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 Philippians 2:5-11  
 Sixth Message  
 John Hanneman  
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## OUR MODEL FOR HUMILITY

When Moses approached the burning bush on Horeb, God called to him and said:

**“Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then He said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ He said also, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Exodus 3:4-6 NAS95S)**

As we come to our study in Philippians this morning, I can relate to Moses. The text before us is holy ground. I feel like I need to take off my shoes and hide my face. This is one of the passages in Scripture that gives a clear look into the character and nature of God. Jesus reveals a God who is hard for us to imagine.

We are in the heart of Paul’s word to the Philippians, in chapter 2. As we have already noted, there were two problems in Philippi that concerned Paul while he was in prison in Rome. First, there was external pressure from the emperor Nero, who demanded that all Roman citizens bend the knee to him as *kurios* or Lord. The believers in Philippi were beginning to suffer for their faith as they sought to live for Christ in a pagan world. Paul fears they will retreat and thus hinder the advance of the gospel. He reminds them of their heavenly citizenship and their loyalty to Jesus as Lord. He calls them to stand firm and strive together with a united front, like a platoon of soldiers facing an enemy or an athletic team facing competition. He hopes to encourage them with his own example of suffering, which was his current lot in prison.

There also seemed to be internal tension arising in the leadership of the church, a friction leading to disunity in the body, a breaking of the ranks, so to speak. Again, Paul’s concern is the advance of the gospel. He calls the Philippian believers to unity through a common mind-set or way of thinking, one of humility, to not be controlled by pride but to consider others more important than themselves. Paul hopes to encourage the Philippians through the example and model of Jesus.

The text to which we come today falls in the middle of a series of exhortations and appeals. Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the most dramatic, exalted, and beloved passages in Paul’s writings. Its language and structure are very poetic in nature. There is much debate among scholars as to whether the apostle wrote these words or if they were the words of an early Christian hymn or poem. But that is not our concern today. Our concern lies in how Paul uses the example of Christ to inform us about how to live in community and relationships.

### I. The Mind-set of Jesus

**Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (Phil 2:5 NASB)**

“Attitude” is the same word that is used twice in verse 2. It means having a certain mind-set: “make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” The mind-set is to be selfless and humble in community. Paul exhorts the Philippians to have this frame of mind, and now he gives them the example of Jesus to follow.

**who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:6-11)**

The poem divides into two sections: what Christ did, and what God did. It describes the descent and re-ascent of Christ. There seems to be chiasmic symmetry here. The poem begins and ends with Christ as God. Christ’s humiliation in the first half is matched by his exaltation in the second. Christ humbled himself; God exalted him. In the middle of the poem is his death on the cross.

### II. What Christ Did as God and Man

The first section is divided in two parts, and the grammar of each is identical. Each part is introduced with a participial phrase, followed by the main verbal action, and this in turn is followed by two modifying phrases, indicating that this is a carefully worded poem.

**6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.**

**8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (2:6-8)**

Jesus existed in the form of God. He was pre-existent and shared the nature of God. The Greek word for “form” is imbedded in our word “morphology.” It does not mean that Jesus was like God but was not God. Rather, he was poured in the form of God, the structure of God, characterized by what was essential to being God. He was not a pre-existent man. He was not yet a human being.

Even though Jesus was God he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped or seized. Jesus did not exploit or take advantage of his divine nature. He was not motivated by selfish ambition, the

characteristic of pride of verse 3. He did not try and promote himself in any way. He did not seek his own glory. He did not take selfish advantage or try to further his own ends.

Rather than considering his equality with God as something he could use to his own advantage, Jesus emptied himself. He didn't empty himself of anything; he simply emptied himself. He poured himself out; he emptied himself of significance or power. The KJV renders this: "he made himself of no reputation." The NIV puts it in these words, "made himself nothing." The contrast is to the vain, empty, baseless glory (alluded to in verse 3) that selfishness seeks.

When Jesus emptied himself, he did not stop being divine. He wasn't God, then a human, and then God again. When Jesus emptied himself, he made himself nothing and became fully human. The decision to become empty was a decision about what it really means to be divine.

Jesus existed in the form of God, but he took the form of a slave, a *doulos*. The word "form" is the same Greek word in both phrases. A slave is a person without advantages, with no rights or privileges. He is a servant of all. Paul applied this word to himself and to Timothy in his greeting in verse 1. This is how Paul saw himself, foreshadowing what he was going to say about Jesus. Becoming a slave is the essence of Christ emptying himself. Jesus described himself as a slave to his disciples in Mark 10:44. By using this term he identified himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah 40-55. He also identified with the nation of Israel who became slaves in Egypt. In fact, his life parallels and fulfills Israel's story.

Becoming the likeness of man elaborates on Jesus becoming a slave. In John's language "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Jesus was similar to our humanity in some respects and dissimilar in others. The similarity lies with his full humanity. It is dissimilar because he was sinless while in the "likeness" of sinful flesh. Jesus fully identified with us, but in becoming human he was not "human" only. Jesus was God living out a truly human life.

Verses 6 and 7 describe what Jesus did as God; verse 8 describes what he did as man. Being found in the appearance as a man he humbled himself. Being found in the appearance or shape of a man is similar to the preceding phrase, in human likeness. Jesus was clearly recognized in his external appearance as a human being.

As a man Jesus "humbled" himself. The word for "humble" is from the same root as "humility" (verse 3). Jesus took the lowest place. He was obedient to the point of death. This explains how he humbled himself. He was obedient to the Father's design for his life even if that meant death. But his was no ordinary death. This was death on a cross, the death of a criminal or slave, the death of the lowest of low, a shameful death. Cicero wrote: "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to slay him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is – what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed."<sup>1</sup>

If someone asked, "Who or what is your God like?" you might point him to this passage. The God of the Bible is a God who expresses his love toward his people through self-sacrifice. We don't know God, but Jesus explains him. He reveals the essence of God's outlandish love. Our God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Ex 34:6). Jesus' humiliation and death on a cross defines what it means to be God.

It is very difficult for us to comprehend this idea of God. Who would imagine a God who would sacrifice himself or become a slave?

Imagine the President of the United States walking through a park and suddenly getting into a mud puddle with a little boy. What about a God who dies a criminal's death? It seems absurd. But it is true.

God created man in his own likeness and Adam failed. God chose Israel, his son, and Israel failed. Pride and idolatry did them in. So God came himself. He had to do it himself. He came in the form of a slave to do what Adam and Israel could not do. On that cross Jesus faced utter rejection. The most precious thing for Jesus was his love for the Father and his relationship with him. And on the cross he gave up that relationship for us. In Jesus we see the ultimate expression of humility.

Paul exhorts the Philippians to unity, and the way to unity is through having a common mind-set, which is one of humility, of being other-centered. This was the mind-set of Jesus, who poured himself out, took on the form of a slave in the likeness of a man, and humbled himself to die on a cross. Jesus is a contrast to the selfish ambition and empty glory that defines the pattern of the world and poisons the body of Christ. This is the mind-set for what it means to be truly human. Mother Teresa is more fully human than Bill Gates or Tom Cruise.

The same appeal comes to us—to have the same mind-set that was in Christ, to seek unity in relationships by humbling ourselves through sacrificial living and dying to self. "The cross is laid on every Christian. . . . As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end of an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die."<sup>2</sup>

Dying to self is what marks a person of faith. It doesn't mean that we can't be smart, or athletic, or good-looking. It doesn't mean that we can't make money or be successful. It means that we empty ourselves of our earthly desires and attachments. It means we don't exploit our talents or take advantage of our good fortune for our own personal gain. It means that we don't regard our status as God's people with a sense of arrogance or superiority.

Dying to self is not an easy proposition. We are willing to die only in ways that are less significant, in ways that impact us less. But eventually God will take us further than we want to go. So then, how do we learn humility? We look at the cross of Christ. We take a passage like this and eat it, chew it and digest it. We reflect and meditate and pray on the cross and allow the Spirit to take its truth deeper into our soul. "Here's an essential truth: To learn true humility, we need more than a redefinition of greatness; we need even more than Jesus' personal example of humble service. What we need is His death."<sup>3</sup>

Later this year my wife and I will celebrate 35 years of marriage. When we got married I was 24 and she was 22, ages that are almost unheard of in today's culture. When we started out it was all about me: my needs, my wants, and my desires. The same was true for Liz. The same is true for most of us. What I have discovered is that the essential ingredient to marriage is dying to self. This is the only way it really works for two people to grow into union with one another. Sacrificial love defines what it means to be truly human, and it is essential to every relationship in our life, whether it is with our spouse, parents, siblings, friends, or members of the body of Christ.

"A sacrificial life is the means, and the only means, by which a life of faith matures. . . . Sacrifice is to faith what eating is to nutrition; it

is the action that we engage in that is transformed within ourselves invisibly and unobserved into a life lived in responsive obedience to the living God who gives himself to and for us, sacrifices himself for us.”<sup>4</sup>

### III. What God Did (9-11)

The second half of the poem describes what God did. We might see in these verses a chiasmic structure: A, B, C, C', B', A'.

For this reason also,

A God highly exalted Him,

B and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,

C so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow,

of those who are in heaven and on earth

and under the earth,

C' and that every tongue will confess

B' that Jesus Christ is Lord,

A' to the glory of God the Father.

For this reason, i.e., because of Jesus' obedience even to death on a cross, God highly exalted him. Jesus made himself low; God lifted him up. Paul takes the ordinary word for exalt and applies a prefix meaning “above.” Thus God lifted Jesus up to the highest possible degree. This was not a reward for what Jesus did, but rather it was to vindicate him for his costly sacrifice.

God gives Jesus a name that is above every other name. The name could be Jesus, i.e., “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow.” But Jesus already had that name. Or the name could be Lord, although that is really a title. The name becomes apparent when we note that the next phrase, “every knee will bow,” is a quote from Isaiah 45:

**“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;**

**For I am God, and there is no other.**

**“I have sworn by Myself,**

**The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness**

**And will not turn back,**

**That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.**

**“They will say of Me, ‘Only in the LORD are righteousness and strength.’**

**Men will come to Him,**

**And all who were angry at Him will be put to shame.**

**“In the LORD all the offspring of Israel**

**Will be justified and will glory.” (45:22-25)**

This text indicates that those who are saved will bow the knee and swear (confess) that “only in the Lord are righteousness and strength.” The word “Lord” is the personal name of God in the OT, the name Yahweh. It is this name, but in its Greek form, “the Lord,” which is now given to Jesus. The Christ or Jewish Messiah has now become Lord. He has fulfilled Israel's destiny as a light to the world and all nations will come and worship him.

To this name “every knee will bow.” This is a common idiom for doing homage and recognizing the authority of the one who is shown respect. Christ's sovereignty is over the whole of created beings—those of heaven, of the earth, and under the earth. “Those of heaven” refers to heavenly beings, angels and demons alike. “Those of earth” refers to all those who are living on earth at the second coming. “Those under the earth” probably refers to the dead. Certainly there was a word here to the Philippians who were being asked

to bend the knee to Nero, but this phrase goes way beyond the realm of Philippi.

Not only will every knee bow, but every tongue will confess that the Lord is Jesus. This is the confession that separates a believer from an unbeliever. No one can make this confession without the Holy Spirit. But here it seems that all of creation will make this confession. This does not mean that everyone will be saved. It means that, in the end, this confession will be made by every person, not as a means to salvation, but as a final acknowledgment that Jesus is both Lord and Christ.

Finally, Paul makes the point that ultimately all that has happened and all that will happen is for the glory of God.

Paul suffered greatly for the gospel. He understood the cost of dying to self, being poured out as an offering, and becoming a slave of Christ. But he also understood how God worked through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection is not mentioned in the text, but it is implied. What Paul is saying is that our death, dying to self, even if it means physical death, is not the end. We may lose our comfort or security, our earthly treasures and dreams, but death in God's economy brings life. Christ is an example of humility for us to follow, but he is also an example of how God works all things to bring glory to himself. When we live sacrificial, other-centered lives, we don't lose our life, but rather gain it. And in the end God will exalt us to share the glory of the Father and Son forever.

“Do I desire power or service; do I want to be visible or remain hidden; do I strive for a successful career or do I keep following my vocation? In this sense, we can speak about life as a long process of dying to self, so that we will be able to live in the joy of God and give our lives completely to others.”<sup>5</sup>

I want to conclude by quoting from *God's Prayer Book*, by Ben Patterson:

When Helen Roseveare went as a medical missionary to what was the Belgian Congo in the 1950s and 1960s, she had no idea of what she was getting into. Fresh out of medical school, she had skipped the final steps in her medical training, which were internships and residency, because as she explained it, she couldn't stand the sight of blood. She had taken classes but hadn't actually practiced what she has learned in the classes. She naively thought her work as a missionary doctor would mainly involve dispensing pills and applying bandages. Her first patient was a woman in labor who required a C-section delivery — definitely not something she had planned on! But Helen got out her medical books, read the directions, and performed a successful C-section. She was beginning to get an idea of what she had gotten into.

Yet she had no inkling of what was to come in the years that followed. During the wars of independence that took place in Africa in the 1960s, she was held captive by the Simba rebels and repeatedly beaten and raped. On one occasion, when she was sure she would be executed, she feared God had abandoned her.

She cried out to God, and in that moment heard the Holy Spirit say to her, ‘Twenty years ago you asked me for the privilege of being identified with me. This is it. Don't you want it? This is what it means. These are not your sufferings; they are my sufferings. All I ask of you is the loan of your body.’

Roseveare was overwhelmed with wonder at this privilege. She wrote about it later: ‘He didn't stop the sufferings. He didn't stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was

all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for him, with him.’

Roseveare was asked later if what she had accomplished in Africa as a missionary had made all her sufferings worth it. Did the success of her work offset the pain? Her answer was no, it did not; the pain was too great. But she added that the Lord had told her that was the wrong question. He said, ‘The question is not, was it worth it, but am I worthy?’ Her answer was, ‘Of course you are, Lord.’<sup>6</sup>

God asks us to for the loan of our body. The question is, how far are we willing to go? How much are we willing to let go in laying down our life? The question is whether Jesus our Lord is worthy. And hopefully, each time he asks us to die, we can say, “He is worthy.”

All praise to thee, for thou, O King divine,  
didst yield the glory that of right was thine,  
that in our darkened hearts thy grace might shine: allelujah!

Thou cam’st to us in lowliness of thought;  
by thee the outcast and the poor were sought,  
And by thy death was God’s salvation wrought: allelujah!

Let this mind be in us which was in thee  
who was a servant that we might be free,  
humbling thyself to death on Calvary: allelujah!

Wherefore, by God’s eternal purpose, thou  
art high exalted o’er all creatures now,  
and given the name to which all knees shall bow: allelujah!

Let every tongue confess with one accord  
in heaven and earth that Jesus Christ is Lord;  
and God the Father be by all adored: allelujah!

—Francis Bland Tucker

*Blessed be our Great God who is humble and sacrificial for our sake.  
May we become a servant of all for his sake and his glory.*

1 Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 217.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), 99.

3 C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2005), 47.

4 Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 51.

5 Henri Nouwen, *The Dance of Life*, Edited by Michael Andrew Ford (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2005), 189.

6 Ben Patterson, *God’s Prayer Book* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2008), 167-168.