

The Hallmark of Humility On Philippians 2:5-8

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Introduction

Of the many differences between the movie "Titanic" and history, one in particular is telling. In the movie, as the ship is sinking the first-class passengers (all third-class human beings) scramble to climb into the small number of life-boats. Only the determination of the hardy seamen – who use guns to keep the grasping men at bay – gets the women and children into the boats.

In fact, according to survivors' accounts, the "women and children first" convention was observed with almost no dissension, particularly among the upper classes. The statistics make this plain. In first class, every child was saved, as were all but five (of 144) women, three of whom chose to die with their husbands. By contrast, 70 percent of the men perished. In second class, 80 percent of the women were saved but 90 percent of the men drowned.

The men on the first-class list of the Titanic virtually made up the Forbes 400 of the time. John Jacob Astor, reputedly the richest man of his day, is said to have fought his way to a boat, put his wife in it and then stepped back and waved her goodbye. Benjamin Guggenheim similarly refused to take a seat, saying: "Tell my wife ... I played the game out straight and to the end. No woman shall be left aboard this ship because Ben Guggenheim was a coward." In other words, some of the most powerful men in the world adhered to an unwritten code of honor – even though it meant certain death for them. The movie makers altered the story for good reason: no one would believe it today."¹

Remember the idea of role models? Those people whose lives actually

¹ Fareed Zakaria, "To Hell in a Handbasket," *The New York Times Book Review*, 19 April 1998, page 17 (<http://www.fareedzakaria.com/articles/nyt/041998.html>, 11 February 2005).

illustrated the answers to such questions as: How should I live? How should I treat others? How should I treat my children? What sort of man or woman should I try to be? How should I treat my neighbor? Today it seems that no one wants the responsibility of having his or her life stand as a grand example of courage, wisdom, integrity or restraint for others. From Charles Barkley's Comment, "I am not a role model," to the development of the "antihero," the bad guy that reluctantly does good, it seems we've come a long way from the days of the men of the Titanic.

That is one of the reasons I think Philippians is so encouraging; it actually offers an example in Paul that is worth following, and it commends us to do so (Phil. 3:17). But Paul is not an unqualified model for us to follow. *His* standard, as well as ours, is Christ: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

An orchestra does not tune itself from one instrument to another progressively, but all tune to one single source. The church, in order to be harmonious in like-minded love for one another (2:1-4), is called to a humility that appropriately conforms to the attitude of Christ, who is the ultimate model of a genuinely Christian mindset. It is Christ — in his incarnation, life, suffering and death — who is the archetype for all humility. In order for us to grow in that humility, Paul calls us to consider Jesus' humility and to understand the heights from which Jesus descended, the depths to which Jesus plunged, and the reason Jesus humbled himself.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

The Heights from which He Descended: Understanding the Incarnation as the Self-Humiliation of God (Phil. 2:5-7a)

I was sitting at my desk in the first grade when we were all pulled out of our class and brought to the auditorium, where a television was showing a grainy picture and blasting distorted audio. It was July 20, 1969, and the Apollo 11 astronauts were landing on the moon. I did not understand then how significant this unprecedented achievement was for mankind. Millions probably remember the words of Neil Armstrong: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Of that event, President Nixon would declare, "All humanity is one in their pride."

Paul draws our attention to a "giant leap" of a vastly different kind: God's descent from the heights of his majesty to take upon himself humanity, actually to become a man. This "giant leap" is not a cause for our pride, but rather for our

humbling. Consider first the One who humbled himself:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God (Phil. 2:5-6).

Paul addresses first the great heights which were Christ's rightful domain. The "form" of God refers to the essential nature of God.² "He who was in the exact essence and nature God" is the One who descended. This explicit declaration of deity is strengthened by the phrase "did not consider it robbery to be equal with God."³ The NASB states it, "Did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped." Paul is working off the assumption of the deity of Christ. Unless Christ is God, the example of humility would be lost. How could it be humble for Christ not to "grasp" at deity unless he is truly God? After all, if he were merely a creature, grasping at deity would be the height of arrogance and blasphemy.⁴

Stop here for a moment and think of his glory, that which properly belonged to Christ as the Almighty God, infinite eternal and unchangeable! When Paul was taken to paradise, he said he heard "inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter"⁵ (2 Cor. 12:4). John (who emphasized Christ's deity throughout his gospel and first epistle) was so enamored and comfortable with Christ's deity that he "nuzzled" up against Jesus at nearly every opportunity. Even so, when John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day on the Isle of Patmos, he fell down as if dead at Christ's feet, such was the astonishing reality of the brilliance of Christ's true glory (Rev. 1:10-17; 19:7-10).

The Prophet Isaiah, in one of the most regal passages of Scripture revealing the glory and majesty of God, considered himself cursed and destroyed because of his vision of God's splendor and holiness. This incredible scene, where unfallen, elect and holy angels are not pure enough to set eyes upon the living God, is attested by the apostle John as being Isaiah's vision of Jesus himself!

² "The form of God here means majesty, as man is know by the appearance of his form, so the majesty which shines forth form God is his figure." Calvin, John: Commentary on Philippians (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 54.

³ Lightfoot, J.B. *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1883). Following the early Greek fathers, Lightfoot gives the sense as, "Be humble as Christ was humble: He, though existing before the worlds in the form of God, did not treat His equality with God as a prize, a treasure to be greedily clutched and ostentatiously displayed: on the contrary He resigned the glories of heaven." (pp. 134, 137)

⁴ Lightfoot, *Ibid.*

⁵ The sense of grandeur, awe and astonishment over the reality of heaven is highlighted by Paul's use of language here: "inexpressible words" are heard, and are heard even though they are unlawful to utter!

“But although [Jesus] had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled ... These things Isaiah said when he saw his glory and spoke of him” (John 12:37-41).

This is our Lord Jesus’ proper domain; this is his rightful place. What is the significance of this? Well, there is simply no more profound way to recognize our true humbled state and begin acting in accordance with it than to consider the true greatness of God. “The true test of humility is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of you greatness is.”⁶

It is God himself who, for the sake of his people and their salvation, “made himself of no reputation.” Literally, he “emptied himself,” he made himself “nothing” in comparison to his glory. He deprived himself of his proper place and status. God stooped low in self-humility.

In light of the fact that God, to whom all glory belongs, would descend from such an exalted position and lower himself on our behalf, how unreasonable would it be for us, who have no such exalted status, to lift ourselves up with pride or selfish ambition? For him it is no robbery to be exalted as God, but for us to rise above our true status is the supreme robbery (Rom. 9:19)! What can humble us more than the knowledge that God became a man on our behalf?

The Depths to which He Plunged as a Man: The Crucifixion as the Nadir of Jesus’ Humiliation (Phil. 2:7b-8)

We live in a world that is inundated with appeals to indulge “self.” You can seek after self-gratification, self-exaltation, self-sufficiency, self-esteem, self-growth, self-improvement, self-interest, self-help, and self-determination. You can thumb through the pages of *Self Magazine* where you are told things like: “You rock!” “You deserve a break today!” “You’re worth it!” and “Have it your way!”

How did the very Son of God appear when he stooped so low to become man? Like Superman? Like a conquering hero with a vast army? Was he like Saul, who stood head and shoulders above the crowd (1 Sam 9:3) and made everybody think, “Oh yeah, that’s the one”? No. Paul says that when Christ came to earth, having made himself nothing, he took “the very nature of a servant.” It would have been infinitely humbling for God to condescend to become a mighty emperor, a man of the greatest renown and reputation, but he came as a servant, a humble servant. It was not about “self” at all, but about others: “The

⁶ Brooks, Phillip. *United Evangelical Action Magazine*, Spring, 1978, as quoted in *Inspiring Quotations*, ed. Albert M. Wells (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988).

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).

Serving is a hard thing to do; it takes humility to do it in such a way that truly blesses others (Phil. 2:3-4):

Leonard Bernstein, the late conductor of the New York Philharmonic orchestra, was once asked to name the most difficult instrument to play. Without hesitation, he replied, “The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm — that’s a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.”⁷

It is this harmony that Paul is alluding to by appealing to the humility of Christ. We are to be like-minded, having the same love and being of one accord and of one mind (Phil. 2:2). The supreme motivation for this is a serious consideration of our great and glorious God who, “Coming in the likeness of men and being found in the appearance as a man, humbled himself.”

Christ’s humble service was to render unflinching submission to the Father in perfect humanity.⁸ A true humanity in which there was hunger, thirst, desire, joy,

⁷ *Today in the Word*, January 3, 1997, p. 8.

⁸ Some of the creedal statements on Christ that point this out explicitly are the following:

The Nincene Creed

“I believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.”

Athanasian Creed

”Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God. One altogether, not by

weariness, and pain. He was flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, tempted in all ways as we are yet without sin (Heb. 4:15):

Jesus has truly known the sorrows and sadness of this life. He has known the treachery of a friend. He has known the pain of mourning. He has known misunderstanding, and rejection, and false accusations. He has known terrible physical pain and unimaginable psychological and spiritual agonies.⁹

All this he endured in his humiliation on our behalf, and how we benefit because of it! Because Christ humbled himself as a man, he knows what you are going through. What marvelous compassion he has in being made in human

confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ; Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead; He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty; . From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and shall give account of their own works. . And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.”

The Definition of Chalcedon

“Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul {meaning human soul} and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness. We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality [hypostasis]. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word [Logos] of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers [the Nicene Creed] has handed down to us.”

⁹ Thomas, Geoff. *The Incarnate Humility of Jesus* (<http://users.aber.ac.uk/emk/ap/sermons/phil15.htm>).

likeness. He is able to save to the uttermost those that come to God by him because he ever lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25). His humility was in obedience; ours is to be “the unfeigned submission of our heart”¹⁰ to God, in which we esteem others as better than ourselves in likeness to the humble Servant of God.

But this is not yet the end of his humility. He is not only man the Servant, but he is the suffering Servant (Isa. 53), who “was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). How far will God go to lift the guilty and sinful out of their condemnation? He lowers himself in his humanity to the very point of death, but not just any death — the death of the cross.

The cross gets pretty good press today in the church. It adorns walls and windows, necks and fingers, all in a very ornate fashion. It is jewel encrusted, ivory entwined, draped in scarlet, gold and silver. It is a meaningful piece of art that people are generally affectionate towards. But this is not how the cross has always been viewed:

“The old cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of a human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said good-bye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing; it slew all of the man, completely and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck cruel and hard, and when it had finished its work, the man was no more.”¹¹

Yet, today the cross is pretty sanitized. Gone is the blood, gone are the swarming flies, gone is the smell of death, and the look of disgust and shouts of ridicule. Although crucifixion was literally “excruciating,”¹² the Cross itself was designed to inflict a shameful and abhorred form of death. While there may have been many more painful ways to die, there were no ways more humiliating and degrading than the death of the cross.

Cicero the Poet once said in reference to how repulsive crucifixion was, “Let the name of the cross be far removed, not only from the body of a roman citizen, but even from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears.”¹³

¹⁰ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.12.6

¹¹ A.W. Tozer, “The Old Cross and the New.” *Man, the Dwelling Place of God*, 1966.

¹² “Excruciate” is of Latin Etymology: *excruciatu*s, from the word “cruciare” meaning “to crucify.” It is used to describe both the infliction of intense pain and severe mental distress.

¹³ An ancient critique of Christianity by a man named Arnobius went as follows: “Our gods are not displeased with you Christians for worshipping the almighty God, but you maintain the deity of one who was put to death on the cross, you

So despised was this form of death, it was equated with the height of ungodliness, and its subjects were slurred as “asinine.” Early graffiti discovered beneath the ruins of the Palatine palace in Rome depicted a rough sketch of a human figure, with the head of a donkey, fixed to a cross; another figure, in a tunic, stands on one side, hands lifted in an expression of adoration. Underneath this caricature ran the inscription “Alexamenos adores his God.” There was no greater human abasement and degradation.

The crucifixion was the nadir of the humility of God, but not merely for the despising of the cross by men; God himself declared that anyone who hangs on a tree is accursed by Him (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). This is the death that Christ died on behalf of others. Think of this: death for the Christian cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Just look at how confidently Paul could say, “To die is gain,” and then debate which he would prefer (Phil. 1:19-24). Death for the Christian is being absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). “That death is sleep in Jesus. That death is without a sting, a death without anathema and with no condemnation.”¹⁴ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20; 1 Thess. 4:13).

But that is not the death referred to here. This is the cursed death, the second death. He who knew no sin died as one guilty and shameful. He died paying in full the wages of sin. He died as a sinner who was not spared. He died burdened with sin confronted with the absolute integrity of God's righteousness against him, and there was no mitigation. The Father did not at any point alleviate his torment in light of the Son's inherent righteousness and flawless obedience. Instead, he bore down upon him with all the loathing and wrath due the vilest of sinners, even such as you and I.

Jesus was forsaken and despised by men, and all sense of his Father's favor was withdrawn. God did not spare him. All that our sin deserves weighed down his soul in that humiliating, condemning, and substitutionary death.

"There was no place in the whole world on the morning of the crucifixion which the human mind might have thought less likely to be the locus of the concentrated presence of our Redeeming God than the place called Golgotha."¹⁵

Christ emptied himself to the point of death on a cross, humbling himself before both men and God. These are the depths of his humility; this is the kind of mind we are to have. But is this humility to be viewed as utter self-subjugation to

believe him to be yet alive, and you adore him with daily supplications.”

¹⁴ Thomas, Geoff. *The Incarnate Humility of Jesus* (<http://users.aber.ac.uk/emk/ap/sermons/phil15.htm>).

¹⁵ Macleod, Donald. *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1998).

everyone?

The Reason for Jesus' Humiliation

Nothing has been more destructive to mankind than our first disobedience in Adam. Immediately after the fall of Adam, the murder of Cain is recorded, and it goes on from there. Every horrific event of history can ultimately be traced to that event. Christ's humiliation was the remedy for Adam's fall and man's disaster:

Through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life (Rom. 5:18; cf. 5:12-21).

Consider the work of the "second Adam," whose service first and foremost was to God. Adam was made from the dust of the earth and raised to an exalted state to take dominion. Christ, who was the exact nature and essence of God, lowered himself to become a servant. The fall was a result of man reaching for what was never his ("you shall be as God," Gen. 3:5). Christ's humiliation consisted of not grasping at what was truly his ("did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped," Phil. 2:6).

Adam rose up in disobedient self-assertion and brought death; Christ descended in obedient self-humiliation and in him was life, and that life is the light of Men (John 1:4)! Jesus came to cure Adam's deadly wound. In other words, he humbled himself in obedience to God for our account. This is the heart of Paul's point: we think and act towards others as is appropriate for those who are in Christ!

True humility consists of an unassuming attitude about ourselves that results in the blessing, help, and comfort of others. This means that at times we should willingly forfeit good things — even things that we deserve — in order to benefit those who are not so deserving. Jesus gave up what was rightly his (glory) in order that I would escape what is rightly mine (hell). As a beneficiary of grace, I can afford to extend it to others!

The love of Christ was such that he humbled himself to save the undeserving. Are we willing to humble ourselves for the sake of Christ and others, in loving obedience to God? "As much as you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me" (Matt. 25:31-46).

Love is a humble grace; it does not walk abroad in state; it will creep upon its hands; it will stoop and submit to anything whereby it

may be serviceable to Christ.¹⁶

If we are to think as Christ, any perceived status and superiority goes right out the window. The way we think about ourselves should entail ways in which, for the glory of God and in service to others, we cease grasping at our station in life and empty ourselves of whatever we think adds glory to our names.

Christ humbled himself in obedience to God and for others. That was the reason: his service to God and the blessing of others. Our humility is to have those same two ends: obedience to God and the benefit of others.

Conclusion

Understanding the heights from which Christ descended, the depths to which he plunged, and the reason he humbled himself assists my growth in humility because it does not allow me to acknowledge the elevation of my will as an acceptable form of thinking. We are to have the mind of Christ, and to take every thought captive for him who opposes the proud and is gracious to the humble. Jesus did not just teach this; he demonstrated it. He humbled himself, and God exalted him with the bride for whom he died (Eph. 5; Col. 3:1-4).

In the Christian story ... one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover.¹⁷

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the perfect illustration for Paul's instructions in Philippians 2:3-4?
2. In Philippians 2:6, what does Paul first affirm about Jesus Christ? Is this significant to his point? Why?
3. What does the incarnation express about the God, specifically the Second Person of the Trinity?

¹⁶ Watson, Thomas. *All Things for Good* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), p. 87.

¹⁷ Lewis, C.S. "The Grand Miracle" in *Miracles*.

4. Can we understand Christ's "emptying himself" as his ceasing to be God? Why or why not?
5. Of what did Christ's "emptying" consist? Is it described in terms of taking away or adding to? See Philippians 2:7.
6. When Christ "emptied" himself, what did he take on? See Philippians 2:7.
7. Was Jesus Christ truly a man? Why or why not?
8. How did people know that Jesus was God? Why didn't other people?
9. How far did the humility and obedience of Christ extend? See Philippians 2:8.
10. Is theology essential for proper conduct? If so, how does this text relate to the answer?
11. What is a proper self-image? Where does it come from?
12. How can a proud person grow in humility?
13. Does being humble mean that everyone gets to take advantage of you? How does a humble person keep from becoming a doormat? How does love for others relate to humility?