

IMITATING THE IMPOSSIBLE

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



Catalog No. 20180429
Philippians 2:5-11
Fourth Message
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April 29, 2018

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My wife and I dated long distance for a while. She was going to college in Texas, and I attended school here in Palo Alto. We got engaged one week before I graduated from college, but she still had six months before she completed her degree.

So I moved from Palo Alto, California to Lubbock, Texas to woo my bride and bring her back to what I thought of as the paradise of Silicon Valley. I sometimes joke that this was my version of the incarnation. Jesus went from heaven to earth. I went from Palo Alto to Lubbock.

These past few weeks I've been studying one of the richest and most powerful passages in Scripture that describes the path that Jesus took. We are going to have the privilege of really understanding this incredible path. Lubbock at least had a Blockbuster Video (do you remember those?) and a mall. I used to say about Lubbock, "It's a nice place to live, but I wouldn't want to visit."

It seems to me that any sermon on this passage has to start with an apology. I will not do justice to this text. So when you leave here this morning and think, "there was so much more Paul could have said", you'll be absolutely right. Nothing I could say can compare with the words in this text.

But, if all I do is to draw our attention to this text for a brief time this morning, that might be enough. This majestic and mysterious text has the potential to transform your life and your relationships. That is the mystery of Jesus Christ.

This morning we're continuing in our sermon series on the book of Philippians that we've called *Tenacious Together*. Last week we saw the two main ideas of this book described. Persevering for the sake of the Gospel and finding unity together as we do that.

Chapter 2 opens with a pleading exhortation from the apostle Paul that this church find unity. He asks them to "be of the same mind." Our passage this morning starts

with that same verb. Today that mind is described. The same mind that we are to all have in common is nothing less than the mind of Christ.

This week we will see a model the humility that we are supposed to have. It is an impossible model because we are supposed to model our lives after the life of Christ. Nonetheless, this is the example that we are given. This morning we will be invited into imitating the impossible.

Philippians 2:5-11 contains the great Christ hymn of Philippians. Few passages in all of Scripture are as rich and beautiful as this. These words are packed with theology. It's like a theological fruitcake. Have you had a fruitcake? I'm not sure anyone actually eats them, but they are full of surprising things. I didn't know I'd find a walnut in there. What's a currant doing in that bite? And what is a currant anyway?

Almost every word leads rise to some deep theological question about who Jesus is. This morning, most of them will go unanswered. We will not deal with the myriad of theological questions in this passage such as:

What exactly did Jesus empty himself of?
Why does Paul say that Jesus was in the form of God and not simply God?
Why is the name of Jesus so significant?
What does it mean that every knee will bow to Jesus?
Is that forced or voluntary?
And there are more.

Each of these questions could be an entire sermon. The raisins, the walnuts, the currants. All of those theological tidbits are fascinating, but they are not the main point of this passage.

In the context of the book of Philippians, the purpose of this passage is extremely clear. People debate about a lot of the details, but almost everyone agrees about what Paul's goal was in writing these words.

Paul wants the Philippians to follow the example of Jesus so that they can have unity. His goal is not to answer theological questions, but to transform

relationships inside the church. Last week we saw that unity does not come through agreement. Unity comes through humility. This is why Paul describes the humility of Christ.

It is worthwhile to consider the mystery of Christ. But, it is far more worthwhile to love the people of Christ. Lose yourself in the mystery, but only if you emerge with love for your brothers and sisters.

If you count yourself as having truly fathomed the depths of the mystery of Christ, but have not arrived at love for the people whom Christ redeemed, then you have been doing it wrong.

As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

Let's not be nothing. Let's have love as our goal. May this great text inspire and instruct you toward love for the people in this room.

Imitate Christ

We'll start by looking at the first verse of the Christ hymn which serves as a bridge to the previous section and reveals the purpose of the hymn in the context of the book of Philippians.

Philippians 2:5:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

There are two ways to translate this verse. The grammar is a bit confusing. It has to do with how we understand the phrase "in Christ Jesus." One approach would say, "have this attitude, which is the attitude that Christ Jesus had." That's saying that our attitude is supposed to be the same as the one that Jesus had.

The other way to translate it is the approach that the ESV takes. This reading suggests, "have this attitude, which you are able to have because you are in Christ Jesus." These translators are trying to take seriously the way that the apostle Paul consistently uses the phrase "in Christ."

Several years ago I used the illustration of a huge hamster ball to help us understand what Paul means when he uses this phrase "in Christ." This is what happens when you believe in Jesus and live your life following

him. The sphere in which you live your life is different. We walk around surrounded by Christ; everywhere we go in everything we do. We live "in Christ."

So yes, we are supposed to have the same attitude that Jesus had, but the only reason that this is remotely possible is that we live in a hamster ball called Christ. It is an impossible goal, but through Jesus, the impossible becomes attainable. We are called to imitate Christ.

The verb used here is literally, "think this way." But this is not an intellectual exercise. There was an article in Psychology Today in 2012 with the title, "Beware: Thinking Leads To Doing." ¹ There is a kind of thought that changes the way we live. That's what we're after here. The subtitle of that article was "If you don't want a divorce, don't even think about it."

We could subtitle this instruction, "If you want unity, think like Christ." Think about Christ. Have the kind of mind that leads to changes in your behavior. This is how we start down the road to unity. We think like Jesus because we are in Jesus so that we can do like Jesus.

If Paul's goal is to transform our relationships, let's make this practical. Think about someone that you feel you don't have unity with. Let's do like Elijah did when he soaked his offering with water. Pick the hardest person in your life. The one who thinks so differently from you. The one who has hurt you with their dismissiveness and condescension. The one you feel far away from.

If you are both in Christ, you're in the same hamster ball. Living in Christ and imitating him means acting the way we're about to see towards that person. Let's keep that in mind as we see how Christ thought.

Humiliate Yourself

Most people think that verses 6-11 are a hymn that was already familiar to people in the first century. It's possible that Paul wrote it, but in any case, he includes it here to make his point about how people should act to find unity.

The hymn begins with a description of Christ humbling himself to the lowest imaginable level. Then it pivots to reveal how God exalts Christ to the highest possible position in creation. It's a dramatic downward journey followed by a soaring exaltation. We'll read it in two parts, starting with the journey down.

Philippians 2:6-8:

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

The descent of Jesus is described in three parts. First, we see his pre-existent state. Then he becomes human. Finally, he succumbs to death. That's his path: from God to man to corpse.

First, we hear of Jesus before the incarnation. Jesus is described as being "in the form of God." That word for form refers to external appearance. But it is a surface that aligns with what is underneath. One scholar describes it as "the way in which a thing, being what it is in itself, appears to our senses."²

The really interesting phrase is that he did not consider equality with God "a thing to be grasped." I love that way of translating this word. It's so easy to visualize. We are familiar with grabbing, grasping, holding onto, striving for, reaching, protecting what is already in our hands.

Margaret Thatcher, the former Prime Minister of the UK, is quoted as saying "Power is like being a lady ... if you have to tell people you are, you aren't." That's a bit of how Jesus is described. He knows that he is God. So he doesn't have to hold onto it.

Several times during the life of Jesus we see how this attitude plays out.

In Matthew 4:3, we read about Jesus having fasted for 40 days. Then the enemy challenges him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus is starving and his identity is challenged. I wouldn't stand up to that. I'd grasp onto that identity. Yes, I'm the Son of God and I'm hungry too. But Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

Three years of exhausting ministry later, Jesus' reward for serving and healing and loving people is finding himself hanging on a cross. Again, he's tired. He's hungry. He's bleeding. Every breath hurts. He is completely alone. Even the Father has abandoned him. And in Luke 23:37, we hear about the man next to him saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself."

Jesus wants nothing more than to save himself. He is the King of the Jews. He could have done that. But he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

Jesus was so confident in his "god-ness" that he didn't have to hold onto it. He held it with an open hand, and that enabled him to do what comes next. We read that Jesus "emptied himself." The Greek word used here is "*ekonosen*" which is why people refer to this passage as "the kenosis." This is one of the most debated theological ideas in all of the Scripture. What does it mean that Jesus emptied himself? What exactly did he give up when he became human?

When I was young, my uncle gave me shares in a company he was invested in. This company wasn't traded on any stock exchange, so the shares were pieces of paper that indicated part ownership of the company. I was pretty excited to own these shares.

Then the company failed and closed their doors. I was left with a few sheets of paper. As a child, I didn't understand corporate finance. I didn't understand that stock was a claim on the company's assets and earnings. I didn't understand investment and ownership or anything.

But I understood that those pieces of paper had been emptied. I didn't know what they once had or what they had lost, but I knew they had lost it. They were empty.

That emptying is described in three ways: the "form of a servant," "likeness of men," and "found in human form." The servant songs of Isaiah form a background to this comparison. But in those songs, being the servant of the Lord was an honor. It was a great thing. Here, being a servant is degrading. Jesus didn't just become human. He entered humanity at the lowest possible point.

We need to understand just how human Jesus was.

There was a TV show a few years ago called *Undercover Boss*. The CEO of a company would pose as a regular employee to see what life was like so he or she could understand their company better. It was all televised and made dramatic.

That's how most of us think about Jesus becoming human. He was God, but he came down to earth and acted like a human. He was God in disguise as a human. That makes sense to us because that's what we might do.

This is called “Christology”: what we think about Christ. The problem is that if our Christology is wrong, then we can’t live Christian lives. If we’re wrong about Jesus, we can’t live like him.

Jesus didn’t do what we would do. He became fully human. A servant, in fact. He went to the bathroom. He had embarrassing bodily problems. He scratched himself. He woke up groggy. He felt lonely and angry and tired and bored. Everything that it means to be human. Warts and bruises and moods. One scholar said Jesus was “no mere reasonable facsimile of a man.”

Encountering Jesus as fully human gives us dignity. It gives us hope and courage. Jesus becomes a model for us. Jesus became—in the fullest sense—a servant. He was born as a poor, working-class infant to an unwed mother of an oppressed people group.

But that was only the second part of his journey. The final movement takes him even lower. Jesus went from God to man to corpse.

God, the giver of life, had his taken away. Jesus, who saw God breathe the first breath into man breathed his last and gave up his spirit.

Not only did Jesus die, but the passage reminds us that it was “death on a cross.” He died in the most degrading, humiliating, shameful way possible in the culture that he lived in. He was abandoned by everyone. The Romans, who had bullied God’s people for a century, claimed victory over the King of the Jews. The shame outweighed all the physical suffering of the cross.

If we follow Jesus, we are supposed to go where he went. We seek humility. But there is no humility without humiliation. Some people define humility as thinking what is true of yourself. Not too high. Not too low. But the humility that Jesus experienced was to allow the people around him to think far less of him than what was true. Jesus wasn’t just humble. He was humiliated.

That’s our model. We are invited to humiliate ourselves. Humiliate yourself.

Some of us have been humiliated. Some of us know the bitter taste of deep shame. We’ve had our humanity stripped away, and our hearts laid bare. Maybe you’re a victim of sexual assault or abuse. Maybe you’ve been blamed for something that wasn’t your fault. Maybe you’ve been judged or accused or mocked or dismissed or ridiculed or overlooked. We all know humiliation on some level.

That’s why we work so very hard to avoid it. If you’ve tasted that drink, you never want to try it again. But then we are given a word like this. An example like Jesus, who willingly offers himself for public humiliation. And we are told that his path is supposed to be an example for us.

Think again about that person that you have a hard time with. Think about being humiliated in front of them. Think about being humiliated by them. Can you even imagine?

For Jesus, the humiliation began by not grasping what he knew to be true of him.

Most of us have some part of our identity that we hold dear. I’m a good father. You’re a good mother. You’re educated or good with your hands or patient or funny or you know the Bible, or you have good doctrine or you a serious Christian or whatever.

Are you grasping it? Can you let go of it?

Can you let go of that thing in order to embrace something else? For me, it’s making good choices. I hate making decisions, so when I do make a decision, I need to think that I made the best one. I think of myself as someone who makes good decisions. That’s one of the things that I hold onto. If I’m honest, it makes me feel better than other people.

What happens if I let go of that idea? I become just one of many. I’m just one of a crowd of people trying to make the best decisions they can. Sometimes good, sometimes bad, often mixed. If I let go of that thing that makes me special, then what becomes of me?

I become human. I’m tempted to hold onto something that gives me an edge. Some way of distinguishing myself. Of feeling okay about myself. We all need something like this. I take the Bible seriously. I love justice. I care about racial reconciliation. I care about the environment. I defend traditional marriage. I protect the unborn.

But following Jesus means that I let go of my superiority. I become human.

It feels like death. Every cell in my body fights against it. It feels like something in me is dying. Some part of me is disappearing. I’m scared because who will I be if I don’t have that “thing”? Will anyone notice me? Will I matter? Will I even be me?

We are told that Jesus was obedient even to the point of death. He stopped at nothing. His downward journey went as far as he could possibly have gone. From God to man to corpse.

So we imitate Jesus in his humility, but now we have a new idea. Obedience. Obedience unto death. Obedience implies a relationship. Who do we obey? That's where the passage goes next.

Obey Jesus

The first part of the Christ hymn describes the descent of Jesus. The second part of the hymn perfectly mirrors the first but shows a journey in the opposite direction. Jesus humbled himself, and as a result, God exalts him. Jesus went from God to man to corpse and then to king.

Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

There is a sense in which when we learn humility; God raises us up. We die with Christ and God gives us new life. When we take up our cross, we become a new creation. Jesus says that the last will become first. Death gives way to life. Humiliation gives way to acceptance and love. To find your life all you need to do is lose it.

But there is a shift in the language of this hymn such that our focus changes. We imitate Christ in his humility, but as we see how God exalts Christ, I think there is a different message being given. Now Jesus is no longer presented as the humble servant that we model our lives after. Here he is seen as the cosmic Lord with authority over all the universe.

The rest of the book of Philippians is about how we can pattern our lives in obedience to Christ. First, we are shown Jesus as a humble servant to imitate. Now we are shown Jesus as an exalted Lord to obey.

First, we imitate Jesus. Then we obey Christ. Obey Christ.

Obedience has a really bad reputation these days. The very word is synonymous with restriction. Obedience

restrains me. It keeps me from living out my true self. If I obey, then I can't be authentic. Having to obey someone holds me back from the kind of life that I was meant to experience. This is what our culture teaches.

I remember as a kid thinking about how badly I wanted to grow up so that I didn't have to obey anyone anymore. I wanted to be freed from obedience.

A few years ago there was an article in Business Insider entitled "Why People Often Do the Exact Opposite Of What They Are Told." The author observed things that anyone who has read the Bible or tried to raise children already knows. Here's a quote:

*"Experiments show that children become more interested in a toy after they're put under severe rather than mild pressure not to play with it, and children and adults become more likely to taste fatty foods when labels explicitly warn against them."*³

I think part of the reason that we don't like to obey is that we don't trust anyone else. All the people we know have faults. No one lives up to who they are supposed to be. Parents make mistakes. Teachers pick favorites. Managers aren't fair. Politicians manipulate the truth.

No one we know is completely worthy of our obedience.

Then we listen again to this description of Jesus. God will give him the name above every name. He will have authority over everyone: all the host of heaven, every person who lives on the face of the earth, all of those who were once alive but now are under the earth. Jesus is given authority over ever created being in the universe.

Think again about obeying Christ. Does it make sense to obey someone who has authority over every created being in the universe?

We love to think about freedom. If people believe at all in God, they think the greatest gift that he gave humanity was free will. And they are happy to take that gift and run off with it, never looking back at the giver. But what most of us don't realize is that obedience is the ultimate expression of our free will.

To voluntarily choose to obey Jesus as the majestic Lord over the entire universe, not because you have to, but because you want to. That is free will. It is the most perfect form of freedom. Obedience is given, not taken. Christ does not demand our obedience. He asks for it.

You are free to disobey Christ. But the more you do so, the more you will find yourself trapped and enslaved by the lies and false promises of this world. It will seem like freedom, but you will end up a slave.

If you really want to be free, the best path to exercise your freedom is to obey Christ. Jesus went from God to man to corpse to king. Serving the servant who has been given the name above all names is not foolish or restrictive or naïve or superstitious. It makes sense. It's wisdom. It will make you free. And it will bring us together in unity.

Conclusion

When I made the journey from Palo Alto to Lubbock, I wasn't doing anything like what this passage describes. I was safe. I was respected. I was secure. There was a beautiful woman who had said yes to me.

There is a kind of false humility. Of seeming like we're giving something up when we really aren't. Let's not be followed into acting like that.

Jesus went from God to man to corpse. The path of Jesus was lonely, shameful, painful and humiliating. But his journey concluded on a throne. So much good came of humility. It's painful, but the same is true of us.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine a community of people who had this mind in themselves among each other? A group of people gathered together who let go of all of their feelings of superiority over each other? Sons and daughters who just came as they are and opened themselves up in humility to others.

Can you imagine being humble in front of that person that you've been thinking about all morning? What would it look like to choose the path of Jesus as you relate to them? I can't tell you how to be humble with them, but I can tell what will come of it: unity.

The road to humility is a dangerous one. But we don't go alone. Jesus is with us. Our brothers and sisters are there. God the Father is watching proudly.

When we take that road, we find unity through our humility and obedience. It's all made possible because we live our lives in Christ. We imitate Jesus. We humiliate

ourselves. We obey Christ. And we find love. We find a community. We find a family. We become one.

Endnotes

¹ Susan Heitler, "Beware: Thinking Leads to Doing." *Psychology Today* (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/resolution-not-conflict/201201/beware-thinking-leads-doing>)

² Ralph P. Martin and Gerald F. Hawthorne. "Philippians, Revised Edition (*Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 43*) (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2004)

³ Adam Grant, "Why People Often Do the Exact Opposite Of What They Are Told." *Business Insider* (<http://www.businessinsider.com/why-people-dont-follow-directions-2013-8>)