

Sermon November 24th, 2019: Philippians 2:1–11.

In Jesus' Name We Rejoice By: Samuel Lau

I have been going through Philippians to and sharing my thoughts with you because we want to learn Paul's secret of being content in every situation. Skipping ahead in the letter a little today, we are going to look at the subject of humility. Specifically Christ-like humility.

What is humility? If you were to give a short definition, what would you say?... That's very interesting. Humility is one of those concepts that seems easy to define, but is actually very difficult. And even some of the sharpest minds throughout human history have disagreed on how to define and whether it's actually a good thing.

Various philosophers, such as the great ancestor of Western thought, Aristotle, did not have a particularly high view of humility, it was not a virtue for him. There are cultures that do place on a higher value on something that might resemble humility, but here also, what "humility" really means in those cultures might be slightly different from each other.

Conversely, you may have also felt some resistance to the practice of humility, either coming from others or yourself. You may have good reason, for like the concept of surrender or submission, these virtues have been used as weapons to keep various people groups down, in their place, as we say. For women, especially. In spite of this danger, however, recent research has highlighted the many positive aspects of humility, both to the individual and the greater social good. But is this Christian humility? If it is, what's the difference? Here in Philippians, Paul gives us one of the most moving accounts of Christ's humility, and let us consider what he teaches us here.

First, we keep in mind what Paul has just previously written. He has just finished telling the Philippians how for him, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:22). And a few verses before chapter 2 he admonishes the Philippians to live their lives in a manner worthy of Christ (Phil. 1:27), so the emphasis and importance lies in the church's resemblance to her Savior. In this is her significance and her confidence. This is utmost importance to Paul.

Humility is also integral to the inter-relationships within the church, as the first verses we read today tell us. And Paul tells the Philippians that if they have ANY encouragement in Christ, then they ought to be humble with one another. This virtue is part of what it means to be "of the same mind", as this mind was in Christ Jesus. To think like Jesus, to see the world like Jesus, to be like Jesus, is to be humble as Jesus was humble.

Helpfully, Paul tells us what humility is NOT. In verse 3, he tells the Philippians to not do anything from selfish ambition or conceit. Now, this is important. Often, humility is a tool, a tool to get favor from others, as a means to present a particular image to the outside. We could be proud or conceited inside but we act helpful, considerate, and self-effacing, in order to make people like us. Now of course, there are more obvious ways of being selfish, and no doubt Paul includes that in his statement, but what Paul expects of us is more clear in the next part of that

sentence, where he tells the Philippians that “in humility, you should count others more significant than yourselves.” And furthermore, in the next verse, Paul clarifies that we are to look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others.

And here we get to the crux of the matter: the example of Jesus Christ. Because if there’s anyone with good reason to NOT be humble, it is the God-man himself. Paul tells us that even though Christ was in the form of God, in other words, pretty much God; yet he did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, like a slave! Paul parodies the Roman Empire, whose emperors jockeyed for power and prestige through violent and deceitful means, so that they could be declared the Caesar, the Son of God. In effect, he says that the dominant cultural narrative of what it means to be ‘godly’ or ‘godlike’ is not only wrong, but the complete opposite of what God is really like. God does not parade his power, God does not seek to put down others to elevate Himself, God does not see his superior power and wisdom and love as a reason to exalt Himself.

Instead, Jesus shows us who God really is. Jesus shows us that despite his majesty and superiority, God does not expect special treatment. God will go through hardship, poverty, pain, rejection, shame, suffering, temptation. God will lower Himself to endure all that even the lowest and the most pitiful of us have to endure. He did not sin, yet he will suffer all the consequences of even the worst sinner.

One of the more interesting definitions of humility I looked up recently was one that was published by a group of psychologists that had done some extensive research. They identified individuals that exhibited many of the behaviors that one would describe as ‘humble’, and they concluded that the key predictor of a healthy and beneficial humility was a specific outlook and perspective that these individuals had. Participants who demonstrated a healthy humility believed that, regardless of what virtues they possessed or what they had achieved, that they did not deserve to be treated differently than anyone else.

Now take note that these humble people are not unaware that they have gifts, talents, skills, achievements that are noteworthy, etc. They do not pretend like they’re not smart, or not experienced, or not talented. But they do not expect to get special treatment because of that. No, they say, just treat me like everybody else.

This is actually radically different from how human beings function, if you haven’t noticed. Almost everything in human society rests on moving up the social ladder, and working to get one’s abilities and talents recognized publicly is how you get better treatment, like a better job, a better spouse, more money to spend on better stuff, more influence, and with that influence, more prestige and money and social connections, and so on and so on.

But in God’s kingdom, this is all up-ended. Jesus Christ destroys this entire system. Because he came and essentially said, “Oh, you think you’re worth special treatment because of what you got? Well, I’m Creator, Redeemer, the Alpha and the Omega, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the only begotten Son of God Himself! And I say that I don’t get special treatment or special privileges. So, is a servant about the master?”

As you all read in your own languages, we are invited to have the same mind in us as Christ. This mindset may not be all that attractive at first, for it sure does not seem like it is conducive to a high self-esteem, always thinking first of others, especially when you very well may not receive the recognition you were hoping for by doing that. But we must remember that we are invited to have the mind of Christ, and that includes Christ's deep abiding confidence in his Father's love and his own eternal glory and worth. Jesus was humble not because he had low self-esteem, but because he had the highest self-esteem possible. He knew himself to be so worthy that not only did he feel no need to prove it, he was ready to do a whole lot that would approve to disprove it, even death on a cross.

This is why false humility is not true humility. False humility is presenting a humble face out of insecurity over one's worth so that others will authenticate you, give you your worth or status. True humility is confident in one's own worth, so confident that one could live one's entire life without being threatened by others. And listen, Paul says that Christ did not count equality with God something to be grasped, or exploited, depending on your translation. And we are to have the same mind! We are told we should have the same confidence in our high standing with God as Christ! And what did God do for Christ, who obediently served in humility?

He highly exalted him, gave him the name above every name. And we are given the same promise. In Revelation, our Lord and Savior promises the church of Laodicea, "to the one who conquers, I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne." (Rev. 3:21)

I have critiqued using humility as a tool to win the praise of others. And that is because it often masks a deeper problem. But God does reward those who emulate Him. Jesus was exalted for how he emptied himself, and the truth of who he was was eventually fully recognized by all. Likewise, God will not forget how we have loved Him by following Him to the cross and obeying all his commands. That is the mind of Christ and that is how we love one another. Our vindication is forthcoming and guaranteed, there's no need to seek it for ourselves.

So how does this help us with finding peace and contentment amidst our troubles? Well, I hope that by now it is becoming clearer for you. If we truly believe all this is true, that Jesus Christ is who we sing so boldly to during our worship, then we truly know that our foundation is secure. If we are seeking God's Kingdom first in our lives, repenting of sin and working out our salvation in fear and trembling, then even in the most humiliating circumstances, we know we are no less exalted and can live in the freedom that that provides. Painful and difficult as they are, those things can never be something that makes us have any less reason to rejoice.