

“Have a Humble Christmas”
Philippians 2:1-11
December 17, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

How many times will we all hear the words “Merry Christmas” this season? They’re good words, expressing a wish that a person has a joyful and happy Christmas. And we want that to be the case beyond Christmas, extending throughout the year and throughout our lives. But it is also an elusive wish. Many will not have a happy season, or even more tragically, a happy life. Some of that is due simply to the brokenness of life in this fallen world. Loved ones get sick and die. Holidays that typically feature family times are a painful reminder to those who for one reason or another don’t have the family life they would like. Instead of joyful times with loved ones, they endure painful times of sadness and loneliness.

Our passage this morning is the most significant passage in the Bible on the nature of Christ’s incarnation. Paul explains that at the heart of the incarnation lies humility. Paradoxically, it is humility that also lies at the heart of a merry Christmas and a happy life. We would do well to know all about it.

I. Humility’s Fruit – v. 1-2

Paul introduces the topic of humility because he wants to talk about unity in the church, and such unity requires humility. So he tells them that it would complete his joy if they were **“of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”** (2:2). It would seem that the Philippian church was experiencing some disunity. Paul even took the step of calling out two women by name who were not living in peace with one another. **“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord”** (4:2).

Haven’t you found it to be the case that pride leads to disunity while humility promotes unity and peace in relationships. I suppose we’ve all known people who are so proud that they always have to be right. As a result, they often get angry when challenged. And they don’t listen very well because they’re so focused on winning the argument. Humble people, on the other hand, don’t start with the assumption that they are always right.

One of the reasons Paul valued unity was that he saw disunity as a threat to the mission of the church. The first word in our chapter is the word “So,” which connects this command for unity to the previous paragraph, where Paul

had been talking about the progress of the gospel through suffering. A church lacking unity and love for one another will not be fruitful in outreach.

So Paul paints a picture for them of the church fellowship God had made possible for them. He reminds them that there is **“encouragement in Christ”** and that there is comfort from their love for one another. There is also fellowship in the Spirit, who fills their hearts with affection and sympathy. Don’t we all want to be part of loving communities like this? I get to see the reality of Paul’s words as pastor of this church, as I see so many of you encourage one another. Such fellowship comes from God’s Spirit and is an essential part of fruitful outreach.

II. Humility’s Components – v. 3-4

Since humility is a key component of church unity, and since church unity is a key component of our mission as a church, Paul goes into greater detail about this humility in verses 3-4. He begins with two heart attitudes that have no place in those who are humble. **“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit.”** Rivalry has the idea of selfish ambition. When I was a young boy, my friends and I would sometimes play the game “king of the hill.” We would find a little dirt pile or just a little bump in the landscape and try to be the first one to get to the top. It wasn’t primarily about your own speed to the top, but more about preventing others from getting there. So it would often devolve into nothing more than a wrestling match with others.

Are you still playing an adult version of “king of the hill”? We all have different hills upon which we want to be at the top or close to it. If someone says to me, “Brad, I’m a much better interior decorator than you,” I would gladly and readily concede. That’s not my hill. But if I’m with a group of pastors talking about theology or ministry, I notice in my heart a strong temptation to an attitude of rivalry. I want to be seen as the best, or at least among those who are closest to the top of the hill. And like the game of king of the hill I played as a child, such an attitude leads to bringing others down. It makes me quietly delight in something negative about another pastor, though I would never show it because that’s not what good pastors do. What’s your hill? Success? Being a good parent? Appearance?

He names another heart motive we are to remove. It’s conceit. A literal translation would be “vain-glory.” It’s the attitude of a person who considers himself better than others. It is that smug sense of superiority that results in a condescending attitude toward others. I remember reading of someone years ago that he possessed the unique ability of being able to strut while sitting

down. That's the attitude Paul is telling us to get rid of. It's the male peacock who loves to unfurl his tail to be admired by everyone.

In contrast to those attitudes, Paul tells us to be humble. The kind of humility he requires will have us **“count[ing] others more significant than [ourselves].”** It's the attitude of the servant who submits his own needs to those of the one being served. He then expands on that in the next verse. **“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”** In the parallelism between looking to our own interests and looking to the interests of others, Paul is saying that we should attend to others' interests with the same zeal we apply to our own.

When I was just out of seminary and serving as an assistant pastor in Center City Philadelphia, I was in need of a new pair of dress shoes. Center City was very urban and required a good bit of walking, and my only pair of black dress shoes had holes in both soles. An observant member of the church saw my shoes and just announced one day that he wanted to buy me a new pair of shoes. He took me to an expensive men's store in the city, where there were no shoes under \$160. That would be a lot of money for shoes even today, but this was in 1981. When I indicated to him that I would be okay with a less expensive pair of shoes, he said, “This is where I buy all my clothes, and I want you to have a pair of shoes at least as good as what I wear.” He was looking out for my interests with a zeal equal to looking out for his own interests.

Let me mention two specific and practical applications of this kind of humility. First, this kind of humble person listens well to others. A good listener is a humble listener more concerned with another's needs than her own. A humble listener isn't listening just enough to know what she will say next. A humble listener has no agenda other than understanding and serving the other person. Second, such humility delivers us from the critical spirit that enjoys finding what's wrong with others and then making sure to pass it along. There's a big difference between the critical spirit and the discerning spirit. Both are able to see what's wrong with another, but the discerning spirit grieves for that while the critical spirit has a little too much joy in it.

III. Humility's Champion – v. 5-11

If you understand the kind of humility Paul is asking of us, and if you know anything at all about yourself, you are likely to be feeling some despair at this point. Paul might as well be asking us to jump over this church building. We might be able for a short time to pretend an interest in others over our own interests. But how can that be sustained and be a part of who we are? It seems nearly impossible. That's why Paul takes the discussion where he does

beginning in verse 5. He talks about the theology of the incarnation, introducing it with the words of verse 5. **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”** Jesus had this humble attitude Paul commands, and there is a sense in which it is ours already by God’s grace.

Jesus is portrayed as just the opposite of the selfishly ambitious person. While that person is grasping for what he doesn’t have but desperately wants to have, Jesus already has everything and is willing to give it up. Being equal with God, he has all the privileges of divinity. The main word the Bible uses for these privileges is the word “glory.” We have a faint echo of this glory in our own world. Picture the parade down Main Street with thousands of people gathered. At the climax of the parade, special honor is given to one person who rides on the back of a shiny new convertible waving to the cheering crowds. That’s just a faint reflection of the glory experienced by the Son of God for eternity. All the angels constantly sing his praises. He exists in joyful, loving fellowship with the Father and the Spirit. He has need of nothing and will always exist in a state of joyful contentment.

The glory of Jesus’ pre-incarnate status makes the next verse all the more astounding. He **“made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men”** (v.7). Jesus didn’t cease to become God when he took human form, but he did give up the glorious privileges associated with divinity. And though he is the rightful King of the whole earth, he did not live with the privileges normally associated with an earthly king. Instead, he lived as a common servant, overlooked and even despised. But that was not the end of his humility. **“He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (v. 8). It’s hard to imagine a more shameful or painful death than crucifixion. It was in his power to avoid the shame and pain of the cross, but out of love he did not take that path. Because he was looking out for our interests and not his own, he voluntarily accepted this dreadful assignment. That is the kind of humility Paul urges us to embrace.

It’s interesting that Paul doesn’t stop here. If his point were simply “Be humble like Jesus was humble,” then he could easily have stopped with the completion of Jesus’ humbling at the cross. But Paul is telling a bigger story than that. So he goes on to speak of Jesus’ exaltation by the Father. **“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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”** (v. 9-11). Jesus did not exalt himself, but was exalted by the Father. As he in his humility became the lowest, the Father makes him the highest, giving him a name above all others. The exalted name means that every knee will bow before him. There is some discussion as to whether this refers to every Christian only,

or also to Jesus' enemies. 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. So I think Paul means to say that every creature will bow before our exalted Lord Jesus Christ. We who follow Jesus now will do so in joyful adoration, while those who oppose him now will do so out of inescapable reality. They may not like the fact that Jesus is given all authority, but the reality of it will be undeniable.

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 know that there is only one story of reality, and it's the one he tells about Jesus. It's the story of humility and exaltation. Just as Jesus humbled himself and was then exalted by the Father, all of reality follows the same storyline. Theologian Willie James Jennings of Yale Divinity School says that storytellers are the most powerful people in the world. Is he referring to novelists? Is he saying that people like John Grisham or C.S. Lewis are the most powerful people in the world? No. What he's saying is that the story you put yourself into makes all the difference in the world. There is only one true story, and it is the one Paul is telling here. 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.

But there is another story you can be part of. It's the one Paul tells here. Follow Jesus into humility as you do nothing from rivalry or conceit but instead die to self and look to the interests of others. It is the story that leads to a good end, because God always exalts the humble. So the way to have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year is to have a humble Christmas and a humble life. It yields not only a joyful Christmas, but a joyful life and a joyful eternity. It's a life that must start in humility as we confess our sinful pride and recognize that we can do nothing to change ourselves. But God immediately begins to exalt us by giving generously of his love and forgiveness to us.

CONCLUSION:

Let me invite you to follow Jesus into humility, not just one time, but every day. As you prepare for Christmas this year, ask God for the grace to live this life of radical humility.