

The Path of self-sacrifice is the path to glory

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 January 2025

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] Now let's turn together to that passage that we read, especially to chapter 2 on page 1179. It'll be really helpful to have your Bible open. We're going to look at a few different passages to get a flavor for the whole book. Our theme this evening is this one, the path of self-sacrifice is the path to glory. So in the early weeks of January, we're going to do one more. We're thinking about the theme of glory, but this time thinking about the glory of Jesus, but how he got there by the path of self-sacrifice. That phrase actually comes from, it's the closing sentence of a B.B. Warfield sermon called Imitating the Incarnation, a wonderful sermon presenting this beautiful portrait of Jesus, taking in his early years through his ministry to his death, giving us Jesus as the example of self-sacrificing unselfishness, describing that way of life as the most divinely beautiful life that we can lead. And I imagine when we stop to think about that, we probably agree. Those who we typically tend to admire are those who are ready to humbly serve others, those who are quick to practice self-forgetfulness to serve other people. Those are characteristics that we typically admire, though there are others that grab our attention as well also. Well, this is where Paul takes us to a life of unselfish, giving for others, sacrificial love. And he shows it principally using Jesus as the model, but he also gives us later on in chapter 2, another two church leaders, Timothy and Epaphroditus, to help to flesh it out for us still further. And Paul's goal, which is now our goal as we spend this time together, is that we would see this path of Jesus, this path of self-sacrifice for others, as the path that we would follow to the glory of God. So let's get into our text. But before we get to the wonderful truths, we need to begin with the problem. There's a specific problem that Paul's letter addresses, but before we get to the specifics, just generally to recognize that as much as we talk about how wonderful it is to see self-sacrifice and to be other-centered, we need to recognize, don't we, there's another competing value system, there's another ideal that's proposed to us, the one that in effect says, me first. The one that says, well, it's my voice, my preferences, my agenda over yours. That instinct to struggle and to compete, to be number one in a variety of ways in life. And into that tendency, to think about it specifically, what's going on in Philippi, what we begin to see under the surface, there is this tendency that's beginning to emerge.

One of the things about Paul, because he's a missionary, he doesn't write systematic theology, he's always writing theology for a particular context. He gives us these wonderful truths for a particular reason. One thing that's really important to say is that Paul loves this church.

He loves all the church, but I think he loves this church in a really profound way. We can hear this in a few different places. We can hear it right at the beginning, verse 3, I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy. And he gives some reasons.

I have joy because of your partnership in the gospel. So this is a church who's been giving sacrificially to help Paul in his ministry, says that in chapter 4. He sees God at work, and he has joy. He's confident that the God who's begun a good work will carry on to completion until the day of Christ. In chapter 4, he'll say to them at the beginning, therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord, dear friends. So he loves this church. And because he loves this church, and because he's a pastor, he also wants them to be alert to the danger signs that he sees developing.

We see it through the text. There is the danger. Maybe the most famous one, if we're aware of the book, is the danger of personal disputes. So chapter 4, verse 2, we're introduced to these two women.

[4 : 40] I plead with Iodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. So there is personal disputes happening. Chapter 2, verse 14, we get another sign of it when Paul writes, do everything without grumbling or arguing. And we also have heard it, the seeds of disunity, there at the beginning of chapter 2. Why does Paul say, be like-minded, have the same love, be one in spirit and of one mind? Because that's not always how they're living.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. They're being tempted to live in exactly that way. Not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of the others. That's beginning to be on display in the church. And so he wants to bring the gospel into this setting. And so the antidote that he presents is Christ. That the church would keep their eyes on Christ. That they would have the mind of Christ. And that they would then focus, as they have been, on the spread of the gospel.

That they would have as their prime motive, the glory of God. So that's the problem that Paul begins to see developing. So the next thing that we're going to see is the path that Christ walked.

It's most likely the most famous part of Paul's letter. It's a wonderful section. Verse 5 to 11. But before we get into the amazing theology, notice there's a very practical reason for sharing these wonderful truths about Jesus. Verse 5, in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. So sometimes we consider this, you know, the wonderful theology about Jesus.

And we forget Paul's telling it for a reason. Because he wants to deal with this disunity, these personal disputes, this grumbling and complaining. He wants it to change their relationships with one another. To have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. The mindset of Christ Jesus who, remember what he says in 2 Corinthians 9, this is Christ who, though he was rich, had all the glory of heaven. Yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

[7 : 11] It's kind of the same theme in different words here. B.B. Warfield in that sermon, Imitating the Incarnation, he suggests this is the nature and pattern of the Christian life. This is to influence Christian thinking. The mindset of Christ Jesus and the pattern of Jesus' life.

The path that Jesus' life took. There's two different phases. In verses 5 to 8, we see the path of humiliation. Notice with me two ways in which Jesus is described as being in the very nature of someone. So, he is in the very nature of God or in the form of God. And he is also the one who took the very nature or came in the form of a servant. So, this idea of the very nature or form simply means to have the essential qualities of something. So, this Bible is a book in its essential form.

It has pages. It has a cover. It has bindings. In all the essential qualities, it has the form of a book. When Paul says Jesus is in the form of God, he's saying he shares all the essential qualities that make God God. Everything that makes God distinct from all other created beings, all the other created spiritual beings, those essential qualities are true of Jesus. Everything that we read about the Lord God in the Old Testament is true of Jesus. And so, Paul wants us to understand very clearly that it is the one who is truly God who became one of us. He is in very nature God. But notice that second thing. He took the very nature of a servant or he took the form of a servant. And that means two things. First of all, it means that he took the essential qualities of a human being. He didn't just appear to be a man. You know, he didn't hover six inches above the earth. He wasn't immune to suffering. But it means more than he became a man, it means that essential to Jesus' life was that he served. He had the exact qualities of a servant. It wasn't just a show.

It wasn't just part-time service defined Jesus' life. It says there in verse 7, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.

So, you have this wonderful thing where you have the idea of Jesus lowering himself, becoming, as it were, nothing by adding to himself true humanity to true divinity. Jesus, fully man, fully God. And why did he do it? It becomes clear that he did it because of love. Selfless, sacrificial love is the reason behind the incarnation. So, you've got those two forms. And then there's this amazing question of Jesus' equality with God. So, verse 6 again, Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Jesus isn't clinging to equality as a prize. He's not going to use his position selfishly. Rather, he is ready to make himself nothing.

[11 : 03] Rather, in love, he humbled himself for a life of loving service. Verse 8, he humbled himself in order to live a life of true obedience. True obedience that would lead him all the way to death, even to the shameful death of the cross. The one who is equal with God was willing to humble himself to suffer and die. And to think about the logic of what Paul is saying here. If we could ask Jesus, Jesus, which matters more to you?

Claiming equality with God or showing sacrificial love? Which matters more, seeking your ways as God or meeting the needs of your people as a servant? What Paul is saying, Jesus chooses to love and to serve.

Of course, it doesn't stop him being equal with God. But he chooses service and love. And notice that Jesus has freedom in that choosing. Notice in verse 7, he made himself nothing. He wasn't forced to, he chose to.

Here is Jesus, God's agent in creation, who chooses in love to write himself into the story of creation in order to become the suffering servant, the servant king, the savior who would rescue us, who would shield us from the judgment of God by taking that judgment for us.

this is Jesus on his path. Well, having followed the path down, Paul now traces the upward journey in verses 9 to 11. And notice as well, as verse 9 begins, who's responsible? Notice that it's God the Father that takes charge at this moment.

[13 : 14] In this exaltation, in this lifting up of Jesus, he doesn't do that himself. God the Father does it. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place. We've been in Revelation. Jesus is given the exalted throne. The Lamb who was slain is the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered, and now sits at the Father's right hand receiving all the worship of heaven.

He has given an exalted name. He's given the name that's above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.

All the saints in heaven, the angels in heaven, they all recognize Jesus is supreme. The God-man who sits on the throne of the universe. But there is a day coming when everyone on this earth, everyone who has ever lived, will recognize Jesus as the sovereign king.

Now, we need to understand that some will recognize and receive him as joy, the people of God. This is it. This is the climax. This is our hope. But for some, they will recognize Jesus as king with all power and authority with that sense of dread, calling on the rocks and the hills, fallen us, because we don't want to face the wrath of the king. He's got an exalted name, and he receives exalted worship.

Verse 11, every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[15 : 05] It's the beauty of those songs, those worship scenes of revelation, a suffering persecuted, Christian church encouraged to remember the beauty, the glory, the authority of King Jesus.

To recognize that as we join our voices in worship, we are joining with the saints and with the angels. Jesus acknowledged as Lord and as God with the result, end of verse 11, that glory belongs to God the Father.

There is glory for God the Father in that journey of Jesus' humiliation to exaltation. Paul's point, all that rich theology, Jesus' mindset is to be our mindset.

Jesus' path is to be the one that we walk down as his people. Sometimes that journey is to be the one that we walk down as our lives. Sometimes that journey is described as the U-shaped pattern of Jesus' life.

Suffering first, humiliation first, then glory and exaltation. That's the pattern for our life also. For the church to continue in that fruitful gospel partnership that Paul celebrates.

[16 : 29] For this church to continue in that gospel partnership that Paul celebrates. For this church to continue in its mission for this people, for us as well to live lives worthy of Christ. This is the path we need to choose.

The path of self-sacrifice as the path to glory. Not seeking our glory, which is where the grumbling and the disputing comes from, but pursuing the glory of God.

To help illustrate that further, let's turn just for a few minutes to think about the pattern of Jesus' life that we have in the gospels. So let's think about the pattern of Jesus' life.

But before we think about Jesus' life, let's just stop for a moment and think about the tendency that we see within the human heart. A tendency that we see in extreme cases, often with people with extreme amounts of power.

Think about some of the famous and infamous tyrants, dictators, emperors of history. Think of a Stalin or a Hitler or a Pol Pot. What do we see from those figures in history?

[17 : 44] That desire in the human heart to grab power at all costs. To seek glory for oneself at all costs. To be ready to exploit a population.

To kill millions. To make sure that they can stay on top. And we see the abuse of power in order to serve self.

You read your history textbooks and you'll see these dictators will be living in the lap of luxury while the population is starving in misery.

There is something within the human heart that aspires to be number one, that looks to gain glory and power for oneself. Where leadership, a position of authority, becomes a way to assert one's own agenda on other people.

How very different is the pattern of Jesus' life? So remember, the Jesus we are considering is one who is infinitely and eternally more powerful than any leader in history.

[18 : 54] He is the creator of the universe. He is the king of kings and lord of lords. He, above all, could say, my rights.

But the nature of his life was one of self-sacrificing unselfishness. And we see it captured through the gospels. Even though we don't get much about Jesus' childhood, even what we do get reminds us that as the son of God, as he came into this world, he was willing to be subject and obedient to his human parents, Mary and Joseph.

Those parents were not perfect. We know that Mary was sometimes confused and doubted some of the claims about Jesus in the course of his life. But Jesus was a son, obedient to his earthly parents.

Again, we don't see much of him as a youth, but we do know that age 12, he is found in the temple. He is spending time in God's word. He is seeking to learn and grow. And he says to his distressed parents, didn't you know I must be about my father's business?

That pattern that we see in Jesus' life of obedience to his father's will. But we also know that during Jesus' youth, he would have worked as a carpenter at his father's side.

[20 : 17] Of course, it becomes so much more clear in his ministry. The first event of Jesus' public ministry sees him willing to come to the River Jordan to be baptized, to stand in the place of sinners, to receive a baptism for the repentance of sins.

Jesus didn't need it, but he knew his people did, and he came to stand in our place. And then Jesus was moved from the baptism into the wilderness to be tempted, and there he was hungry.

And the devil said, you should use your power in order to make bread. And Jesus refused to use his own power for his own ends at the temptation. And as his ministry begins, it is clearly announced in the Gospels that here is the promised king.

Here is the anointed son of man. And yet, what do we see him doing? We see him serving the sick. We see him feeding the hungry. And we see him reaching out and extending grace to those who are spiritually lost and needy.

When his disciples have no time for children, he welcomes children. When others would swerve around outcasts and foreigners, he positively enjoys having fellowship with them.

[21 : 32] Those who have low reputation so often become honored within the stories of the Gospel by this king, this servant king, this one who had been so low as to wash his disciples' feet.

And anticipating that reality of going to the cross, facing the shameful death on the cross in order to wash us from our sins. And when Jesus died, the eternal son of God, as he became one of us, as he humbled himself, he had nothing of his own.

He was stripped naked. And he was buried in a borrowed tomb. The pattern of Jesus' life was one of self-giving sacrifice.

And because he took the form of a servant throughout his whole life, loving and obeying the Father, faithful to the Father's plan of salvation, loving and serving a lost and broken world in order to redeem, he is now exalted to the highest place, receiving the worship of heaven.

And Paul reminds us, we worship Jesus, and he is our example to follow. So what does it look like to imitate the incarnation, to borrow B.B. Warfield's phrase?

[22 : 51] What does it look like to pursue a life of sacrificial, loving service to others? So let's finish there. Let's think about what are the principles that we can apply from this section of Philippians.

So we're back on the ground in Philippi. So Paul has been diagnosing this underlying problem within the church that's sometimes bubbling up on the surface. And we need to recognize, actually, it's a heart problem.

It's not just a heart problem for Philippi. It's also a heart problem that we can all struggle with. Here's a church that's in danger of taking their eyes off their gospel privileges.

So at the beginning of chapter 2, he's inviting them to remember, you should be encouraged because you are united with Christ.

You should find comfort because you have been loved by God. You do commonly share in the Spirit with your brothers and sisters. God has shown in Jesus tenderness and compassion to you in the gospel.

[23 : 59] These are truths that belong to Jesus' church. But what he's beginning to see are those seeds of disunity, the signs of self-interest and selfish ambition, and the conflict that comes when we don't value others above ourselves.

And Paul knows that these problems, they could derail their worship. They could derail their mission. It could derail the spread of the gospel.

Because as Christians and as a church, we're called to represent Christ, not just with our words, but the way that we live. There should be a correspondence. And so if we are representing this Savior, then the life of the Christians should be like Jesus, one of self-giving, sacrificial, focused on others' love.

And so Paul brings them the gospel to bring them back to Jesus. So the antidote is the gospel of Christ. And so he says to this church, and he says to us, here is what to do if we are to follow the path of Jesus.

He says, pursue unity for the sake of Jesus. So he's given us Jesus as the wonderful example of sacrificial love, but he also gives us two other men, Timothy and Epaphroditus.

[25 : 30] Timothy is introduced there in verse 19. Verse 20 is striking. I have no one else like Timothy who will show genuine concern for your welfare, for everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

So Timothy is a wonderful example of following Christ by putting others first. And then we get Epaphroditus. So this guy, Epaphroditus, was sent by the Philippians to bring a financial gift to Paul, even when others were staying far away from Paul, because it was risky.

He was imprisoned by this stage. It was risky to identify with Paul. But Epaphroditus is risking everything, and he's got sick, and the church was really worried about him, so Paul sends him back. Verse 29, he says, Welcome Epaphroditus in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ.

The life of Epaphroditus was one of putting the gospel first, putting Jesus and his church first. And actually, Paul himself becomes a wonderful example of putting unity first, being willing to overlook wrongs for the sake of the gospel.

So in chapter 1, verse 12 to 18, you get this fascinating moment in the church where Paul basically says, Listen, I'm in prison, and while I'm in prison, there are people preaching the gospel.

[27 : 00] Some are preaching the gospel from really good motives, because they want people to meet Jesus, and they want to be saved. Other people are preaching the gospel to make life harder for Paul, to make life difficult for him in his chains.

He says, verse 18 though, What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and because of this, I rejoice.

Here's a wonderful example of someone who's saying no to self-interest, who's ready to overlook the bad motives of preachers, if only Jesus would get glory.

He can actually have joy, even when he's in prison. And so I think that the way that Paul speaks about Timothy and Epaphroditus and about himself, it reminds us that as the people of God, as a church, we are to be busy on the mission of making Jesus known, of pursuing God's glory, of that being our laser focus, so that we're willing to ignore those grumbles that we might have, that we would be willing to put aside personal agendas and personal disputes, because we want Jesus to be made much of.

So that's the first thing. The second thing to say is that we're invited to let Christ define what self-sacrifice looks like.

[28 : 33] Because I wonder whether there's a danger that we could overreact. We hear about self-sacrifice, we're called to sacrifice like Jesus, and we could become like monks. You know, we could punish ourselves, and we can, you know, kind of set ourselves off from anything good and everything pleasant, and we could just, you know, punish ourselves.

It could be a lifestyle of extreme Lent, you know, rigorous self-denial always. But notice that Jesus' pattern is never self-sacrifice as an end in itself.

He's not saying, be known for saying no to stuff. He says, be known for self-sacrifice for the sake of others. That's what brought Jesus into the world.

That's what took Jesus to the cross. And that's what will send us out into the world, to love and serve others, to love and serve one another, to share the good news of a loving, sacrificial Savior.

And the third thing is that we're invited simply to choose the path of Christ. There may always be a battle in our hearts at different times.

[29 : 47] Why am I not being noticed? Why should I serve that person again? How can I get glory in this moment? The gospel, the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we consider Him, as we're invited to choose the path of Christ, it is to see the one who came to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

It's to see the one who refused any other path to glory. When Satan tempted Him, here's a way to get instant fame. Do something dramatic. Here's a way to gain kingdoms without suffering.

Jesus always said no. He voluntarily, lovingly, chose the path of humility and unselfishness and self-sacrifice for us, for our salvation.

And it's this Jesus who calls us to follow that same U-shaped life, to be ready to go low for others, to humble ourselves, that in the fullness of God's time, He might exalt us.

So in light of our gospel privileges, which are many, and the book of Philippians has got so much to encourage us, let me encourage you to read the book of Philippians this week. And for the sake of the gospel and the glory of God, let's together choose this path, the path of self-sacrifice, as the path to glory.

[31 : 26] Let's pray together briefly. Let's pray.