

**The Christmas Story From Paul's Perspective
Philippians 2:5-11
Part One**

This week I will be doing something that I have never done. Typically I give a single Christmas message but this year I will be doing an extended series. These messages will not be based on the gospels but rather these messages will be based on Philippians 2:5-11. I will break this passage up into two different parts; the early phase of the Christmas story from Paul's perspective which goes from Phil. 2:5 to Phil. 2:8 and the later phrase of the Christmas story which goes from Phil. 2:8 to Phil. 2:11. And I would hope by the time that we finish these verses that they will be by far your favorite Christmas passage.

We will begin by reading Philippians 2:5-8 which is the early phase of the Christmas story from Paul's perspective, **“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (6) who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, (7) but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men, (8) and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

This passage is deep and it is majestic. In some ways it is even unfathomable. It describes the condescension of the second person of the Trinity in human incarnation. It is the single greatest passage on God becoming man. This passage is a christological gem. As strong and unfathomable as the passage is theologically, the passage is first and foremost given to us in order to shape our conduct.

Hopefully you remember that we are presently studying a much larger section of Scripture that goes from Philippians 1:27 all the way to Philippians 2:18. This larger passage of Scripture concerns itself with the church conducting itself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

We have already seen that if we are going to make a claim to conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ then we, first of all, must be standing firm for the faith of the gospel as described in Philippians 1:27-30. And secondly we must be striving for church unity as it is explained in Philippians 2:1-4.

When we examined this passage we learned that if we are going to be motivated by the reasons given us in Philippians 2:1 to strive for the unity that is described in Philippians 2:2, then it will only be accomplished by the means described in Philippians 2:3-4.

What was the means that Paul shared with us in verses 3-4 to achieve church unity? If we are going to enjoy church unity then we will need to practice humility of mind as Paul described in these two verses.

The introduction of the lowly or humble mind in VV. 3-4 leads us to the third element of conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel in VV. 5-11. The third element of conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ is having the attitude of Christ

(Philippians 2:5-11). Look at **Phil. 2:5**, “**have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.**”

There is a close connection between Philippians 2:1-4 and Philippians 2:5-8. Look again at **Philippians 2:5**, “**have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.**” What attitude? The “humility of mind” attitude referred to in Philippians 2:3, which Paul now goes on to say was in Christ Jesus. This is the attitude that we need to have in ourselves.

Yes, Philippians 2:5-11 is Christologically a theological gem. It is majestic and certainly unfathomable but it is primarily given to us not as a theological treatise but rather as a call for us to have the attitude of Christ.

Paul is presenting Jesus as the model of someone who possessed the “humility of mind” attitude. But he is not satisfied with simply telling us that Jesus had this attitude, he goes on to describe how it was manifested. And in this description he gives to us his view of the Christmas story in its early or initial phrase, which was all about Christ’s descent from heaven to earth. This descent was not a rags to riches story but rather a riches to rags story.

Talking about Christ’s descent as a riches to rags story I believe certainly is fair, especially in light of Paul’s comments in **2 Cor. 8:9**. What does Paul declare to the church at Corinth? “**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.**” What Paul refers to in 2 Cor. 8:9 is described for us in some detail in Phil. 2:6-8.

Over the next several weeks I would like to detail for you the steps that Christ took in order to go from the penthouse to the basement, the steps that Christ took in order to go from riches to rags. And in doing this I would hope that not only would we see it as a model that we would follow as we seek to have a humility of mind attitude, but we would find ourselves falling in love with Christ all over again.

What was the first step that Christ took in order to go from the penthouse to the basement? What was the first step that Christ took to go from riches to rags? Christ did not grasp His personal riches too tightly. What were the riches that Christ did not grasp too tightly?

Let us read **Philippians 2:6**, “**Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.**” What were the riches that Christ did not grasp too tightly? It had something to do with being in the “form of God.” The Christmas story must begin with this phrase. If we do not appreciate this phrase then we will never appreciate the Christmas story.

What does Paul mean by the word “form?” The word “form” (MORPHE) refers to the essential character of something. We perhaps can understand this word better if we compare it to another Greek word, SCHEMA translated “likeness” in **Phil. 2:7**. What is the distinction? “Form” (MORPHE) is the essential character of something. “Likeness” (SCHEMA) is the outward form that it takes. MORPHE never changes but the SCHEMA can.

I am a male. I have possessed maleness since I was conceived and I will possess maleness until I die. This is my MORPHE. But my maleness or my MORPHE has many SCHEMA. I was an embryo, a fetus, a baby, a toddler, a child, a youth, a young man, an adult and now I am a senior. Though my appearance has been continually subject to change, I have always been a male. This is my “form” or MORPHE.

But what was Christ’s form or MORPHE? The verse says, **“who, although He existed in the form of God.”** When Paul speaks of Christ as having existed in the form (MORPHE) of God, he is in essence declaring Him to be God.

Not only is he making it clear to us in this phrase that Jesus is God but He is also making it very clear to us that he continues to be God. How is this communicated to us in this phrase? Let us take a look at the word “existed.” “Existed” (HUPARCHO) is a present participle which stands in contrast with all the aorist participles that follow it. Such a contrast would mean that Christ existed in the form of God in the past and is still existing in the form of God in the present. Jesus was, and is and always will be God.

Certainly having established that Jesus was, and is, and always will be God communicates very powerfully the fact that Christ was rich. But what riches was Christ willing not to continue to grasp as He began His descent to rags? Perhaps He was willing to give up a boatload of pearls. Perhaps He was willing to give up a mountain of gold. What were the riches that He was willing to give up?

Let us look at the next phrase, **“who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.”** Someone might ask, “Does this mean that Christ was willing to give up His deity?” And the answer is, of course not. How could God, who is eternal, stop being God? It is impossible. Why? Because God is eternal.

But you say, “The verse says that Christ who existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped. Doesn’t this imply that He was willing to give up His deity?” And the answer is, absolutely not! He couldn’t give up His deity because He was God but He could give up equality with God. This is in fact quite easy to understand if we understand the word “equality.”

The Greek word translated “equal” (ISIS) means exactly equal. We get our English words isomer, isomorphic, isometric, isosceles from this Greek word. Christ existed in the form of God and prior to His incarnation was exactly equal with God both in his form (MORPHE) and likeness (SCHEMA). If we understand this then we know what the riches were that Christ was willing to give up. And what were the riches? Christ, though equal with God both in form (MORPHE) and in likeness (SCHEMA), was willing to give up everything that would externally identify Himself as God.

This would, in a sense, be like a man who was extremely rich being willing to give up the trappings of his wealth so that he would no longer appear wealthy to those who came across his

path. But though it may be similar it is not nearly the same. When a rich man gives up the trappings of material wealth, what does he in fact give up? Not much. He gives up a few creature comforts but he also gains some things. What would those things be? His life becomes less encumbered. His life becomes simpler. And his wealth no longer is the object of people's desires.

Giving up the trappings of deity carries a much higher price. Let me ask you this question: when God is on His throne clothed in the splendor of His majesty, what do we see the heavenly hosts doing? They are worshiping. When God is seen in the splendor of His deity it will invariably produce worship (Isaiah 6:1-6; Ezekiel 1:26-28.) Let us consider a few of these passages.

Let us first of all consider **Isaiah 6:1-5**, **“In the year of King Uzziah’s death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. (2) Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. (3) And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. (4) And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.”** What was the response of Isaiah to what He was seeing? **“Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”**

Is this how people respond when they see Bill Gates, the richest man in the world? Absolutely not. They will stand at a distance and speculate on how their lives might be different if they had all of his wealth. But they are not going to feel as if they are standing before the judge of the whole earth who has the power over life and death both in this world and the world to come and melt before Him, agonizing over their personal sinfulness.

Let us consider Ezekiel for a moment. He was being held captive in Babylon and while being held captive it says in **Ezek. 1:1** that the heavens were opened and he saw visions of God.

Initially we see a vision of the “four cherubim” in 1:4-14. It then moves to a vision of “the chariot” in 1:15-25 and it climaxes with a vision of God’s throne in **Ezek. 1:26-28**. Listen to his account, **“Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, was a figure with the appearance of a man. (27) Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and there was a radiance around Him. (28) As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”** Who was Ezekiel looking at?

He was looking at God; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. This is who he was looking at. He was not seeing the Lord’s poverty but His riches. And what was his response? What does the verse tell us? **“I fell on my face!”**

Is this how people will respond when they come into the same room with Bill Gates? Of course not. They may be trying to think of some way to strike up a conversation with him but they are not going to fall down on their face, with their bodies prostrated before Him, eager to bring every area of their lives into complete conformity to his will. But this is exactly what had always been the experience of Christ since the creation of the heavenly hosts because He was fully equal with God in form and in appearance.

Christ in eternity past, though He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped. He was willing to let it go. Christ, from eternity past, was willing at an appointed time to abandon all those external trappings that declared Him unmistakably to be God, and this willingness was a necessary first step to go from riches to rags.

We will never be able to say that we are conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ until we have the attitude of Christ, until we are willing to surrender our riches for His sake as He was willing to sacrifice His riches for our sake.

CONCLUSION

This morning we will be celebrating communion. We would not be here this weekend remembering the body that was broken for us and the blood that was shed for us if Christ's attitude was to grasp and hold on to His equality with God. What was the first step that Christ took in order to go from the penthouse to the basement? CHRIST DID NOT GRASP HIS PERSONAL RICHES TOO TIGHTLY.

In light of what we are celebrating, are you prepared to follow in the footsteps of Jesus? Are you willing to release all the things in your life that you value in your quest to live a life pleasing to Christ, who loved you and gave Himself for you?