

BECOMING NOTHING

SERIES: BECOME LIKE THEM TO LOVE THEM

By Paul Taylor

Underwater spelunking is a bit of a niche sport. It basically combines two things: exploring caves and scuba diving. Put those together and you get cave diving, which is what most people call it. I just think “underwater spelunking” sounds a lot cooler. It’s not a very popular sport because it’s really dangerous. Exploring caves is dangerous, scuba diving is dangerous—put them together and you’ve got all sorts of danger. In terms of safety, the most important piece of equipment (apart from having enough air in your tank and all that) is called a guide line. A guide line is a string that the dive leader ties to a fixed point outside the cave and then unrolls as he explores the cave. The divers can then use this guide line to find their way out of the cave in case they get disoriented or confused, or there is a silt-out and visibility is completely lost in the cave. The guide line provides an anchor for them as they explore. All the cave diving websites I found say that not using a guide line is the number one cause of fatalities for cave divers.

Well, we’re going to talk about more than underwater spelunking in this message. In the last message (Discovery Paper 5260) we began this two-part sermon by talking about outreach. We looked at 1 Corinthians 9 and asked, What does it look like for us to become all things? How do we adapt ourselves to others so that we can love them? But there was one big question that I didn’t address in the last message. Several people picked up on it and asked me about it afterward. The question is basically, How far do we go? People asked me things like, “Should I

become a drug dealer to love drug dealers?” “Should I become an alcoholic to love alcoholics?” And I was actually glad to hear these questions. This is the type of question we should be asking. If I could choose how I would have been misunderstood in the last message, this is exactly what I would have chosen. Is this idea so radical that we should become exactly like people for the sake of loving them? The fact that people were asking these questions meant they understood the radical nature of what I was suggesting.

In this message we’re going to talk about how to love others without sacrificing who we are. And the underwater spelunker will be our guide (which I suppose fits well with our *Little Mermaid* theme from the last message). We’ll look at two broad ideas: anchoring and exploring. In the last message we talked a lot about exploring—becoming like others in order to love them and being willing to take significant risks. But you can’t explore without an anchor. Just as the underwater spelunker has a line anchored to a fixed point before he explores a cave, we must be anchored as we explore.

To look into this issue, we’re going to examine Philippians 2:5-8. The famous underwater spelunking passage. It describes Jesus’ incarnation: how he emptied himself to become human. In the last message we saw Paul articulating the principle: become like them to love them. Now we’re going to look at Jesus as the supreme example of living out that model. What we want to discover for ourselves is how to adapt ourselves to others without sacrificing who we are.

Anchoring: identity with freedom

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

but made himself nothing,

taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Paul begins in verse 5 by saying that we should emulate Jesus. Now, this is a relatively familiar idea. Even people who don't "believe in Jesus" often consider him to be a good role model to follow. But the particular path that Jesus took isn't one that most people try to live out. It's not often you find books with titles like *How to Give Your Life for People Who Hate You*. Jesus wasn't upwardly mobile. He was downwardly mobile. And that's what we're told to emulate. As we strive to become like others in order to love them, we will lose something. Adapting yourself to someone else is a sacrifice. It doesn't come naturally. But Jesus' life shows us a picture of what loving others looks like. So it makes sense to really study his life and pray that we might be changed by watching how Jesus lived. (I recommend Scott Grant's Christmas series from Hebrews 1-2 [Discovery Papers 5265-5268], which looks in depth at the incarnation of Christ, as well as Scott's extensive journey through the Gospel of Mark [Discovery Papers 5270-5277], in which we walk alongside Jesus hoping to be changed as we encounter his life.)

How does Jesus model our theme of becoming like others to love them? The passage starts out with a description of Jesus as “being in very nature God.” The NASB renders the Greek more literally: “He existed in the form of God.” That can be confusing, though, because we usually think of form as the external appearance of something, and being in the form of something doesn’t necessarily mean that you are that something. If I shape a marshmallow into the form of a snowman, it doesn’t make the marshmallow a snowman. But that’s not how the Greek word is used, which is why the NIV translates the phrase as “being in very nature God.” The Greek word for “form” indicates the external appearance that represents the internal essence. It means being something. But it highlights the external appearance. So it’s likely that the term “form of God” alludes to the glory of YHWH pictured throughout the Old Testament as the “form of God” (1). Those words describe Jesus as he existed before becoming a man—referred to as the pre-incarnate or pre-existent Christ—clothed with the glory of God the Father. This is the glory that could kill you by its sheer beauty if you looked at it, the glory that Moses barely caught a glimpse of. It’s what Jesus was talking about in John 17:5 when he asked the Father, “Glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” It’s the glory that the author of Hebrews referred to when he called Jesus “the radiance of God’s glory” (1:3). It’s Jesus clothed in the awesome glory of God the Father with whom he created the universe, standing in unimaginable splendor; Jesus the beloved Son of the God of the universe, brilliant in glory. Can you see it? This is Jesus: he is God.

This was Jesus’ anchor. He knew who he was. And this is a big deal. Jesus’ identity is no small matter. The first three hundred years of Christianity were basically spent trying to figure out how

to articulate who Jesus was. The identity of Jesus is still an issue today. Everybody wants to know who Jesus was. But even if no one else could figure out who he was, Jesus knew who he was. He was anchored in his identity.

Well, this is part of our problem. We are a culture of people who don't know ourselves. Just look around: we're fixated on finding out who we are. Personality tests are a standard part of our conversation. Are you INFP or ESTJ? Are you phlegmatic or choleric? Are you red or green? Are you a lion or a horse? I did a search on Amazon.com for personality tests and found bestselling books with titles like these:

- *The Big Book of Personality Tests: 90 Easy-To-Score Quizzes That Reveal the Real You*
- *What Color Is Your Personality? Red, Orange, Yellow, Green...*
- And my favorite: *Are You Crazy? 18 Scientific Quizzes to Test Yourself* (What do you do if the answer is yes?)

I think we're obsessed with finding out who we are because we just don't know who we are.

We're not confident in our identity. And if you're thinking that this applies only to non-Christians, think again. I found over a hundred books on how to discover your spiritual gifts on Christianbook.com. We're just as obsessed as everyone else with finding out who we are. We're all in the same boat.

But Jesus was different. He knew who he was: so much so that he could give it up. He was anchored in his identity, which gave him freedom. The second part of verse 6 reads, "[He] did

not consider equality with God something to be grasped.” What does that mean? It means that Jesus didn’t consider his equality with God something to hold on to fervently. The grasping hand has to hold on to its treasure because of the uncertainty of keeping it. It’s a picture of insecurity. Jesus is a picture of security. He was anchored; his identity gave him freedom.

This is the secret that we need to learn as we try to become like others so that we can love them. To become like them, we need to be secure in who we are. If I’m not secure in who I am, then adapting myself to someone else is very threatening. Think about the underwater spelunker. If his line is his anchor as he explores, then losing that anchor puts him in a world of hurt. If he doesn’t have his anchor, he’s not exploring, he’s lost. Chances are he’ll never make it back from that underwater cave. I found online a sign that’s posted at the entrance to many underwater caves. It has a large grim reaper on it with several drowned scuba divers underneath him. It says, “STOP. Prevent Your Death. Go No Farther.” Then it explains that if you don’t have a guide line, you have no business going into this cave. This is the danger of adapting ourselves to someone else, because if we forget who we are, then we have nothing to offer them. If I become a drug dealer to love him, then I’ve lost my anchor and I have nothing to offer that drug dealer. I’ve become like him, but I’ve become trapped in his world. As we adapt ourselves to others, we need an anchor in order to offer people something. Our anchor is our identity.

One of our other problems in terms of being secure in our identity is that we don’t like who we are. We desperately want to be different. This is what advertisers play on. You don’t have to be who you are, you can be like the person on the billboard or the person on TV. Our consumer culture breeds discontent around our identity. We’re taught to not like who we are so that people

can make money turning us into someone else. I've felt this way to one degree or another most of my life. At times, I still look at someone and think, "If I only I were more like him, I'd feel a lot better about myself." When I moved from Connecticut to Houston in the middle of high school, I saw it as a chance to become someone else in a new place, because I didn't really like who I was. But if we don't like who we are, then adapting ourselves to others isn't a way to love them, it's a manipulative tool to get them to love us. It's not about them, it's about us. That's not love, it's hypocrisy. Out of my deep insecurity, I act like them in desperate hopes that they might like me.

This is another question people asked me after the last sermon. "Isn't it hypocritical to act like someone else?" Well, yes, especially if you're acting like them so that they will like you. That's hypocrisy: acting like you're not. But we're not talking about hypocrisy here. If I want to love people on the chess team, do I pretend to like chess as a way of loving them? No. Instead, I develop a real liking for chess so I can love them. I don't pretend to be interested in what they are interested in, I get interested in what they are interested in. If I love them—and that's my goal—then I will get interested in what they are interested in because I'm interested in them. When I was in high school, I was on the wrestling team. And I know that my mother hated wrestling as a sport, especially since she had to watch me get pinned so frequently. And she didn't pretend that she liked it. But she got interested in it because she was interested in me. She became like me as she loved me.

If we're anchored in our identity, we are able to adapt ourselves to others without sacrificing who we are and without being hypocritical. And as believers in Christ, our identity is rooted in

him. We are created sons of God the Father, made in his image. And we are redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ. We are new people. Our identity is firm. Our identity is Christ. But some of us aren't well anchored in our identity. And that's okay, because this journey that we are all on will take the rest of our lives. Some of us need to finish Cave Diving 101 before we take the risk of a real cave dive. I think there's an arc of maturity in the Christian life. Rhonda Lawson recently shared about being welcomed in this church as a place of safety when she was a young Christian, and now feeling a sense that it is time to start moving outward again. I think that's how it works. When you're first introduced to the radical love of God through Christ, it takes time to get used to your new identity. It's like the new bride who keeps forgetting and writing her maiden name. Just walk up to Jake Dodson's new wife and call her Mrs. Dodson. I'm sure it will freak her out. If you've recently been rescued from a life of addiction, next week isn't the time to become like addicts to love them, because your anchor isn't secure. You won't love them if you forget who you are. That doesn't mean that if you're a new Christian you can't reach out to people. It doesn't mean that you can't share the good news of the gospel. You can and should tell people about what God has done in your life. It just means you need to be careful about adapting yourself to others in an area of weakness.

But while it is true that there is an arc of Christian maturity and there is a time to be extremely careful about becoming like someone else, I almost hesitate to say that—because it's also possible to focus so much on your identity that you never explore. It's possible to tie that rope so short that exploring for you means never leaving sight of your anchor. That's not being anchored, that's being trapped. And I think we tend to be a church with really short guide lines. I don't hear too many stories from our community of people so dedicated to loving others that they

lost their anchor. It certainly happens that people lose their anchor. But it doesn't often result from a sense of intentional love. Some of us finished Cave Diving 101 some years ago. Some of us practically have our Ph.D. in cave diving, but we've never set foot in the water. For some of us, it's time to trust our anchor and take the risk of exploring.

Exploring

Let's turn back to our model of Jesus in the passage to find out more about exploring. Jesus was anchored: his identity gave him freedom. That freedom led to sacrifice by his adapting himself to others. The text reads, "[He] made himself nothing...." That's the question we're asking ourselves today: How do we become nothing without losing our anchor? How do we become nothing without becoming nobody? This phrase literally reads, "He emptied himself." He poured himself out. It brings back echoes of Isaiah 53:12, where the Savior who was to come was said to have "poured out his life unto death...." Remember the image of Christ as he stood clothed in the majestic glory of his Father before becoming human? Jesus left that world and entered our world, not only becoming human, but becoming a servant—a slave—the lowest class of human. He traded glory for grime. He traded power for being pushed around. He traded his throne for thorns. This is what it took for Jesus to save us. He had to become human, enter our world, and learn our language.

In high school, I accompanied my father on a business trip to Paris. While he was in his meeting, I wandered around the city for the day. Incidentally, Paris isn't a very fun city to be in when

you're alone. But I tried to make the best of it. At one point, though, I sat down at a café and tried to order a drink. I had taken French in school, so I tried to order in French, but I couldn't figure out what the waiter was saying, and he just kept getting more and more frustrated with me. I finally realized that he was trying to ask whether I wanted ice in my lemonade, but this was after a few minutes of going back and forth. The whole experience left both us frustrated. And it was right of him to be frustrated. How did I really expect to relate to him without being able to communicate with him? You need to be able to speak someone's language in order to relate to them.

This is what Jesus did. But learning a language starts with hearing it. The first step in adapting yourself to someone else is to find out about them. How can you become like them if you don't even know them? Becoming starts with listening. We often assume that we know what life is like for other people without asking them first. But to become like people, we have to talk with them, without judging them, and find out who they are. I've often heard people exclaim in frustration, "I just don't understand my son," or "I just don't understand my parents," or "I just don't understand this guy I work with." That's a good place to start—acknowledging that you don't know someone. But too often, this is said as a kind of surrender: I don't understand this person and I don't think I ever will. But understanding takes time and listening. It's a lot different to say to someone, "I just don't understand you!" than to say to someone, "I don't understand, can you explain?" We have to listen to our children. We have to listen to our parents. We have to listen to our co-workers. We have to listen to our world.

But listening to our world can be difficult. After all, people in our world are a mess. They're certainly not like us. I mean, have you seen things out there? There are all sorts of sexual problems out there. There are all sorts of addictions out there. There are all sorts of greed and self-serving. There are dysfunctional relationships, broken families, rebellious hearts. People are angry, mean, lonely, and confused. It's terrible. Certainly not like us in here. They're a mess....or are they that different? Come to think of, we have all those problems. Come to think of it, I have all those problems. Maybe they are a mess, but maybe we are too. So maybe it's not that dangerous to listen to them. Maybe listening to them will help us understand ourselves. Maybe becoming like them in order to love them is a whole lot easier than we think.

Jesus went from being God to being human. If his becoming like us was like a complete remodel, then our becoming like others is like touching up a coat of paint. It's not that hard. And we can start by realizing that we're not that different from people in our world. I've never been addicted to a chemical substance, but I'm an addict. I'm addicted to approval, I'm addicted to getting my own way, I'm addicted to feeling good about myself. I may not use chemicals to get there, but that doesn't mean I'm not an addict. It's not that hard to become like others in order to love them because I'm not really that different.

Who are the people in our community who need to be loved? How are you adapting yourself to them to love them? Are you loving them as an evangelistic goal? Or are you just loving them, being willing to risk some misconceptions in order for them to be loved? Jake Dodson made a great comment as we were talking recently. He said sometimes we love people but add, "Please see footnote to my love." Do we love with footnotes, clarifications, addenda, disclaimers, and

explanations? Or do we just love? We want to love the people we work with, we want to love the people we sit next to in class, we want to love the people whose kids go to school with our kids, we want to love people around us. And loving without footnotes means becoming like them. It means listening to them without judging them, and then adapting ourselves to them.

And we want to love the people with whom we regularly interact in our world. We have to start there. But sometimes God calls us to go to people specifically to love them. Sometimes we need to leave our regular rhythm just to love people. Are you sensitive to God's leading in this area? Are you willing to go? This is an amazing church for going. We had an elders/pastors/deacons dinner recently, and we heard stories about people from this church going to Pakistan, Colombia, India. We heard about the impact we are having in Thailand and other places in the world. And I was amazed. I was proud to be part of a community that God is using in so many places around the world. But for us it can sometimes be harder to go into our own community than to go halfway across the world. How can we go into our own community? Can we as a church grow in our ability to go into our own community without giving up our commitment to going all over the world?

But once again, the question comes up: How far do you go to understand people? How much do you give up? Well, if we look back at our passage and ask what Jesus teaches us by his example, then the answer is simple: we go all the way. Our passage says that Jesus went from being a King to being a slave. He went from being God to being man. He went from being immortal to being murdered, and that on a cross. That last phrase is like twisting the dagger. "He became obedient to death...." That much is amazing. Jesus Christ, the One clothed with the glory of the Father, not

only became a human, not only became a slave, but went so far as to die. The immortal One, dead! And then the kicker: “even death on a cross!” After that phrase, you can hear a pin drop. Can it get any worse?

So how far do we go? All the way. As far as it takes. We sacrifice everything. We give up our whole lives. We become obedient unto death: even death on a cross. And yet there is a mystery: Jesus went all the way. He sacrificed everything. He became nothing. But he didn't become a nobody. He didn't sacrifice who he was. He explored as far as there was to explore. But he was anchored. He didn't stop being God. He didn't stop being Jesus Christ. And if he had, he would have forfeited his mission. If he had lost his anchor, he wouldn't have been any good to us at all.

This is part of my challenge as a college pastor. I am not a college student. I was a college student, so I have some experience, but now I'm several steps away from being a college student. I'm over thirty—in college life, that's old. I'm married. Most college students in this area can't even imagine getting married; it seems really far away. And I have kids—not one or two, but three kids. I'm definitely not a college student, so sometimes I feel that I don't have anything to offer college students. Sometimes I think I need to give up who I am in order to love them. But that's not true. The truth is that I have something to offer precisely because of who I am. And so I strive to become nothing, adapting myself to them in order to connect with them, but not becoming nobody: I maintain the anchor of my identity so that I have something to offer them.

Discover

So this is the journey that we are on. It's the delicate task of loving people who are different from us. Becoming like someone in order to love them begins with an **anchor**. It starts with a secure foundation of who we are. That knowledge gives us the freedom to **explore**. Because we know who we are, we are able to adapt ourselves to someone else. We're like the underwater spelunker who anchors a line to a fixed point in order to explore the intricacies of a new world. But that cave diver doesn't just explore for the sake of exploring. His goal is to discover.

We don't have time to look at it in this message, but that is exactly where our text leads us, because it's exactly where loving people leads us. After Jesus became nothing, the text continues to describe how his Father exalted him to the highest place, above all others. He discovered a new relationship with his Father and his creation by becoming nothing. And we became nothing so that we can invite others into the discovery of God's love and experience it in a new way for ourselves. We explore so that others can discover. We explore so that we can discover. We love so that others can know love.

Love is complicated. I may have created more questions than answers for you as we've looked through this. And that's okay. I'm hoping your questions aren't along the lines of "What in the world is he talking about?" but more along the lines of "How does this apply to loving my neighbor who just cheated on his wife?" That's a good question to be asking. Because when you're really trying to love someone, to adapt yourself to them, to figure out what you should do in a complicated situation, you won't know exactly what to do. I think really loving people often includes more agonizing questions than simple answers.

These questions are the life of faith. We talk about them in prayer with our Father, asking for guidance in daily situations. And we talk about them in our community. We ask each other, “What would you do here? How would you handle this situation? How do I love this person?” (If my sermon has raised questions for you, you can post them to the message on the website. Others can then see them and respond. We can have a conversation together on-line about what this looks like.)

I want to leave you with the image of the underwater spelunker. From what I hear, it’s a dangerous but rewarding activity. But you have to explore to make it worthwhile. You don’t see underwater caves when you’re still on the boat. Yet you have to be anchored. If you’re not anchored, you’ll lose your way, perhaps never to return. So let’s be anchored in who we are, refusing to become nobodies. But let’s explore by adapting ourselves to the people around us, becoming nothing if that’s what it takes. And let’s pray that together with others we may all discover love—real love—the love of our Father.

Notes

1. Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, © 1991, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 208.

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Philippians 2:5-8

Second Message

Paul Taylor

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