

Humility: The Call of Christmas

Philippians 2:5–8

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Introduction

Christmas is the time of year when we celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the time of year when we celebrate the magnificent mystery of the eternal Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14); God the Father, giving the greatest gift that could ever be given to sinful humanity: the gift of His Son—born as a helpless babe, so that He could take upon Himself the weakness and infirmity of humanity; so that He could live as a man, and accomplish righteousness as a man, in precisely the way that Adam failed—and in precisely the way that you and I have failed to live righteously before God.

And the Father sent Him not only to live as a man, but to die as a man—and in His death, to bear the full penalty of the wrath of God that was due to us because of our sin. The Lord Jesus Christ was born to die, so that, having paid the penalty for the sins of His people, He might rescue us from the condemnation that we rightly deserve. That is the meaning of Christmas. And that is what we celebrate when we remember the incarnation of Christ.

As I thought about a text for this evening’s message, my mind was drawn to Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 through 8, perhaps the most detailed explanation of the incarnation of Christ—of the mystery that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, that two distinct natures bound up in a single Person. But what’s interesting about this passage is that, even though it contains that lofty theology, it’s not Paul’s primary point to discuss the fine points of Christology. The theology is in the text to illustrate the *humility* that Paul calls the church to in the preceding verses.

In chapter 1 verse 27, Paul begins to explain what it means for the people of God to conduct our lives as citizens in a manner worthy of the Gospel. And he says in verse 27 that that chiefly involves being *united* with one another. If we are to stand firm against the opposition of a hostile culture, we must do so “in one spirit.” If we are to strive together for the faith of the Gospel, we must do so “with one mind.” And so chapter 2 begins with a call to Christian unity, verses 1 and 2: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation of love, any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the *same mind*.”

And the key to experiencing that unity is humility. Disunity festers only so long as it’s fed by selfishness, pride, and arrogance. But when the members of a congregation have a proper view of themselves in the light of God’s holiness, all sense of entitlement—the sense that it is owed to us

to be treated in a certain way—vanishes. Disunity simply cannot survive in a congregation that is permeated by the kind of self-forgetful humility that seeks its own happiness in the happiness of others. And so he commands us in chapter 2 verse 3 to do “nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but in humility of mind regarding one another as more important than ourselves, not merely looking out for our own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Then, in verses 5 to 11, Paul gives us a concrete example of that humility. And not just any example, but the ultimate model for Christian conduct—the supreme example of self-sacrificing humility. And that is: the incarnation and Gospel mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 5: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

And so you see, friends, Christmas—the celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ—isn’t just a nice story that family and friends can unite around. For true believers in Jesus, Christmas has ethical implications. The truths of the incarnation of Christ are not just to make us smile and feel all warm and fuzzy inside; they are to have a visible impact on our lives. The incarnation of Christ is to make us a humble people. The whole point of Paul’s explaining the fine points of Christ’s pre-existence and incarnation in this text is to demonstrate the heights from which the Lord came, and the depths to which He humbled Himself in His birth, life, death, and in His service of others: so that we would have the clearest picture of His example to follow as we pursue humility and service to our brothers and sisters. The call of Christmas is a call to humility.

And we hear that call as we study the incarnation. And so I want to focus on **three points** in our time together in Philippians 2:5–8 this evening. I want to consider the Christ in whom we behold the supreme example of humility, and meditate on (1) **the glory He renounced**, (2) **the rights He relinquished**, and (3) **the shame He embraced**.

I. The Glory He Renounced (v. 6a)

First, **the glory He renounced**. Look at verse 5 and the first part of verse 6: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God...” And we’ll stop there for now. Even before the baby Jesus was born, Christ was “existing in the form of God.”

Now, this doesn’t mean that Jesus only seemed like God, but wasn’t God. The Greek word that gets translated “form” is the word *morphe*, which speaks of “the outward manifestation that corresponds to the inward essence” (Kent, 123)—to the external form that represents what is intrinsic and essential (Kent, 126). The NIV actually brings out the sense best when it translates this phrase, “being in very *nature* God.” Christ was existing in the *morphe* of God because in His very essence—in His very being and nature He *was* God: “In the beginning was the Word, and

the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” Later in verse 6, Paul says Christ didn’t regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, which means that before His incarnation, in heaven, He did possess equality with the Father. And because Scripture teaches there is only one God, then Christ Himself must be fully God, the Second Person of the eternal Trinity.

Now, if the word *morphe* refers to the outward manifestation of the inner essence and nature, what is the outward manifestation of the inner essence and nature of God? It’s glory. When God manifests His presence amidst His people, that manifestation is what we know as His *shekinah* glory. It’s the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, the smoke that fills the Tabernacle, and so on. Well that very glory belongs to Jesus from all eternity. In John 17:5, Jesus prays, “Father glorify Me together with Yourself, with the *glory which I had with You* before the world was.” John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His *glory*, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In Isaiah chapter 6, the prophet says that he “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple” (Isa 6:1), and there the angels sang to the One on the throne, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His *glory*” (Isa 6:3). And then in John 12, John quotes this passage of Isaiah 6, and says, John 12:41, “These things Isaiah said because he saw *His glory*, and he spoke of Him,” speaking of Jesus! Isaiah’s amazing vision of the glory of Yahweh, is the glory of God the Son!

Dear friends, this is the heavenly glory your Savior renounced! Jesus Christ is not merely a man. He’s not just a good teacher, or a great prophet! He’s not merely *god-like*, or a god among many gods! He is not the first created being, or the highest class of angel. He is God Himself! God of very God! Before the world was, He was eternally existing in the very nature of God, in the very essence of God, and in the very glory of God!

And it is from this magnificent height of Heaven, from divine equality, and from divine glory, that God the Son descended in the humility of His incarnation. This is how far He had come. John Calvin puts it perfectly, “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!” (55).

II. The Rights He Relinquished (vv. 6b–7)

Well having beheld a glimpse, then, of the glory Christ renounced, let us now turn our eyes upon **the rights He relinquished**. Look at verses 5 through 7: “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing 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.”

So even though Christ was existing in the very nature and essence and glory of God, in equality with God the Father, ruling creation in majesty and receiving the worship of the saints and angels in Heaven, He didn't regard that equality as something to cling to. Instead, He humbly accepted the mission of His incarnation, in which He would renounce the glories of Heaven for a time, take on the nature of a human being, and live with all the restrictions of what it meant to be human. Though He had every right to continue in unlimited manifest power and authority, in receiving the worship of the saints and angels, in participating in the glory of His Father, in perfect, face-to-face fellowship and unity with His Father and with the Holy Spirit, He didn't selfishly count those blessings to be slavishly held on to, but sacrificed them to become man and accomplish salvation for sinners.

He "emptied Himself," verse 7 says. A better translation would be, "He nullified Himself," or "He made Himself of no effect." The King James Version captures this well when it translates this verse: Christ "made himself of no reputation." The NIV also gets the idea; it says: he "made himself nothing." And He did this by "taking the form of a slave, and being made in the likeness of men." Christ made Himself nothing by taking on human nature in His incarnation. This is an emptying by adding. This is a subtraction by addition. God the Son emptied Himself by adding to His divine nature the very nature of a human being.

Now, we may say, "Is that really slavery?" We struggle to understand the gravity this because humanity is all we know. But think of what Christ left! This is the Creator of the universe! This is the possessor of divine glory and majesty! This is the One rightly worshiped by all the heavenly host! This is the Lord and Master taking the form of a slave!

Friends, when we think about **the rights Christ relinquished** in the incarnation, we ought to be astonished by His humility! Think about how much you would love to throw off the weaknesses of your physical body! Even aside from the sinfulness of your flesh! Even just the pain and the infirmity that characterizes finite, decaying beings like you and me. I would love to be free from that! But Jesus, free from that weakness, free from that infirmity, free from that decay, contemplated the riches of His pre-incarnate glory, and humbly chose to take on human nature and the weakness of human flesh—to live and die as a slave of all. In the language of Philippians 2:3 and 4, He was doing nothing from selfishness, but was regarding others as more important than Himself. He was not looking out merely for His own interests, but also for the interests of others. And in doing so, He models for us what we are now called to do.

There is a lesson for us here. As sad as it is to admit it, the reality is that for many people, the holidays are not always a happy time. Perhaps people think back to a time when they enjoyed the holidays with their whole family. But now, certain loved ones have moved away; others have passed away; and the holidays only remind us of how much we miss them. For others, it can just be a time of severe stress—trying to make all the dinner plans and travel preparations, and finish

all your Christmas shopping. For others, it could just be that different people had different expectations as to what a holiday gathering was supposed to be like. You really had your heart set on things going a particular way, and now that plans have changed you're disappointed. And all of these scenarios can cause our tempers to shorten and our pride to grow strong.

But especially at this time of year, we need to have in ourselves this attitude which was also in Christ Jesus. In the midst of a conflict with a brother or sister in Christ—or with a family member, or even with a spouse—though we might be right about something, and though we might have a good case to make, we can think on the only One who ever had a right to assert His rights and didn't, and we can regard one another as more important than ourselves, and give preference to one another in honor (Rom 12:10) for the sake of true unity. Calvin said, "He [Jesus] gave up his right: all that is required of us is, that we do not assume to ourselves [a higher position] than we ought" (54). The question we need to ask ourselves is: if *God the Son* has stooped this far, friends, to what depths of humility will you refuse to stoop?

III. The Shame He Embraced (v. 8)

Well, we've seen the glory He renounced, and the rights He relinquished. Let's now consider **the shame He embraced**. Verse 8 says, "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

See, Jesus' humility didn't stop at His taking on a human nature. He didn't just become a man; He became an obedient man. From all eternity the Son was equal to the Father in glory and majesty, but in His incarnation He now relates to the Father in terms of authority and submission. He repeatedly says things like, "I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me," John 5:30. "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me, John 6:38.

And ultimately, Christ's humble submission to the Father takes Him to obedience to the point of death—to the laying down of His life. Jesus was born to *die*. The point of the Jesus' incarnation is Jesus' passion. Christmas is simply the introduction to Good Friday.

The Author of Life humbly submits to death. The One who is without sin humbly submits to sin's curse. The One who has life within Himself (John 1:4; 5:26)—the One who gives life to whomever He wishes (John 5:21), humbly releases His grip on His own life in submission to the Father and in love for those whom His Father has given Him. Here is humility shining like the sun in its full strength. "Amazing love! How can it be, that Thou, My God, shouldst die for me?"

But it doesn't stop there. There are greater depths to plumb before the humiliation of the Son of God reaches rock bottom. He wasn't just obedient. He wasn't just obedient unto death. The Holy

Son of God, the Lord of glory, “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, *even death on a cross.*”

And in that day, the cross meant one thing: the most horrific and shameful kind of death. One commentator said, “The cross displayed the lowest depths of human depravity and cruelty. It exhibited the most brutal form of sadistic torture and execution ever invented by malicious human minds” (Hansen, 157).

In crucifixion, metal spikes were driven through the victim’s wrists and feet, and he was left to hang naked and exposed, sometimes for days. Because the body would be pulled down by gravity, the weight of a victim’s own body would press against his lungs, and the hyperextension of the lungs and chest muscles made it difficult to breathe. Victims would gasp for air by pulling themselves up. But when they would do that, the wounds in their wrists and feet would tear at the stakes that pierced them, and the flesh of their back—usually torn open from flogging—would grate against the jagged wood. Eventually, when he could no longer summon the strength to pull himself up to breathe, the victim of a crucifixion would die from suffocation under the weight of his own body.

This was the most sadistically cruel, excruciatingly painful, and loathsomely degrading death that a man could die. And there on Golgotha, 2,000 years ago, the innocent, holy, righteous Son of God died *this* death. God. On a cross.

This was the Highest of the high gone to the lowest of the low. And if He, the One who was worthy of all honor and all praise could submit Himself to *that*, can we continue in selfish ambition and empty conceit? Can we continue to bicker with one another, and insist on our own rights? Can we withhold forgiveness? Can we do anything less than surrender all of our rights, and lay down our lives in the sacrificial service of one another? A wise man once asked, “How can *anyone* be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?”

Conclusion

But as hard as it may be to believe, the shame and pain of the cross was not the lowest depth to which the Son of God humbly submitted Himself. The Old Testament taught that anyone hanged on a tree is accursed of God. Paul quotes this verse in Galatians 3:13: “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’” Worse than the pain, and the torture, and the shame, crucifixion also brought with it a divine curse. This is rock bottom.

We need to dwell long and hard on what it meant for God the Son to be cursed by God the Father. He never deserved to know His Father’s wrath. He only ever deserved to know His Father’s delight and approbation. And there on Calvary, He was cut off from the apple of His eye, from the joy of His heart. And He was innocent! I can barely imagine the sense of

bewilderment that the Son of God must have experienced, when for the first time in all of eternity, He felt what it was to know His Father's displeasure. No wonder He cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?!" I can barely handle that thought. That was *my* sin that did that. *My* wrath that He had to endure. That was *my* frown from the Father, *my* alienation. That was *my* cry of dereliction.

And my friend, if you haven't felt the pain of that thought in the depths of your soul, and cried out with every fiber of your being for God to have mercy on you, you sit here dead in your trespasses and sins! But I beg you: feel it now! Cry out now in repentance and faith, and cast yourself on the mercy of Christ! Turn from your sin—abandon all your "good works" that you would rely on to get you to Heaven, and beg for forgiveness on the basis of this death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and trust entirely in *His* righteousness alone for salvation! And you will be saved! It's free! His death will have become your death. His curse, your curse. And His righteousness, your righteousness. What could stop you from seizing eternal life, this very moment?

And to my brothers and sisters who have seized it, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." If He could come from the glories of Heaven itself, all the way down to the abject degradation of the cross, surely we can humble ourselves to be servants of all. Surely we, mere creatures of the dust, can surrender our rights for the sake of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The call of Christmas is the call to humility. May it be that we answer that call, by the grace of God.