

WPC
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Imitating Christ's Humility
Philippians 2:1-11

In today's Scripture passage, the Apostle Paul reminds the Philippian church about the source of their salvation. In the midst of telling the Philippians how they as Christians ought to conduct themselves, Paul gives an example of how Jesus Christ conducted himself.

Notice what Paul tells the Philippians: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit." The word for 'conceit' is the Greek word *kenodoxa* = *keno* (empty) + *doxa* (glory, praise; doxology - glory/praise we say to God); therefore, conceit literally means 'empty glory.' What an amazing insight into what conceit is – conceit is empty glory, hollow praise, the praise you heap on yourself because you're so impressed with yourself, even if no one else is.

The reason I wanted to share this Greek word is because Paul is going to do a word-play in a little while with this phrase *kenodoxa*, empty glory.

After telling the Philippians to do nothing from conceit, Paul says, "but in humility regard others as better than yourselves." Paul then uses Jesus Christ as an example of ultimate humility.

Jesus, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself –again, the word *keno* (empty) is used; but as opposed to *kenodoxa*, conceit or empty glory, Jesus here emptied himself of claims to glory. This is why theologians sometimes call this hymn the *kenosis hymn*, because it speaks of Jesus emptying himself and taking on the form of a slave.

Not only did Jesus empty himself, he also humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of *Jesus*, “every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory (*doxa*) of God the Father.”

Now we see the play on words that Paul employs. Instead of *kenodoxa*, empty glory, Christ emptied himself, *keno*, of claims to glory, with the result that all should confess that he is Lord, to the glory, *doxa*, of God the Father. Thus, we end up with the complete opposite of *kenodoxa*, or empty glory/conceit. Instead Christ empties himself with the purpose of giving glory to God.

This hymn from Philippians is probably among the most famous and familiar writings of Paul. Ancient as it is, its message is timely and relevant

even today. It's vitally important to know who Jesus Christ is, because our faith depends on it.

I'd like to make two reflections on our text. First, this passage shows that Paul can't speak of any subject without returning to the source of his faith. Although the main subject at hand was how the Philippian Christians were to conduct their daily lives, here he pauses with an entire hymn on the character and person of Christ. Jesus Christ infuses his whole being, his whole manner of life. We can learn a great deal from Paul's example. It's been said that one problem with the church is that we're trying to make Christians relevant without first making ourselves into Christians. Like Paul, we need to first be grounded in the source of our salvation before we can reach out to others.

Paul continually reminds the Philippians who Jesus Christ is and what he's done for us. He doesn't take for granted that the Philippians know who Jesus is. Some of them were probably confused as to his identity, and if that was true 2000 years ago in a church that Paul himself established, then it's certainly true in today's society.

For instance, a Gallup poll taken several years ago indicated that only 42% of the public knew that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Many people believe that the phrase "God helps those who help

themselves” can be found in the Bible, but that’s not a biblical saying. Even people in the church can have trouble getting to really know Jesus because there’s such a huge discrepancy between the biblical Jesus and the cultural Jesus that we’ve created. It may surprise and disappoint some people to point out that Jesus was not a Republican, he was not a Democrat, and he wasn’t even an American! Tony Campolo says that we’ve done a terrible thing: God created us in his image, and we’ve decided to return the favor. In other words, we’ve tried to make Jesus look like us.

My second reflection has to do with what Paul means when, after telling the Philippians to do nothing from conceit, he says, “but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” This sentence has been misunderstood by some people. What does Paul mean? Does he mean that you should consider that you don’t have any value and other people have more value than you have? Is that what Paul’s saying? Is that what Christian humility is – that I’m supposed to feel very badly about myself and at the same time feel that everybody else is of greater worth?

No, that’s not what he means. Actually, commentators have discovered that he’s using a 1st Century saying that his readers would understand. Paul doesn’t mean regard others as better in a qualitative sense; he means better in terms of position or in line – we’re to encourage one

another, to put others in front of us, to focus on the interests of others because we feel good about ourselves (in other words, we're not asked to be a doormat). What Paul is saying is he wants the Philippians to encourage one another; instead of being conceited, he wants them to act with humility by putting others ahead of themselves. What can this look like?

Paul uses Christ as an example of humility. Remember the story of Jesus acting as a servant by washing his disciples' feet before the Last Supper? Acting as a servant and humbling himself for our sake is the essential character of who Jesus Christ was. He's the one who went to the cross in our place.

We have lots of examples of people who have taken this concept of humility to heart, of putting other people in front of us: Parents do it all the time for their children, and as parents age, children start doing it for their parents. Historical figures who are known for putting others in front of them include Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

But not many of us can do what Mother Teresa did. What can this look like in *our* lives today?

Well, let me give you two examples. The first is about a baseball player. From 1949 to 1958 Pee Wee Reese was captain of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was named not for his size, but for playing marbles as a kid

with a pee-wee shooter. He was a great shortstop, a daring base runner, and a superb clutch hitter.

He was an eight-time All Star and sparked the Dodgers to seven National League pennants. He fielded the final ground ball in Brooklyn's only World Series championship in 1955. He never earned more than \$35,000 playing the game he loved.

During his total of sixteen years on the field for the Dodgers, Reese was respected as a person as well as a ballplayer. His fellow Dodgers called him simply "The Captain" and deferred to his judgment on many matters.

He wasn't good at speeches. His leadership came from inner confidence, integrity, and consistency. His manner had the unpretentious effect of causing people to trust and follow him.

Just back from a three-year stint in the Navy during World War II, Reese had helped win a war against racial intolerance in Europe and was destined to be caught up in fighting the same injustices in his own country.

His team decided to break the barrier against black players by bringing up a young player named Jackie Robinson. Some of the Dodger players began circulating a petition in the clubhouse to protest the plan. The petition said in effect that the players signing it wouldn't play on a team with a black man.

Confident that Reese would sign it because he was a Southerner, it was shoved under his nose. "I'm not signing!" he said, and the petition died.

Robinson was with the team for spring training in 1947. Before a game in Cincinnati just across the river from Reese's native Kentucky, the ugliness was intense. Fans in the stands joined players in the opposing dugout to shout racial slurs at the black man taking infield practice at second base.

Pee Wee Reese raised his arm to halt the team's warm up. He walked from his shortstop position to second base and put his arm around Jackie Robinson's shoulders.

That event is viewed as a turning point in the history of baseball. By extension, it was also a major blow against racism in American society.

Robinson recalled: "Pee Wee kind of sensed the sort of hopeless, dead feeling in me and came over and stood beside me for a while."

"He didn't say a word, but he looked over at the chaps who were yelling at me . . . and just stared. He was standing by me. I could tell you that."

That's imitating Christ's humility. It's a show of strength, not weakness, because Pee Wee put himself in danger by standing up for Robinson. Sometimes you don't need to say anything to lead. Just be there.

Stand for what you know is right. There's an eloquence in actions that words can't equal.¹

Let me share with you another example closer to home. There's an event that happened a couple of years ago right here in the state of Washington that exemplifies what Paul is saying in this passage. I've shown this video before, and I debated whether to show it again, but it's such a good example of humility that I decided it's o.k. to see it again. And for some of you, this may be the first time you've seen this video. [SHOW CLIP OF CENTRAL WASHINGTON SOFTBALL:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEDBnKahuNs>]

When we experience Jesus' love, we feel so good about ourselves that we're able to share that love and put others ahead of us. Acting with humility doesn't mean being a doormat for people to step on. It means we're able to focus on the interest of others because we know that we're beloved by God.

It makes a huge difference knowing that we're beloved. In a magazine article about this incident, I learned a lot about Mallory Holtman, the Central Washington softball player who came up with the idea of

¹ The Author of the story is Rubel Shelly who preached for the Family of God Church at Woodmont Hills in Nashville, Tennessee, from 1978 to 2005. He became Visiting Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Rochester College, located in Rochester Hills, Michigan, in 2005, and began full-time duties there in June of 2006. Additional stories and sermons of his can be read on his website at www.rubelshelly.com

carrying her opponent around the bases after she was injured: “She has a brother and father who will let nothing harm her. [And] she has a mother and sister who affirm her without condition.”²

This is not a person with low self-esteem. This is a person who is so secure in her belovedness that she was able to put a fallen opponent ahead of herself and in the process remind us that goodness and decency and honor still exist. I don’t know if Mallory Holtman is a Christian, but she certainly imitated Christ’s humility during the last softball game of her college career.

The love of God helps us to show that kind of humility. Our example is Jesus, who emptied himself by being born in human likeness, and not only became human, but even took the form of a slave, which was the lowest rung on the social ladder in the Roman Empire. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

²“The Way It Should Be,” Sports Illustrated, June 29, 2009, p.62.