

“Philippians: In Imitation of Christ”
Philippians 2:1-11

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Responsive Reading of Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11

Sermon:

Part One:

Imagine...

I want you to imagine a king. Imagine a king with a crown, a throne, a sceptre, servants, advisors and generals all around him. Imagine that this king has a son. His only son! And this son stand next to the king’s throne, ready to do whatever the king asks. This son is the crown prince. He holds the greatest power in the kingdom second only to the king. His is a life of privilege, power and glory. But he never lets it go to his head. Instead, he is always faithful to his father, always generous with the people and exercises wisdom and justice in the kingdom.

One day, the king receives some disturbing news from a messenger. He motions his son over to the throne, and his son bends down so his ear is by his father. The king says, “You remember that problem we talked about a while back?” The son nods. “Do you remember our plan for solving that problem?”

“Yes, father, I do,” replies the son soberly.

“Are you still willing to go through with it Son? Are you still willing to go undercover?” the father asks.

“Yes, I’m willing to go undercover father. It’s the only way,” the son responds.

“Ok, then it’s time,” the father commands.

Some of the kingdom officials and generals have known for a while that there was a plan developing. Some of them even knew the prince was going to have to go undercover. A hush falls over the throne room as they all turn to watch what is about to happen.

The prince steps down off the platform where the king’s throne sits. He gets down to the floor and beckons some servants to attend him. They begin to take off his rich, velvet robe, the one with the fur around the collar. These servants reverently fold the robe and take it away. Then another servant unclasps the son’s necklace, the one that holds his badge of office around it, places it in a mahogany box and closes it. A third servant holds out a bowl and the prince removes his rings, one by one, and, with a soft clink, places each one in the bowl. The servant carefully, and respectfully carries the bowl away.

Having removed all the signs of his rank and wealth, the prince then starts to take off his shirt. He hands it to a servant who gently folds it. Another servant helps him take off his soft, supple, comfortable boots. Finally, the prince takes off his nice pants, leaving only his undergarments. Some of the officials in the room stare at the floor, the ceiling, anywhere but at the prince, standing there in his vulnerability. Then another servant comes in carrying a bundle of cloth. He looks embarrassed as he kneels before the prince and offers up what he is carrying. The prince thanks him as he takes the stack. He proceeds to put on a rough shirt made of burlap, rough pants of wool, a belt made of rope and simple wooden sandals.

The officials, generals and servants in the room gasp at the dramatic change in the prince’s appearance, but he’s not done yet! Next a servant enters the throne room carrying a bowl of water, a towel and a razor. The prince kneels down in front of this servant who proceeds to shave the prince’s head! This is scandalous! Only slaves shave their heads! When the haircut is done, the prince stands up and looks around. Nobody can recognize him.

He puts on a cloak of rough cloth, lifts the hood over his head, and slips quietly out the back door to the throne room. He quietly leaves the palace, without any fanfare or ceremony, and slips into the night. He has gone on a secret mission, going undercover, taking on the very appearance of a slave in order to complete some important task for his father.

There is no word of the son the next day. Nor the day after that. In fact, there is no word about the prince for weeks on end! In fact, months go by without any news about the son, his mission or even his safety. Rumours abound. Many are afraid to bring up the topic of the missing prince in the king’s presence. Only a few, close and trusted advisors dare bring up the issue of the missing prince with the king, and then only in

private. The king only smiles softly and says, “This is all part of the plan. That we have not heard from my son is no surprise to me. He is undercover after all! No, I’m not worried about his safety. Not yet at least.”

The months turn into years. People have, for the most part, given up hope of the prince’s return. Nobody speaks of him anymore. But the king doesn’t seem too sad. This baffles those who have given up hope. But the king is the king after all! Finally, after nearly 30 years, rumours come to the capital of unrest in a neighbouring kingdom. In fact, this kingdom is the arch rival of their own kingdom, their greatest enemy. Centuries before, this evil kingdom had conquered a huge part of the good king’s territory through treachery and deceit. The people of the kingdom had been subjugated and enslaved for generations. Now there was word of an uprising! The rumours grow that the slaves are in revolt and that they are winning!

A short time later, the prince suddenly returns to the kingdom! He is leading a group of former slaves, their own countrymen, coming home. The king claps for his servants and commands them to set a great feast and celebration. The royal trumpeters go out to meet the prince. The most respected servants in the household go into the king’s chambers and bring out prince’s old robe, clothes and jewellery. As the prince nears the city, the people go out to greet him, clapping and cheering at his return. He is triumphant! He enters the palace and heads straight to the throne room. There the king greets him with a hug and huge smile. He is so proud of his son! He looks him over and sees that he is scarred dreadfully. He has been badly treated on this mission, but nothing can remove either man’s smile. The prince is victorious! The servants bring him his clothes, his rings, necklace and cloak.

But then the royal jeweller comes in, carrying a box. He is followed by several of his own apprentices, each carrying something. The royal jeweller opens the box for the prince, who reaches in and brings out a brand new ring, a royal signet, showing that the kingdom is now his. He now speaks for his father. The other jewellers bring him a sceptre, even larger and more ornate than the one his father carries. He is given a new necklace with an even more impressive badge of office, a more ornate robe to wear. When he puts on his new signs of office, everyone in the throne rooms bows before him, dropping down to one knee. Everyone begins to chant his name! Word spreads outside the palace and the people in the streets all begin chanting too. They all fall to their knees in honour of the prince, the king’s son, who has returned victorious.

The prince goes out onto a balcony in the palace. He addresses all the people and tells them that he has brought back with him a number of rescued slaves, but some are still held in captivity in the evil kingdom. But this is not the end. His next task is to raise an army. He is going to go back and fully defeat their rival kingdom, freeing all their countrymen. He has freed many of the slaves, but the enemy king still sits on his throne. The prince’s next task is to go back in force, no longer undercover, and dethrone the evil king. Then, having destroyed their greatest enemy, he will take the throne of the neighbouring kingdom. At that point, having taken the throne, he will turn over the neighbouring kingdom to his father who will reunite the kingdom as it once was and rule it all together.

Context

How do you think the people would feel? How do you think the freed slaves would feel? How do you think those slaves who were still imprisoned would feel, knowing that the prince was going to return to set them free?

This is a version of what we are going to see in our passage today. This is a fantasy description of what Jesus, the Son of God, did for us. We are the slaves held captive in the land that once belonged to the king, the land that was taken over by an enemy through treachery and deceit. Jesus is the prince, the Son of the King, who went on an undercover mission, taking off all his signs of office and power, giving up all the comfort and praise of Heaven, to come to us, in the form of a slave, the lowest of the low, entering the world as a little baby, in order to rescue us. And he is victorious! He has beaten sin and death. He has returned to his Father, the king, for the time being, but he will return to finally and fully defeat sin. He will take the throne of our world and turn it over to his Father once he has conquered all his enemies fully. Then, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

Let’s take a closer look at our text which we read together responsively a few minutes ago. Remember that Paul is talking about unity in this section of his letter. At the end of chapter 1, he talks about being unified in purpose, standing side by side and supporting one another as a sign that we will be saved by God and those who

are oppressing us will be destroyed.

What It Says

Now, in the beginning of chapter 2, Paul says, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, any comfort from his love, any fellowship with the Spirit, any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.” We see Paul saying a number of things here. First, we see that **as Christians there are four things that bind us together: encouragement from Christ, comfort in Christ’s love, fellowship in the Holy Spirit and God-given tenderness and compassion.** [James Montgomery Boice, *Philippians*, p. 113; Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, p. 182]

We should find encouragement in our times of difficulty, temptation, or sadness from the fact that we are united with Jesus. He went through everything we can go through, so he can understand. We find comfort in Jesus’ love, that he put our needs ahead of his own and is primarily concerned with our well-being. We also find that part of the Christian experience that binds us together is fellowship in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is at work in each of us, and we should find fellowship or friendship in our shared experience of that work. We also have tenderness and compassion for one another, seeing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul goes on to say that from this foundation of some of the first experiences of being a Christian, unity with Christ, his love, fellowship in the Spirit etc., we can grow and mature as Christians by having in us the same love we’ve experienced from Christ, by being unified in spirit and purpose.

We are not to do things for our own gain, but be humble and consider the needs of others as being more important than our needs. That’s like our definition of agape love- being primarily concerned with the well-being of others. To do this is to be like Jesus. We are to have the same mind-set as Jesus.

Paul then gives us one of the most spectacular descriptions of Jesus we have in the entire Bible. From verses 6-11 he describes what Jesus’ attitude was like. This has been called “the great parabola” of scripture. Jesus, the Son of God, starts out at the top. He then voluntarily descends all the way down to the bottom, the lowest point being dying on the cross. Then, though, God lifts him back up again, raising him even higher than where he started! [Boice, p. 125]

What It Means

Let’s take a few minutes just to highlight some of what these verses mean. In these verses about Jesus, we find many of the central truths about Christianity. We see that Jesus, the Son of God, existed before he came to earth on that first Christmas day. We see that he is equal to the Father, that he is fully God. We see that on that first Christmas, he became fully human. We see the crucifixion and the resurrection. We see that his crucifixion was voluntary, he allowed himself to be killed. We also see the power of the resurrection, that God vindicates Jesus in the resurrection and glorifies him, raises him up. We also see the certainty of the future victory of Jesus over evil and his ultimate reign over the universe.

In this passage we see that Jesus “**voluntarily, deliberately, and decisively**” turned his back on **personal glory and gain**. “He recognized no limit to the extent to which His obedience to God in self-humiliation must go.” [J A Motyer, *The Richness of Christ*, p. 85]

Discussion and Prayer

We are going to take a little while at this point for some discussion together and a time of prayer. We have a number of group leaders here today, so we are going to break the congregation up into groups. If possible, we want to have an inter-generational mix in each group, so please take a look around and see if you can join up with some people who represent a different generation than your own! We have some discussion questions for us to talk over for about 10 minutes and then we are going to spend about 10 minutes in prayer together. If you have some little ones in your group, please encourage them to share their thoughts on the discussion questions and their prayer requests as well.

Part Two:

What (Else) It Means

There is a lot of great stuff happening in this passage; far too much for us to explore in depth today. In fact, one could probably preach on these verses for a whole month and still not cover everything!

This incredibly rich passage about God and the nature of Jesus is fantastic. But we should also notice where it falls in Paul’s letter. This rich passage about the divine nature of Christ falls smack in the middle of a

longer passage about how to live as a Christian. This deep, theoretical or philosophical discussion about Jesus is placed in the context of very practical Christian living. [Boice, p. 129] How do we mature as Christians? How do we live together as a church? How do we find unity when we can be so different from one another? How do we face the difficulties of living in this world, like temptation, or affliction, or being persecuted, picked on or bullied for being Christians? All of these very practical questions find their answers in this passage and the answers all have to do with following the example of Jesus.

Paul tells us to be “like minded” in verse 2 and to have the same attitude or same mind-set as Jesus. This doesn’t mean that we have to all think and say the same things. Paul is not telling us to be parrots, repeating the same things and saying the same things. Not at all! God loves diversity and there is great value in a diversity of opinions, preferences, personalities, gifts and abilities in God’s church. [Halford E Luccock, *More Preaching Values in the Epistles of Paul*, p. 180]

Being like-minded doesn’t mean thinking, speaking and liking the same things. Rather, it means having the same goals and attitudes. Our goals should all be the same: to glorify God and proclaim Christ. That is what we see in Jesus- the goal of glorifying God. How does he do that? He is humble. He doesn’t consider his rights and status as God something to be grasped, or, better yet “clutched.” He doesn’t hold so tightly to what he is due that he can’t let go of it in order to help others. He is obedient. He is even obedient to the point of death on the cross! We are to have the same goals and attitude as our Lord Jesus. **We are not to clutch our rights**, to clutch what we are due to such a degree that we can’t obey God when he calls us to do something hard, or something we don’t want to do or something that will be unpleasant, or even painful.

When we find another Christian with whom we disagree, we are to honour them as a brother or sister in Christ. We are to look out for their best interests, even though we disagree. This is what it means to have the same love as Jesus. “The person who really loves the other Christian this way will not seek to separate from him because he is cantankerous or because he sees some minor doctrine differently. He will seek to know him, to learn from him, and to help him on spiritually as both together advance in the Christian life.” [Boice, p. 115] After all- God doesn’t seek to separate himself from us for those reasons, and we have offended God far worse than anybody can offend us! In contrast, God actually seeks us out, seeks out his offenders, seeking their well-being, even sending his Son to die in their place in order to be reconciled to them! [Boice, p. 115]

Why It Matters

I know many of you were here last week, but some of you were not, so let me remind us all of what Paul has been saying so far in his letter to the Philippians.

Paul has talked about how everything that has happened to him, even the bad things, has ultimately served to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because his whole goal in life is to bring glory to God and to proclaim Christ, he can see things with a different perspective. He doesn’t care if people mistreat him or are rude to him, as long as it serves to advance the gospel somehow.

That is how all Christians should view the world. **We should all make it our goal in life to bring glory to God and to proclaim Christ.** We should have this unified purpose, which leads us to stand side by side, helping one another, supporting one another, encouraging one another when we face trials, difficulties, temptation and hardship. We have already been made saints, we have already been set apart by God as his special people with a special purpose. This is how we grow up into that role, this is how we mature as Christians to live up to the life we have been given.

This is really quite counter-cultural! In our society, we don’t look out for others, we look out for ourselves. We don’t humble ourselves, we protect our interests at all costs. We fight for our rights, instead of voluntarily surrendering them in order to help somebody else. So it should not come as a surprise that it is really hard for us to live like Paul says we should. It is really hard to do!

Like Jesus, we are to love other and live for others. That can be really difficult for us to do! In fact, it is impossible for us to do without the Holy Spirit working in us to change us from our natural way of living. But the Holy Spirit only works in us to the degree we allow him to, or invite him to. So what steps can we take to help us along the path to having the same attitude as Jesus?

First, admit you don’t care for others the way you should. Recognize that if left to yourself you would choose yourself first, your own needs, your rights, your preferences first. Admitting we need to grow is

the first step in actually growing!

Second, humble yourself before God. Even Jesus humbled himself before the Father! So you don't have to think that humbling yourself is "beneath" you. In fact, when we think humbling ourselves is beneath us, that's when we know we're in trouble! Humble yourself before God, saying, "God, I know I don't love the way I should. I know I put myself first way too often. I know my natural desire is to look out for myself first, and if I have any time or energy left over to look out for those closest to me. I know that's not what Jesus modelled for us. I know that's not Christ-like. Please help me be more like Jesus and less like my sinful side."

Third, spend time with Jesus daily. Have a daily fellowship with the person you're trying to be more like. I remember a few months back hearing a writer talk about how he wanted to be a great writer, so he intentionally spent time with a great writer he admired. He made the connection that if we want to be like Jesus, we need to spend time with Jesus. That means carving out time in our busy schedules every day to pray, or read scripture, or listen to worship music, or listen to or watch a sermon or Bible lesson. And during that time, we need to be intentional about asking Jesus to help us get to know him better through this activity.

If you wanted to become friends with somebody, you wouldn't start out by not spending time with them. Quite the opposite! You would go out of your way to talk to them, to learn about their interests, to hear what they have to say. You can do the same thing with Jesus by reading the Bible, or praying, or worshipping him.

And when it gets tough to do this, when it becomes dry or a chore, come back to this passage. Come back to these verses and see what Jesus did for you. Allow yourself to be reminded of the future. Be reminded that Jesus is coming back in victory. He is coming back to finish what he began- the complete annihilation of evil in the world. He is coming back to make everything right. Knowing that in the big picture will help you in the little picture stuff, like spending time with Jesus, changing your attitude about other people, finding a way to love those with whom you disagree, standing side by side with other Christians, and the like.

In this way, you will make Paul's joy and my joy complete. You will be unified in the Spirit, being of one attitude and goal: to glorify God and proclaim Christ. Amen.