

## Called to Humility

### Philippians 2:1-11

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I am continuing a series of sermons on calling. The thesis of this series is that God's call in our lives has much more to do with character than it does with work. Today we hear that God is calling us to humility.

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Usually when Paul wrote a letter to one of the early churches, it was because there was a problem that he needed to address. When he wrote to the church in Philippi, it was because a dangerous conflict had developed. Apparently, the conflict began between Euodia and Syntyche, and it must have been serious because it bothered Paul enough to write this letter from prison. Conflicts in churches have a way of spreading. Like wildfire. That is why James calls the tongue a fire that is hard to tame. Before you know it, an entire church can be inflamed over conflict, gossip, and hurt. The solution that Paul has for this conflict is to teach the whole church about humility.

Now, humility is not our favorite virtue. When proud parents show me their new baby, they never say, "Yeah, he's a good looking boy, and someday we hope he's going to grow up to be humble." (What they should say is that he is going to grow up to make us humble.) The reason we are not crazy about humility is that we confuse it with poor self-esteem. But true humility can only be demonstrated by people with the best self-esteem.

Trying to make his case for this, Paul tells the church at Philippi, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." He is not telling them to imitate Jesus. He is telling them to participate in the life of Jesus or to be in Christ Jesus. It's like being in love: it takes over your life and changes everything about your identity.

If you want to know who you really are, look at Jesus Christ. That is who you are, and everything else is just make believe. We tend to think just the opposite. We assume that who we really are is insecure, hurt, or controlling, and we will have to pretend if we are going to look like somebody who is following Jesus. But that gets us back to the impossible task of imitating Jesus. He is not just our teacher or mentor. Jesus is our savior. The way he saves our lives is to give us his own identity before his father.

So when someone in the church bites your head off and then feebly apologizes by saying, "I'm sorry I have such a temper, but that's just the way I am," the apostle would scream down from the balcony of heaven, "No, that's not the way you are. You're just pretending. You are who God made you. And he didn't make you angry." The conversion that occurs in our lives, when Jesus gets hold of us, restores our lives to what God had in mind from the beginning. So from the moment of our baptism, as the early church said, we are burying the old life with Christ, in order to be raised with him into a new life. His life. Every time we baptize a child, if it wouldn't scare the parents so much, what we ought to say is that as of this day, this child has died. He or she has been promised a new life and a new name: "Christ-ian" The rest of life will be spent learning to receive that identity, learning to become who he or she is, in Christ.

Only then can we understand this wonderful third verse in chapter two. "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." Again, Paul is not calling us to poor self-esteem. To the contrary, he is calling us to such a tremendous self-esteem that humility comes easily. He is calling us to live in Christ. And Christ was able to give his life humbly to others only because he was first of all convinced of his Father's love.

Verses five to eleven are among the most powerful words of the entire Bible. They contain the essence of our entire Christology. Many of our scholars believe that these verses were an early church hymn which was sung over and over because they are so powerful. Notice how the hymn begins-- with Christ Jesus being in the form of God. As the gospel writer John said, he was with God and was God from the beginning. But from that place of loving identity, the Son chose to humble himself and take the form of a servant.

The love of God is demonstrated not in reaching down to pull us up, but in identifying with us that we may identify with him. As the early church father, Cyril of Alexandria, said, "The son of God became like us, that we may become like him." This is at the essence of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. First, the Spirit presses Christ to us, and second draws us to Christ. This first process we call the incarnation. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In his baptism, where he identified with us, the Spirit descended upon him. Then the Spirit drew Christ to the wilderness where he was tempted as we are. Then Jesus said, "The Spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Always the Spirit was pushing the incarnation deeper and deeper into our lives. Secondly, so is the Spirit drawing us into Christ, which we call sanctification. This is the process by which we are adopted into the Son's relationship with the Father so that we too hear, "this is my beloved with whom I am so pleased."

So the beginning place for your call to humility is never to think that you are just not good enough. The beginning place is to hear the Father refer to you as his own precious beloved child. Being good enough has nothing to do with it. It is all grace! I know that so many of you want to figure out how to get an A on this spirituality exam. But it is all just pass/fail. That drives you crazy, doesn't it? But children aren't supposed to struggle for an A on being loved. You just receive it as a grace.

Grace leads to gratitude. And gratitude leads to humility. What grateful people most want to do is to give. So then, and only then, having identified with Jesus as the beloved of the Father, we can also identify with him in humbling ourselves before others. But don't dare try to rush to the humility until you first receive the gracious love. Otherwise humility becomes law. It can only flow out of love. You are cherished! So cherished that the Son of God left heaven to find you and bring you back with him to your exalted home.

That's at the core of our truth. We expect God's truth about us to tell us awful things, but most of us are pretty clear about that already. The more frightening truth is to discover that we are forgiven and cherished. That terrifies us because it means we will have to change. The monastics would sometimes pray, "Lord show me the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is." Until you come to see your beauty, in Christ, you will never be able to serve, in Christ.

In Ovid's famous poem about Narcissus we are introduced to a young man who is so beautiful that all of the nymphs loved him. Especially Echo, who could only repeat the last words she heard. But Narcissus was incapable of loving anyone. When he saw Echo who loved him so desperately he said, "I will die before I give you power over me." Tragically she echoed, "I give you power over me," and disappeared forever into a cave.

Then Narcissus saw his own reflection in a pool of water and fell in love for the first time. Now the important thing to remember in interpreting this poem is that he didn't know it was his own image. He keeps reaching into the pool, only to lose the new image. "Nor knows he who it is his arms pursue with eager clasps, but loves he knows not who." The redemptive message in this tragic poem is that until we find a new image of ourselves we will never be able to love another. Either we will keep spurning love like Narcissus, or like Echo, we will give too much power to others until we disappear as persons. That is because we are looking for something in the other person that can only be found in ourselves; namely, that we are cherished.

When Narcissus stands up and realizes that the person he loves is himself, he says, "What I long for I have." Then he faces a great choice. He could return to the world free to authentically love and give himself away. But instead he returns to the pool and lies there consumed by his own image, until weak and spent he descends into the underworld. The difference between Narcissism and humility is what do you do when you discover this beautiful truth that what you long for, you already have. Are you going to turn to the world as one free to love? Or are you going to use spirituality and faith to turn back to obsessing with your own reflection?

In Jesus Christ, you are given a new image of yourself. Look at him, and you will see what the Holy Spirit has created of you. Reach for him, and you will embrace God's beautiful new creation in your life. But you can't stop there! Jesus won't let you. The reason he became like you was so that you would become like him -- humble, emptying yourself into the lives of those who are dying for the Father's love.

The reason you were given a new beautiful life is so that you will give it away. Give it away. Not because your life isn't of value, but because in Christ, it finally is.

Oh God, by your Spirit, draw into Christ that we might share in his humble ministry of giving this great love away until every knee bows and every tongue confesses he is Lord. Amen.