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## SUPREME HUMILITY

Philippians 2:5-8

By

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Philippians Lesson 11

## Supreme Humility Philippians 2:5-8

We live in a day when Bible doctrine is commonly despised, even among God's people. I've heard people say, "We want life, not doctrine," as if the two were in opposition to each other. A young woman once told me that the wonderful thing about her experience-oriented church was that they didn't have any doctrines; they just had Jesus! The term "air-head" was not yet in existence, or it might have popped into my mind on that occasion. Christian people proclaim that doctrine is divisive and that what we need is unity. Often that unity is built on a common experience that people have had, supposedly through the Holy Spirit, even though these people often hold to seriously erroneous doctrine. We tend to think of theology as impractical, academic stuff that seminary students and professors like to debate. But it doesn't have anything to do with how we live.

But when we buy into this anti-intellectual approach to the Christian life, we are forgetting that the Apostle Paul did not write his profound doctrinal sections of Scripture to theologians. He wrote Romans, Galatians, and the other great theological portions of his letters, including our text, which is one of the most profound Christological portions of Scripture, to common people--business people, working people, soldiers, housewives, and even slaves--to help them live their daily lives in a manner pleasing to God.

It is significant that Paul is not using our text to combat some heresy or theological error. He is writing about a most practical subject--how Christians can get along with one another. It applies to how we relate to one another in the church, but also in our homes. As we saw last week, at the heart of our relational problems is self. To live in harmony, we must learn to die to self and humbly live for others for Jesus' sake. To illustrate this point, Paul sets before us the person of our Lord Jesus Christ as the example of supreme humility. Solid theological understanding about Jesus Christ is the foundation for how we can get along with one another. Paul is saying that ...

To promote harmonious relationships, we must grow in the humility Jesus modeled in His incarnation and death.

Since the early 1970's there have been dozens of books and hundreds of articles written from a supposedly Christian perspective that tell us how to build our self-esteem, our mate's self-esteem, and our children's self-esteem. We have been assured by the supposed "experts" on human behavior that low self-esteem is at the root of all our emotional and relational problems. I'm sad to confess that for many years I was influenced by this teaching and even taught it myself. But I came to realize that there is not a single verse in the entire Bible that tells us that we need to build our self-esteem. There are many verses that tell us we need to lower our view of ourselves and grow in humility (the biblical word for humility means "lowliness of mind"). How many recent books or articles have you read on how to lower your self-esteem and grow in humility? Yet that is what Paul is clearly teaching here. His teaching is built on the great doctrinal truths of the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ.

1. To grow in humility, we must understand the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ.

Although many volumes have been written on these verses, the basic thought is quite simple and clear: That Jesus Christ voluntarily left the highest position in the universe and went to the very lowest position on earth in order to rescue from God's judgment people who did not in any way deserve it. There can be no greater example of lowering oneself than what Jesus did on our behalf. If your heart is cold toward the things of God, think on who Jesus is and on what He did in leaving the splendor and purity of heaven and coming to this wicked world to be made sin on your behalf. It should fill our hearts with love and devotion and make us realize that no personal sacrifice we make, no humiliation we go through, can ever match what our glorious Savior did for us!

- A. To grow in humility, we must understand Christ's incarnation, that the eternal Son of God left His glory to take on human flesh.

When Paul states that Jesus existed in the form of God (1:6), he is referring to His preexistence before He was born of the virgin

Mary. Jesus is not a created being, but rather is the second person of the triune God. As John opens his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (John 1:1-3). A few verses later John explains further, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Or, as Jesus said to the Jews who challenged His claims, "Before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58).

When Paul states that Jesus existed in "the form of God," "form" refers to that which is intrinsic and essential to the being of God, that is, to God's attributes (J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* [Zondervan], pp. 132-133). Thus Paul is saying that Jesus in His preexistence shared the essential attributes of deity. He is God! Before He came to this earth, Jesus dwelled in the indescribable glory and perfection of heaven, one with the Father and the Spirit, in the blessedness of the divine being. But He willingly left that glory to come to earth!

The next phrase has been variously translated and interpreted. The King James Version reads that He "thought it not robbery to be equal with God." The NASB translates, He "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." John Calvin explains the sense: "There would have been no wrong done though he had shewn himself to be *equal with God*" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Philippians 2:6, p. 55).

Lightfoot, following the early Greek fathers, gives the sense as, "Be humble as Christ was humble: He, though existing before the worlds in the form of God, did not treat His equality with God as a prize, a treasure to be greedily clutched and ostentatiously displayed: on the contrary He resigned the glories of heaven." He goes on to observe, "For how could it be a sign of humility in our Lord not to assert His equality with God, if He were not divine? How could such a claim be considered otherwise than arrogant and blasphemous, if He were only a man?" (pp. 134, 137).

Paul goes on to say that Jesus "emptied Himself" (NIV = "made Himself nothing"). Clearly, God cannot cease to be God,

and so Jesus did not, as some have asserted, give up any of His divine attributes. He limited the independent use of certain attributes and prerogatives while on this earth. And, His preincarnate glory was veiled (John 17:5), except for the brief time on the Mount of Transfiguration, and perhaps when the soldiers in the garden fell backwards after a flash of His glory (John 18:6). Paul explains the main sense of how Christ emptied Himself in the rest of verse 7 and in verse 8: by taking the form of a servant and being obedient to death on the cross.

When Paul says that Jesus took on the form of a bond-servant (2:7), he means that He voluntarily adopted the very nature of a servant. He did not cease to be God in any sense, but added to His divine nature a true human nature. Jesus' human nature was exactly like ours, except that it was joined to a divine nature (not mixed or blended); and, it was without sin, although His body was subject to the results of the fall, such as weariness, aging, and death. When Paul says that Christ was "found in appearance as a man" (2:8), he means that if you had looked at Jesus, you would not have thought, "There is a superman or a god," but rather, "There is a normal-looking man." He was born into a family as a baby, grew to maturity as we all do, and in every other observable way was completely human.

Thus the orthodox statement concerning the person of Christ is that *He is undiminished deity and perfect humanity united without confusion in one person forever*. To deny either the full and perfect deity of our Lord or His complete humanity is to veer into serious heresy. So what Paul is showing is that the Lord Jesus went from the highest place in the universe, as eternal God, to take on human existence, and that, not as a king or powerful warrior, but as a lowly servant. But, He went even lower:

- B. To grow in humility, we must understand Christ's death, which was the most shameful death imaginable.

It would have been amazing enough for the eternal God to come to this earth as a mighty king. It was even more amazing that He came as a humble servant. But it's almost beyond comprehension that He would even go lower and die. And, even more staggering, His death was not a noble death, but a horrible, ignoble death of a common criminal. For the Jew, whoever was hanged on

a tree was accursed of God (Deut. 21:23). For Gentiles, death by crucifixion was the lowest, most despicable form of death imaginable. Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion. The Roman poet, Cicero, said, "Far be the very name of a cross, not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens" (cited by R. P. Martin, *Philippians* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 103).

So, Paul is saying that Jesus went from the height of heights to the depth of depths. We will never begin to know what glory He gave up or what humiliation He suffered on our behalf until we are with Him in glory. But, to grow in humility, we must think about the staggering implications of what it meant for the holy, glorious, eternal Son of God to take on human flesh; and, not the flesh of a king, but of a servant; and, stooping even lower, He willingly and obediently went to the cross for our sins.

2. To grow in humility, we must allow the truth of Christ's incarnation and death to affect the way we act toward one another.

In our day humility is hardly ever emphasized as a Christian virtue that we must pursue. In fact, we extol the opposite, self-love, as a healthy quality that we need to work on! I began to see how far off I was on the self-esteem issue by reading John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. In Calvin's *Institutes* (ed. by John McNeill [Westminster] 11:11:11), he mentions how Chrysostom, the church father, viewed humility as the foundation of Christianity; and how Augustine said that the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third, and always are humility. Calvin rightly argues that due to the fall, self-love is innate in all humans. He says that we are quick to listen with applause to anyone who extols human nature in favorable terms. Even those who take a more modest attitude and give God credit for some things, he says, "so divide the credit that the chief basis for boasting and confidence remains in themselves" (11:1:2).

Edwards, in his "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:294-303) points out that there is a false and inadequate sort of humility which professing, but unconverted, people can have. But, he argues that any-

one who is truly converted will display what he calls “evangelical humiliation.” Listen to his words:

Evangelical humiliation is a sense that a Christian has of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness, with an answerable frame of heart....

The essence of evangelical humiliation consists in such *humility* as becomes a creature in itself exceeding sinful, under a dispensation of grace; consisting in a mean [= worthy of little regard] esteem of himself, as in himself nothing, and altogether contemptible and odious; attended with a mortification of a disposition to exalt himself, and a free renunciation of his own glory.

This is a great and most essential thing in true religion. The whole frame of the gospel, every thing appertaining to the new covenant, and all God’s dispensations towards fallen man, are calculated to bring to pass this effect. They that are destitute of this, have no true religion, whatever profession they may make, and how high soever their religious affections may be:...” (p. 294).

When I first read this about four or five years ago, the first thing it did was make me question my own salvation. The second thing it did was draw a line in the sand and confront me with the question, “Which side are you on? The side of Scripture (and Edwards heaps up verses to prove his case) or on the side of modern psychologized Christianity?” I realized that both cannot be truly Christian. I had to repent of my former errors.

Granted, then, that we must pursue humility, what does it look like? Christ’s humility teaches us several aspects of true humility:

*(1) True humility is a proper attitude toward self that results in proper actions toward others. “Have this attitude in yourselves ....”* Jesus Christ could rightly have thought, “I’m the eternal God. I’m not about to become a human being, let alone be a servant, let alone die!” I’m glad He didn’t think like that!

Who are we? According to Scripture, we are rebellious sinners at heart, who have gone our own way and despised the God who created us. But, by His undeserved favor, we have become His

children through faith in Christ. By grace, He has forgiven all our sins and has made us members of Christ's body. He has entrusted spiritual gifts to us to use for *His* kingdom and glory (*not* our own kingdom and glory!). As a result, we have the great privilege of serving others for Jesus' sake.

(2) *True humility means renouncing self for the sake of others.* Jesus had to renounce any self-will when He came to earth and went to the cross. In the garden, He prayed, "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Of course, He had no sinful will to renounce, whereas we fight it every day. But humility means dying to self daily so that we can do God's will.

(3) *True humility means lowering myself to lift others up.* That's what Jesus supremely did in giving up the splendor of His glory in heaven to hang naked on the shameful cross for our sins. It would be impossible for us to go to that extreme. But we do need to lower our view of ourselves so that we can serve others. If you ever find yourself saying, "That task is beneath me," you'd better check your pride.

(4) *True humility yields any rights for the sake of serving others.* Did Jesus have a right not to come to this earth in the humble way He did? Of course He did! Did He have a right not to go to the cross? Of course! But, He yielded all His rights and became a bond-servant for our salvation. A bond-servant was the extreme bottom of the ladder when it came to rights, because he had none. He didn't have a right to his own time. He didn't even have a right to his own life.

This doesn't mean that we become the slaves of everyone else's whims or desires. Jesus was obedient to the Father, not to what others thought He should do. Even so, we become enslaved to do what God wants us to do. Jesus told the disciples that when a slave comes in after a day of working in the field, his master doesn't serve the slave dinner. The slave has to fix dinner and serve the master, and only then is he free to eat. Jesus concluded by saying, "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:10). The only right I have is the right to hell. Any privileges I enjoy are by God's undeserved favor.

(5) *True humility serves others in obedience to God, even at great personal cost.* The cross was painful beyond description for Jesus, not just because of the physical pain, but because He who was totally without sin endured the wrath of God by becoming sin for us (2 Cor. 5:20). Any personal cost we have to bear in serving Christ is nothing by way of comparison, even if it means laying down our lives. As Isaac Watts put it, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all" ("When I Survey the Wondrous Cross").

### Conclusion

If you're experiencing friction in your relationships, whether at home or anywhere, chances are you need to grow in humility. C. S. Lewis saw this. He wrote,

... Pride ... has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began.... Pride always means enmity--it *is* enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God.

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that--and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison--you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you (*Mere Christianity* [Macmillan], pp. 110-111).

Calvin sums up the practical application of our text: "Since, then, the Son of God descended from so great a height, how unreasonable that we, who are nothing, should be lifted up with pride!" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, p. 55). But, the fact is, we must fight pride all our lives. In 1985, a Spanish bullfighter made a tragic mistake. He thrust his sword a final time into the bull, which then collapsed. Thinking that the bull was dead, the bullfighter turned to the crowd to acknowledge the applause. But the bull was not dead. It rose and lunged at the back of the unsuspecting matador, piercing his heart with its horn.

Pride is like that. Just when we think we've conquered it and we turn to accept the congratulations of the crowd, pride stabs us in the back. It won't be dead before we are. Fight it by focusing on

what the Savior did for you by leaving the glory of heaven and coming to die for your sins. Have that same mind in you which was in Christ Jesus: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (2:3, 4). That's the way toward harmony in our church and in our homes.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is proper theology essential for proper conduct?
2. Those who teach self-esteem say that they're not promoting pride, but only a proper self-concept. Are they?
3. How can a proud person grow in humility? What steps should he take?
4. How does a humble person keep from becoming a doormat?

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