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Be Like God

Philippians 2:5-11

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When we talk about the fall of Satan and what the sin was that caused him to be cast out of the heavens, we often say that his sin was that he wanted to be like God. But I would suggest to you that is not true at all, because I believe Satan did not want to be like God in any way. Let me lead you down a different path of thought first, and then we'll return to that idea.

Can you think of any good rationale for the systematic extermination of the elderly, the handicapped, the poor, or the disenfranchised? Can you think of any good rationale for racism or for ethnic cleansing? You would say, "Well, of course not." But are we aware of the fact that several generations now have been taught a theory that proposes just exactly that? It's called the *theory of evolution*. Now I know evolutionists get upset when I say this, but they can't disagree with it, because at the foundation of the theory of evolution is Darwin's belief in the survival of the fittest. The whole idea of the survival of the fittest is that the strong eliminate the weak which, in the end, causes the race to evolve. For those who believe in the theory of evolution, the ultimate virtue is selfishness – or what Darwin would have called "survival." If the ultimate purpose in life is to survive, then what matters is me—my needs and my survival. The strong take advantage of the weak, the strong move on, and the weak are eliminated. If that theory was true, then that would provide rationale for the systematic elimination of all those in a category we would call "weak" in terms of just mere survival. It would also be rationale for racism because, if Darwin was right, then there would be a race of people at the highest end and a race at the lowest end of the gene pool. Ethnic cleansing would, in the long run, be a good thing.

So, at the core of evolution is this idea of selfishness. Many in our culture today have called it the idea of the autonomous self – the idea that self is the centerpiece of the world. If I believe that, then I define for myself reality and what is true. I define for myself everything about life, because I am the center of my own universe.

That is really not a new idea, but evolution may be the latest rationale for it. Selfishness has been a problem with sinful mankind ever since the beginning. But it does provide a radical contrast when Jesus then entered into this world and walked among men, preaching a message that is just the opposite. Jesus' message was: think of others as more important than yourself ... turn the other cheek ... go the extra mile. Jesus said, "No greater love has a man than this, that he lays down his life for his friend." What Jesus taught was radically opposed to the whole "me-ism" selfish survival mode.

Jesus modeled for us the very heartbeat of God, and what it means to *be like God*. So now we are back to the opening question: *Was Satan's sin which caused him to be cast out of heaven that he wanted to be like God?* And the answer would be no—he didn't want to be like God in any way. What Satan wanted was God's power. He wanted God's authority and God's position. Satan wanted God's glory, but in no way did he want to *be like God*. As a matter of fact, Satan represented everything that God is *not*.

I would say the same thing is true of Adam and Eve. When the serpent came along and said, "You can be like God," did Adam and Eve really want to be like God? No, they didn't. They wanted to be like God in the sense of deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. They wanted God's authority; they wanted God's power; they wanted God's glory; but they

didn't want to be like God. In our own nature, by our own flesh, there is not one of us who wants to be like God—that runs contrary to what comes naturally to us. To be like God is not what our flesh is naturally drawn to.

What does it mean, then, to be like God? I don't know a better passage in the Bible that deals with that topic than Philippians 2:5-11. This passage is theologically loaded, so we need to go through it slowly and unpack the terms in order to make it clear. It does get pretty deep, but I guarantee that if you understand what is being said in these verses in Philippians 2, you will never again look at a manger the same way. This passage is an absolutely breathtaking picture of the wonder of the incarnation of Christ.

In Philippians 2:5 Paul said, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." So the opening line is simply *be like God*, because in the following verses he is going to make the case that Jesus *is* God, and he is going to make the case that we need to have the same attitude that Jesus had. Paul tells us to *be like God*, and he is about to define what that means. "Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus who, although He existed in the form of God..." When it says "He existed" it is saying that he has always existed.

It's very important at Christmastime that we remind ourselves that Jesus did not begin at Christmas—that was not the starting point of Jesus. Jesus has always been. That is what we call the pre-incarnate Jesus: He has always been from the beginning. In John 1:1 it says "In the beginning was the word, {and that's Jesus}, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us." When the first verse says, "In the beginning was the word," it is stating the eternal existence of Jesus. He goes on in John to talk about the fact that Jesus was the Creator of the Universe. Colossians would affirm the same thing about Jesus. So when we open up Genesis 1:1 and we read "in the beginning, God..." we understand that's talking about Jesus—He is the Eternal God.

When John the Baptist walked this earth he made a very interesting statement about Jesus. John the Baptist was born before Jesus, therefore he was older than Jesus, yet he said that Jesus existed before him. Obviously he is talking about the fact that Jesus was the Eternal God who has always existed and was born, then, into humanity as the God-Man, and that, of course, is what we celebrate at Christmas.

There are those who look at John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son") and say that means Jesus started at some point in time. But that is not what the word *begotten* means. The word *begotten* means unique—God's very unique Son was the Son that He gave. But there is no starting point for Jesus. He has always been, and that is what is being said in this passage – "...who although He existed..." He has always existed, but how has He existed? He has existed in the form of God. Why does it mean when it says in the "*form of God*"? Why doesn't he just say "existed as God"? The *form of God* is a way of saying He has existed in the very essence of God. It is a very strong statement of the deity of Jesus – it is a statement that He was, in every essence, God. But it is a term that also goes beyond that. The Greek word for *form* means that there was an external reality to this eternal essence. Jesus always existed in an environment that was proper, befitting for someone of his essence. That is what the word *form* really means, so there is a picture painted here with one simple term and we have to understand that in order to fully appreciate where Paul is going in this passage. Paul is saying that Jesus existed in an environment that was right for God—an environment that is so majestic, and so glory-filled that we can't even begin to imagine. It is an

environment that would be right for an Eternal Creator God. That is where Jesus existed—that was the environment He was in: “...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.”

That is an absolute statement of the deity of Christ. Some people may think, “Well, the form of God, I’m not sure... it maybe sounds like He wasn’t God.” But Paul follows that by a statement saying, “He was equal to God.” That’s as clear as it gets. “But he did not consider that something to be grasped.” The word *grasped* means something to be exploited, something to hold onto. Paul is saying that Jesus existed in the very essence of God, God Himself, in an environment that was fitting for the God of the universe – in an environment beyond our ability to even imagine – but he did not consider that to be something to be exploited for His own benefit. Already we are starting to realize that is nothing like what Satan wanted, because what Satan wanted was God’s power, God’s authority, and God’s glory, to consume it upon himself. But the very nature, the very essence of God, is to take who He is and not consume it upon Himself but, rather, use it for the benefit of His creation. That’s the very opposite of what Satan wanted, and that is what is being said when it says it was not something to be grasped or exploited.

In the Garden of Eden what Adam and Eve wanted was God’s authority, God’s position, and God’s power. But they didn’t want it for the good of others. Instead, they wanted to exploit it and consume it upon themselves. And that is naturally where every one of us tends to go. Think about what we want – we want to consume it upon ourselves, which is the very opposite of the essence of God. Have you ever looked into a manger and asked the question, “God, why? Why would you ever do that?” The answer is because that is who God is. It is not because I am worthy. It is not because I deserve it. It has nothing to do with me, but it is because that is the very nature of God, which is what Paul is saying.

He goes on in verse 7: “... but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond servant and being made in the likeness of men.” What does it mean when it says he *emptied* himself? The Greek word *kenosis* is the word translated “empty” here. This passage is referred to by theologians as the “kenosis passage” because it is dealing with the whole concept of that emptying. When it says Jesus emptied Himself, it does not mean that Jesus ceased to be God. The word emptied is used by Paul four or five times in his epistles, and always it is used figuratively. In other words, it is a way of saying, figuratively, that Jesus laid aside the independent use of His attributes when He became a man. He didn’t cease to be God—He remained fully God – but He did lay aside the independent use of His attributes when He became a man. Therefore, when Jesus walked this earth, you do see clear signs that He was still God. He had power over creation; He calmed the sea; He had power over life and death; He raised the dead; He had power over disease; He healed the sick, and He gave the blind their sight. But you also have interesting passages where Jesus is asked a question and He says, “I don’t know. Only the Father knows that.” What does that mean? Did Jesus all of a sudden lose His omniscience—the power to know everything? No, He did not lose it, but there was a willful laying aside of the independent use of that attribute, at that point, to carry out the will of the Father.

Another one of those strange dialogues is in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus said, “Not My will but Thy will.” When would the will of Jesus ever be different than the Father’s will? It is simply an expression of this coming together of deity and humanity and Jesus’ willful submission to the Father. That word *empty* refers to His desire to identify with us, that He might be like us. So you have a case of Jesus walking this earth when He was both

weary and omnipotent (all powerful) at the same time. It is the mystery of this union of God and man when it says, “He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant.” We’ve already defined the word *form* – it means essence – but it also means to create an environment that is fitting for that essence. What is being said now is that Jesus took on the form of a bondservant – or we might recognize the term *slave* better. He basically subjected Himself to an environment that was fitting for a slave, in order that He might identify with us, to redeem us, being made in the *likeness*. That word *likeness* means to be identified with us.

To understand what is being said here you almost have to lay down your Bible and just sit and *think*. It says that Jesus has always existed from eternity in an environment that was fitting for the God of the Universe—an environment so majestic, so glory-filled, so beyond our ability to imagine. When Moses said to God, “God, I want to see your glory,” God responded: “If you saw My glory, it would kill you because it’s too much for you.” So God took Moses and put him in the cleft of the rock and said, “I’ll tell you what—I’m going to pass over. When I pass over, I’ll put my hand over the cleft of that rock, and it will shield you from My glory. And when I get all the way past, I will remove My hand, and you can just see my back side, because that is all you can handle.”

That is what God did, and it was so awesome that Moses came down from the mountain glowing, and the people didn’t know what to make of that. That was just the tiniest glimpse into what that environment must be like, but that is where Jesus has existed from eternity past. Yet Jesus did not see that as something to exploit for His own good, but rather to use for the good of others. So He was willing to step out of that environment and to lay aside the independent use of His attributes, in order to become and dwell in an environment befitting for a slave – in order to be identified with you and with me. That is pretty amazing, isn’t it? Jesus didn’t just become the God-Man for an hour; He didn’t become the God-Man for a year. He didn’t even just become the God-Man for 33 years. He became the God-Man forever, and that is amazing.

The more I thought about that concept this week, I just had to push my Bible onto my desk and take a deep breath, because that is almost beyond our ability to even comprehend what God was willing to do for us. But he goes on in verse 8: “... and being found in appearance as a man, {*in other words, He became a man and was dwelling in that environment fitting for a man*} He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” He was going from the height of glory, not just becoming a man, but becoming a man obedient to the point of death.

Paul makes an interesting statement when he says: “...even death on a cross.” Because, in the first century there was death, and then there was death *on a cross*. There was no rung on the social ladder that was lower than to die on a cross. In the eyes of the first century people, to die on a cross was as low as the low could ever get. In fact, the cross was primarily reserved for slaves – it was reserved for the worst of the worst. When someone was hung on a cross, they died very slowly, usually over a period of days. They died from blood loss, or from asphyxiation, or they died from a lack of food and water. Sometimes they died because wild animals would attack them on the cross and consume them. It was a gruesome way to die. Just to reveal how people felt about those who were crucified: it wasn’t at all unusual that, when someone was crucified, their bodies were not removed from the cross. They would just hang there, and the birds would pick them until there was nothing left to pick. It was their way of saying that these people dying on the cross do not matter at all.

One of the great defenses that we, as Christians, have as to the truthfulness of the message of the Gospel is that no serious movement in the first century would have ever claimed to have a leader who was crucified on a cross. You absolutely could not have picked anything more scandalous or offensive to anyone than that – no one would have made that up. But it was true, and that is why it is a part of the message of the Gospel. Paul says in Corinthians that the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, because those people believed no serious movement could ever have a leader who was nailed to a cross. So when Paul says “obedient to death—even death on a cross” that is what he is saying. Think about where Jesus has gone—from the absolute height of glory, willingly giving all that up to become the God-Man forever, and in the process of that, dying the lowliest death on the cross. Why would He do that? Because that is who God is.

Well, he goes on—the story doesn’t end there, of course—because there is, then, the exaltation of Christ. Verses 9-11: “Therefore, also, God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Those amazing three verses remind us that Jesus went from that humiliation of the cross, back to an exalted position in all of His glory – the rightful position that is deserving of the God of the universe. And one day every atheist, every skeptic, every religious person—every knee – will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord – that Jesus Christ is God.

But the question still remains: why is Paul telling us this? Is it just good theology? And the answer is no – it’s more than that. Look back at Philippians 2:1 for the reason why Paul is telling us this.

If, therefore, there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul is using the incarnation of Jesus, the very heartbeat of Christmas, as a way of saying, “Understand the very heartbeat of God and who He is, and this is what I want you, as His people, to be like: I want you to be like God.”

Back in Philippians 1:27 the whole discussion starts with the statement: “Only conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.” If that is what God was willing to do to bring about this Gospel message in order to redeem us, then those who have believed that message, and have experienced the salvation of Christ should live their lives consistent with the very heartbeat of God – who made that message possible in the first place. In other words, we, as Christians, are told to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

As I spent my week meditating on this passage and trying to understand it and all its ramifications, I find that when I look into that manger and see that little baby, I realize I’m nothing like God. *I am nothing like God!* As I try to understand the incredible heart of God and what He was willing to sacrifice for me, my own selfishness is exposed, because I am *not* very much like Him. It is a tall order to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. But if He was willing to use His privileges in order to redeem me, what am I willing to sacrifice that someone else might be redeemed? Every time we look into that manger, let us never forget the words of Paul: “*Be like God.*”

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