

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
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**EXALTATION THROUGH HUMILITY**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

This passage is one of the most glorious passages of the New Testament. In these seven verses, we have the great span of Christ's life from eternity past to eternity future. It speaks of His pre-existence and equality with God; it describes with immense passion the costly nature of His identity with humanity; and gives us insight into His glorification.

It may be one of the best statements in the Bible of the divinity and humanity of Christ and the breathtaking way that God secured our redemption. It is glorious. But, this passage is not an abstract statement of doctrine. It is an argument for Christ-like conduct: To have the same attitude as our Lord, to follow His example.

To get into the real thrust of this passage before us, we must recall the reasons Paul is writing. We have been looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians for the past few weeks. You will remember that Paul was in prison for preaching about Jesus. About four years before the writing of this letter, he had been arrested in Jerusalem and was taken to Rome to stand trial before Caesar.

Even though the outcome of his trial was uncertain, he can rejoice. Why? Because he knows the gospel is being advanced because he is in prison, because of his humble circumstances. People all over the city of Rome are hearing about Jesus, believers throughout the city are encouraged to boldly share their faith, and Paul is overflowing with joy.

For Paul, Jesus Christ was the very centerpiece of his life. He could honestly say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" and confidently encourage the Philippians to have the same perspective on life.

He wants his readers – the Philippians and each of us – to live in a manner worthy of the gospel – striving together in unity for the sake of God's kingdom. Because of our redemption, the reality of the gospel in our lives, we are to live in unity and humility.

And our motivation for humility comes from the example of Jesus Christ. That is what our passage is about, exaltation through humility. The Son's humiliation of Himself, followed by the Father's exaltation of the Son. Let's look briefly at this passage and consider the example of Christ.

**THE SELF-HUMILIATION OF CHRIST**

Let's first explore the self-humiliation of Christ. In verses 6-8, Paul describes Christ's divine nature and His willingness to empty Himself by becoming human and dying on a cross. His first step, in verse 6, is to describe Christ as divine, as *being in very nature God*.

Paul is talking about the idea of the Son of God being equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We see very clearly the truth of Christ's pre-existence. Jesus is the eternal Word of God, the

Second Person of the Trinity. Christ was not created, He is God and has existed in eternity past, He is co-eternal and co-equal with God the Father and God the Spirit. Scripture is loud and clear on this.

The Son is and always was God! *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning* (John 1:1-2).

But here we have the unusual statement of Christ's humility, even in heaven, that Christ *did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*. Jesus did not consider His co-eternity and co-equality as something to exploit. Though He had the highest position in the universe, He did not take advantage of that position. Instead, even before the foundations of the universe were laid, in eternity past, the Son covenanted with the Father to humble Himself, become a human being, and die for our redemption.

Friends, this should turn upside down the idea of privilege: In God's economy, divinity and servanthood are compatible. They are one-and-the-same. Even though Christ is God, He is a servant. As commentator Frank Thielman wrote, Jesus is not a master of privilege but a master of unselfish giving (*Philippians: NIV Application Commentary*). That's the kind of God we serve!

That is the example of Christ. *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45).

Look again at verses 6-8: *He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

Through Jesus, the sacrificial love of God is revealed and we see what God is really like. Paul describes Christ's deity in terms of His selfless love: Jesus empties Himself and Jesus humbly obeys the Father's will all the way to His death.

Jesus, made himself nothing, He emptied himself. That is, He condescended to our level and took on the likeness of human flesh. It is important to note that Christ did not give up divine attributes – there was never a time that He stopped being God or that He set aside His divine nature while He was here on earth. Every minute of His life, Jesus was fully God and fully man. Rather, he revealed God's character by taking on the form of a slave and human.

That's what makes Christ's humanity so special – He literally humiliated Himself, stepped down from His throne of glory and participated fully in all the joys and pains, the blessings and disappointments of human experience. In every way He was a human being, except one – He did not sin.

But Paul emphasizes that Christ's humiliation was even deeper than simply becoming human. He became a servant. The word literally means *slave*. He took on what most folks would think is the lowest form of human existence, the very bottom of the social ladder. He became a slave.

One familiar story illustrates the attitude that Jesus had. In John's account of the Last Supper, the disciples were reclining at the table, with their filthy dirty feet stretching out behind them. While the meal was in progress, the Teacher rose from the supper and stood apart from them. They watched Him remove His outer garments and wrap Himself in a towel.

And then He poured water into a basin and began slowly to move around the circle washing and drying the feet of each disciple. It was a sight that took their breath away. No Hebrew, even a slave, could be commanded to wash feet. But here, the Incarnate Son, God Himself had dressed like a servant and washed the feet of His disciples. He humbled Himself as a slave.

Then, do you remember what He said?

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him (John 13:14-16).

Paul tells us the same. Have the same attitude as Christ. Be like Jesus and humble yourselves.

Furthermore, we see that Jesus humbled himself by being obedient to the point of death on a cross. He takes his self-denial to new depths of lowliness for the sake of the redeemed. Not only does He leave His glory and become a man, not only does He become a lowly slave, but He dies for us – even on a cross.

Death on a cross was the most offensive form of death, reserved for rebellious slaves and the worst of criminals. It was a cruel form of execution. The cross was *a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*, (1 Cor 1:23). Polite Roman society refused to talk about the cruelty of execution. Jewish people considered hanging from a cross or a tree to be a sign of God's curse.

But in His sovereign plan, God chose crucifixion. He could have chosen another way, but He did not. More than anything else, the crucifixion demonstrated God's character, His sacrificial love. Jesus humbled Himself. Despite the horror of the Cross, He remained obedient to the Father and followed through on His assignment to die.

That is the self-humiliation of our Lord. He identified Himself with the human race, donned a towel and took on the appearance of a slave, and in great humility and obedience, suffered the pain of the cross. That is the Lord we serve!

And Christ's humility was His own initiative. No one forced it on Him, no one made Him do it – not the Jews who cried out for His death, not the Roman government who nailed Him to the cross, not even you and me, for whom He died. Jesus humbled Himself.

That is our example. In our relationships with each other, we are to humble ourselves with the same attitude as He has. Paul's command to us in Philippians reads:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but

also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Phil 2:3-5).

### **THE EXHALATION OF CHRIST BY THE FATHER**

Christ emptied himself and was obedient, even to death on a cross. He waited for the Father to exalt Him. Jesus didn't worry about His own reputation and honor. He didn't consider the outcome of His decision to be humble and obey. He left that up to the Father. Matthew 23:11 says, *For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.* In keeping with His own spiritual law, Jesus' self-humiliation brought about exaltation.

Friends, that is the example we are to follow. Paul's command to us is to be like Jesus. Humble yourselves and wait on God to exalt you.

So how did the Father exalt Jesus? Look at verse 9-11: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The words in verse 9, "exalted Him to the highest place" actually mean that God "super-exalted" Jesus. He lifted Him up to the highest place possible. The exaltation and glory that Christ now enjoys stretches our imagination and understanding.

First, of course, Christ is exalted in His resurrection. He had gone down from heaven through the humiliation of His incarnation (His becoming a human being) and through His passion and death. His lifeless body was placed in a cold and empty tomb. But then, in a final explosive upsurge, the grave could no longer contain Him. What a great morning that was, when Jesus came out of the tomb. He lives!

Following Christ's resurrection was His ascension to heaven on a cloud and His return to His Father's right hand. There, He rules and makes intercession for us. He is lifted up, He is exalted!

When the Father exalted Christ, He gave Him the Name above every name. It is God's own name – Lord. In the Old Testament, it was the word Yahweh, the name God gave Himself as He revealed Himself to His covenant people. It is greater than any other name – so great in fact, that Jewish tradition was to never actually pronounce the word. By giving Jesus this name, The Father is declaring Christ's authority over all creation.

Paul is NOT saying that Christ increased in power after His ascension. Christ was always co-eternal and co-equal with Father and Spirit. But His rule and authority became more evident. Because of His self-humiliation, because of His obedience to the sovereign and eternal plan of redemption, Christ's authority became – or will become – recognizable to all creation. Some day every knee will bow, before His name and every tongue will confess Him as Lord. It doesn't say that everyone will be saved. Not all are redeemed. But everyone – the angelic beings who are heaven, human beings who are on the earth, and those who have passed on and are dead and under the earth – will exalt Jesus. Every angel, every demon, every human being of every language and race and creed will acknowledge Christ as Lord.

This is a reason for evangelism and missions. The fact that Christ is Lord of every one propels us to send our summer missions teams to West Virginia or France or Mexico or support missionaries in places like Rome or Uganda or Kazakhstan.

And Christ's exaltation is a comfort to those who belong to Him. Our assurance of heaven rests on the Father's exaltation of Christ. It is our identity with Him in His death and resurrection that gives us hope. 1 John 3 tells us:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! . . . what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:1-2)

## **CONCLUSION**

That is why Christ's self-humiliation is an example to us. We are told to be like Jesus, to humble ourselves and wait on God to exalt us. Paul tells us that our motivation and power comes from the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is fully God and entitled to all the privileges of God. But He expressed His deity in humility and obedience of the lowliest type. Through that humility, the Father exalted - super-exalted - His Son, for the sake of the gospel.

No sacrifice of our own comparatively trivial rights as human beings should seem too great to make in order that the gospel might be advanced. Frank Thielman writes:

Unwilling to use His privileges as God for selfish ends, Jesus expressed His deity in lowly and humble service. The passage calls on us to take the daring step of conforming to His divine character in unselfish obedience to God, so we should express our Christian character by placing the interest of others ahead of our own in obedience to God's Word (*Philippians: NIV Application Commentary*).

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about how Faith Church can grow from being a good church to a really great one. We spoke of how we can advance the gospel in our own lives and here in Kingstowne, Lorton and Woodbridge, and around the world. We will advance the gospel and really make His love and glory known when we humble ourselves before God and consider other people as more important than ourselves.

We can live in humility and make others better than ourselves only as we make Jesus Christ our example. He is our motivation. He is our power. He is the reason we are here. Everything else is secondary. To live is Christ and to die is gain! The Apostle Peter wrote, *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time* (1 Pet 5:6).

That final day, just as He responded to Christ's obedient life, God will respond to the lives of His obedient servants with commendation. We will be exalted with Him. So friends, be like Jesus. Humble yourselves and wait on God to exalt you.