

Unwrapping God's Greatest Gift
CHRIST'S HUMILITY
(The Upside Down World of Christmas)
Philippians 2:5-11

The way up is down. And the way down is up.ⁱ

That's the upside down world of Christmas. And that's the upside down world of the Christian life.

Jesus said...

- The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.
- He who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven, must become the least of all.
- He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.
- He who saves his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake, will save it.

Yes, the way up is down. And the way down is to attempt to go up.

We see this in the verses that were just read in Philippians 2. We can outline this beautiful hymn this way. First, there is *incarnation*. That's a word that means simply "embodied in flesh." And in these verses Paul describes for us in detailed terms just how God became man.

But beyond incarnation, there is also *humiliation*. Not only did deity take on humanity, but this One – Jesus Christ – also clothed himself with humility.

And as a result of such humiliation for you and me, God the Father exalted His Son above all things, so that every tongue will one day confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. That is *exaltation*. And so we see the movement from *incarnation*, to *humiliation*, and finally to *exaltation*.

For Jesus, the way up was down. And so it is for you and me.

THE WAY UP IS DOWN

I want you to remember that these words were not first of all written as a theological dissertation on what took place when God became man. The real purpose of this passage is more practical than doctrinal. And that's why Paul introduces these words in verse 5: "Your *attitude* should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (verse 5).

You see, Paul's primary concern here is to paint a portrait of Christ's humility in order to encourage believers in the Church at Philippi to be humble in the way they related to one another. In fact, there were particularly two women in this church who were at each other's

throats. Their names are Euodia and Syntyche. Paul talks about them in chapter four, verse two: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”

As a young boy, I remember a preacher referring to these two people as Odious and Soon-Touchie. Odious is not a word you hear too much anymore. It basically means to be repulsive, offensive, or disgusting. And for Soon-Touchie, she was probably overly sensitive. And when you take an offensive person like Odious and an overly sensitive person like Soon-Touchie and put them together, sparks fly! And it’s not just Odious and Soon-Touchie who are the problem. I suspect that many in this church were struggling with the temptation to be divisive, overly sensitive, arrogant, proud, unloving, and demanding their own rights. In fact, this is one of the primary reasons that Paul writes this letter to the Philippians.

Any people like that in your life? Or maybe *you* tend to be like Odious or Soon-Touchie. To the degree that I, you, we have such attitudes, we are *not* reflecting the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. We have *not* yet learned that the way up is down.

I have a suspicion that the church of Philippi had begun to be influenced by the culture of Philippi. The city of Philippi was a model city of Roman culture, reflecting the pride and arrogance of the cultural hierarchy that characterized Rome. Everything in this Roman colony was based on a highly stratified social pecking order. Based on their particular social status, people wore different clothes, sat in different seats, and experienced different treatment when it came to the courts. In fact, Roman society was the most status conscious society of the ancient world. This was particularly true of the city of Philippi. Anyone who had any position of honor at all wanted to proclaim to the whole world their worth by erecting some type of inscription or monument somewhere in the city. Everybody wanted to be somebody! And the pride and arrogance of the culture was now influencing the church.ⁱⁱ It was fueling the dysfunctional relationship between Odious and Soon-Touchie. You see, the culture says that the way up is up. Jesus and Paul tell us that the way up is down.

THE WAY UP IS GIVING, NOT GRASPING

Not only is the way up, down. But more specifically, the way up is by giving, not grasping. And that is where Paul points us in verse 6. He says,

[Christ Jesus] Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped... (verse 6)

As we’ve already seen in the previous messages in this series, Paul makes it very clear that Jesus Christ is deity, i.e. he is God. He says, “Who, being in very nature, God...” That means that all that God the Father *was*, God the Son *was*. The Son of God shared all the attributes of deity from eternity past. He was omnipotent, meaning all-powerful. He was omniscient, meaning all-knowing. He was omnipresent, meaning being present everywhere. All that God the Father was, God the Son was. He was light, truth, glory, justice, mercy, righteousness and grace. In fact, the glory of his nature and the brilliance of his character were so awesome and so overwhelming that if you were to see him you would fall down like a dead man!

But notice what Paul says next: “He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (verse 6*b*). Paul is *not* saying that in becoming man Jesus gave up his equality with God. He *is* saying that he laid aside certain honors and privileges that go along with being God. Jesus waived his rights to certain *expressions* of deity, without sacrificing his *possession* of deity. In other words, before coming to this earth, the Son did not consider his divine nature as something to be used for his own advantage. His equality with God the Father did not excuse him from suffering for us. On the contrary, it uniquely qualified him to suffer for us.

Just how did Jesus waive his rights to certain expressions of deity? Paul goes on to explain. He says in verse 7, “But made himself nothing.” Many translations say here that the Son of God “emptied himself.” In fact, there is a well-known hymn that is often sung in our churches, written by Charles Wesley. It goes like this:

He left His Father’s throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace!
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race!

This has led some to believe that when God became man, he laid aside his divine attributes. But is Paul saying that Christ gave up his deity? Not at all! That would be a form of divine suicide!ⁱⁱⁱ

When we look at how this same word is used elsewhere in the New Testament, we discover why the NIV properly translates it “made himself nothing.”^{iv} It simply explains the previous phrase. He limited certain expressions of deity, without sacrificing his possession of deity. He gave rather than grasped. He veiled his deity and clothed himself with humanity for the purpose of accomplishing our salvation.

So let’s ask ourselves: What is the attitude of Christ Jesus that we are also called to have? It’s an attitude of *giving*, rather than *grasping*. That’s the attitude of Christ. And that’s the attitude of Christmas. That’s the attitude of the way down that leads to the way up.

Quite frankly, I continue to see so many areas of my own life that fall far short of the attitude that characterizes Jesus Christ. I was once again reminded of this the other day. One area where I have struggled for much of my life is with a demanding spirit fueled by an acute sense of justice.

For example, I recently made a purchase during a before Christmas sale. Everything in the store was marked as 10% off. However, when the cashier rang up my bill, the advertised discount was not reflected in what I was charged. At that point, my demanding spirit, fueled by an acute sense of justice, surfaced full bore. I immediately questioned her judgment, pointing out what I thought was an oversight on her part. She explained that the price I had previously seen was already discounted, and that previously discounted items were not now included in the additional 10% off. Before I knew it, I found my lawyer instincts taking over, as I convincingly argued to the contrary. In fact, I probably came across like Odious and Soon-Touchie all wrapped up in one person! Within five minutes I had eloquently proved my case and walked out of the store with the additional 10% discount.

I was quite pleased with the few dollars I had saved, until Justin had to spoil it all. “Dad, don’t you think you were sort of rude to that person?” he asked. Though at the time I defended myself, his words pierced my heart. And I was reminded that the attitude of Christ and of Christmas is giving, not grasping.

But there is more. Not only is the way up, down. Not only is the way up characterized by giving, not grasping. But the way up is the path of humility, not glory.

THE WAY UP IS THE PATH OF HUMILITY, NOT GLORY

It’s here that we come to the crux of this passage. For Jesus, the path of humility is described by two images: the image of the slave and the image of the cross. First, we find the image of the slave. Paul says in verse 7: “taking the very nature of a servant.” Literally, he took the “form” of a servant. And it’s the same word that describes Christ’s existence in the “form” of God in verse 6. What this means is that Jesus didn’t just look like a servant, a slave. He *was* a servant.

For those in the church in Philippi, this is a powerful and paradoxical statement. You see, in the Roman world of the first Century, great public dishonor was attached to slavery. True, there were some freed slaves who enjoyed a certain amount of respect and standard of living. But if they were born a slave, they could never really throw off the dishonor associated with that position. It carried with it a social stigma that inevitably relegated that person to the lowest of the low.

Do you remember what happened in the Upper Room while Jesus was with his disciples on that last night before his death? John describes it for us in John chapter 13. He says that what was about to happen was intended to show the full extent of Jesus’ love for his disciples.^v

It was customary in such a hot, dry climate for a servant to wash the feet of those entering the house. But apparently there was no such servant at this gathering. Maybe the disciples were looking at each other, wondering who would make the first move. Who would be the first to take off his robe, wrap a towel around his waste, fill up the bucket with water and stoop down and wash the dirty feet of his fellow disciples? As they looked at each other, maybe one of the disciples mumbled under his breath: “I’m not about to wash his feet! Not after what he said about me the other day!”

In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus is reclining on the couch with his disciples around him. As such, he was in the position as Lord and Master over his disciples. Anyone entering the room would have recognized this. But then Jesus does something absolutely amazing. He gets up, lays aside his outer clothing (since this would interfere with his humble service to his disciples), and begins to wash their dirty feet. Now, if anyone came into the room at that point, they would have identified Jesus as a slave. He was kneeling on the floor, dressed only in an oriental tunic, washing the dirty feet of these twelve other men. Anyone would have concluded, “Well, that’s the slave!”

And that’s precisely what Jesus did when he came to earth. He exchanged his clothes of glory for his clothes of humility. However, he didn’t take off his clothes of glory and throw them away! What he did was he temporarily discontinued the expression of his glory as deity so that the full

expression of his humanity and servant-hood could shine through.^{vi} Why? Because His ongoing expression of glory would have prevented him from effectively carrying out redemption's story. His garments of glory would have interfered with his work as a servant to you and me. And so one expression of who Jesus was, glory, was exchanged for another expression of who Jesus was, humility.

But not only did Jesus come as a slave. He was a slave who went to a cross. Paul adds in verse 8: "He humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross."

In Paul's language, "death of the cross" is in a position of emphasis. Paul wants you and me to pause and reflect on the full import of these words.

Crucifixion was the cruelest, most humbling form of punishment that one could experience. This death was too debasing for any freeborn Roman citizen. It was reserved for the lower classes, particularly slaves. In fact, one slave in the late third Century, afraid of being found out for a wrong he had committed, wrote: "[My master will] change my name for me the minute he gets back, and transform me from Chrysalus ["gold-bearer"] to Crossalus ["cross-bearer"] on the spot."^{vii}

Justin Martyr, one of the great apologists of the early church, tells us that many were *not* believers precisely because Christians taught that Jesus, the Son of God, was crucified. For them, such a thought was unimaginable. How foolish and shameful to worship a crucified man! That's why Paul says to the Corinthians that the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23).

So these two terms, "slave" and "cross," represent the most *dishonorable social status* and the most *dishonorable public humiliation* known in that day. But both were vital to Roman imperialism. They served to punish and discourage rebellion among the lower classes. They also reinforced the social stratification of the culture of that day, giving greater power and honor to the elite.^{viii} And yet, paradoxically, a crucified slave is seen in these verses to be the very one who is so greatly honored by God.

See any similarities to our culture today? The challenge that Paul gives the Philippians as well as each one of us is this: Will you embrace Jesus and reject cultural norms? Will you embrace the upside-down world of the Christmas story? After all, as Paul reminds us in chapter 3, we are no longer citizens of earth, but citizens of heaven (3:20). On earth, the way up is up. In heaven, the way up is down.

In C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* he challenges us to "dress up" like Christ. Just like a child pretends to be a shopkeeper or a soldier or a parent, we too can evaluate each situation of life from the standpoint of Jesus' attitude and actions. How would Jesus feel and what would Jesus do in this situation?

You see, for Jesus the way up was down. The way up was by giving, not grasping. The way up was the path of humility, not self-glory. If I had adopted that attitude at that pre-Christmas sale, I believe I would have had a different response.

How about you? We would all do well to become like little children who “dress up” like Jesus and then begin to view life from that perspective. Take, for example, the area of forgiveness. We all struggle with that one. And yet this is another area of life where the way up is down. The path to freedom is not bitterness, but forgiveness.

Just a week ago, two young people were senselessly shot to death at the Youth with a Mission center in Colorado. But a couple of days ago, their parents met with the parents of the gunman. They said, “We forgive you. We don’t hold you responsible.” The *Rocky Mountain News* described it as “an incredible example of the power of God’s love.” You see, that’s the upside-down world of Christmas.

Here’s another example. Say you’re having a difficult time connecting with other believers in the church. Maybe many are different than you, in age, in culture, or in background. Ask yourself: “Is my focus more on me – my needs and my desires – than on others?” How can I do as Christ did, and enter boldly and humbly into the lives of my fellow believers so that our differences are bridged by the love of Christ? After all, that’s what God did for us. He crossed over the greatest cultural barriers known to man, leaving heaven above and coming to earth below. And he asks you and me to humbly move across the differences that can so easily divide us, focusing on that which can unite us – the love of Jesus. That’s the upside-down world of Christmas.

The ultimate joy and reward of taking such steps is assured. Notice verses 9-11.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that 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.

The chief Actor in these verses now changes. In verses 5-8 it is the Son who abases himself. Now in verses 9-11 it is the Father who exalts the Son. Peter puts it this way, “Humble *yourselves* under the mighty hand of God, and *He* will exalt you in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

It’s true. The way up is down. The way up begins with going down, bowing the knee and confessing that Jesus Christ is who he claims to be, God in flesh. The way up begins with living as He lived.

That’s the upside-down world of Christmas. Will you bow the knee to Him today?

ⁱ These words were coined by Donald Grey Barnhouse during a Keswick Conference in England. See Stuart Briscoe, *Bound for Joy* (Glendale, California: Gospel Light Publications, 1975), 73.

ⁱⁱ Joseph H. Hellerman, "The Humiliation of Christ in the Social World of Roman Philippi, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (October – December 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Augustine said: "Thus He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, not losing the form of God. The form of a servant was added; the form of God did not pass away." Augustine (354-430).

^{iv} The word is used only four times in the New Testament and carries the idea of "to render void" (Rom. 4:14; 1 Cor. 1:17; 9:15; 2 Cor. 9:3).

^v John 13:1-5 1 It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. 2 The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, *took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist*. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

^{vi} In fact, there was only one time in his earthly life when the full expression of Jesus' deity was unveiled. ? Matthew tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up to a high mountain. There he was "transformed" before them, the text says (Matthew 17:1-8). Did you catch that? "Transformed" ... "form"...The Son existed in the "form" of God we read in verse 6, but then "made himself nothing" becoming like you and me. But on this one occasion, on the mountain of Transfiguration, he was "transformed", i.e. the full display of his deity shone through. No wonder that Matthew says that "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). That's why Jesus asks God the Father to restore to him the glory that he had with the Father in eternity past: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5). This glory was restored when his work of redemption was accomplished.

^{vii} As cited by Joseph H. Hellerman, 429.

^{viii} *Ibid.* 430.