

He Humbled Himself

Philippians 2:5-11

Series: “Christmas in the Epistles” (Christmas Series 2020)

Preaching Date: December 6, 2020

Worship: “O Come, O Come, Immanuel”

Key Sentence: In the incarnation God the Son humbled himself
and God the Father exalted him

Outline:

I. Humbled in the incarnation (Philippians 2:5-7)

II. Humbled on the cross (Philippians 2:8)

III. Exalted in the resurrection victory (Philippians 2:9-10)

Philippians 2:5–11 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

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

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

He Humbled Himself Philippians 2:5-11

Edward the eighth was the oldest son of King George the fifth of Great Britain. Born in 1894, he became Prince of Wales in 1911, and becoming the most traveled and popular future king England had ever had. But on one of his trips the bachelor prince had met and fallen in love with Wallis Warfield Simpson: an American, a commoner, a divorced and remarried woman who on his behalf sought a second divorce. Then, in early 1936, Edward's father died and he became king. He wanted to marry Wallis Simpson, but neither the people nor the parliament of England could sanction such a marriage, nor did they trust her. So, to avoid a constitutional crisis, Edward the Eighth, King of England and Wales and the still vast British Empire, set aside his crown and stepped down from the throne on December 11, 1936. Six months later he married Simpson, whom he called "the woman I love."

What kind of love is it that will give up crown and throne, position and honor, for the sake of someone far lower in public status, esteem and respect? It could be called Christlike love. For if Edward astounded the world when he gave up the throne out of love, all the more should the world be astounded to see the king of glory, the Son of God give up his throne, position and honor the sake of the undeserving and sinful. If Edward is remembered with some respect because he gave up the crown for love, all the more should Jesus be worshiped because he humbled himself in the incarnation and on the cross.

This is the first week of our Christmas series. None of the messages this month will be taken from the gospel accounts of Christmas. All will be taken from Epistles, Paul's letters or John's letters, from places where we are told why: why the Son was sent, why he came and what his purpose and mission were. The series is called "Christmas in the Epistles," and as I said we will start in one of the great incarnation passages of the New Testament, Philippians 2:5-11. We'll see in this passage that in the incarnation God the Son humbled himself and God the Father exalted him. He humbled himself in the incarnation, he humbled himself on the cross, but in the resurrection victory he was exalted forever and worthy of worship. Let's read the passage. Then we'll look at how he humbled himself in the incarnation. Philippians 2:5-11. *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

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Paul opened the letter to the Philippians with a prayer and an update on his ministry. At the end of chapter 1 he began the main content of the letter by asking the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He amplifies this by saying, in chapter 2 verse 3: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” At this point Paul decides that he wants to illustrate selflessness and humility and looking out for the interests of others. Like some preachers, he decides to use a hymn as his illustration. This may in fact be a fragment of a hymn of early church worship and doctrine. Or it may simply be a very poetic fragment of Paul’s own thought. Either way, it is used to reinforce his theme by pointing to the example of Christ.

“Have this mind among yourselves” he says. He’s referring to the mental embrace of humility and selflessness that he just described. “Have this mind . . . which is yours in Christ Jesus.” You are to have this attitude because you are to have inherited it through your relationship with Christ Jesus. The New International Version, NIV, I think, does a better job translating this “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Your attitude of humility and selflessness should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Paul launches into this great description of the incarnation and suffering of Jesus in order to reinforce the humility and selflessness that should be the norm for us.

“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” The NIV says “who, being in very nature God.” The New American Standard says “he existed in the form of God.” What is this saying about Jesus? Is this speaking about his essence, that he was in very nature or essence, God? Or is it speaking about his form, that he looked and behaved like God? The answer to the two questions is yes. The Greek work, *morphe*, expresses both essence and image. A *morphe* is a copy indistinguishable from the original, like it through and through, doing the same things as the original. If I wrote an expanded paraphrase, I would probably combine the choices made by the translators. “Who, having the very nature of God, and existing in the very form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.” That last phrase sounds in the English translations like Jesus might at one time have been yearning for full equality with God and thought about seizing it. But the Greek doesn’t really imply that.

Rather it implies that Christ possessed that equality and chose not to hang on to it. So, further amplified: “Who, having the very nature of God and existing in the very form of God, did not regard his being equal with God in glory and majesty as a prize and treasure to be held fast.” In other words, Jesus embraced humility. He was willing to give up the perks of Godhood, unwilling to hang on to the majesty and glory that was rightfully his as God the Son.

Instead, verse 7, he “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” The first phrase of this verse, he emptied himself or he made himself nothing, was the subject of a controversy that has now grown kind of old. It revolved around the question “what did he empty himself of?” Did he empty himself of Godhood, become only a man? Or if not, what did he empty himself of? It’s clear from the life and work of Jesus that he didn’t empty himself of Godhood, though he did at times limit his expression of deity. But he couldn’t have emptied himself of Godhood and still be God. Don Carson’s commentary, explains it this way: “An animal that waddles like a porcupine, has the quills of a porcupine, and in general has all the attributes of a porcupine is a porcupine. If you take away all the attributes of a porcupine, whatever you have left is not a porcupine. Likewise, if the Son is stripped of all the attributes of deity, it is difficult to see how he can in any meaningful sense still claim to be deity.” Let me continue to quote Carson, because he says it so well: “The expression ‘he emptied himself,’ far from meaning he emptied himself of something, is idiomatic for ‘he gave up all his rights.’ NIV: ‘he made himself nothing.’ Not literally nothing, of course, for then he would cease to exist. Rather, he abandoned his rights; he became a nobody.”

Don’t you love Carson’s words: Jesus became a nobody. He divested himself of the glory and majesty and honor of the Godhead. He “took the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” Being in very nature God, he took on the very nature of a servant. Just as a porcupine has certain attributes that make it a porcupine, so a servant has certain attributes and attitudes that make him a servant, and in the same way one who is God has certain attributes and attitudes. Just as Jesus once had attitudes and attributes and honors as God, but now he has added the attributes and attitudes and humiliation of a servant. He himself said: “The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Are you following this? This is a downward movement. God is coming down to our level. God the Son made himself a nobody: made himself nothing, became a slave, and was made in human likeness. At Christmas we celebrate his incarnation as a human being. That’s what was happening when Mary encountered the angel and the Holy Spirit. That’s what was happening there in the stable of Bethlehem.

God was made man, born in the likeness of men. This doesn't mean that he was just made to look like a man, but that he was the same thing as a man. The Greek word translated "likeness" literally means the same thing. He became the same thing as a man. Or as the Apostle John said: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Charles Wesley wrote: Our God, contracted to a span - incomprehensibly made man." More than that, because he made himself a nobody, he was born in obscurity, born in poverty, born without pomp and without circumstance. I read someplace that even a star, an angel choir, and gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, were a poor exchange for the glories of the throne room of heaven. Few knew, and even fewer cared about this one lonely birth. It's as if the President of the United State were to quietly quit, and take a job as a greasy mechanic in a little shop off the main road. It's as if some honored intellectual or scientist were to leave his job and go full time behind the counter at Stop 'n Go. Jesus made himself nobody. This was humility-in-action, worthy of our worship and of our imitation. If Jesus, being who he was, could do what he did and become who he became, how much more should we empty ourselves to serve others.

Yet that was not the lowest point in this downward movement. Verse 8: *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* This is the climax, the high point of the low point. If it wasn't already humiliation enough to have become a man, this Jesus humbled himself even after becoming a man. Adam had lifted himself up to be like God. He had disobeyed. Jesus the creator lowered himself to the status of a creature, and he obeyed perfectly. He humbled himself. Soren Kierkegaard said of verse 8: "Christ humbled himself—not, he was humbled . . . There was no one in heaven or on earth or in the abyss that could humble him! He humbled himself. In every humiliation he suffered it was absolutely necessary that he himself assent and confirm and submit to that humiliation. This is infinite superiority over suffering, but at the same time also suffering infinitely more intense in kind."

Compared to every other man who ever lived or ever would live, Jesus placed his will and his actions totally in the hands of another, totally in the hands of the Father. But what was the Father's will? That this first and only perfect man should die as if a sinner. Jesus was the only one whose slate was ever clean, whose record was flawless. He didn't need to die for his own sins, but he choose in obedience to die for ours. When the Father said "Sacrifice yourself so that I might redeem a people." Jesus said "Not my will but thine be done." He demonstrated perfect obedience, obedience that led him to the cross.

This is the last downward step. Not only did die, but he died as one accursed, shameful in both Roman and Jewish eyes. Carson again: “Suppose you were to place as a central symbol in your church a collage glorifying Auschwitz, its starvation barracks, gas chambers and crematoria. Wouldn’t everybody be horrified? In the first century, the cross had something of that symbolic value. Scholars have gone through every instance of the word ‘cross’ that has come down to us from about the time of Jesus, and shown how ‘crucifixion’ and ‘cross’ invariably evince horror. In Rome crucifixion could be used only for slaves, rebels, and anarchists; it was considered too cruel for a Roman citizen, so shameful that the word itself was avoided in polite conversation.” But here is Paul, boldly insisting that the Lord Christ, whom we serve made himself a nobody, became human, became in fact a slave - and then humbled himself further by obeying his heavenly father and allowing himself to be killed in the odious, revolting death of the cross. The language is meant to shock.”

Many have tried to capture the depth, the irony, the paradox of such love. One of the first was St. Augustine, the great early church theologian. “The Word of the Father, by whom all time was created, was made flesh and was born in time for us. He, without whose divine permission no day completes its course, wished to have one day for His human birth. In the bosom of His Father He existed before all the cycles of ages; born of an earthly mother, He entered upon the course of the years. The Maker of man became man that He, Ruler of the stars, might be nourished at the breast; that He, the Bread, might be hungry; that He, the Fountain, might thirst; that He, the Light, might sleep; that He, the Way, might be wearied by the journey; that He, the Truth, might be accused by false witnesses; that He, the Judge of the living and dead, might be tried by a mortal judge; that He, Justice, might be condemned by the unjust; that He, Discipline, might be scourged with whips; that He, the Foundation, might be suspended upon a cross; that Courage might be weakened; that Security might be wounded; that Life might die. To endure these and similar indignities for us, to free us, unworthy creatures, He who existed as the Son of God before all ages, without a beginning, deigned to become the Son of Man in these recent years. He did this although He who submitted to such great evils for our sake had done no evil and although we, the recipients of so much good had done nothing to merit these benefits.”

Isn’t it right to worship one who humbled himself in the incarnation? Who humbled himself on the cross? Isn’t it right to worship one who was exalted by the Father. Philippians 2:9-11 *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

If the movement was downward in the first four verses, it is upward in these. In fact, the upward movement is a consequence of the humiliation. Verse 9 starts with “Therefore God exalted him.” It was because of his self-emptying, because of his obedience, his death on the cross that God the Father exalted him. The implication of this is that God valued highly what had been done. God highly approved of this self-sacrifice, highly approved of this death. Why? Because by it Jesus redeemed for himself a people. God loved us so much he thought it worthwhile, even wonderful, for his Son to sacrifice himself on our behalf. God loved sinful, fallen people, and longed for them to be redeemed from sin, forgiven, and brought into fellowship with holiness. So the Father exalted the Son because the Son had given himself in love for us. Incredible.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place. Implied in this little phrase is first, the resurrection, and second the ascension. He could not have been exalted if he had not first been raised from death. The resurrection victory was in fact the first step in his exaltation. The ascension was the second step, exalted to the position of authority and honor at the right hand of the Father almighty. That’s the way it is used in the New Testament. God raised him from the dead, exalted him to his own right hand, and gave him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. When Paul says that God gave Jesus “the name that is above every name,” he is saying much more than that the Father “renames” him. In Hebrew and Greek, names were more than convenient labels. What is meant here is that God assigns Jesus a name that reflects what he has achieved and that acknowledges who he is. But even in that sense Jesus has many names. In Isaiah 9:6, that great Christmas text, we hear some of those names. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

But the name Paul has in mind is one that every tongue will someday confess: that Jesus is Lord. Remember that “Lord” is the word that the Hebrew people used when they were talking about God’s personal name, Yahweh. Isaiah 42:8: “I am the Lord, that is my name.” I am Yahweh, the eternal one. But when that name was rendered in Greek, it was translated as “kyrios” Now, Paul says: “Jesus is kyrios.” Jesus is Lord as Yahweh is Lord. Jesus is recognized as having this same “lordship,” this same status with his Father. Not that he didn’t have it before, but now he has it as the God-man, as the crucified and risen Redeemer. It was for proclaiming this lordship for Jesus that the early church was often persecuted. Rome claimed Caesar as lord, but the Christians knew that they could only bow to one true Lord, the risen Christ, Jesus.

God had said: "I am the Lord, that is my name, I will not give my glory to another."

And he has not given his glory to another: he has given it to Jesus! Jesus himself said that all will honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. Someday every knee will bow and every tongue confess the truth that Jesus is Lord. Paul is alluding again to Isaiah, who says in chapter 45: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. ²³By 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.' ²⁴"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. ²⁵In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory."

But if Isaiah's words apply to Jesus, as Paul affirms, Jesus must be God. Only to God does every knee bow, every tongue confess. Even so, Jesus is distinct from God the Father. It is God the Father who has exalted Jesus to the highest place and the confession "Jesus is Lord" is to the glory of God the Father. Two persons, Jesus Christ and the Father, are said to be God in this passage, but the Son eternally glorifies the Father just as the Father eternally exalts the Son.

Now the fact that every knee will bow cannot mean that everyone will be saved. In the Isaiah 45 passage, although everyone confesses that in the Lord alone are righteousness and strength, and though everyone bows the knee, nevertheless, "to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him." So also here in Philippians 2. Every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, but it does not follow that every tongue will confess out of happy submission. All those in heaven, angels and archangels will gladly bow before Him. All those on earth who have confessed his name will also fall adoring to their knees. But those on earth who have never trusted in him will still bow. He will place his implacable hand of judgment on their shoulders, and force them to their knees. And even those lower than the earth - Satan and all his demons - will on that day be forced to confess that he is and has been their Lord, sovereign over even the forces of evil as omnipotent God.

So we have a choice: either we repent and confess him by faith as Lord now, or we confess him in shame and terror on the last day. Each of us has this choice. Will you bow willingly now, or will you bow in shame later? Think now for a few moments about what we have said. Jesus has humbled himself. He was made a nobody in the incarnation. He lived as a servant. He died a cruel and shameful death. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, not only giving up his status as God, but taking on himself the wrath due our sin, and taking that stain, that guilt, that punishment, so that we undeserving sinners might be redeemed.

He lowered himself, but God raised him up. God exalted him so that he is now Lord and worthy of worship. And for the same reasons that God exalted him we exalt him today in our hearts. It's because of his incarnation, being made man, it's because of his sinless life, and undeserved death, his substitution for us that we meet with him today in praise and thanksgiving. It is because he humbled himself that he is exalted, raised up to life, raised up to the highest place. And we with him, his redeemed, his rescued, his beloved. When we celebrate communion together we remember these things. And we worship.

Edward the VIII laid aside his crown because he loved one woman, a woman who in the eyes of the world did not deserve his love. Jesus laid aside his crown because he loved us, and we clearly did not deserve his love. But he went further. He gave his life for us, that we might live.

Joseph Bayly, an author and evangelist, wrote this prayer, with which I close. Praise God for Christmas. Praise Him for the incarnation, for the word made flesh. I will not sing of shepherds watching flocks on frosty nights, or angel choristers. I will not sing of a stable bare in Bethlehem, or lowing oxen, wise men trailing star with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Tonight I will sing praise to the Father who stood on heaven's threshold and said farewell to his Son as he stepped across the stars to Bethlehem and Jerusalem - to the manger and the cross. And I will sing praise to the infinite, eternal Son, who became most finite, a baby who would one day be executed for my crime. Praise him in the heavens, Praise him in the stable, Praise him in my heart.