

**"The Downward Mobility of Christ"**  
**Sermon Series: *Christ: the Source of our Joy and Strength***  
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**(Phil. 2:1-11)**

**Introduction.**

Leonard Bernstein was one of the greatest American composers and conductors in the last century, and I attended one of the Young People's Concerts he put on all over the country when I was in elementary school. Once he was asked, "Mr. Bernstein, what is the most difficult instrument in the orchestra to play?" He thought about it for a moment and then replied, "Second fiddle!"

There is something in each one of us that has a hard time playing second fiddle. We want to be first in line. We desire to have the finest house on the block. And we want the best seat. However, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is a remarkable display of just the opposite. Instead of pursuing upward mobility in life, Jesus sought to be downwardly mobile, not only in the incarnation but also in how He ministered to those on the margins of society. Instead of climbing the ladder of success and trying to be first in line or the one on the top of the heap, Jesus came down the ladder, so to speak, and He gave us an example for how we're supposed to serve and sacrifice for others, too.

As we continue in our study of the book of Philippians, I would like for us to take a few moments to reflect on one of the most remarkable passages in the whole Bible, and let's consider the downward mobility of Christ.

**I. The Attitude of Christ.**

There was a problem in the church in Philippi which surfaces in Paul's letter here in the second chapter, and he'll talk about it in more detail later on in his epistle. It seems that there were tensions in the congregation which caused certain members of the church to oppose each other instead of working together in unity. Later on in the letter Paul names the three people who were involved in these arguments which threaten the unity of the church.

Controversies and arguments are nothing new, and they occurred in the churches in the New Testament just like they do in congregations today. Christians back then were just like us, and they struggled to get along same as you and me. One positive result from all this is that it makes it impossible for us as believers today to create in our minds a fantasy portrait of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church and think that it was comprised of holy people who didn't struggle with the same kind of things we do.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against wish-dream idealism in thinking about community in the body of Christ, and he said, "The Christian Church is not a divine ideal but a divine reality."<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to try and address the problem with factions in the church in Philippi, Paul urged his readers to move away from focusing so much on themselves and their disagreements and instead cultivate the kind of attitude that Jesus Christ had. And he says, "*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Jesus Christ*" (2:5). Paul advocates a oneness of love, and he encourages them to follow the example of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).

Why do we fight with each other? I think it's partly because we're starved for glory. We want to feel like we matter, that our opinion is important, and that what we do is appreciated. And when that doesn't happen, we get upset, we feel overlooked, and sometimes we argue and fight in order to try and get our way. But Jesus wasn't a Person who was starved for glory. He had an inner fullness that came from the relationship He enjoyed with His heavenly Father. And because Jesus was already full of glory from the security of that relationship, He was then able to empty Himself and serve others.

Jonathan Edwards was one of the leaders of the First Great Awakening in this country, and he once wrote a little book entitled *Charity and Its Fruit*. It's a series of sermons he preached in his church in Northampton in 1738. In that book he said that the kind of humility Jesus demonstrated must be opposed to four things in one's life.

The first is **self-consciousness**. Edwards said we tend to be focused on ourselves too much of the time, and we become self-absorbed and obsess about me and mine. We want to make sure we get our piece of the pie. But Jesus wasn't like that. Because He was full from His relationship with His heavenly Father, He could focus on other people. He didn't have to be self-absorbed because he felt so loved, accepted, and affirmed by the Father. C.S. Lewis once said that humility isn't thinking less of yourself; it's simply think of yourself less. Do you see his point?

The second thing Edwards said is that true humility avoids **willfulness**. That's the kind of attitude which says, "I'm always right and you're always wrong," and it tries to demand its own way. A willful person doesn't listen to other people, and they aren't open to advice. But Jesus sought to do the will of His heavenly Father, and He was willing to sacrifice Himself rather than demand His own way.

The third thing Edwards said is that true humility is opposed to is **scornfulness**. That's the kind of attitude that is really sarcastic, and a scornful person is contemptuous and has disdain for other people. They put others down in order to make themselves feel like they're above everyone else. But curtesy and gentleness aren't just signs of being nice. They're also an indication that you're full of God's love.

And finally, Edwards said that true humility avoids **drivenness**. It's one thing to work hard, and there are seasons in your life when you have to put in a lot of time at work. But if you're habitually over-working all the time, it's usually a response to inner-emptiness, not a response to fullness. I think that many people who are super-competent and super-productive are simply trying to prove themselves and fill the inner vacuum they feel in their souls. They are desperately looking for respect, and they haven't found the fullness of love and affirmation they can only receive from the grace of God.

How do you get the kind of heart that is full like that? Where can we go to live in such freedom? Paul said, "Look at Jesus Christ and the attitude He had and the relationship He enjoyed with God, and try to cultivate it in your own life by the power of God's Spirit." If we contemplate the miracle of the incarnation, we will see the best example of what a servant-attitude looks like in Jesus. We will see how the Lord emptied Himself of His beauty and His glory and His power, and He took on our sinful humanity so He could give His fullness to us. What a Savior!

## **II. The Downward Mobility of Christ.**

Many scholars say that these verses in Philippians represent the high-water mark of Paul's entire letter. They also represent one of the greatest Christological statements in the whole New Testament. Paul explains that Jesus was a Person who never felt the need to be upwardly mobile.

Instead, he came down the back stairs, and He demonstrated His humility through sacrificial service.

There are three things I want you to note in this passage Paul says about the downward mobility of Christ. First of all, note that it says **He who was sovereign became a servant**. In Philippians 2:6,7 we read, "*[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not cling to His prerogatives as God's equal, but emptied Himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*" Here we're reminded that the King of all creation, the Master of the universe, the sovereign Lord of all that is became a servant. The one person in all the world who had the right to assert His rights waived them, and He chose to humble Himself in service to others. On one occasion He took a towel around His waist and washed His disciples' feet.

When I read of Jesus' example, I'm reminded of the values of the kingdom of God – values not predicated on how much work I can do or what I can accomplish. God didn't come into the world in the Person of Jesus Christ to rescue me from sin and death because of what I could do for Him. Rather, He came into the world because of what He could do for me. He came to serve. He who was sovereign became a servant.

Second, note that **He who was rich became poor**. Paul continues in verse 7 and writes, "*...who being in the very essence God... made Himself nothing.*" Elsewhere the apostle writes, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that through His poverty you might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9). The Lord Jesus had everything, and He gave it all up in order that we might gain His eternal inheritance. He emptied Himself so we could gain the riches of heaven, and in return He took on our poverty.

Have you ever thought about how poor Jesus was?

If you've read the gospels, then you've noticed that during His earthly ministry Jesus was always borrowing things from other people. For example, He borrowed a place in which to be born because there was no room for them in the inn. He borrowed a boat from which to preach. He borrowed an animal on which to ride into Jerusalem. He borrowed an upper room to celebrate the Passover. And He borrowed a tomb in which to be buried when He was crucified.

And above all this, in His poverty Jesus took on the debt of our sin, and He paid the price you and I owed. As Isaiah put it, "*He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was laid upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed*" (Is 53:5). No one was richer than Jesus. None became poorer than He. Christ who was rich became poor.

And finally, **He who was life became death**. Paul writes in verse 8 of our passage, "*Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.*" Jesus came into the world not to live as no one had ever lived, nor to teach as no one who had ever taught, and He didn't come to heal as no one had ever healed. The reason Christ came into the world is so that He might die as no one had ever died! As the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

Holman Hunt has a famous painting of Jesus, and in it the painting shows our Lord at the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He is still a young man, and he has come to stretch his arms which had grown cramped over the workbench. He stands there at the doorway with His arms outstretched, and behind Him, on the wall, the setting sun throws His shadow. And it's the shadow of a cross. In the background there kneels Mary, and as she sees that shadow, there is the fear and apprehension in her body of the coming tragedy. Jesus said that His atoning death upon the cross was the very reason He was sent to the earth (Jn. 12:27). And it's the sacrifice of

Christ on the cross that enabled us to be delivered from sin and spiritual death. He who was life became death.

The late Henri Nouwen once wrote, “The way of Jesus is radically different. It is the way *not* of upward mobility but downward mobility. It is going to the bottom, staying behind the sets, and choosing the last place! Why is the way of Jesus worth choosing? Because it is the way to the kingdom, the way Jesus took, and the way that brings everlasting life.”

### **III. The Exaltation of Christ.**

Paul concludes this passage with the greatest surprise of them all: this humiliation became a victory! The low point of Jesus’ human life turned out to be the high point of human history. In his voluntary humiliation on the cross Jesus won the victory over sin and death and all the power of evil.

And now God has highly exalted Jesus and has given Him the Name that is above every other name. In antiquity a person’s name often signified their dignity or their character. It told you something about who they were. This was true to some extent later on in history when people were often identified by who their parents were (for example, Johnson meant “John’s son”), or by their occupation (such as Baker), or where they lived (such as Green). But Jesus has the character and dignity above everyone else in history, not only earth but also in heaven. That’s why His name is above every other one.

There is a profound poetic play on words within the structure of this early Christian hymn. In verse 3 Paul warned his readers about *keno-doxa*, which literally means “empty glory.” It’s translated “vain conceit” in most Bibles, but it really means “empty glory.” Then in verses 5-11 he shows the contrast between our empty glory and the greatness of Jesus Christ and His glory. Christ emptied Himself (*kenoo*) and by doing so was exalted to the glory (*doxa*) of God the Father.

If you and I try to establish our own glory, it will only turn out to be empty and worthless – vain conceit, like Jonathan Edwards talked about in his book. It’s only as we empty ourselves of any false claim to glory and the praise we seek from other people that God’s power can then work through us. And it’s only as we are filled with the glory of Jesus imputed to us that we can be full and serve out of that fullness in sacrifice for others. Do you see what Paul is saying here?

Perhaps more than in any other passage in Paul’s writings, this marvelous hymn shows that Paul can’t talk about any major theme without relating it to Christ. For the apostle, Jesus was the foundation, the center, and the focus that gives meaning to and integrates all of life together. “How can you and I become more like Christ?” That’s what Paul wants us to ask.

### **Conclusion.**

Tomorrow is a national holiday in America on which we honor the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It’s a day when we remember the leader of the civil rights movement and the profound moral courage he demonstrated. It was 50 years ago this year when he was assassinated during the struggle for civil rights, and we rightly take time tomorrow to honor this man and reflect on all he stood and fought for.

Philip Yancey has written a wonderful chapter on Dr. King in his excellent book *Soul Survivor*, and in that book he explains how the downward mobility of Christ was the model for Dr. King and the inspiration for the civil rights movement. Martin had been thrust into leadership of the movement in Montgomery, Alabama, after Rosa Parks made her brave decision not to move to the back of the bus.

The black community formed a new organization to lead a bus boycott, and by default they chose as a compromise candidate for its leadership the new minister in town, Martin Luther King, Jr. He was just 26-years-old. Growing up in a middle-class home with an inherited religion from his father who was a preacher in Atlanta, King hardly felt qualified to lead a great moral crusade.

As soon as King's leadership of the movement was announced, the threats from the Ku Klux Klan began. And within days King was arrested for driving 30 miles per hour in a 25-mph zone, and he was thrown into the Montgomery city jail. He was so shaken by his first experience in jail, the following night King sat in his kitchen wondering if he could take it anymore. "Should I resign?" he wondered.

It was around midnight, and he felt agitated and full of fear. A few minutes later, the phone rang. The voice on the other end of the line called him the N word and said, "We are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house." Then they hung up.

King sat staring at an untouched cup of coffee and tried to think of a way out, a way to quietly surrender leadership and resume the serene life of scholarship he planned. In the next room lay his wife Coretta, already asleep, along with their newborn daughter Yolanda. Here is how King remembers that night in a sermon he later preached.

And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep....And I got to the point that I couldn't take it anymore.

And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it.... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage."

...And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr. was full from the affirmation of God through the power of the Spirit of Christ that night, and it gave him the strength, the courage, and the humility to lead the civil rights movement which brought about societal change that was so badly needed in this country. Dr. King followed the example of Jesus in Philippians 2, and from the fullness of his relationship with Christ he was able to make the sacrifice to do whatever was necessary in the struggle for civil rights. He even laid down his life in that struggle.

(Friends, there is more work to do, and we will need the fullness of Christ, too, in order to empty ourselves of our own agendas in order to do what we can to take up God's call to bring justice and reconciliation to a lost and broken world. May the Lord inspire us through the example of Christ which Paul painted so beautifully in Philippians 2 so we can leverage our positions of influence today to help usher in the kingdom of God more fully here in Winston-Salem and around the world. To God be the glory! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper, 1954) 27.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., from a sermon tape. Cited by Philip Yancey in his book *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 20-21.