

OUR SUPREME EXAMPLE

Phil 2.5-11

INTRODUCTION

With some passages of Scripture – like Psalm 22, or Isaiah 53 - as we approach them, it's almost as if we can see a little green notice popping up in front of us, reading, *Please keep off the grass*. We feel as if we would be treading on holy ground indeed, if we dared to venture onto them, to expound them or discuss them. And the verses before us this morning, from Phil 2.5-11, are just such a passage.

- Someone has commented that the Gospels tell the *story* of the cross; but it's the *letters* of the New Testament that explain its *significance*. The Gospel writers tell us *what* happened; but it's the rest of the New Testament writers who explain to us *why* the cross happened.
- In the verses before us this morning, the theology expressed is some of the most profound to be found anywhere in the entire New Testament. Countless books, by the most eminent of theologians, have been written on these half dozen verses.
- And the poetry in which the theology is expressed is some of the most sublime found anywhere in the Scriptures.

So every preacher feels a little diffident about venturing onto such holy ground to expound the text.

But for all the profundity of the theology written here, and the beauty of the language in which it is expressed, we mustn't lose sight of **Paul's purpose** in including this segment (perhaps of an ancient hymn) in this letter. It's included **to encourage us to develop the mindset (or attitude) of a true servant**. Indeed, it's to help us understand what shape the mind of a true servant assumes. Paul's words here are a direct follow on to what he has been urging his readers in verses 3 and 4. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

And in this, as in everything else in life, **Jesus himself is our supreme example**. His mind, his attitude, his outlook was that of a true servant, even though he was God's eternal Son. So what Paul is saying literally in verse 5 is something like this: *Let this kind of mind be among you - the kind of servant mindset we see in Jesus - as is fitting for those who are living 'in Christ Jesus' - that is to say, in a dynamic, living union with him.* For us Christians, it's a case of 'like Master, like Jesus.' If this was his attitude and mindset, it should be ours too, if we claim to be living our lives in true fellowship with him.

The world measures greatness by the number of people who work for us, someone has said (Warren, p257). If you can command, or demand, the service of others, you've arrived. But God measures greatness, not by the number of people who serve us – but by the number of people we are prepared to serve. And by that token, Jesus was the greatest of person there has ever been. *The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many,* he explained in Mark 10.45. In the Christian life, the way to the top begins by taking a downward step – and that, not because we're forced to travel in that direction, but because we volunteer to take that route.

So let's trace the pathway to Jesus' eventual exaltation, to the highest place of all; and in so doing learn what kind of a mindset is most pleasing to God.

To understand what's going on here, we need to look first at our Lord's

1. HIS STARTING POINT (v6a)

Paul speaks of Jesus *being in very nature God* – that is to say, before his descent to earth, **Jesus possessed** – not only in his outward appearance, but also in his innermost substance – **the full reality of deity**.

- *In the beginning was the Word*, John tells us at the start of his Gospel; then adds, *the Word was with God (face to face with God), and the Word was God* [John 1.1]. Jesus was the real thing, fully God, through and through.

Illustration. A silver-plated object, like a great sporting trophy, or a piece of jewellery, may look very impressive; but underneath the thin veneer of silver, there will be a common metal like iron or steel – very

different from an object made out of solid silver. If you slice open an object of solid silver, what you will find on the inside will be exactly the same as what you see on the outside – pure silver.

And that's the way it was with Jesus. Before his descent to earth, it wasn't simply that he looked like God, as it were, in his outward appearance – **he really was God, through and through!** That's the sense of the word Paul uses here to describe our Lord's true nature – his 'form', his 'shape'.

⇒ And so if anyone had a right to be served, it was surely Jesus. Yet that was not his mindset, as the next phrase reveals.

2. HIS MINDSET (v6b)

He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Paul uses a very interesting word at the end of this phrase, and it's the only place in the New Testament this particular word occurs.

It may mean

(a) to cling onto something at all costs.

- It is sometimes said that *you don't miss what you've never had*; and there's an element of truth in that. If you've never had your own private jet aircraft, or luxury yacht, you don't really miss not having one!
 - But by the same token, our natural inclination is to cling onto what we do have – especially our rights and privileges. We are normally very reluctant to let go of them – especially if they have been hard won. Once you've had a car, it's very hard to do without one – even for a day. Once you've had a mobile phone, you may feel bereft without one, especially if you've been used to using it every day.
 - So what this phrase may be telling us is that ***Jesus didn't cling on to all the trappings of deity that were rightly his, from eternity past*** – all the privileges that came with his nature, as God's eternal Son: his place in heaven, enjoying unbroken fellowship with his Father God; the adoration of countless angels; the glory of living in a sin-free environment. These are things we can only begin to imagine, how good they must have been for Jesus, because we have never experienced them for ourselves.
 - But Jesus thought long and hard about them. He considered *all those things that made him an equal with God – an equal part of the eternal godhead.* And he came to the conclusion that it wouldn't be right for him to cling onto to them – especially if his Father God wanted him to give them up, so he could come down to this earth to serve humankind and give up his life to become our Saviour.
- ⇒ So this is the kind of mindset that God looks for in us, his people. He doesn't want us to insist on our rights. He doesn't want us to cling onto our privileges at all costs. He wants us to be prepared to let go of those things that make us equal with other people, in order that we might become servants towards other people.

The word 'grasp' could also mean

(b) to seize something that doesn't belong to us.

- This is how a very similar word is used John 10.12 to describe a wolf *attacking* a flock of unguarded sheep; and in John 6.15, it is used to describe the crowds who followed Jesus, after his feeding of the 5,000, *coming to seize Jesus by force, to make him their king.*
- In Mat 23.25, the word is used to describe the *greedy grasping* attitude of the Pharisees; and in Heb 10.34, it is used to describe Christians' possessions being *seized* and taken off them, either by the authorities or by looters (cf Mat 11.12).
- So the word can carry the sense of seizing something that doesn't belong to us – either like a thief, or as an opportunist.
- So some people have suggested that what is being spoken about here is the temptation for Jesus to seize the glory that would eventual come to him through the cross, by some other means – a short cut, if you like. Was there a temptation for him to take advantage of his unique relationship with his Father, to usurp his Father's position, for his own self-advancement? Was there a temptation to grow impatient with his relative obscurity? Was there a desire to bypass the cross, in order to seize glory by an easier means – so he would be on the same par as God the Father, in terms of recognition and fame?

• Perhaps Paul is intending us to see a parallel here with Adam, who reached out to seize the forbidden fruit, in a misguided lunge to ‘become like God’. This is how one person has put it. *Adam senselessly sought to grasp at equality with God, and through his selfish ambition and disobedience marred the glorious image of his Creator, which he already possessed through being made in God’s likeness. But Jesus chose to tread the hard path of lowly obedience, and was rewarded with unparalleled exaltation* (Martin, p97).

⇒ So here too is a revelation of the kind of mindset that pleases God - not that of a grasping attitude, which is forever trying to grab what isn’t ours. But a willingness to submit ourselves to the will of the Father, so that at the right time he is able to bestow on us all that he wants to gift to us.

The Christian life is not about us trying to cling onto our rights and privileges; nor is it about being opportunists, grasping what doesn’t belong to us, whenever we think it’s just within our grasp. It’s about us using the rights and privileges God has given us to help and serve other people.

Rick Warren has some helpful things to say about cultivating the mindset of a true servant in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* (p258ff).

- Real servants make themselves **available** to serve other people. They are not so caught up in pursuing their own ambitions that they don’t have time to serve other people. *If you remind yourselves at the start of every day that you are one of God’s servants, interruptions won’t frustrate you so much, because your agenda will be to fulfil whatever God brings into your life. True servants see interruptions as divine appointments for ministry* [p259].
- True servants pay **attention** to other people’s needs. They show both sensitivity and spontaneity. Great opportunities never last long. So, *as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers*, Paul urges us in Gal 6.10. We need to have the sensitivity to see other people’s needs, and the spontaneity to meet those needs whenever we can.
- So, true servants **do what they can when they can**. *Do not say to your neighbour, "Come back later; I'll give you a hand tomorrow"-- when you now have it within your powers to help the person today* says Proverbs 3.28. John Wesley used to say, *Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, and for as long as you can.* We mustn’t wait for the perfect opportunity to come along to serve other people, because that moment will never arrive. *Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap* [Eccles 11.4]. True servants do what they can, when they can, with what they’ve got.
- True servants also serve **wholeheartedly**, not grudgingly. Jesus never considered anything to be beneath his dignity. He was completely secure in his role, so never worried about what other people might be thinking about him as he stooped to serve. He was prepared to take a towel and wash his disciples’ feet. *“You will never arrive at a state in life where you’re too important for menial tasks. God will never exempt you from the mundane.”* [p260].
- True servants are **self-effacing**. They’re not attention seekers.
- And true servants are **faithful in finishing** the task they have been given to do. *Servants fulfil their responsibilities, keep their promises, and complete their commitments. They don’t leave a job half done, and they don’t quit when they get discouraged.* [p261].

These are the marks of a true servant – and it all begins in the mind, with our inner attitude – just like it did with Jesus. *He considered* (or calculated) *that equality with God was not something to be grasped*

What Paul shows us next is our Lord’s

3. HIS SELF-EMPTYING (v7-8a)

He made himself nothing – or more literally, he *emptied himself*. Paul uses an expression here that is found nowhere else in Greek literature – neither inside the Bible nor outside of it. Here is something that was absolutely unique to Jesus - his self-emptying.

- But what did he **empty** himself *of* some people may ask? Well, it wasn't his deity, nor any of the attributes that go with deity – like omniscience and omnipotence. What he emptied himself of were some of the trappings of deity, and the privileges that normally go with deity – his place in heaven, and the worship of countless angels; his right to be acknowledged and worshipped by everyone he came into contact with.
 - He emptied himself of the trappings and privileges of deity, in order to take on the **very nature of a servant** – the same word is used here as is used in verse 6 to describe his divine nature. Jesus didn't merely take on the *appearance* of a servant. His servanthood wasn't a façade, only skin-deep. It was as real as his deity. It became an integral part of his very being. *He emptied himself of all his rights and privileges so that he could pour himself into servanthood* – like liquid being poured out of one container into another one with a different shape.
 - To become such a servant, he had to take to himself a human nature. And so Paul goes on to speak of him **being made in human likeness**. This is a reference to his incarnation, when he added a physical human body to his already perfect deity. Paul is very careful in his language here, you'll notice. He doesn't say that Jesus '*relinquished his deity in order to turn himself into nothing more than a human being.*' He says that he was *made in human likeness*. His humanity was as real as yours and mine. But *there was more to Jesus than his humanity*, during his days on earth. There was also his deity, which enabled him to teach in such an authoritative way, and perform so many remarkable miracles.
 - Paul goes on to say that as far as his outward **appearance** was concerned, people found him to be an ordinary **man**. But behind his ordinary appearance was a very special nature – a divine nature; and on the Mount of Transfiguration, the veil of his humanity was momentarily drawn aside to enable Peter, James and John to glimpse the full splendour of his deity.
 - The veiling of his divine radiance was all part of his remarkable humility. And Paul tells us here that Jesus **humbled himself**. He wasn't humbled by anyone else, because there was no one greater than Jesus around. John the Baptist, the greatest of God's prophets by Jesus' own reckoning (Mat 11.11), said of Jesus, *I'm not worthy even to untie his shoelaces for him* (John 1.27). There was no one greater than Jesus, no one who could put him in the shadows, no one to humble him. Yet Jesus humbled *himself*, before the very creatures he had brought into being.
- ⇒ This too, is the kind of mindset God looks for in his people – a mindset that is willing to empty ourselves of all the privileges we could claim as our own, by right, in order that we might become true servants – not skin-deep servants, but servants right down to the very core of our being.
- ⇒ God looks for people who are willing to humble *themselves*; people who are willing to assume a lowly role, without being forced or pressurised to do so; people who are willing to assume a lowly role without any fuss or bother, and without drawing attention to themselves, for to do so would betray a secret spirit of pride within us. You see, it's possible to humble ourselves for the wrong motives, or in the wrong spirit – to be noticed, or as a mere duty.
- ⇒ The *truly* humble person doesn't notice he is being humble, because he doesn't think about himself at all. In 1 Peter 5.5, when Peter tells us to *clothe yourselves with humility toward one another*, he uses the same expression that John uses of Jesus, when Jesus *wrapped the towel* around his waist to wash the disciples feet (John 13.5). That's the kind of self-humbling God looks for in each one of us – a willingness to take on the most menial role, without fuss or any attention seeking.

Now, if all of this wasn't sufficient to describe the attitude of a true servant, Paul goes on to describe the most daring aspect of our Lord's servanthood,

4. HIS OBEDIENCE (v8b) to death-- even death on a cross!

Someone has rightly pointed out that only a divine being, with *built-in immortality*, could accept death as obedience; for the rest of us mortals, it's something inevitable. Jesus alone, as an obedient divine Son, could *choose* death for his destiny. And he did so because of his extraordinary love – his love for his Father, who had planned such a destiny; and his love for us sinners, to give us a destiny (Martin, p102).

- *When Christ came into the world, he said to his Father God, "You prepared a body for me. So I said, 'Here I am - it is written about me in the Scriptures - I have come to do your will, O God.'" And by that will, we have been made holy, through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all, Hebrews 10.5-10 tells us. Here we have the motto text for Jesus' entire life, someone has commented (Martin, p102): I have come to do your will, O God. Jesus, in his obedience as God's Son, had come to earth to do the Father's will, even if that will meant his own death.*

⇒ That's the mindset of a true servant if ever there was one – obedience to the point of death.

- Sometimes we may be forced to do things we would rather not do, but feel we have no choice in doing them. But the extraordinary thing about Jesus' obedience is that it was entirely **voluntary**. *No one takes my life from me*, he explained in John 10.18; *I lay it down of my own accord*. Although death was his Father's destiny for him, his obedience to his Father's will was entirely voluntary on his part.
- In the days of the Old Testament, many sacrificial lambs were brought to the Temple, to be slaughtered as an offering for the people's sins. Before a lamb was killed, the worshipper would lay his hand on the head of the animal victim, as a symbol of his sin being transferred to the animal, and as a recognition that his sin deserved death. So the lamb became a substitute for the sinner. But it wasn't a perfect substitute, because it was an involuntary substitute, someone has pointed out. *"The central citadel of sin in the worshipper, the human will, was left unrepresented in the uncomprehending, unconsenting animal"* [Motyer, p117]. But in Jesus, the human will was fully represented, for his sacrifice was entirely voluntary. *Only the perfect man could be the perfect substitute; and at the heart of his perfection lay a human will delighting to do the will of God – being obedient to death."*
- Yes, **even death on a cross**. It's hard for us to grasp how shocking death by crucifixion was in the ancient world. It was one of **the most barbaric forms of execution** ever devised by man.
- This is how one writer has described it.

"Crucifixion seems to have been invented by barbarians on the edge of the known world, and taken over from them by both Greeks and Romans. It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practised, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. When the Romans adopted it, they reserved it for criminals convicted of murder, rebellion, or armed robbery, provided that they were also slaves, foreigners or other non-persons". (J.R.W. Stott, The Cross of Christ, p23).

The same writer goes on:

"The prisoner would first be publicly humiliated by being stripped naked. He was then laid on his back on the ground, while his hands were either nailed or roped to the horizontal wooden beam, and his feet to the vertical pole. The cross was then hoisted to an upright position and dropped into a socket, which had been dug for it in the ground. Usually a peg or rudimentary seat was provided to take some of the weight of the victim's body and prevent it from being torn loose. But there he would hang, helplessly exposed to intense physical pain, public ridicule, daytime heat and night-time cold - until he breathed his last" (op cit, p48).

- So barbaric was this form of torture and execution, that Cicero, a Roman orator from the first century BC, condemned crucifixion as *'a most cruel and disgusting punishment. To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to kill him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is what? There is no fitting word that could possibly describe so horrible a deed. The very word 'cross' should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears ... the mere mention of it is unworthy of a Roman citizen'*. (Stott, p24).
- It was abolished as a form of execution in 315 AD, because even the Romans considered it too inhumane.
- But not only did the Romans find crucifixion abhorrent. **The Jews regarded it as scandalous.** Anyone's body hung up on a piece of wood was considered to be cursed by God, according to the Old Testament.

If a man guilty of a capital offence is put to death, and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. (Dt 21:22ff)

So by submitting to death by crucifixion, Jesus was not only submitting himself to the most painful form of execution ever devised by man; but also to the most shameful form of death any God-fearing Jew could imagine. But he did so, in obedience to his Father's will, and out of his great love for you and me.

⇒ So this is the kind of mindset that is pleasing to God, we discover. Not a mindset that insists on its rights; not a mindset that clings to its privileges; but the kind of mindset that empties itself of everything that would hinder the taking up of a servant's role. It's the mindset that is willing to use one's own personal rights and privileges for the benefit of other people; a mindset that is willing to become nothing, so that others can become everything they could ever wish to be. A mindset that is willing to be obedient to the Father's will, whatever the pain or shame involved.

Moved by such remarkable servanthood as we see it in Jesus, we would echo the words of Isaac Watt's fine hymn. *When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

This is how we know what real love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us [1 John 3.16-18]. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

The story of Christ's mindset ends there, but not the story of his life. For Paul tells us next what his Father God did for him as a result of him adopting this mindset. First, there was

5. HIS EXALTATION (v9)

And the most important word of verse 9 is the first word: *Therefore*. It was because of his servant mindset and actions that *God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name*. In God's kingdom, the way up is down, at first. *Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time*, Peter urges us [1 Peter 5.6]. Paul uses a made-up word here when he speaks of God hyper-exalting Jesus. He has been the name, that is the position and status, that is higher than any other. But to what end?

6. HIS RECOGNITION (vs10-11)

It is so that *at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. This is nothing more than Jesus deserves. No one started so high, but stooped so low, of his own accord. And so no one will be lifted higher than Jesus, to be honoured and recognised by all.

- Some of course will be glad to bow their knees before Jesus, in humble love and adoration, on the great and awesome day he returns to this earth.
- But for others, who have spent their life trying to ignore Jesus, or sideline him, or oppose him, it will come as a tremendous shock to realise they have been so wrong. They too will bow their knees before Jesus and confess that he is Lord after all. But they will do so as their last act before being banished into a godless eternity. *All will submit to Jesus, and all will confess him as Lord; but not all will be saved* [Motyer, p122] – only those who have accepted him as their saviour and Lord in the here and now.
- This is what gives our evangelism its cutting edge and sense of urgency. Jesus has already been made Lord. He has already been exalted to the highest position that God can bestow. It's just that his Lordship is currently veiled, just as his deity was on earth. But *one day, all will be revealed, and Jesus will enjoy forever what he refused to snatch prematurely*.