

The Surprising Pattern of the Cross

Philippians 2:5-11

It's not uncommon to speak of celebrities as having a "God-complex." People who have worked hard, very often, and have become famous, and then let that fame and sense of significance and importance go to their head. You look at some of the speaking fees that notable Americans will demand. If you're a former President, you can pull in anywhere from \$50,000 to \$350,000 just for a single speech. Some celebrities don't even have to say a word—they charge an "appearance fee"—receiving anywhere from a couple grand to \$50,000 just to show up and be seen at a party or an event.¹

Perhaps few modern cultural artifacts capture this mindset better than the "concert rider." These are the backstage requests that famous performing artists attach to their contracts—things like a bowl of M&M's with all the brown ones picked out, or a new toilet seat installed at each performing venue, or "an organic cheese tray featuring cave-aged Gruyere, Swiss and sharp cheddar, along with organic berries, fresh – not canned – olives and Ferrero Rocher chocolates."² One commenter explains, "They've reached a certain point in their careers where they expect respect. And they want a physical manifestation of it."³ They want you to treat them in accordance with their status as famous people. They have this status and they want to *gain* from it by making others serve them, and if you don't do a good enough job, then you will face their unholy wrath. It's no surprise that it has become common place to refer to celebrities as deities—we call them "Rock Gods" and "Goddesses," "Divas," and "American Idols."

But what about someone who really is equal with God, someone like Jesus? What mindset does he have? How does he use the status that rightfully belongs to him? And how does that shape the way we should think about things like status, rights, reputation, privileges, desires, and goals, when it comes to living as a community shaped by the gospel and for the gospel? This is where Paul takes us in a passage that is at the same time both richly theological and intensely practical—the "Christ hymn" of Philippians 2:5-11 and the surprising pattern of the cross.

Philippians 2:5-11 is again part of a larger section of the book where Paul is laying out more direct exhortations about how the church should live—they are called to live in a manner worthy of the gospel in 1:27—to be a gospel-centered church. Which we saw a couple weeks ago means living as a community on mission for Christ, with unity, humility, and love, being so satisfied in Jesus that we are actually free to serve Jesus. Paul says in chapter 2:1-4:

¹ "Outrageous Celebrity Appearance Fees," May 27, 2010.

² Sona Charaiporta, "Top 10 Outrageous Celeb Contract Demands," ABC News, Dec. 15, 2008. Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Music/story?id=6461409&page=1>

<http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Music/story?id=6461409&page=2>

³ Tyler Gray, cited in Charaiporta, "Top 10."

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

That's the call. But what does unity, humility, and love look like in the life of the church? In vv. 5-11, Paul offers us the ultimate pattern: Jesus himself.

The poem or hymn itself has two parts: vv. 6-8 show us the self-giving humiliation of Christ, and then vv. 9-11 show us the super-exaltation of Christ. We'll look first at his self-giving humiliation, starting in v. 6.

Paul begins by highlighting Jesus' status as being equal with God: "Who, being in very nature God [or in the form of God], did not consider *equality with God* something to be grasped" (v. 6). So Jesus is equal with God, because he is, in essence, God. The God of the Bible is a *Triune God*—one God, three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all of whom are fully God from all eternity. Jesus has always been fully God—he is the *eternal Son*. As John 1:1-2 says, "In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." And Jesus always remains fully God, even when he takes on flesh to become fully human at the same time. Jesus is one person with two natures—divine and human. So Jesus was not a human who lived such a good life that he worked his way into becoming a god; neither does he become less than God when he takes on flesh and becomes human (as some people misread this passage to say).

Jesus is equal with God—always. But what does he do with that equality, that status? That's the question here. It's not about whether he retains it; it's what he does with it. And to explain this, Paul draws a contrast between Jesus being in the form of God and taking on the form of a servant. When Paul says Jesus was "in the very *nature* or *form* of God," he's not talking about Jesus' *essence* or *substance*—what we often think of with the word "nature." The word here refers to his "outward appearance and shape."⁴ What he looks like, not what he is. He *is* God; Paul's talking about what he looks like. If you were to have looked at Jesus in heaven before his incarnation, before he took on humanity, you would have seen him appearing in the full radiance of the glory of God. Jesus' equality with God was displayed outwardly in his glory.

But listen again to the middle of v. 6: "he did not consider his equality with God something to be grasped" or "something to be *exploited for selfish gain*, but he made himself nothing," he emptied himself—his glorious status—"taking the form of a servant"—a slave, "being made in human likeness" (2:6-7). The picture is powerful. Jesus, being equal with God, exchanged his outward glory and status as God, for the outward shame and lack of status that come with being a

⁴ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 659. See also G. W. Hansen: "The one existing in the outward appearance of God took the outward appearance of a slave" (*The Letter to the Philippians* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 135); and Richard Bauckham: "The 'form of God' (v. 6) and the 'form of a servant (slave)' (v. 7), which are clearly intended to be contrasted, refer to forms of appearance: the splendour of the divine glory in heaven contrasted with the human form on earth" (*Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 41-42).

slave. From all of the rights, privileges, and glory of God to no rights, no privileges, no glory, only shame.

In other words, when Jesus came from heaven to earth, he didn't come with a concert rider, saying, "if someone as important as me has to spend time with someone as unimportant as you, then these are my demands. And don't forget the cave-aged Gruyere." No he took off his outer robes, and like a slave he washed the feet of his own disciples (Jn. 13:1-20). Isaiah 53 describes him, looking into the future: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (53:2-3).

But this shame and humiliation had a purpose. Isaiah continues:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

There was a purpose in Jesus becoming human. And that purpose was to rescue sinful humans. The problem with humanity is that we all have a celebrity complex, a God-complex. We all want to be treated like God, because we think we're more important than him, that our rules are better than his. We have rebelled against the King of the Universe. The Bible calls this sin. And the punishment for sin against God's eternal throne is eternal death. But before eternity God decreed that he would send his eternal Son to rescue us from our rebellion—something only God could do. But to do it, God the Son had to become fully human. If Jesus isn't fully human, he can't stand in the place of human sinners, living the life we were supposed to live but couldn't, and dying the death we deserve to die but won't, because he's paid for our sins.

So in perfect obedience to his Father, Jesus chose not to exploit his equality with God for selfish gain, but became nothing, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. Verse 8: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" Jesus humbled himself, from the glory of heaven to the most humiliating point of human existence—crucifixion. The cross was the epitome of shame in the Roman world—"reserved for slaves, rebels, and anarchists."⁵ The Roman Philosopher Cicero said, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him is an abomination; to slay him is almost an act of murder; to crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed."⁶ This was the lowest of lows in human existence. That's how far Jesus was willing to go to obey his Father and *to love us*.

That's what Jesus did with his status. As one commentator puts it, "He did not understand his equality with God as a matter of being served by others, but as something he could express in service, obedience, self-renunciation and self-humiliation for others."⁷ Another author says, "his progression through incarnation to death must be seen, not as something which required him as it

⁵ D.A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 46.

⁶ Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.566 §169-170 (LCL: Cicero, *The Verrine Orations* 2.655-57); as quoted in Hansen, 157.

⁷ Bauckham, 42.

were to stop being God for a while, but as the perfect self-expression of the true God.”⁸ In other words, Jesus’ decision to take on the form of a servant, to become a human and to die, was not a contradiction to his deity; it was an expression of it. He showed us, in his incarnation and death, what the self-giving love of God looks like.

And look at what God does for Jesus in response. Verse 9:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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.

God takes Jesus from the lowest of earthly lows to the highest of heavenly heights. Listen to the language of elevation in v. 9: “God *exalted* him to the *highest* place and gave him the name that is *above* every name,” what one preacher calls the “super-exaltation of Christ.”⁹

And what name does he give him? The only name that demands the allegiance of every creature—as v. 10 describes, every knee that is either in heaven, on earth, or under the earth—in other words, *every knee that ever existed!* God gives Jesus the only name that will be on every tongue that ever existed when we stand before God in the end—confessing that he alone is God, whether as “a shout of joy” or a “cry of anguish.”¹⁰ The same name that Isaiah 45 speaks of, which Paul echoes here, where God says, “‘To *me* every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.’ Only in *the LORD*, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength . . .” (Isa. 45:23-24). God gives Jesus his very own proper name, Yahweh, translated in the Old Testament as “LORD” with all capital letters. Just as Philippians 2:11 tells us: “every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*—Yahweh—to the glory of God the Father.” If there was ever any question as to his equality with God, v. 11 casts away all doubt.

Jesus receives the glory due his name, the glory he rightfully deserves being equal with God, the glory that redounds to his Father. But here’s the point: it was only *through his humiliation* that Christ is exalted. It was only *through his death* that he brings new life. *Through the shame* that he receives glory. This is the surprising pattern of the cross. Christ’s exaltation in vv. 9-11 was not despite his humiliation, but *because* of it. Verse 9 begins, “therefore.” Jesus acted in accordance with his Father’s plan, and in accordance with his equality with God. Humiliation wasn’t the problem, it was the pattern—the necessary pattern for rescuing sinners like me and you. Because when Jesus humbled himself to the lowest of lows, the shame of the cross, he went where we deserved to go. He became human in order to take our humiliation on himself, our sin, and the penalty of that sin—shame and death—on himself, to rescue us, as only God can do.

And I just want to say that if this idea is new to you, if you’re just trying to make sense of Christianity and what it means to be a Christian and to know God personally, I want you to know that the work is done. God is not waiting for you to get your act together and make it up to him, to try harder; he’s done the work! God is asking you to believe. To put all your hope and trust in Jesus and what he has done through his life, death, and resurrection.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 103.

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

¹⁰ “Jesus Is Lord,” words and music by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend. Copyright © 2003 Thankyou Music.

There are few passages in the New Testament as comprehensive in theology and beautiful in poetry as this. But the marvel of this passage is not only the picture it paints of Jesus, but the fact that this picture supplies the pattern for our lives and relationships as partners in the gospel. Look again at v. 5, which sets the whole poem up: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who . . .” The very reason Paul goes into this poem is to give us a model of how to think about life as we partner together for the advance of the gospel. Think the same way that Jesus thinks—have the same attitude, the same mindset. In fact, there are several verbal connections between Paul’s instructions in vv. 1-4 and the pattern of Jesus in 5-11. For instance, just as Paul tells us, “in humility consider others better than yourselves” (v. 3), so Jesus did not *consider* (same word) his equality with God something to be grasped, but *humbled* himself (same word) to serve others.

So we cannot walk away from this passage simply knowing more about Jesus, having our doctrine cleared up. We must walk away with that, or we haven’t heard it; but that’s not all Paul is doing. We have to ask ourselves, What does it look like to adopt the same attitude toward life and status and rights and privileges that Jesus has? And what’s at stake if we don’t? What happens if we take on the world’s way of thinking—if we give way to the celebrity complex, not only personally, but bringing it into the church?

It looks like selfish ambition and vain conceit, the very things Paul warns against in v. 3. It fuels a culture of *self-centeredness*, where what I want, what I deserve, comes first. I have these gifts and abilities—I deserve to be able to use them. I have these desires and preferences, and I have a right to enjoy them. I’ve worked hard; I deserve to hold this position, or that office, and I’m certainly too valuable to spend my time doing *that* one. And all of a sudden our self-centeredness betrays our *self-righteousness*—our God-complex. We think we’re better than others, sheepishly reminding people that “I’m kind of a big deal.” My ideas are better; my tastes are better. And in order to protect our interests, we must always be on guard against the interests of others. And so our self-righteousness breeds a culture of *suspicion*—always afraid that someone’s going to try and deny me my right. And if I think you’re a threat to my rights, then I’m either going to retaliate, or better yet, preemptively strike. And so what are we left with in the church but broken relationships, wounded lives, vessels not useful for God’s purposes—too consumed with self to even see Jesus.

But the pattern of the cross is so different. One author writes,

The incarnation of Christ Jesus represents the antithesis of this human drive to dominate. Although he had access to all the privileges and power to which his identity with God entitled him, and although he could have exploited that privilege and power to dominate his creatures, Jesus considered his deity an opportunity for service and obedience.¹¹

And not only did he do it himself, he told us to do the same thing. Jesus says to his disciples in Mark 10:42-45:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

¹¹ Frank Thielman, *Philippians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 129.

That's the pattern of the cross: life through death, glory through shame, exaltation through humiliation. Downward mobility.

So what does it look like to have this same mindset among ourselves? What if following the pattern of Jesus meant laying aside my rights and my desires, and instead, championing yours? What if it meant that I was more interested, for example, in making sure that we sing the songs you like, that the ministry you're passionate about is funded? What if it means not assuming that I'm always right, but being eager to listen and to learn from others? What if it means being okay if I am never recognized again for my efforts on earth, but will be satisfied merely to receive my reward in heaven? What if it means being so satisfied in Christ that I'm free to respond to the needs and troubles of others with compassion and self-giving love, rather than the fear of being inconvenienced or taken advantage of? What if following Jesus' pattern means that I'm free to be deprived of every right, that I don't have to defend my rights, because just as God was faithful to vindicate Jesus, so he will be faithful to vindicate us. He promises that we too will share in Christ's glory—not stealing it, but reflecting it—in the resurrection to come. As Paul says in ch. 3:21, when Christ returns, “he will transform our *humble* bodies so that they will be like his *glorious* body.” We don't have to grasp at our glory now; we can trust God to exalt us in the proper time.

What if I find that in giving up everything for Jesus and for the love of his people and the sake of his mission, that I've actually gained everything worth having—more of Jesus, the joy of his presence, the incomparable inheritance of heaven with all the saints? That's the surprising pattern of the cross—life through death, glory through shame, exaltation through humiliation.

May God give us the strength personally, and as a church, to follow this pattern, and so delight in and be useful to Jesus and his gospel purposes.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Jesus use his status of being equal with God (vv. 5-8)? How does that model what Paul calls the church to do in 2:1-4? In what areas of life are you most tempted to use any status you have for personal gain?
2. The sermon stressed the fact that Jesus remained fully God throughout everything described in vv. 6-11—even as he became fully human at the same time. Why is this important for making proper sense of both who Jesus is and what he did for us in his life, death, and resurrection?
3. Look again at the contrast between Jesus being in the outward appearance as God in v.6 to taking on the outward appearance of a slave (v. 7), and humbling himself to the lowest of earthly lows—death on a cross (v. 8). How does Jesus' humility actually display his equality with God, rather than contrast it (cf. Mark 10:42-45)?

4. Notice how God responds to Jesus' humility in vv. 9-11. Why do you think Paul makes such a strong connection between Jesus' humiliation in vv. 6-8 and his exaltation in vv. 9-11? How should this pattern shape our expectations about the Christian life?
5. If we are called to follow Christ's example in humiliation (vv. 5-8), then in what we should we expect to share in his exaltation (vv. 9-11; hint: see 3:20-21)? What difference should this hope make in our daily lives, particularly when we face trial or suffering?