

What is God Like?

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 12, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

For the last four weeks, we sought to understand better how we can go about building joyful lives. Last week, we saw that Paul urged the Philippians toward lives shaped by humility and selflessness (Phil 2:1-4). Today, we consider why.

A Christ-hymn

After urging the Philippians to always put the interests of others ahead of their own, in v.5 Paul tells the Philippians, “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” This is all about attitude! Peterson renders it this way: “Think of yourselves the same way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” So, the obvious question is ~ how did Jesus think of himself?

Paul answers this question by using the glorious Christ-hymn of v. 6-11. That it is a hymn, sung or not, is widely accepted. Thus, it gives us a peek into the proclamations about Jesus that were made by some of the earliest Christians. Whether Paul composed it or simply used it in his letter, this hymn, this “Christ-hymn,” was written before any of the gospels.

Philippians is filled with Paul’s teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do’s and don’ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless –

The Humiliation of Christ

Rome ruled the NT world and did so with the most rank-and-status-conscious culture ever known. Frankly, life was little more than a relentless quest to gain status and honor. Even wealth was desired only for the status it might bring.

Philippi, in Greece, had a unique history and was the most Roman city outside Italy. When Paul arrived in Philippi, we can be sure that he felt like he had stepped into another world. The Roman obsession with status and honor was every bit as evident in Philippi as it was in Rome.

Yet in today’s passage, Paul calls upon two images to portray the selflessness of Jesus Christ. First, he uses “slave” (v.7) – the most dishonorable *public status* one could have, and then “cross” (v.8) – the most dishonorable *public humiliation* one could suffer.¹

It is surely impossible for us to really grasp the shocking nature of Paul’s claim that Jesus, God himself, had taken on the form of a slave, been crucified, and then exalted so that all creation might bow before him. Indeed, the average Philippian was probably less shocked than simply amused. The Roman world scoffed at the very idea.

The humiliation of Christ turns the world upside. Power is weakness. Honor is humiliation. First is last. Victory is death on a cross. And for whom did Christ turn the world upside-down? For whom was he humiliated? For you and for me. Surely, this ought to stagger us, to drive us to our knees as we throw ourselves before such a God and sing praises to his name.

1. This was driven home to me in a recent article on Christ’s humiliation in the social world of Philippi by J.H. Hellerman in *Bibliotheca Sacra*. v. 160. n. 639 & 640.

and all we get is verse after verse of theology! Jesus was “in the form of God” . . . Jesus “emptied himself” . . . Jesus was “found in human form” . . . all this theology. But this is Paul’s way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:9). Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ’s selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

Surrendering our rights . . . and gaining it all

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. Sometimes, I think we’ve about convinced ourselves that we have the inherent right to do whatever we want. Still, Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God’s beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn’t cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” He gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus’ surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul’s point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, anymore than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is *in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.*” God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus. If we want to know what love is like, we can look to the cross.

How does God respond to Jesus’ “obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross”? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom “every knee should bend” and “every tongue confess.” Using these stirring words of worship from Isaiah (45:23), Paul points us toward Jesus as the image of the one true God, whose self-sacrifice embodies the meaning of true love. Jesus is to be worshiped. His example urges us on toward loving sacrifices of our own. We are not to cling to our rights and privileges, we are to surrender them for the sake of others. For, this is what God is like . . . and we too are made in the image of God.

Several commentators have noted parallels in language and form between the story of Jesus’ foot washing in John’s Gospel and the Christ-hymn in Philippians. Perhaps this hymn arose from reflections upon Jesus’ pointed demonstration of selflessness on the eve of his own death.			
	<i>John 13:3–17</i>		<i>Philippians 2:6–11</i>
1.	“Jesus, knowing . . . that he had come from God and was going to God” rises from the table and lays aside his outer garments (v 3-4).	1.	“though he was in the form of God . . . he emptied himself.” Moffatt translates this as “He laid it (his divine nature) aside” (v 7).
2.	Jesus takes a towel and wraps it about himself, puts water in a basin and begins to wash his disciples feet (a menial task often assigned to slaves) (v 5).	2.	... taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form he humbled himself (v 7).
3.	When Jesus finishes, he once again takes his outer garments and puts them on, and again sits down at the table from which he got up (v 12).	3.	Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name which is above every name (v 9).
4.	Finally Jesus says: “You address me as teacher and Lord and rightly so, for that is what I am” (v 13).	4.	... that every tongue might openly confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (v 11).

This table is adapted from G. F. Hawthorne’s commentary on Philippians in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, 1998.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Colossians 1:15-20 Another Christ-hymn from one of Paul's letters.</p>	<p>Day 2 John 13:3-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 8 Paul appeals to the Corinthians for a collection of money and uses Jesus' humbling of himself as an example(v. 9)</p>	<p>Day 4 Galatians 4:1-7 Paul reminds the Galatians that they are heirs of the kingdom because God's own Son was born of a woman and under the law.</p>
<p>Day 5 Isaiah 45:23 & Romans 14:10-12 To whom will every knee bow and every tongue confess? What does it mean to proclaim that Jesus is Lord?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Are you in a Sunday morning class? If not – try one!

Scott Engle's new Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. We meet in Wesley Hall (the 'old' sanctuary) at 9:30. It is a great chance to make new friends and learn more about the Bible and the Christian faith. More than 140 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Being humble . . . that is a word I can deal with. I have a much harder time with "humiliated"! Being humble just seems so Christian and such a nice thing to be. (I guess I could even take pride in my humbleness!?!?) You might begin by discussing your own reaction to being "humble" v. being "humiliated." Perhaps the difference is this. Being humble is something I can try to do for myself. Being humiliated is something done to me by others. Jesus was both humble and humiliated. He took the form of a slave upon himself. The humiliation of the cross was inflicted on him by others. Have there ever been times in your own life when you were humiliated for the benefit of others? Were you humiliated willingly? How did it make you feel? Why is it so hard for us?
2. What does our difficulty with being humiliated have to do with our lives as Christians? Many Christians seem focused only on enjoying the benefits of Jesus' suffering, forgetting that we are called to *share* in his suffering. Sharing in Christ's suffering is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament. Surely, there are plenty of opportunities in life to suffer for the benefit of others, but the question that haunts me is whether I ever really do it – or if I do, do I embrace some sort of martyr complex! Consider areas in our lives where we suffer and sacrifice for others. Parents sacrifice for their children. But where else?