

## **The Humility of God**

Philippians 2:1-11

Main idea: Christians are called to imitate the humility of Christ through joyful obedience, servant love, and worship.

### **Introduction**

The theme for this Sunday in Advent is humility. Earlier there was the Advent candle reading about Mary and how she exemplifies humility before God. So Pastor Jerry asked me if I would preach this morning on the subject of humility. I got to wondering why Pastor Jerry asked *me* to come give this sermon. And then I realized that he must have known about how I'm world's foremost expert on the subject. He must have seen the book I wrote on humility. It's obvious that I wrote it because it's got my picture on the front cover.

It's almost too easy to make jokes about humility, isn't it? You all laughed when I bragged about humility. The irony is pretty obvious. But this illustrates something important. There's something elusive about humility, isn't there? As soon as we think we're pretty humble—well, maybe we're not. Or we could put it this way. Pride has a way of sneaking up on us. Just when we think that we've rooted out our pride, there it is again. There's something elusive about humility. And there's something devious about pride. Many Christians have taught that pride is actually the root of all our sin. All sin comes from this posture of the heart in which we rebel against God; put ourselves first; make ourselves the lord and master of our life.

Let me offer just a couple of examples. First, imagine that you are driving in your car and you come up to a stoplight. A little ways ahead of you, a pedestrian steps out onto the crosswalk and forces you to slow down and miss the green light. They make you one minute late. How dare they! Or here's another scenario. Suppose that your spouse asks you to come and help with a little household chore. You aren't doing anything especially important, but you feel like it is "your time." (As if any of us really owned time). Or third, suppose you get a phone call or a text from a friend that you know is lonely. But this person, if you are honest, just kind of tires you out.

What do we do in these kinds of situations? Or even if we end up doing what we would regard as the kind and considerate thing to do, what is our first, inward reaction? Don't we tend to have an instinct to put ourselves first? This issue of pride and humility is challenging, isn't it? It's almost difficult to know where to begin in talking about these things.

But a good place to start is where we are right now: the season of Advent and Christmas. The Christmas story is saturated with humility. We've already reflected on the humility of Mary in how she received God's message to her and simply believed and obeyed. She knew that she was God's servant. Of course, the whole circumstance of Jesus' birth is very humble. Jesus wasn't born in a gilded palace. He wasn't even born in a tidy guest room prepared for the

occasion. He was laid in a feeding trough. Sounds like a pretty humble way of coming into the world.

## **The Humility of God**

But I think that above all the Christmas story tells us about the humility of God himself. Perhaps you noticed that my sermon title is “The Humility of God.” Maybe that phrase made you stop and wonder, “Now wait a minute. Is God humble?” God is the almighty king of the universe. He sits enthroned in splendor between the cherubim. He calls all creatures in heaven and earth to bow down and worship him. He works always to express his own honor and glory. And as the great creator and redeemer of all things, he has the right to do that. Is *humility* the best word to describe God?

It’s an interesting question. And this is where it helps to look back at Philippians 2. In this passage we have this amazing statement about Jesus. Many people think that Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn here. But in any case, he describes three main things about Jesus: He was fully God, he humbled himself by coming to this world and going to the cross, and now God has raised him back to the highest place of honor and glory. So let’s start with that first point: Jesus was, and is, fully God. Christians have always confessed that. It’s been theology 101 for as long as the church has been the church—that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. Jesus was and always has been equal to God the Father in glory and honor and worthiness.

And yet we read here that “he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” Instead, “he made himself nothing.” Some translations render this a bit more literally, that he “emptied himself.” Now there’s an old theological debate about what exactly that means. What exactly did Jesus *empty himself of* when he came into the world as a human being? Well, we’re not going to be able to talk about this in much depth, but I think we can come close enough by saying this: first, that Jesus didn’t empty himself of his divinity or “God-ness”. He didn’t become any less “God” than he had ever been. But he did empty himself of his right to be *treated* like God. By coming to earth as a little baby, as a humble servant, as a sacrificial offering for sin, he was laying down his divine rights. This would be like if the CEO of a huge corporation, for a few days, took off his expensive suit, put on work clothes, and started doing shifts on his factory floor. He didn’t cease to be the CEO. He just stopped acting the way we expect a CEO to act. He gave up his right to wear the fancy suit and to sit in the comfy leather chair. I think that gives us some idea of what this passage is saying about Jesus.

That’s why my sermon is called “The Humility of God.” Because in and through Jesus, the God of all Glory stooped down and made himself a human being. The King of Kings showed up in servant’s clothing and taught us the meaning of love. The Creator groaned under the weight of his own world. The one being who deserves to sit in the place of ultimate honor gave up that seat and came to a place where he was shamed and beaten and crucified for the sake of his sinful people. So if Jesus really is God, then I’d say God is pretty humble. In fact, He’s almost more humble than we lowly humans can imagine. And as surprising as that it is, it actually makes a lot

of sense when you think about it. The lower one is, the more room there is for unwarranted pride, but the greater one is, the more room for unexpected humility. There is no pride as outrageous as the pride of sinful human beings, and there is no humility as glorious as the humility of God as we see him in Jesus Christ.

### **In Pursuit of Christlike Humility**

And this is what Paul wants us to imitate. We're amazed at the humility of Jesus, but how do we actually imitate that kind of example? Look at what Paul says here: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition." "In humility value others above yourselves." "Don't look to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Those are some tough instructions, aren't they!

But in another sense, I think this passage is very helpful. Because when we read it carefully, we get a clearer idea of what humility really means. And I think that's a big part of the struggle, because we sometimes have a false idea of what humility is really about. We often think of humility as kind of sticking our faces in the dirt. "Woe is me, I am but a loathsome worm", and that kind of thing. Or perhaps we think of humility as denying or downplaying our strengths or talents.

But humility as we see it in this passage actually has less to do with how we think about ourselves than how we think about others. Paul keeps the emphasis in this passage on how we should value others above ourselves, and care for their interests before our own. It isn't that we loath ourselves or downplay our own abilities, but that we are simply more interested in other people and their good than we are in ourselves. There's a big difference between putting ourselves down and putting others first. And this passage is all about putting others first. Rick Warren this very memorably: "Humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less." Or perhaps we could put it this way: humility doesn't mean sticking our faces in the dirt, but rather turning our faces toward God—and therefore also toward our neighbor made in God's image.

And then I think we get the best sense of what humility means when we go on and look at the example of Jesus. Jesus humbled himself by laying down the things he deserved and making himself a servant. Verse 8 says that "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" For Jesus, humility meant obedience to the Father, and it meant sacrificial love. And I think that's what humility means for us, too. It means that we have a posture of obedience before God, and a posture of sacrificial love for others. It means that we are even willing to forego our own rights if that's what it takes to glorify God and love our neighbor.

Let me tell you something else that we learn about humility from Jesus in this passage. Jesus was not on a mission to win a contest in eating humble pie. It wasn't his goal to come and try to be as humble as he could. His goal was to obey and glorify his Father. His mission was to be a servant and to give his life in sacrificial love. His humility was the byproduct of that mission. I think I can say that it's the same way with some of the humblest people that I've

known. They weren't moping around trying to wear their humblest face. No, they were preoccupied with caring about other people, caring about causes bigger than themselves, caring about the mission of God in the world. Humility is something that is found when we take our eyes off ourselves and focus on something worthy beyond ourselves.

This suggests that maybe we shouldn't try to pursue humility as an end-in-itself. We don't grow in humility by going out and self-consciously trying to be as humble as we possibly can be. Because as long as we're doing that, we're still looking in the mirror. Still evaluating ourselves, trying to measure up. Pride basically is the condition in which we stand in front of a mirror all day, and maybe we like what we see, or maybe we don't, but either way, as long as we're staring in the mirror, we're still preoccupied with ourselves. Humility requires us to take our eyes away from the mirror and to look at something beyond ourselves; to realize that there are bigger and more important things in this world than me. It requires looking into the face our savior. It requires gazing at the glory of God. And to make it much more practical, it requires looking into the eyes of another human being and caring deeply *about them*.

So let's look at three ways in particular that this passage teaches us about true humility; about orienting our lives toward God and our neighbor rather than inward toward ourselves.

### Joyful Obedience

The first is obedience. If we want to grow in humility, obey God. That's not a very flashy-sounding piece of advice. It probably won't sell many bumper stickers. But that's what Jesus did. Jesus lived his life as a perfect example of obedience to the Father. Now, the word *obedience* might have a negative connotation for some of us. It might sound like committing ourselves a kind of joyless religious drudgery. But I think that really the opposite is the case. Hebrews 12:2 calls us to fix our eyes on Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and says that "*for the joy set before him* he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God." If God is really God—if he is the creator and redeemer of all; the source of all goodness and the goal of all worthy desires—then there is no ultimate joy apart from God, and no joy apart from living in alignment with his purposes for us. There's something joyful about living for purposes beyond ourselves. That's why humility is found on the path of obedience, and that's why this path leads to true joy. So we all need to think about whether we are living in humble obedience to God. Part of that is an eagerness to read God's word and learn about the kinds of things God desires for our lives, and a willingness to repent and turn back to him when we drift away. But part of it is also asking ourselves, "Am I living in obedience to the mission which God has called us to? Am I using my gifts, my abilities, my opportunities, in ways that serve God and his purposes in this world?"

### Servant love

Here's the second thing. Serve one another out of sacrificial love. This passage really emphasizes how Jesus became a servant. We read that Jesus "did not consider equality with God

something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.” In other words, Jesus, the Eternal Lord and Creator of all, set aside his place of divine honor, came to earth, and made himself a servant. Jesus himself described his ministry that way. Mark 10:45 says, “For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus vividly demonstrated that at the last supper when he put a towel around his waist and washed his disciples’ feet. In all these ways, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus’ ministry was all about servanthood driven by sacrificial love. So if we are going to pursue Christ-like humility, that also involves becoming a servant.

Again, it helps for us to get specific here. A moment ago I compared Jesus coming to earth to a CEO who comes down from his office and works on the floor of his own factory. Now maybe there aren’t very many CEOs in the congregation this morning. But I imagine that a lot of you have jobs in which you supervise or manage some people. What would it look like for you to imitate the humility of Jesus in your workplace?

Of course, we don’t have to be a manager or a boss of some kind to imitate the servitude of Jesus. All of us have opportunities to put others first—to look out for their interests, and not just our own. That’s what servant love really comes down to: putting others first, and choosing to act for their ultimate good rather than just our own.

Worship the glorified Christ.

So if we want to grow in humility, we can do so by focusing on obedience to God, servant love, and thirdly, by worshipping the glorified Christ. When we read this passage in Philippians 2, we can’t help but notice how it ends in an explosion of praise for Jesus Christ. As we trace this passage, we see that it sketches the life of Jesus as kind of an inverted arch. It begins with glory, with the reminder that Jesus is in very nature God, that from all eternity he is one with the Father, then explains how he plunged down to earth, became a servant, and went down to the depths of sacrificial suffering on the cross, and then finally ascended back to the highest place of God’s eternal honor and glory.

At first glance, it almost looks like Paul has forgotten about the theme of humility as we come to the end of this passage, which is all about the worship of the glorified Christ. But I don’t think that Paul has actually forgotten about humility at all. Because one of the best ways for us to grow in humility is to fix our eyes on the glory of Jesus Christ. See, pride is the condition of being out-of-touch the reality of who God is, and we become preoccupied with ourselves. Humility is grace by which we forget ourselves in gazing on the glory of God as he revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Also, there’s a much deeper connection between humility and glory than we might realize at first. I know, it’s kind of a paradox. But listen to these words of Jesus, which he said on more than one occasion: “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Jesus didn’t just say that, he lived it like nobody else and he proved

that it was the truth. When Jesus willingly went to the place of utter pain and humiliation for the sake of obedience and servitude and love, there on the cross was the splendor of God's glory most fully put on display. Or to put it differently, God glorified himself not in spite of but precisely in and through his astonishing humility. Nothing so captures our wonder and evokes our worship as the astonishing thing that God did when Jesus came to this world and went to the cross for us. Nothing so humbles us as gazing self-forgetfully at the miracle of the baby in Bethlehem and the wonder of the king on the cross.

And of course, we grow in self-forgetful humility when we gladly give Jesus Christ the worship and honor he is due; not only for what he did for us, but for who he is. Pride is the great deception in which we forget that God is God and we try to take his place. Humility then is a joyful acknowledgement of reality: that Jesus is Lord, and the all the glory belongs to God. Humility brings us to the end of ourselves, but therefore to the beginning of everything else. When we come to the end of ourselves, we encounter a world filled with people to love, a savior to trust, and an amazing God to worship. And I think we can all agree with Paul that this is something worth celebrating together.