

This Changes Everything

“Part #4 - Humility”

Philippians 2:1-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 24, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Philippians 2.
- A famous public speaker in the ancient world was once asked, **“What is the first rule for being eloquent in public speaking?”** He answered, **“Delivery.”** It’s how you deliver a speech. **“What is the second rule?” “Delivery.” “What is the third rule?” “Delivery.”** Reflecting on this, one of the greatest early church leaders, a man named Augustine, said, **“In the same way, if you ask me what are the great precepts of the Christian Religion, I will answer, first, second, and third, ‘Humility.’”**¹
 - Augustine went so far as to say, **“Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues.”** On the flipside, pride is the foundation of all vice. From pride comes anger and self-centeredness. Pride drives relationships apart.
- C.S. Lewis captures the destructive power of pride so well in his book *The Great Divorce*. It’s an imaginary story in which the main character of the book arrives in hell and finds a sprawling suburb of houses. But they are all empty. It is explained that people just cannot get along. So they move. But then they fight with their new neighbour and so they keep moving apart. The main character asks another man where those people are who arrived thousands of years ago.
 - Here is the response: **“They’ve been moving on and on. Getting further apart. They’re so far off by now...astronomical distances. There’s a bit of rising ground near where I live and a chap has a telescope. You can see the lights of the inhabited houses, where those old ones live, millions of miles away. Millions of miles from us and from one another.”**²
 - How many relationships have been ruined because, in our pride, we blamed the other person and refused to apologize for our part. What we need, what I need, is humility.
- This morning we will see that the message of Christmas has the power to change us – to rid us of pride and give us humility.
 - So let me develop this in three parts. First, *the virtue of humility*. What is it? Second, *the revolution of humility*. I want you to see here how the coming of Jesus created a revolution in history that radically altered our understanding of humility to this very day. And finally, *the cultivation of humility*. How can we cultivate it in our own lives?
 - So the virtue, the revolution, and the cultivation.

THE VIRTUE OF HUMILITY

- First then, let’s look at **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** the virtue of humility. Philippians 2 is all about humility. Paul helps us to understand *what it is* and *what it is not*. Look at his description in verses 3-4.

¹ Cited in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.11.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 19.

- **READ 3-4 - Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.**
- So we can see here what humility is and what it is not. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First, humility is not humiliation, though it comes from the same word. Both come from the word for “low” as in “low to the ground.” **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** The difference between humiliation and humility is willingness. Humility is willing whereas humiliation is unwilling.
 - Humiliation is the feeling of being low to the ground because you have been conquered or shamed. Humiliation is forced on you like when someone publically humiliates you in front of others.
 - But Paul clearly does not define humility as humiliation. Notice that Paul says humility is willing. A humble person, Paul says, willingly *counts* others more significant than themselves. A humble person willingly *looks* out for the interests of others.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** We see here as well that humility is not belittling or devaluing one’s self or one’s abilities. That is self-depreciation and false humility because it is to always be focused on your self. But notice that Paul’s definition of humility is not focused on self at all. Everything about humility here is about others – not looking to self, counting others to be better, and looking to their interests. As C.S. Lewis has so helpfully said,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6) “Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself. It means thinking of yourself less.”** Paul goes further. It is thinking of yourself less precisely because you are thinking of how to serve others.
 - That is why Lewis says **(SHOW SLIDE 7) “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of ...person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him...He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”**³
- So here is a working definition of humility from a man named John Dickson. **(SHOW SLIDE 8) “Humility is the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself.”**⁴
 - Now I really don’t think I have said anything controversial here. Generally speaking, our culture prizes humility. You can see it in secular books. John Collins wrote a famous leadership book entitled *Good to Great* where he showed what made good companies like Gillette become great companies. One key factor is what he called Level 5 leadership. Level 5 leaders are marked by two characteristics: steely determination and an attitude of humility.
 - Stephen Covey, who wrote *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, calls humility the mother of all virtues. In our culture we do not like proud people who boast about their achievements.
 - We love stories like *Les Miserables* where Jean Valjean, at great cost to himself, makes the noble choice to forgo his status in order to use his power and money to help Fantine and raise her daughter.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 127.

⁴ John Dickson, *Humilitas*, 24.

HONOUR, SHAME, AND HUMILITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

- This is not controversial to you today. But there is a reason for that. 2000 years ago a revolution took place in culture. This revolution changed the entire way that western culture thinks about humility. So having looked at the virtue of humility, let's turn in the second place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** the revolution of humility.
 - I read a book by Dr. John Dickson who is the senior research fellow of the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University in Australia.
 - In their research a team of historians recognized that a revolution took place around the first century in how people thought of humility. I'll let him lead us through this point.
- Dickson and his team point out that the Greeks and Romans did not value humility like we do today. They valued honour. Life revolved around ensuring that you and your family received public honour and avoided public shame.
 - So a father's goal was not that his son would be happy or make money or live rightly but that the boy would bring honour to the family.
- You see this for instance in the story of Achilles. In the movie *Troy* Achilles' mother talks about her desire for him to join the attack on Troy.
 - She says, ***"If you stay in Larissa, you will find peace. You will find a wonderful woman, and you will have sons and daughters, who will have children. And they'll all love you and remember your name. But when your children are dead, and their children after them, your name will be forgotten... If you go to Troy, glory will be yours. They will write stories about your victories in thousands of years! And the world will remember your name."***
 - Today we would say, ***"Who cares about glory if you are dead."*** If we encouraged our sons to go to war it would be because it is the right thing to do not because it would make them great.
- In such a society humility was not considered a great virtue. Another example: in the 6th century BC there was a book written by the Greeks that outlined 147 maxims of what it meant to live an ethical life. It included maxims like, ***"Help your friends, return a favour, despise no one, don't mock the dead, and respect your elder."*** Of the 147 humility was nowhere on the list. How different from our writers like John Collins and Stephen Covey.
 - The reason for this was because humiliation and humility were viewed as being the same thing. The Greeks of course showed humility to the gods but that was only because the gods could kill them.
 - But you did not show humility to an equal and especially not to someone less than you. That would be to shame yourself.
- In this context people thought nothing of praising themselves in public. Or getting others to praise them. You took hold of the honour that was rightly yours based on what you had done.
 - You remember in Luke 2 that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. At the end of his life Augustus wrote a 2500 word list of his achievements. He had them inscribed in bronze and set up outside his grave. Copies were sent around the empire. People did not cringe at his blatant self-congratulation like we would today.
 - He describes 35 of his accomplishments. For instance "#10. ***"My name was inserted in the hymn of the Salii by a decree of the senate."*** Or #15. ***"To each member of the Roman plebs I paid under my father's will (two months wages)..."***#25 ***"I made the sea peaceful and freed it of pirates."*** In #34 he

describes how he passed his power to the senate. And then says, **“After this time I excelled all in influence.”**⁵

- You might think, **“Well this guy is an emperor. Of course he boasts about himself.”** But ordinary citizens did the same. Josephus for instance begins his autobiography by boasting about his abilities: **“While still a mere boy, about fourteen years old, I won universal applause for my love of literature; insomuch that the chief priests and the leading men of the city used constantly to come to me for precise information on some particular in our ordinances.”**⁶
 - Can you imagine an autobiography today beginning with such self-congratulation? For them it was perfectly normal. If it was true, if you had earned the merits, then you deserved the honour.
 - So why do we cringe at such boasting? Dickson and his team of historians argue that a revolution happened in history – a revolution that completely changed how the western world thinks about pride and humility, honour and shame.
 - This secular university argues that it was the message of Christmas changed everything.

THE HUMILITY REVOLUTION

- So what is the message of Christmas that changed everything? Paul outlines it here in this passage. As we have seen Paul calls Christians to make the noble choice to forgo their status, deploy their resources and use their influence for the good of others before themselves – especially those lesser than their equals.
 - And then he gives the ultimate example of humility. Look at verse 5. **READ 5 – Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.**
 - So what was Jesus’ mindset? What is this mindset or attitude that we are to copy? **READ 6-7 – who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.**
- What a shock this verse was to the ancient world. What a shock it should be to you today. To feel its shock you must first grasp *who Jesus is*. Look at verse 6.
 - **“Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God.”** Jesus is not just a great prophet or a holy man. Christianity teaches that Jesus is none other than God Himself. He is in very nature God. He is the Creator of heaven and earth.
 - If anyone deserves honour and praise it is Jesus.
- Once you have grasped who he is then secondly grasp *what he did*. To our shock verse 6 says that He willingly gave up the honour that was due to him. He **“did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.”** That is, he did not cling to the honour that was rightly his **“but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”**
 - It is not that he ceased to be God. It is that he gave up his rights for honour. He chose to forgo his rights. And he voluntarily lowered himself by taking on human flesh.
 - But you would think that even if he chose to give up the honour and praise that heaven gave to him, that when he came to this earth he would come as a king to be worshipped and adored. You would think he would arrive by

⁵ Ibid. 92-93.

⁶ Ibid. 95.

sending a billion angels ahead, that he would split the sky and descend in pomp and ceremony for all to see, that archangels would declare who he is, declare his mighty deeds, and demand that everyone bow in honour.

- But no. It says he **“emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.”** He came as a servant. A servant? God, a servant? A servant God? Who has ever heard of such a thing?

- But he lowered himself even further. Look at verse 8. **READ 8 – And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**
 - The great problem is that you are not shocked by this verse. The cross has been sanitized. We wear gold crosses. But you must realize that the cross was the greatest instrument of torture in the ancient world.
 - But it was more than that. It was also the greatest way to shame someone.
- Read the crucifixion story through the lens of shame and you will see how they shamed Jesus. Kings wore purple robes. The soldiers put a purple robe on him and mocked him as king. They pressed a crown of thorns into his skull. Is 50:6 says they ripped out his beard - an act of profound disrespect in ancient culture where men’s beards were their glory. They spat on him. They mocked him. They crucified him.
 - To add to the shame this entire thing was done publicly. There was no suffering in dignified privacy. Again, we sanitize our images of Jesus on the cross by showing him with a perfectly placed loincloth but crucifixion victims were stripped naked. We do not know for sure but it is far more likely that Jesus was naked on the cross. Jesus was displayed for all to see and for all to mock.
 - **“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”**
- Archeologists found this crude piece of graffiti. It dates to the second century. **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** It depicts a boy standing beside a cross with an arm raised in worship. On the cross is Jesus but he has the head of a jackass.
 - The caption reads, **“Alexamenos worships his god.”** Apparently this young Alexamenos was being mocked by his friends for worshipping a god who culture viewed as a jackass of a criminal.
- Here is the million dollar question: why would Jesus, the glorious God, the one who deserves all honour and praise allow himself to be shamed like this? He did it for us. We have sinned against God. We are helpless to save ourselves from judgement. But Jesus chose to forgo his status. He laid aside his right to receive honour. He became a man to die for our sins. He used his power and resources for us. He took our punishment upon himself that we might go free.
 - Humility is at the heart of the message of Christmas: Jesus humbled himself to the very point of death in order to rescue you and I.
- There is a story of a missionary who ministered in a very dry part of Africa. People would dig wells, but they are not the kind of wells that you think about where you lower a bucket into a well. Actually they sink deep shafts into the ground. The water actually condenses on the sidewalls and seeps down in very small amounts. They do not put a bucket down there but they send people down into the well to wipe the walls and sop up the floor with rags. Then they squeeze the water into buckets.

- One day there was a man who went down into the well, but he only got a little way down and then fell. He broke his leg at the bottom of the well. Somebody had to go down and get him. He was a big man though. Nobody wanted to go down and help him out until the chief came.
 - The chief at that time was the largest and strongest man in the tribe. As he stood looking into the well he took off his robe. He took off his headdress. He put them aside. He then climbed down into the well. The chief got dirty. The chief risked his life. He picked up the other man and brought him back up.
- This is the message of Christianity. Jesus, the great chief, did not just look to his own interest. He put aside his robes, the crown on his head, and the honour that were rightfully his. He came down into the dark and dirty well of this world where we lay broken in our sin. But He did not just risk his life. He gave up his life. He willingly did this in order that you and I might be rescued. Oh what humility.
 - When you consider who Jesus is and what he did, it is not overstating it to say that this is the greatest act of humility in the history of the universe.
 - It was this act that brought a revolution to the ancient world. Aristides, a first century man, wrote scornfully of the early Christians, but even he was forced to admit they acted humbly toward each other: ***“If these Christians hear that any one of their number is in distress for the sake of Christ’s name, they all render aid in his necessity.”***⁷
 - So Dickson and his team concluded that **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “Honour has been redefined, greatness recast. If the greatest man we have ever known chose to forgo his status for the good of others...greatness must consist in humble service. The shameful place is now the place of honour, the low point is the high point.”**⁸
 - And that is what we see for the passage goes on to say that because of this tremendous humility, God has raised Jesus up above all else.
 - The way to greatness then is not to exalt yourself. The way to greatness is to lower yourself, choosing to forgo your rights, and using your power and influence for the good of others.

THE CULTIVATION OF HUMILITY

- Well, we have looked at the virtue of humility and the revolution of humility. Let’s just take a few more minutes to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** the cultivation of humility.
 - How can you cultivate this in your life? Two things from this passage.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** First, cultivate humility by filling your heart with the message of Christmas. Is that not what Paul is calling us to do? In verses 3-4 he calls us to humility. But how do you get it? How can you stop being so self-obsessed? Paul’s answer is that you need to develop the mindset or attitude of Christ.
 - We are so prone to think of ourselves first, to look to our own interests but when we look at Jesus our hearts melt. Oh what humility – that God would forgo what was rightfully his, that he would give up his honour, that he would look to our interests, that he would use all his strength to the point of death in order that we might benefit.
 - This is why we need to live daily in the good news. The gospel renews our hearts. Daily we need to be in the Bible that we might cultivate the attitude of

⁷ Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed Allan Menzies, Vol 9, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*.

⁸ Ibid. 109.

Christ. This is also why we need to be committed to Sunday worship because we need this good news preached to us, sung to us, and visibly laid out to us in the Lord's Supper. The way you develop humility is to continually fill your heart with the message of Christmas.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** Second, cultivate humility by serving others.
 - Humility is not just an attitude; it's an action. Jesus attitude led him to act.
 - Here is the challenge: **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** What is one specific way you can use your power and influence in service to others this week?
 - This will transform your marriage. What is one thing you can do for your spouse that they would appreciate? How can you serve him or her?
 - This will transform your workplace. What is one way you can use your power and influence to serve those at your workplace?
 - This will transform your extended family. At Christmas time, what is one way you can use your power and influence to serve your family? Forgo your status and use your resources for them.
 - This will transform the church. Rather than guarding your time and money, what would happen if you joyfully poured out your life to serve in this church? Oh the difference we could make in this city.
 - This will transform the world. What can you do to serve the poor, the hurting, the handicapped, the elderly, the unborn, the orphan, or the single mom?
 - What is one specific way you can use your power and influence in service to others this week?