

Philippians 2:5-11 (PM)

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Date: 15 May 2022

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[0 : 00] Perhaps a title for this talk tonight would be, The Humble Self-Giving Being of God Inspires and Empowers the Humble Self-Giving Being of His People.

It's really about a Christ hymn, and it invites us into a discussion of the next aspect of what it means to live joyfully as Christians.

Right before this passage, Paul talks about his joy being complete as we are like-minded, and then that is expounded for us in this passage, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, your mind should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

In other words, one of the greatest secrets to Christian joy is to have a focus on Christ, to have a focus on God, to have an orientation towards Him, a contemplation of Him, in which we both ironically discover who we are and yet are forgetful of who we are in our own selves.

So this is a wonderful passage. Concerning somewhere else where I once studied, nowhere near here, which would surely never be true of where I lecture now, people in that city would say, you can tell a so-and-so grad, but you can't tell them much.

[1 : 37] In other words, humility wasn't much in evidence. Humility is a grace that's very difficult, I think, to define.

It is that grace which, when you think you have it, you probably don't. As my Uncle Andrew from Scotland used to say, you can never be proud of your humility.

I have to say that preaching about this subject seems very dodgy, as one might assume that the preacher knows something about it, or at least that he thinks he knows something about it. It kind of reminds me of the story of a preacher who preached his heart out, and as the glorification of the worm ceremony happened, that is, as people were expressing their appreciation, someone said, that was a great sermon.

And when his wife got in the car, he said, you know, somebody told me that was a great sermon. How many great preachers do you think there are in the world, hun? And he said, there's one less than you think there is.

I found that good friends and Scottish culture are often good for keeping you humble. This is one grace, above all others, that you probably need to leave to community to decide upon, and not yourself.

[2 : 57] I have a very fond memory of a humble missionary that my father worked with in Angola. His name was George Wiseman from New Jersey. And all the missionaries called him six feet two of humility.

That's what he was like. And I do remember him as a child, precisely showing such great humility. I want to ask, how important is it to be humble?

Apparently, Paul thinks it's fairly important. He thinks our joy cannot be complete unless we discover humility, unless we enter into the mind of Christ. So one measure of how important humility is, is the fact that one of the greatest Christological passages in the whole of the New Testament was crafted to define and inspire and empower humility.

humility. This passage is about the embodiment of humility in God himself, and particularly in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The very form and lyrical beauty of the passage that portrays humility is utterly remarkable. The passage has actually been called the Christ hymn because its structure has a poetic rhythm and flow to it.

[4 : 21] Some commentators believe that Paul did not devise this hymn. He did not design this hymn. It was already present in the worship of the church. And he lifts it out and uses it for his writing.

Irrespective of who actually wrote it, New Testament scholar Marcus Bockmeier has said this, that everyone agrees on the fact that exalted, lyrical, quasi-credal language is employed in these verses.

And some scholars, I suppose, would prefer to call it a poem because we don't know that it was sung by anybody. But I am content to call it a hymn. It's, as far as I'm concerned, the Christ hymn. The content of that hymn and its place in context in the epistle highlight the importance of the notion of humility and therefore towards the transformation into joyful living that this epistle envisages. I have four Ps in my sermon tonight. Some of the old preachers I used to hear used to talk about putting Ps in your Peashooter. So there are four Ps in your Peashooter tonight. And the first is the primacy of the grace of humility.

[5 : 30] The priority, if you like, of the grace of humility. It is absolutely primary. It is mission-critical to Paul. It is crucial to the unity of the church.

And it is crucial to its mission. So it's not a peripheral grace. It's a chief grace. Culturally, this virtue was largely foreign in the Greco-Roman context of the Philippians.

It is still today, I think, a counter-cultural concept. And it seems increasingly so in contemporary politics and culture. Yet it could be argued that the pursuit of humility is the very principal paradigm for Christian transformation in this great epistle of transformation.

This epistle, as we mentioned a few weeks ago, is not an epistle of great moral correction or it's not of great doctrinal polemic.

There are no major theological errors in this church. The church at Philippi is possibly Paul's favorite church, if I may accuse him of favoritism.

[6 : 36] As we said a few weeks ago, again, Paul uses the vocative beloved. This is, you are my beloved. Only eight times in his epistles and three times in this very epistle, this little church in Philippi.

This epistle is an epistle of a friendship nature, even a family nature. He's at home with them. He loves them as family. And so these Christians are both doctrinally sound and they are also missionally engaged.

But Paul nevertheless anticipates some potential problems. Two things for this church that might cause them difficulty somewhere down the line. The first is the threat of emperor worship in this very Roman town with its very Roman work guilds, which were a looming threat to the well-being and the work of these Christians who insisted that only Jesus Christ is Lord.

So the character of this city is not humility. It is power. It is pride. And he thinks that he possibly needs to address humility because of that.

Secondly, in facing this threat, it would be very important for the church to be united, that there be a fellowship of a body of believers who are together.

[7 : 49] And there appear to be some little cracks in this perfect church. We all know there is no perfect church. And if you find the perfect church, don't join it because it won't be perfect anymore.

We know that. Chapter 4 tells us about two women who are at odds with one another, Lodias and Syntyche. Sometimes they've been called Odias and Syntyche.

And they're at odds with one another. And if they didn't humble themselves, this would make it very difficult for the church to stand together when that persecution came.

Now the line of argument that Paul uses begins back in chapter 2, verse 1. The therefore, at the beginning of chapter 2, verse 1, draws us back into the last verse of chapter 1, or verse 27 in particular, where he says, I want to commend you folks because you're living a life worthy of the gospel and you are contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

And then he carries that over into the discussion of unity in chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, and then on to what is necessary for corporate unity, that is personal humility. So you get the connection.

[9 : 01] Mission. Mission requires a church that's in unity. And unity requires people who are humble. That's the line of argument that Paul uses.

So this connection between mission and unity and humility makes humility a very important grace indeed. And if you want to continue to be that kind of missional community, Paul is saying, then you need to have the mind of Christ.

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, so that you are one together and so that you're effective missionally. That's the line. So first of all, the priority, the primacy of the grace of humility.

The P of primacy. Secondly, the P of the possibility. So what is humility? And is it even possible? And if so, how? Now I think this one is a great surprise.

That the possibility of humility lies in the strength of identity, not weakness of identity. Knowing who you are.

[10:04] This Christ hymn begins with these words, who being in very nature God. I really don't intend to give a Greek lesson tonight, but that word nature is a really important word because it's going to recur as the hymn develops.

So in being, first of all, the declaration that we have of this most humble person is that he knows he's God and that we know he is God.

What does this word mean? Being in the very form of God. It includes the fact that he is God, but especially it focuses on the fact that he exhibits that godness and exhibited that godness in his life here on earth.

He exhibited his deity when he was here with us. A little later down in this hymn, we read that this one who is in the form of God takes upon himself exactly the same word.

This is a miracle of this great passage. He takes upon himself the morphe, the form of a servant. And I think this is the most remarkable thing about this hymn, is that apparently servanthood and being God go together.

[11:20] In other words, this is a passage about God. As Graham Kendrick sings, wrote in his great song, Meekness and Majesty, at the end of it, he says, this is your God.

In other words, Jesus, who is the Son of God and who manifests that glory prior to coming into the world, empties himself, takes upon himself the form of a servant, but being a servant does not annihilate being God.

So in fact, servanthood and being self-giving is part of who God is. And similarly for you and I, the key to being humble is not denying who we are in the core, that is, the sons and daughters of the living God who are in Christ and like Christ and our identity is that which gives us the security also to be humble.

So here we have this great hymn declaring the deity of Christ and showing us that servanthood is not contrary to that. But in the middle of that, of those two phrases, come these amazing words. The Son of God emptied himself. Cannot tell you how many commentaries and papers have been written about this particular passage. What does it mean that when the Son of God came into the world, he emptied himself?

[12:44] There are three major opinions. Sorry, I have to bore down into this just a little bit. Be patient with me. This doctrine is really important for us to get to the point where we can actually practice it as well. But it's possible some people have said he, when Jesus, so, so when the Son of God comes into the world of the incarnation, he emptied himself of his deity, ceasing to be God.

Well, we all know that's heresy, so we can put that one aside. It's sometimes called the doctrine of kenosis, in which the deity of Christ is compromised.

And I don't think that's in any way fitting to the character of the New Testament. So let's go to the second possibility, that he emptied himself of his glory, not as deity, but of his glory.

Glory is the outshining of inward excellence. When God the Son became a baby in Bethlehem, he left aside his glory, not as deity, but his glory.

And he went all the way to the cross as someone who chose not to claim that glory. He laid it aside and he empties himself and he gives himself in the great divine act of God's self-giving to the world.

[14:01] So that's another possibility, that he emptied himself of his glory. And I think that fits the context well. And that's what humility is all about. I don't have to proclaim my own glory.

I leave that with God. The third option is that the word self-emptying actually simply means self-giving. And that the giving of the Son and then the Son's giving of himself all the way to the cross is simply an exposition of this word he emptied himself.

So he doesn't really empty himself of anything but gives himself in the great divine act of God's self-giving to the world. But what I want to focus on here as we begin to think about humility is simply the fact that this person, Jesus, that we know as our Savior is God.

And that his coming into the world to adopt humanity and to become a servant and go all the way to the cross does not deny his godness but actually expounds what our God is like.

If you think about this, God has for all eternity been a self-giving God as in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have been giving themselves to one another in complete mutual fellowship and I use

the word perichoresis and the great divine dance for all eternity.

[15:20] So there's nothing strange about the Son of God coming to give himself for us because that's what God is like. One of the great theologians of the last 20th century says that what marks out God above all false gods is that they are not capable and ready for this humility in their otherworldliness and supernaturalness and otherness.

The gods are a reflection of the human pride which will not unbend, which will not stoop to that which is beneath it. God, our God, God is not proud. In His high majesty, He is humble. Divine humility can be properly understood as a perfection of the divine loving. It's a manifestation of what God is like in His own inner being and it's reflected beautifully in the giving of Jesus for us. So becoming human and becoming a servant who will go all the way into sacrifice on the cross, even the death of the cross, is not something the Son stops being God in order to do. That's the point. This is what God is like. He is the humble, self-giving God. That's who He is. And He is our model.

[16:32] And we want to talk about how we move in that direction as well. If I can think of one example in the life of Jesus demonstrating this practically, it was when He washed His disciples' feet.

That passage begins with these words that Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power and that He had come from God and was returning to God. And so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist.

The act of humility was inaugurated, which inaugurated the order of the basin and the towel is enacted by a person who knows who He is, who has nothing to prove, and therefore is free to serve.

Was there a single disciple who got down and washed their fellow disciples' feet? Nary one, not a single one. What are they doing on the way to that event? They're arguing about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God.

And they have everything to prove so they are not free to serve. And that's why I say humility is not self-denigration. Humility is not self-hatred.

[17:43] Self-hatred is not a Christian grace. We are called upon to know who we are in Christ and therefore from that place of security we are free to serve the other.

This Christ hymn moves from the cross and then upwards. In many ways we could call this hymn V-shaped.

It's the Son of God from heaven coming down to become human, to become servant, to die upon a cross. And then God highly exalts them and gives them a name that's above every name that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And the very essence of this text I believe is that you and I are called upon to follow that V-shape. It's kind of interesting that this psalm ends in an exalted way because you might say, well, does that mean Jesus wasn't humble once he got to the right hand of the Father?

No, that's not the case at all. These, he attains a new position as highly exalted. He's given a new name. He's given unrivaled sovereignty over the whole creation.

[18:55] This wasn't hubris though. He's fully aware. That the glory he has is the glory he shares with the Father because that passage ends with to the glory of God the Father.

And so the glory of the Son and the Father and the Holy Spirit are all enmeshed together so he doesn't become unhumble by his exaltation. In fact, he holds it along with the Father and his glory. And even as someone who's at the right hand of the Father, Jesus continues to serve even now. What does he do in heaven now? He serves us.

He ever lives to make intercession for us. And this is a glorious reality. I guess the blessing of God is being poured out upon us here in this sermon as we think about this context.

And so, what am I trying to say here? How do we begin to follow this be ourselves? Humbling yourself could easily feel like denigrating yourself, hating yourself, all of those things.

[19:58] And I want to say very, very strongly, humility is not self-hatred. C.S. Lewis speaks to the heart of the confusion that surrounds the apparent contradiction of Christians being invited on one hand to love themselves and on the other hand to deny ourselves or hate ourselves.

And he speaks about two types of self-hatred, one which is healthy and one which is not. The first and very real unchristian self-hatred leads to a poor view of all people and for Christians with a

wrong view of the doctrine of total depravity leads to a worship of suffering.

The second and appropriate Christian self-hatred is hatred of our sin nature, hatred of our selfishness, our independence which taints every aspect of the person and a concurrent love and acceptance of the self as God's good creation.

In summary, C.S. Lewis says, that the wrong asceticism torments the self, the right kind kills the self-ness. Perhaps it was partly in response to this confusion between loving and renouncing the self that David Benner wrote the great book *The Gift of Being Yourself* where in the preface he begins, it is a profound irony to write a book promoting self-discovery to people who are seeking to follow a self-sacrifice in Christ.

It may well be that you fear that I've forgotten or worse fail to take seriously Jesus' paradoxical teaching that it is losing our self that we truly find it. What Benner goes on to say is that if Christians were to mistakenly reject themselves they would be rejecting a gift that God gave them.

[21 : 34] They would also be inadvertently rejecting the fullness of the possibility of personally knowing God. And all that would be left, he said, would be a detached cognitive knowing of the structure of God and self, a very thin existence indeed.

I've been fishing this week in the Roche Lake with three of my I'm going to say crazy colleagues. They're crazy because we slept at minus one degrees in a tent on the floor.

I didn't sleep a wink for two nights. It was hard to get excited about the fishing. And between the five of us we caught two fish. And I wasn't one of those that caught.

And God was doing a real job in my humility I can tell you. Because I got skunked. And of course my first aversion is to go to I am a terrible fisherman I'm never going to come again.

Rather than just saying okay I'm an okay fisherman the conditions were bad nobody else caught either. So you know those are the things. So I'm trying to stress here that humility is not synonymous with poor self-worth.

[22 : 41] And as someone who's struggled with poor self-worth most of my life I say that with some passion. To have poor self-worth is to fail to acknowledge the fact that the Father created you unique. Only you have your DNA.

Only you have your life circumstances and your history. It's to deny the fact that Jesus loved you so much He died on a cross for you. It is to deny the fact that the Holy Spirit has given you special gifts that nobody else have.

So having poor self-worth is not a virtue. It's when we have an appropriate sense of self-worth that we are able to give ourselves to others because we have nothing to prove just like Jesus.

And I want to say that humility is also not a perpetual groveling about your sin and your moral state. Now don't get me wrong repentance is necessary for all of us every day of our lives.

But repentance moves from sorrow to joy. And again, I speak with experience. I say the Lord's Prayer at least two or three times a day.

[23 : 43] And the reason I do that is if I just pray on my own, I will go straight to confession and I'll never stop confessing because that's how badly I feel about myself and my sins. See, the Lord's Prayer doesn't allow you to start with confession.

It starts with worship. It tells you to get your eyes on God, our Father, who art in heaven. And then after a few, give us this day our daily bread, which by the way is meant to be for the whole world, not just for you and your family.

Give us this day our daily bread. And then and only then when you've got a vision of who God is and you're concerned for your neighbor, then and only then does God allow you to come with contrition to repentance.

I think it's very difficult for us to believe that we are forgiven and all kinds of psychological aspects to that. Humility, folks, is not undue self-deprecation, but rather it exists with fervent gratitude for the gifts that God has given us and with the service that he allows us to serve with.

The primacy, the possibility in Christ of finding humility and thirdly, the posture of humility. The posture of humility is one of relinquishing and not grasping glory.

[24 : 59] Some scholars have told us that what happens here in Philippians chapter 2 is meant to remind us of the first Adam and it's a contrast between the first Adam and the last Adam.

One scholar says that this hymn replays the fall, but this time Christ gets it right. Rather than grasping at God and his glory, which the first Adam did, Christ humbled himself and laid aside his glory.

It's the whole thing of relinquishing that I bring to you as the great posture. It's giving yourself away. It is serving others when it's costly.

It is a call to relinquishment not of our essence, but of the glory associated with it as with Jesus by means of servanthood and service.

I want to ask you tonight, what does God call upon you to relinquish as someone who would have the mind of Christ? I have a colleague who every year turns down an invitation to a very prestigious lecture simply because he knows he needs to stay humble.

[26 : 26] He relinquishes that lecture. Maybe you need to relinquish the right to always be right. Maybe you need to relinquish fame, recognition.

I will never forget a professor of mine at the first seminary I attended in Dallas. His name was John Hanna. He was a wonderful church historian. Someone asked him at the beginning of the lecture, what's your greatest ambition? What's your greatest ambition, Dr. John Hanna?

And he responded in this way and I've never forgotten it. He said, my greatest ambition is to raise two children who have such a strong sense of self-worth in Christ that they're willing to serve unrecognized in a village in Africa and never be known.

See, humility, folks, is not about thinking less of ourselves. It is thinking of ourselves less. Lastly, and this is the gospel part, because right now you're probably feeling like this is impossible.

Yes, there's the V in Jesus, but how can the V in Jesus become the V in me? I'm so glad you asked because this passage is couched between two other passages, before it and after it, that give us the secret, that give us the key to learning to pursue humility.

[27 : 44] And that, so the last P is participation or union with Christ. I want to say to you that the greatest secret to discovering the mind of Christ is participation or union in his life, which is already ours.

It is to participate with Christ in his history so that the history of Jesus Christ becomes your history. Paul doesn't say, let this mind be in you as if he's taunting us with something that's absolutely impossible.

And so, before he ever says that, in chapter 2, verses 1 to 4, he outlines what I think is the greatest theme of the New Testament. What's the greatest phrase in the New Testament?

I believe it's the words in Christ. And Paul gives us a wonderful exposition. I don't want to go back to chapter 2, verse 1 to 4, he had a wonderful sermon on that last week, but I just want to remind you that it precedes what I'm talking about and that what Paul says there is, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, see, I think Paul is saying, look, contemplate Jesus, look away to Jesus, look away from yourself, for every one time you think about yourself, think about Jesus ten times.

Look away to him. But it's not just contemplation and isolation. I'm not changed just by contemplating Christ unless I'm also in union with Christ.

[29 : 25] And every believer in Jesus, you are in union with Christ. And now we need to practice that union with our communion with Christ. And the great key to us developing life with Christ and the mind of Christ is to be participating with him in his death and resurrection, in mortification of the flesh, and in vivification by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so Paul says, if you are united with Christ, that's the only key to becoming like Christ. Christ. Again, he says in that preceding context, if any common sharing in the Spirit, oh my goodness, isn't that wonderful?

Common sharing in the Spirit. How shall I be like Christ? Only because the Spirit lives in me. I am in Christ, greatest theme of the New Testament, and Christ is in me, the second great theme of the New Testament.

He became one with us by his incarnation. We become one with him by the Spirit. And by the Spirit, he enables us to begin to be humble. And then after, after this great passage, Paul says, therefore, my dear friends, as you've always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. What is Paul saying here? He's saying, you've observed the working out of salvation in the history of Jesus Christ.

[30 : 58] Now work out your salvation. Work it out into your life. And how do you do that? By union and communion with the living Christ. So it's not just imitating Christ and looking away to him.

That's important. Contemplating Christ every day as we read the word of God and contemplating him together as we come together to read the word and to take communion, all those things. That's vital. Contemplation is vital, but we do so.

And this is the power dynamic. Because the Holy Spirit is in us. Because we're in the realm of Jesus Christ in communion with him.

And so let me sum up. We must come at this hymn, yes, with, shall we say, expository diligence, and yes, with theological acumen, and yes, with some awareness of what we're doing when we interpret it.

But above all, we come at this passage because it is a celebration of who Christ is for us and in us. And with a profound desire to connect this personally and practically to our own experience, due to the reality that we are in Christ, and Christ is in us by the Spirit.

[32 : 10] Amen.