

“Unity’s Mindset”
Philippians 2:5-11
January 9, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage continues the theme of church unity, a theme raised by Paul because of the challenges to unity that had arisen in the Philippian church. This is one of the main passages in the Bible to help us get straight our theology about Christ. It provides a comprehensive view of Jesus’ incarnation, death, and exaltation. Paul brings up Jesus not to give an informative lecture about Christology, but to offer him as an example of the kind of mindset required for unity. That’s why he begins this passage the way he does. **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus”** (v. 5).

There is a particular mindset or attitude that promotes church unity and another mindset that harms church unity. The mindset or attitude we bring to life has great influence. There is an approach to counseling that reflects this, known as “cognitive behavioral therapy.” It seeks to help the counselee identify wrong thoughts he or she is having. For example, a depressed person typically has a mindset that is dominated by three thoughts. “I’m no good,” “My world is bleak,” and “My future is hopeless.” These are more than passing thoughts; they are a type of abiding, unexamined thought structure acting as a filter through which every life experience passes. Cognitive behavioral therapy refers to these structures as “schemas.” What Paul is urging upon us is the “schema” or mindset of Jesus, which is the mindset we need to promote unity.

There are three components to the kind of humility we see in Jesus, and we will be exploring those components momentarily. Before doing that, though, let me mention one general principle. Church unity comes to the degree that each person embraces this mindset of humility. That’s a simple principle, but one that is often ignored. Everyone is in favor of church unity and sees disunity as a problem caused by others. Such an attitude promotes further disunity. If you see disunity as someone else’s problem, you need to hear that your lack of humility about this is actually the problem. So let’s consider now these three components of humility we see in Jesus, and be open to what God might be saying to each of us about areas where we need to trust him and repent.

I. Hold Lightly to Advantage – v. 5-6

No greater advantage can be imagined than that which Jesus enjoyed prior to his birth in Bethlehem. **“Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”** (v. 6). This is not saying that

Jesus gave up his divine nature in his incarnation. It is obvious throughout the Gospels that Jesus maintained his full divinity. He forgave sins, which only God can do. He raised the dead, spoke peace to the raging storms, and could heal with a mere touch, all uniquely divine accomplishments. But he did give up the advantages of a heavenly existence. The text says that he gave up the “form of God.” Those who saw Jesus during his earthly life didn’t say, “There’s God walking among us.” Rather, his form was that of a humble servant. He was a poor member of the Jewish working class, and his form was in keeping with that.

If we were to diagram the events in Jesus’ life that are described in this passage, it would be a “U” shaped diagram. Jesus started at the greatest height imaginable, living in the glories of heaven. But then there is a descent in which he took the form of a servant, and that was followed by his exaltation. No one has descended as far as Jesus in the history of the world, because no one started at such an exalted position as Jesus. None of us has ever seen heaven, but the Bible records something of its glories. The book of Revelation describes the awesome creatures that surround the throne in heaven. It speaks of the innumerable angels there who spend their time in the passionate and joyful praise of God. The apostle Paul elsewhere describes a glimpse he was once given of heaven. He says that he heard things there **“that cannot be told, which man may not utter”** (2 Cor. 12:4). Human language is incapable of expressing adequately the glories of heaven. To do so is to try to contain the ocean in a five-gallon bucket.

Jesus did not hold tightly to all the advantages of heaven. It was love that led him to turn loose of heaven’s glories and take the form of a servant. If we would promote the unity of the church, we must do the same. What might that look like? Much disunity comes from holding on to personal reputation. We want to be seen as right, and we want to look good. As a result, we get defensive and become argumentative. We stop listening to others and start talking way too much. This passage urges us to hold lightly to the advantage of a good reputation. Jesus is an example in this area too. In the eyes of many, he was viewed as a drunkard and glutton, a consorter with unsavory types, and a transgressor of God’s law. He didn’t spend much time refuting these false characterizations, but just continued quietly serving.

This point also has broad application to unity among different races and social classes within the church. My daughter is a member of a church in Chattanooga that is quite diverse economically, racially and socially. I once heard the pastor of their mother church talk about this. As he was planting a church in an economically impoverished urban setting, he had several wealthier people from suburban areas who wanted to join him in the effort. He welcomed them, told them that they were needed, but then proceeded to tell them that the church would be culturally compatible with their urban setting and not a middle-class suburban setting. Many still joined him, willing to hold

lightly to the culture of their preference. As a result, there is this beautiful picture of the unity of Christ's church in a challenging urban setting.

II. Hold Tightly to the Humility of Obedience – v. 7-8

Jesus didn't descend just a little, but all the way. He **“made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”** The descent from heavenly glory to the limitations and challenges of humanity in a fallen, cursed world would be significant. But Jesus went further still. He could have arrived as a member of earthly royalty, for he is a king. But instead, his parents were poor and powerless. His descent didn't stop with his humble ancestry. We all like rags to riches stories. Jesus' story could have been one where a humble carpenter worked his way up to the top of earthly power and influence. Instead of a rags to riches story, Jesus' life was a rags to death row story. He died the death of a criminal. He humbled **“himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

Spurgeon says of his crucifixion, “The death of the cross was one reserved for slaves and the basest of felons; no Roman citizen could be put to death in such a way as that, hung up between earth and heaven, as if neither would have Him, rejected of men and despised of God.” He died all alone, rejected by his own nation and cursed by his heavenly Father. What motivated him to walk this exceedingly difficult path? Paul tells us here. It was obedience. The heart of Jesus was expressed in his Gethsemane prayer just before his crucifixion. **“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will”** (Matt. 26:39). It was the will of the Father that Jesus should die a cursed death. To the casual observer, this makes no sense whatsoever. This is the outcome for God's Messiah? The Bible itself explains this curious situation of the cruel death of the only perfectly holy man ever to walk this earth. **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’”** (Gal. 3:13). He died the cursed death deserved by sinners like me that I might enjoy the blessings deserved by a completely righteous man like him.

Let's focus some on this phrase of verse 8. **“He humbled himself by becoming obedient.”** The clearest expression of humility is to be obedient. The obedient person is making the humble declaration, “I don't trust my own conclusions about how to run my life. I do trust that I have a wise heavenly Father who does know how to run my life. He knows things I don't know. He sees the big picture. With him there are no unintended consequences. The only path through the confusing maze of life is to trust and obey God, not myself.” This is what humility looks like for us.

One of the places in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is called the “Valley of Humiliation.” Christiana finds it “as fruitful a place as any the crow flies over.”

Bunyan explains the beauty and fruitfulness of that place like this. “He that is down needs fear no fall” in the Valley of Humiliation. “He that is humble ever shall have God to be his guide.” We often use a book of Puritan prayers in our worship services that goes by the name, *Valley of Vision*. It is in the low places, the valleys of life, where we come to see most clearly. The humble heart, such as Jesus had, is willing to obey God even when such obedience takes the person into difficult circumstances.

It is this quality of humility that promotes unity in the church. The humble person is quick to conclude that her conclusions might be wrong. She listens to others, most importantly to God. Is there some area in your life where you have not been obedient to God because you’re afraid of the difficulties such obedience might bring your way? Humble yourself before your loving Father, as Jesus did. You will find that in obedience is not misery, but true freedom.

III. Let God End the Story – v. 9-11

So why does Paul add this section on the exaltation of Jesus in a passage where he is urging us to live lives of humility? He wants us to see the end of the story for the one who humbles himself in obedience. The end of Jesus’ U-shaped story is the realization of his true state. He is exalted as the true King. His name is lifted above all names, and every knee bows before him, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord. Some use this verse to support universalism, the idea that every person ever born will eventually be saved. That is not what this verse is saying. Paul is likely taking this language from Isaiah 45:23-25, and in that passage some who are bowing the knee are his enemies who will now be put to shame. Both Jesus’ friends and his enemies will bow before him, the former with joyful hearts and the latter with fearful and shame-filled hearts.

There is an important change to notice in these last three verses. It is a change in the principal actor. In the first two points, the principal actor has been Jesus. It was Jesus who did not hold on to the glory of heaven, and Jesus who humbled himself by his obedience. But now, it is God who is acting and Jesus who is being acted upon. Jesus doesn’t bring honor upon himself but let’s God bring the honor in his time and his way.

The point of these verses is not that if we humble ourselves, then God will exalt us and have people worship us. Rather, it is that God will bring about the happy ending for each of us in the way he knows is best. Jesus didn’t glorify himself but waited on God to do so. We dare not seek honor for ourselves. Such an effort inevitably ends tragically for us. We wait on God to end the story. Sometimes, he ordains that a little glory might come our way in this life. At other times he ordains that this glory should await completely the next life. But in every case, we let God make the choice.

How much disunity is caused in churches by the seeking of honor for oneself! Yet God's goal for us in our churches is not our glory and honor. His goal is our sanctification, as he prepares his bride to be without spot and blemish. This sanctification is our glory and honor. We all love happy endings, but only God knows how to end our stories happily. We wait on him to do so.

CONCLUSION:

These verses tell us a story of the life of Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we are being called here to follow Jesus. That is, we are to embrace the same story we see of him here, holding loosely to any advantages we may have been given, holding tightly to the humility of obedience, and waiting on God to end the story. One of the ways our lives go awry is when we put ourselves in the wrong story. There is only one true story, and it is the one Paul describes here about Jesus. All other stories are false stories that lead to deadends. What are some of these false stories? There's the orphan story that says no one will take care of me, so it's up to me to prove myself and provide for myself every day. Or there's the narcissist story that says I am the most important reality in the world and everything and everyone must center on me. There's the self-pity story that always sees oneself as a victim of others with power. All of these stories, and many more we could name, are false stories that lead only to misery and death.

Our closing hymn today was written by Anna Waring. She was a Welsh poet of whom we know very little, mostly because she chose not to seek the limelight for herself. I sought to learn more about her this week, but was able to discover just a little. She did love the Lord and his word. As a teenager, she learned to read the Old Testament in Hebrew so she could read the psalms daily in their original language. She was very active in the difficult work of visiting the prisons of her area in order to minister to those confined there. Today's closing hymn is her most famous hymn and was sung at her funeral. She died at age 87, having never married. This hymn is a beautiful expression of today's passage. "I would not have the restless will that hurries to and fro, seeking for some great thing to do, or secret thing to know; I would be treated as a child, and guided where I go. In service which thy will appoints there are no bonds for me; my secret heart is taught the truth that makes thy children free; a life of self-renouncing love is one of liberty."

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 2:5-11

1. Can you think of an area where your mindset about something has significantly changed over the years? For example, my mindset about poverty has changed dramatically, since I used to think it was due solely to personal laziness, but now see that it is far more complex than that.
2. How would a mindset of humility promote church unity? How might a mindset of pride promote disunity?
3. Jesus is offered as our example in a proper mindset, and the first feature of that is his willingness to hold lightly to advantage, in his case the advantages of heavenly glory. What advantages might Christians be called to give up today?
4. Jesus humbled himself by his obedience, and we are called to do the same. What is the link between humility and obedience? That is, in what way does obedience to God require humility?
5. Is there some way God is calling you to obedience that is requiring humility of you right now?
6. Bunyan refers to the “Valley of Humiliation” as a place of fruitfulness. Have you experienced times of suffering as fruitful times in your life? Can you think of an example?
7. Jesus waited on God for his exaltation of Jesus, and we are called to do the same, rather than seeking honor for ourselves. Our honor is not the same as Jesus’ because he is the unique Son of God and King of the universe. But there is honor in store for God’s people. What is that honor that is the end of the story, the happy ending, for us?
8. Three false stories were mentioned in the sermon: the orphan story, the narcissist story, and the self-pity story. Do you battle with one of these? How might God’s true story help in this battle with a false story?