

Be Like Christ

Philippians 2:1-11

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There is a book entitled *The Death of Adam*, which is really a compilation of essays written by a woman named Marilynne Robinson. One of those essays is entitled “Darwinism,” in which she makes her claim that the reason Darwin’s theory of evolution was embraced so quickly had nothing to do with science, but rather had to do with what was happening in Europe at that time. It was the time of the Industrial Revolution, and the people were looking for some reason to rationalize why it was okay for the strong to take advantage of the weak. What they heard in Darwin’s theory was survival of the fittest, which gave them a reason to justify what they were doing. Whether you agree with her or not, really what she was saying is that Darwin’s theory provided an excuse for selfishness.

We all would agree that we don’t need much of an excuse to be selfish; it comes pretty easily. We live in a consumer culture; and a consumer culture is driven by “me.” What about me? What about my needs? How does this affect me? That is the way we think, because that’s the way this culture operates. To bring it down into more specific terms, I think we all would agree that the reality is we struggle with selfishness every day. Every one of us does; it is a part of us. We disguise it; we hide it; we try to rationalize it. But it is there and it is a struggle.

Think about that in terms of the mission statement of our church: to glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ. What does it mean to be complete in Christ? It means to *be like Christ*. What does it mean to be like Christ? It means to die to ourselves and to live a whole different way—to think of others as more important than ourselves. That is pretty radical.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was put in a Nazi POW camp and ultimately executed there. He once stated, “When God bids a man, He bids him come and die.” He is right about that. When God calls us, He calls us to come and die to ourselves. He calls us to come and die to this consumer mindset and be resurrected to a whole different way of life.

There is probably no more passionate appeal to that than Philippians 2. I think Philippians 2:1-11 is connected with Philippians 1:27-30, so I think it is unfortunate the chapter division is where it is. Paul is continuing to talk about conduct worthy of the gospel. In other words, he is talking about living in such a way that our message has credibility—that we are living like we really believe what we say we believe.

In verses 27-30 he talked about the specifics of what that means. It means to come together in unity because we all have a common spirit. Therefore, we ought to do whatever is necessary to be unified as the people of God. It means to have the mind of Christ, and that His purpose is our purpose. It means to stay on the front line and to suffer for His sake.

Starting in chapter 2, I think Paul is just continuing with that same discussion. It starts with the word “therefore,” and we know the adage: whenever you see the word *therefore*, you stop and see what it is *there for*.” In other words, you always go back and see what precedes the word therefore. In this case, it is “conduct worthy of the gospel.”

Verses 1,2: “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.”

The opening verse offers some “if” clauses that in the Greek grammar actually mean, “if this is true, and we know that it is.” We might, for example, use the word “since.” Here is how the sentence really reads: “If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, and we know that there is; if there is any consolation of love, and we know that there is...” That is really how that first sentence grammatically reads.

When he says, “If there is any encouragement in Christ,” the word “encouragement” means to come alongside. In other words, he is saying, “If Christ has called us to come alongside him, to learn from Him and to represent Him to the world, we would say yes, that is what He has done.”

“...if there is any consolation [*or comfort*] of love [*meaning if we have experienced the love of Christ and we would say yes, we have*], if there is any fellowship of the Spirit [*meaning we share in common the same Spirit; yes that it true*], if any affection and compassion...” Affection is the emotion and compassion is the action—in one word, we might say “caring.” He is saying if we really care (yes, we do), then verse 2: “Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.” That is just a review of what he has already talked about in chapter 1, verse 27.

Paul goes back through the theological review. If it is true that Christ has brought us alongside and said, “This is what it means to follow Me;” if we have experienced His love; if these things are true that He has described, then we need to be a unified people focused on His purpose. What does that mean? We are again at a point where we need to see what that means and to flesh that out in everyday life.

Verses 3,4: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

I have to say that verses 3 and 4 are a real mouthful. Those words are absolutely life-changing if we can really understand what he is saying. He says, “Do nothing from selfishness.” We have seen that word before. It was in Philippians 1:17, translated selfish ambition. It is a political word which means to canvas for votes. So selfishness is really trying to convince people that we are special or that we are good. It is trying to convince people that we are successful and we have value and worth. We might say it is like tooting our own horn.

Conceit is trying to generate self-glory. Empty conceit is saying that it does not work. Have you ever been around people who are trying too hard to convince you that they are really great? It does not work, does it? You walk away saying, “Man, that was irritating.” You don’t walk away saying they are great. We just don’t like it. But yet, in our own subtle ways, we still do the same thing. We are trying to convince people that we are something. That is the whole idea of selfish ambition and empty conceit. I think we understand that; it’s pretty straightforward. Let’s stop and think about it in the context in which Paul makes these remarks. In other words, he is talking about conduct that is worthy of the gospel.

Why is selfish ambition inconsistent with the message of the gospel? We understand that every one of us has this drive within us to somehow prove that we are acceptable to God, to merit some sort of favor with God or to be good enough for God. Every world religion is based on that—except for Christianity. At some point in our lives in order to experience salvation, we had to come to the conclusion that we are *not* good enough. There is nothing we can do to merit favor with God. We came to God in a moment of brokenness and said, “God, I can’t do it. I die to that belief.” Therefore, all I can do in my brokenness is reach out and receive this gift of grace. That is at the very core of our theology. As we learned in Galatians, it is not just at the moment of salvation; it is all throughout our Christian walk. Galatians 3:3: “Not only did you start this way...” We understand that this process of growth, or what we often call sanctification, is to be totally dependent upon God doing for me what I cannot do for myself. Therefore, our salvation and our Christian life is really in brokenness saying, “I can’t do it. I am not great. I am not special. But rather, I come in brokenness; and it is God that is doing in me what I cannot do for myself.”

To believe that and proclaim that and to turn around at the same time and be guilty of selfish ambition is to be a hypocrite. It is to come before God and say, “I am nothing.” I simply reach out and receive a gift, but then turn right around and say, “I am something” and try to convince people of that. Those two messages just do not line up. Selfish ambition is inconsistent with the message of grace.

Legalism flows out of our pride. It is an attempt to say, “I am something and I am going to prove it to you.” A consumer culture is based on competition and comparison. That is how selfish ambition works. It means that I am going to compare myself to you, because that is the basis upon which I prove that I have value and worth. It is by those comparisons that we are tall or short, we are pretty or we are ugly. It is by comparisons that we are skinny or fat, we are successful or we are failures. In other words, if I were the only one on a deserted island, there would be no selfish ambition. I would have no one to compare to because it would just be me. In our culture, this is all based on a competitive system; that is how it works.

We learned in the book of Galatians that when we come to Christ we die to that way of thinking. We come to the conclusion that there is no longer any need for comparison. There is no longer a need for competition. I am simply a broken sinner in need of a Savior. Therefore, that should be the end of selfish ambition and empty conceit. I just don’t think that way any more. I died to that way of thinking. The problem is, it just kind of keeps creeping back in.

It is interesting how Paul makes the same basic argument in Romans 12:1. He uses the word “therefore”—which is in reference to 11 chapters of systematically developing the theology of salvation by grace through faith. Paul says in Romans 12: “Therefore, because we have come to this conclusion that we are saved on the basis of grace, (verse 2) we are not to be conformed to this world but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” What does that mean? He tells us in Romans 12:3, “not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.”

In other words, to be conformed to the world is to think the way the world thinks—that this is all based on competition and comparison. It is all about selfish ambition. To have the renewed mind on the basis of grace is to no longer think that way—to no longer think of myself more highly than I ought to think. That is the alternative that Paul puts forth in verse

3, "...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.

You might be interested to know that humility in the first century was not a virtue. As a matter of fact, the Greeks considered humility to be a weakness. They were very strong proponents of selfish ambition. It was a virtue to market yourself. Jesus was pretty radical when He came on the scene and started talking about humility.

Humility does not mean thinking poorly of ourselves. It is not kicking a rock and saying, "Oh, I am nothing; I'm just a clod." I don't know what that is, but it is not humility. Humility is just *not thinking* about ourselves. In a consumer culture, every day all day, we think about ourselves. We think about how people treat us, how people talk to us, what about this and what about that. We are consumed with ourselves. Humility means that we start to look at life through a completely different grid. I start now to think of others as more important than myself. I start to think of others' interests as more important than my own interests.

It is amazing how many of the issues that we have in our culture are really related to selfishness. I think much of the depression (not all of it, but much of the depression) is related to this. Much of the discussion concerning self-esteem is related to this. We become so self-oriented, that that is all we think about. I have to tell you, if all I thought about was myself all day long, I would be depressed. It is not a real encouraging picture we get there, and that is true of all of us. Everything in life can revolve around how people are treating me, whether or not people like me, whether this is fair or unfair to me—that is just how we process our day.

The way to change our self-esteem is not to somehow convince ourselves that we are great. Our theology says we are not great. We are broken. We are recipients of grace. The way to change that is to stop thinking about yourself and start to think about others. Think about others as more important than yourself. Think about others' interests instead of just thinking about your own interests. It is a completely different way to live life, and it is life changing. That is what Paul is talking about in this passage. That is conduct worthy of the gospel. It is consistent with the message of grace that we proclaim.

About this time, we may be pushing back a little bit and saying, "Wow, I don't know if I like this. What would happen if I thought of others as more important than myself and I thought about others' interests? It just sounds like a little too high of a price to pay. It sounds like quite a sacrifice." About the time we might be thinking that way, Paul pulls out the supreme example of this type of attitude.

Verses 5-8: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus [*In other words, he is saying, 'Be like Christ'*] who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

We need to unpack some of these words to understand what Paul is saying. In verse 6 it says "although He existed." This is what we call the pre-existence of Christ. It means that before Jesus was born in that stable, He existed. And He has existed for all eternity. How has He existed? He has "existed in the form of God."

The Greek word for “form” is a hard word to translate into English. Because God is a spirit being, He does not have a shape; so we are not talking about that kind of form. It is actually a word that means for the outward environment to be appropriate for the inward essence. In other words, it is a way of saying that the environment that Jesus dwelt in for eternity was appropriate for God. What does that mean? We cannot even fully explain that. What kind of environment is appropriate for God? What kind of an environment is proper for the Eternal God of the universe—that He has dwelt in from eternity past?

There are two ways we can process this, just to get the slightest glimpse of what that might be like. One of those ways is through creation. Stop and think about the universe. Because of technology over the last 10 or 20 years, we have been able to go out into space and see things we have never seen before. We are discovering that the universe is more spectacular than we could ever have imagined. We now have pictures of the universe available, that for ten thousand years or however old the earth is, no people have ever seen—until this generation. In other words, the majority of people who will ever live on this planet had no ability to see the pictures we can see today. This raises the question: Why did God create it? Not just create it, but create it with all the spectacular color and majesty? There is only one answer to that question and that is: Because God likes it that way. It was not created for you and me. It was not created for people to see. It was created that way for God because He likes it.

The same thing is true of the ocean floor. There are things on the ocean floor that no man will ever see. Just in recent times we have continued to research and go down into the ocean floor. We are not even close to discovering all that is there. It raises the question again: Why is it filled with such spectacular beauty and majesty if no men and women will see it? The answer is: Because God likes it that way, or because God sees it. Think about this for a minute. If that is true, that God has created this universe that way, and He created it with just a spoken word and there it was, and it is that spectacular, what must the environment that He has dwelt in for eternity be like? It is hard to imagine, isn't it?

Here is another way you can process it. Throughout the Scriptures, we get just the slightest glimpses of what it might be like. For example Moses, when he went up on Mount Sinai said, “God, I want to see your glory.” God said, “Moses, if you saw My glory, you would die. Here is what we are going to do.” He took Moses and put him into the cleft of the rock and said, “I am going to go over, and I am going to put My hand over the cleft of the rock to protect you. When I am leaving, I am going to pull My hand back just enough for you to see the tail end of My glory.” And Moses did—so much so, that when he came back down the mountain, he glowed. That was just from getting a tiny peak.

You have the same thing in Isaiah 6, when Isaiah gets just a glimpse of the glory of God. Isaiah falls on his face and says, “Woe is me. I am coming unraveled.” That is really what he said—“I am coming unraveled!” Again, it's the same thing in Revelation 1. When John gets just a peak of the glorified Christ, he falls on his face and says, “I am a dead man.”

If each of those experiences was just from the slightest peak, try to imagine what that environment must be like that Jesus has dwelt in for all eternity. That's what Paul is talking about in verse 6: “Although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God [*This is a great statement of the deity of Christ*] a thing to be grasped.” The word “grasped” means to be exploited for one's own benefit. Oftentimes we say that the sin of Satan was that he wanted to be like God. That is not completely accurate. He did want God's glory and

God's power. But he did not want to be like God. He wanted to exploit that for his own benefit, which is not like God at all. Because rather than exploiting that (grasping it), Christ emptied Himself.

That word "emptied" is the Greek word "kenosis." Theologians refer to this as the kenosis passage. They do a lot of arguing about the question: What exactly does it mean that He emptied Himself? At the very least, we understand that it means He basically laid aside the privilege of that environment, and He certainly laid aside the independent use of His attributes that go from eternity to time and space. The God who is omnipotent and all-powerful was still weary and tired. In other words, He set those attributes aside. He did not cease to be God, but He just chose not to access those attributes—to do what? To take on the form of a bondservant. We saw the word "bondservant" in Philippians 1:1; it means a slave. It means that Jesus went from an environment that was proper for God, to an environment that was proper for a slave. That is what Paul means when he says, "...being made in the likeness of men." Just stop and think about this for a minute. For example, think about when Jesus was born and laid in that manger. Then think about where He had come from. For all eternity, He was in an environment so spectacular and so majestic that we cannot really even begin to imagine. Yet, He willingly set that aside and ended up in an environment that was proper for a slave.

There is more than that. Verse 8: "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." The reason Paul says "even death on a cross" is because in the first century the cross was reserved for the worst of the worst. There was no lower point in life that any man or woman could have fallen to, than to be nailed to a cross. It was the bottom.

Crucifixion was a horrible way to die. Often it took two or three days. Sometimes people died of asphyxiation. Sometimes people bled to death. Sometimes in the middle of the night a wild animal would jump up and begin to tear them off the cross, and the people would let that happen. It was not at all unusual that when someone would die on a cross, people would just turn and walk away. They wouldn't even take the body down; they would just let the animals consume it. It was their way of saying, "This person is so worthless it is not even worth our time to take that body off the cross." That was how they felt about people who were nailed to a cross. That is why Paul says He went from that spectacular environment in the heavenlies, and willingly laid that aside, in order to go to that cross.

Remind me again...what was that sacrifice for you that is just too much? Remind me again...why is it too much to think of others as more important than yourself? In light of the theology of our message, in light of what we believe was done on our behalf, we are to have the attitude Christ had that took Him to that cross.

Verses 9-10: "Therefore God also highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

In other words, Jesus was exalted back into the heavenlies. One day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. There are no exceptions. Every single person who has ever drawn a breath will admit that Jesus is God. He is the exalted Savior. We know that; we believe that. That is part of our theology. If we believe in the exalted Christ, if we believe

that He made that sacrifice from the heavenlies to the cross for us, then we are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of that message.

What does that mean? It means that we die to ourselves. That is the sacrifice—that we die to ourselves. We no longer live our lives as consumers, every day asking, “What about me? What about my needs? What about my feelings? What about this... and what about that?” We run life through a completely different grid, where our lives are defined now by thinking of others as more important than ourselves, and putting others’ interests ahead of our own. It’s the very attitude that brought Jesus to that cross.

Do you realize how many people have never heard the message? They have no understanding that that is what Jesus did for them. That is why we are advancing the gospel. That is why our conduct needs to be worthy of the gospel—because they need to know that. How we live needs to line up with what we say is true.

Ask yourself, *What am I sacrificing for the gospel?* Really, what are we sacrificing? What is the price that we are paying for the gospel? Given what Jesus has done for me, what am I willing to sacrifice for him? But it is not just that. Given what He has done for me, what am I willing to sacrifice for others that they, too, might know the Savior?

Jesus, the Lamb of God, paid the price for your salvation. What sacrifice are you willing to make to live worthy of the gospel?