

Christians, Be Imitators of Christ

*(Philippians 2:5-11) Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: {6} Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, {7} but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. {8} And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! {9} Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Tell me, do you have someone in your life who you've used as a role model? Someone you look up to? Someone whose example you sought to follow? Maybe it's a parent or a grandparent. Maybe it's a co-worker or a celebrity of some kind. A number of years ago, Gatorade had a marketing campaign entitled, "Be like Mike." It featured all these young people out on the basketball court trying to imitate Michael Jordan. Maybe for you, as the weather gets a little warmer, you're thinking about imitating Jordan Spieth or Phil Mickelson.

2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul saw the benefit of having a role model. Only in Paul's case, his role model was not a golf pro, or a basketball star. No, his role model was Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul holds up Jesus as a role model for all of us—not only in how we act, but even in how we think—when Paul writes in Philippians chapter 2, "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*"

Today, as we continue our sermon series entitled The Way of the Cross, we focus especially on the fact that the Way of the Cross is one of humility. And here in our text, St Paul points to Jesus as the ultimate example of that attitude of humility, an attitude which still serves as a model for our hearts and lives today. The encouragement which Saint Paul gives to us today is simply this:

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Now, maybe I should begin by saying that even though this portion of scripture begins with an exhortation directed toward Christians, it really doesn't focus on Christians. Rather, it focuses on Christ. In fact, these 6 verses offer us one of the most concise descriptions of who Jesus is and why he came to this world.

St Paul begins by saying, *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God....* Who being in very nature, God. What is Paul saying there? He's saying that Jesus, in his very essence, is God; he's divine. Jesus is equal to God the Father in wisdom, power and glory. He is just as eternal as any of the other persons of the Trinity.

But Paul goes on to say that Jesus *did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*. What does that mean? It means that Jesus did not feel the need to flaunt that he was God. The Greek word here is "harpadzo." It's the same word that would be used of a Roman soldier reaching down to grab a nice shiny sword or a bag of gold from his fallen enemy soldier and saying, "Ahah! Look at what I've got. It's mine. All mine!" A modern-day parallel might be the actress who wins her first Oscar. She holds up that little statue as if to say, "Look at what I have!" Or maybe better, "Look at who I am. I am equal to the best of them all!"

But you see, that's exactly the attitude that Jesus did NOT display. Jesus did not consider equality with God as something he had to show off. He didn't run and tell everyone, "You'd better respect me because I'm God and you're not. He didn't force people to kowtow to him. No rather, quite the opposite. What does St Paul say? *Jesus made himself nothing*. Literally, the original language says, Jesus emptied himself. That is, he did not make full use of the divine power and glory that was rightly his. Even though he was 100% God the entire time he was here on earth, he did not always act like he was God.

Instead, what did Jesus do? Paul says that Jesus took *the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness*. In other words, even though Jesus was 100% God, he also became a man. He took on a human nature. We call that his Incarnation. Incarnation means to take on flesh. It happened when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary. From that moment on, Jesus was both God and man.

Now, can I explain to you how Jesus could be 100% God and 100% man in one person? No I can't. But can I show you that that's what Scripture says about Jesus? Yes, I can. Just look at the parallel terminology that Saint Paul uses here. On the one hand, he says that Jesus was, in very nature, God. On the other hand, Jesus took on the nature of a servant. In both cases, the same word is used. Jesus, in nature, was both God and Man.

From there Paul goes on to describe how Jesus used his two natures. Paul says of Jesus: *and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself*. With those words, St Paul is referring to what is called Jesus state of humiliation, that period during which Jesus set aside the full display of his godly power and glory. It began with his conception, confining himself to a tiny little embryo. It continued with his coming down the birth canal and being laid in a feed trough, in a barn filled with a smells of you know what—that was all part of Jesus' humiliation. Jesus didn't come into this world as a pampered and powerful King. He came as a poor and helpless baby. And that state of humiliation is something that continued throughout his life. The God-man allowed himself to be dependent on the care of others—whether it was as a young boy, being cared for by his parents or as an adult being cared for by the women who accompanied him. You think about how, on Maundy Thursday evening, Jesus humbled himself by taking on the job of a slave. He got down on his hands and knees and washed the feet of his disciples.

Don't you see that humility even in the events of Palm Sunday? I mean, here Jesus is entering the city, surrounded by crowds of adoring fans. They are acclaiming him as the Son of David and treating him like royalty. And yet, in the midst of all that adoration, in the midst of what could have been a real ego trip, what does Jesus deliberately choose to ride on? Yeah, a baby donkey. You talk about an absolutely stunning contrast, a king riding on a donkey. That my friends, is an expression of humility. And of course, from that point on, Jesus continued to stoop lower and lower and lower. Allowing himself to be captured by men who really had to no power over him, subjecting himself to the mockery of the Sanhedrin, subjecting himself to the spit and the blows of the Roman soldiers, and ultimately, surrendering himself to the worst form of humiliation in his day, namely, being nailed to a cross naked and left to die. It's what Saint Paul means what he says, *Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross*.

But now, in light of that ultimate act of humbling himself, in light of the attitude of humility that Jesus displayed through it all, go back to the opening words of this section, where St. Paul says, (Christian), *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus*. Hmmmm. So how are you doing maintaining a Christ-like attitude, when it comes to humility? Are you always quick to put others ahead of yourself? Is the goal of your life to become a servant of

others? Are you more than happy to give up rights, your personal comfort for the sake of others? Or do you kind of like it when you get your way? It feels good when people praise you, when they put you on a pedestal—whether you deserve it or not. Are there times when you evaluate a particular situation with the question, “What’s in it for me? How do I get what I want?” I don't know about you, but when I think about what my attitude is like, and compare it to the attitude that Jesus showed, I’m looking very good. It shows me how selfish I am. How proud and arrogant. I don't want to be the servant. I want to be the boss. Comparing my attitude to Jesus’ attitude simply shows me what a sinner I am.

Which is why it's so important to recognize that Jesus came into this world to do more than show us what a good attitude looks like. Jesus came to be more than the perfect role model. No, Jesus came to be the perfect substitute. Jesus came to do more than set an example for us. Jesus came to take our place before God. He came to do and be all the things that you and I aren't. Jesus was humble. He was selfless. He served the needs of others. And what’s really amazing is that now, through faith in Jesus, God gives you and me credit for all the things Jesus was and did. In effect, God looks at you and me and he sees Jesus. All those characteristics of Christ are yours. God says, “In Christ, you are humble. In Christ, you are self-less. In Christ, you have a servant’s heart.” It’s who God has made you to be in Christ. In fact, when you think about what God has done for you in Christ, you realize that St. Paul was absolutely right when he said, *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.* It’s who God has made you to be.

And yet, I have to say that our text for today tells us more than simply how Jesus humbled himself, how he showed an attitude of humility. It also tells us how the Father responded to Jesus’ act of humiliation. After Jesus lowered himself in a state of humiliation, God in turn raised Jesus up again. He exalted him. St. Paul describes that action, beginning in v. 9. Notice how that verse begins. Therefore. That’s an important word. After describing how Jesus humbled himself even to the point of death, Paul continues...*Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.* With those words, Jesus is establishing a cause and effect relationship between Jesus’ humiliation and his exaltation. In other words, because Jesus did humble himself even to the point of death, because he successfully completed his mission in life, therefore God exalted him to the highest place. In effect, God the Father said, “Job well done, Jesus. Take back the full use of your power and glory again.”

If you think of the words of the Apostles Creed, you will find that we confess the various stages of Jesus’ exaltation. From his descent into hell to proclaim his victory over the devil, to his resurrection on the third day, to his ascension into heaven, to his sitting at the right hand of God, and finally his return to judge the living and the dead. Really, it's that final stage of Jesus exaltation, which St. Paul describes as the time when *every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.* In other words, every believer, every unbeliever, every angel, every demon—*every tongue (will) confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.*

Now, don’t misunderstand. That doesn't mean that on the Last Day everyone will become a believer and be saved. No, rather, it means that on the Last Day, everyone will know the truth. Everyone will Jesus for who he truly is, namely God and Lord and judge of all. For those who rejected Jesus in their lives, that fact will be absolutely horrifying to them. It will mean their eternal condemnation. On the other hand, for those who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, put their trust in Jesus, that Final Day will bring utter comfort to them. It will mean eternal salvation for them. Both results, as St. Paul puts it, will be *to the glory of God the Father.*

I don't know about you, but I look at this section of Scripture and I see an amazing summary of both, the life of Christ, and in a sense, the life of a Christian. First comes Jesus' humiliation. Then comes his exaltation. Or as it's sometimes stated, first comes the cross, then comes the crown. The same thing is true for you and me, isn't it? Yes, the day is coming when we too will be exalted. We will be raised up with Christ, wearing the crown of glory, seated with him at the heavenly banquet. But until that day arrives, the way of the cross, yes, the way of the Christian, is one of humility. But we have our role model. He's shown us what humility looks like. He's made us holy in God's eyes. He's given us everything we need to be Imitators of Christ. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.