially in self-righteousness, until we have visited a place called Calvary. It is there, at the foot of the cross, that we shrink to our true size. (*The Message of Galatians*, p. 179)

Carl Henry asked, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" One of the most practical things we can do to cultivate humility is to dwell on the cross of Christ.

Second, ***Notice how Jesus is "gentle and humble in heart" in His dealings with you.*** Jesus' teachings are recorded for us so that we'll take them seriously and take them personally. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that He is gentle and humble in heart so that they wouldn't misinterpret what He said and did. The same is true for us. As we follow Christ we need to be careful to notice that He is gentle and humble in heart: He always looks out for our personal interests. If you pay attention, you will notice how Jesus speaks tenderly to you – through Scripture, through music, through creation, through circumstances. And even when He disciplines you, you can be sure that He's not trying to crush you; He is bringing healing into your life. I am certain that Jesus doesn't merely want us to know theoretically that He is gentle and humble in heart; He wants us to experience it firsthand.