

Philippians #4 - Imitating Jesus

Bible Reading

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11

In the previous session we saw Paul encouraging the Philippian believers to live lives that are consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ.

This included maintaining a delicate balance between behaving in ways that were consistent with their faith while also being good citizens.

It also involved telling others about Jesus, living in harmony with other believers and, where possible, with their non-Christian neighbours.

In today's message, we will be looking at how Paul expands on how we should live our Christian lives, using Jesus as our primary example.

In the first section the key theme Paul pursues is the 'Jesus mindset' that Christians are to adopt, and to illustrate this he uses what seems to be a Christian poem or hymn.

It is possible Paul wrote it, but whether he did or didn't, it is likely that he is quoting a composition already known to the Philippians. In a similar way to how people illustrate a point they are making by quoting lyrics from a familiar song.

It begins with how God the Son, Jesus, became a human being.

Let's just pause for a moment and think about that.

Jesus, fully God, creator and sustainer of the universe, omnipotent (infinitely powerful), omniscient (infinitely aware), omnipresent (infinitely, erm, present), the second person of the Trinity, no beginning or end, Alpha and Omega, is born as a human child by a human mother.

Our familiarity with the concept of Jesus being God 'incarnate', 'in flesh', can cause us to lose sight of the magnitude of what Paul is saying here.

God has become a human being. Really?

And it would have been even more mind-boggling for a 1st century, religious, well-educated Jew like Paul. God, YHWH, the great 'I AM', choosing to take on human flesh? Nope. No way. Never.

And yet this is what Paul had come to believe.

And this has profound significance for the mindset that Christians are to adopt. Jesus is fully God. He had no obligation to become a finite human being. And yet he did.

Jesus took on the 'very nature of a servant'.

The word for 'servant' also means 'slave'. And in the Roman world a slave was a 'living tool', an object, to be used in whatever way their master decided. Yes, in absolutely whatever way. Let your imagination wander a little.

As 21st century western Christians, this is an uncomfortable message.

Paul is telling us that we need to adopt the mindset of Jesus, the mindset of a servant or slave, and that this mindset must be lived out in our relationships with other people, and especially our relationships with other believers.

I've said it many times before, and I'll no doubt say it many times again, our culture is obsessed with 'self-help', 'self-esteem' and 'self-worth'.

Selfishness has become a virtue. Looking after number one is seen as a healthy pursuit. No one is going to tell me what to do. Be kind to yourself. Put yourself first. Follow your heart... Me, me, me.

And yet here we have the creator of the universe deciding to lower himself to the form of a creature, a fragile human foetus.

Paul is almost certainly connecting Christ's incarnation, becoming a human being, to the Genesis account of humanity being created 'in the image of God'.

God the son is made in the likeness of humanity

Being made in human likeness.

Philippians 2:7c

in a mirror reversal of humanity's creation in the likeness of God.

Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'.

Genesis 1:26a

Which brings us to what Jesus' obedience looked like.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Jesus, fully God, who enjoys an eternal perfect relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, not only *becomes* a human being, but chooses to take the place of *every* human being, taking on all of humanity's sin as he died sinless on the cross.

This is the Jesus we are called to follow. A Jesus who became less so that we could become more.

Paul is using Jesus's example to illustrate that followers of Jesus are called to live lives that help others. That lift others up.

To live lives that are outward rather than inward looking, first to God, and then to the people around us.

Having told us what Jesus' obedience to his mission cost him, Paul now moves on to what happened after Jesus's death and resurrection.

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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11

Paul is riffing on Isaiah 45...

Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength'.

Isaiah 45:22-24

In this chapter, Isaiah has been ridiculing the 'gods' that the people of Israel have turned to, reminding them that only the God of Abraham and Moses is God, and that all other 'gods' are worthless, dangerous idols.

Paul's use of this passage is important. Isaiah is saying that only God, YHWH, the great I AM, is worthy of worship. And here, Paul is talking about *Jesus* being worthy of worship.

Isaiah declares that one day every human will acknowledge God...

...before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.'

Isaiah

Paul gives the same status to Jesus...

...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord

Philippians

Jesus is identified with YHWH, and when Jesus is worshipped, it is ‘to the glory of God the Father’.

There is no competition here. Jesus the Son is neither lower or higher in status than God the Father. He never was. He never will be. They are, along with God the Holy Spirit, in a way that we will probably never fully understand, one inseparable God.

When the Bible talks about Jesus being ‘lowered’, it does not mean he ceased to be fully God, although he did become more physically limited.

And when God the Father exalts him, he isn’t putting him *above* himself, it is re-instating his omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence.

How does this work? Ultimately, I have no idea. Some things are too deep for human minds to fully comprehend. That is the mystery of the incarnation. As 1 Peter 1:12 says, ‘Even angels long to look into these things’. That is the mystery of our salvation.

But the gospel is not merely, or even primarily, about theology and mystery. It is about power and purpose. It is about forgiveness and freedom to live lives the way God always wanted them to be lived.

Paul moves from how Jesus didn’t cling to his exalted status, to how this should affect the Philippians’ mindset. He begins with a ‘therefore’, and, as we all know, when we see the word ‘therefore’, we need to see what it’s ***there for!***

Slide (Philippians 2:12-18)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the

sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Philippians 2:12-18

Paul moves from presenting Jesus as the perfect example of a servant to giving the Philippian Christians (and us!) examples of what imitating Jesus will mean in our lives.

As we have noticed in earlier sessions, Paul holds a deep affection for the Philippian congregation. They are his 'dear friends'. Paul knows that they are sincere and obedient in their commitment to live as Christians.

And he wants to encourage them to grow in their faith. Paul wants to remind the Philippians that they are serving an awesome and holy God.

Hence the 'fear and trembling'. God is pure love. Absolutely holy. We are not. Even on our best days, we fall far short of his holy perfection. There is a sense that we are like slaves, with no status or rights before God.

And this is how we are to approach our Christian lives, realising that we are utterly dependent on God for everything that we have. And this is good news, we don't have to work out our salvation on our own. It is 'God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose'.

It's another virtuous circle.

God works in you.

In response, we do the things we know God wants to do through us.

We pray. We read the Bible. We ask him to help us comprehend how holy, magnificent and loving he really is. We ask him to help us want to be more like the person he wants us to be.

And when we fail, and we will fail, we turn to him and ask him to help us, and he will. God's gifts are the gifts that keep on giving.

As we do so, we increasingly experience God's power and joy in our lives.

A few years ago my children bullied me into going 'bouldering'. For the uninitiated, it is a modern form of torture where you clamber up walls using hand and footholds.

I can't say I loved it, but my youngest son (he's in his 30s) encouraged me to keep going, mainly because it means he gets a free taxi ride to the bouldering centre.

And I have continued going. And I continue to fail. But each time I fail a little better than I did before.

That doesn't make each climb any less terrifying, especially because when you get better there is always a more difficult challenge to attempt. But it is good to look back and see the (slight) progress I have made.

In the same way, as we learn to fail better as we work with God at being more like him, we gradually understand what it means to follow him.

Which inspires us to continue living God's way.

The 'you' is plural. It is addressed to the whole Philippian congregation.

But for a community of believers to be healthy, each member needs to be actively working out how God wants to help us become less selfish and more like Jesus.

And each of us has a personal responsibility to deepen our relationship with God.

Through regular Bible reading, thinking about what it says and putting it into practice, through talking with and listening to God, through regularly meeting with and sharing with other Christians, and through encouraging and helping the people God puts in our lives.

And as we do this God, through his Holy Spirit, works in our lives, encouraging and strengthening us, helping us 'to fulfil his good purpose'.

Paul expands on this in the following verses...

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Philippians 2:14-16a

Here he is alluding to Old Testament themes that Paul would have shared with the Philippians when he was with them. In particular he would have explained the stories of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings of Israel as they moved towards the promised land.

In these stories, the Israelite people regularly grumbled and argued with God, despite all that he had done, and was doing for them.

‘Do everything without grumbling or arguing’ may seem like a trivial command. But just think how much better *your* life would be if there was no grumbling and arguing in it.

Think about how much better your life would be *if the people around you* stopped grumbling and arguing.

Think how much better *our church would be* if people stopped grumbling and arguing.

Think how much better *life would be for other people* if you stopped grumbling and arguing.

Grumbling and arguing are symptoms of the ‘me, me, me’ attitude I was talking about earlier. The opposite of the ‘servant/slave’ mentality that Paul is showing us Jesus demonstrated.

This does not mean becoming a weak and ineffectual doormat.

In a previous talk I read out some passages from a letter by Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church who spoke out against the Chinese government’s persecution of Christians, and as a result is serving a 9 year prison term in solitary confinement.

Despite being treated terribly, the tone of the letter is respectful, but he is clear that his allegiance is first to Jesus, and secondly to human authorities.

Being a Christian does not mean being weak, quite the reverse. But it does mean being willing to be radically different to the culture we live in, seeking to serve and not to be served, confident that God will ultimately ensure that justice is seen to be done.

As Paul says, blameless, pure, without fault... all words that describe Jesus, all words that describe holiness, godliness.

They are ideals that we are unlikely to attain in this life. I'm sure Pastor Wang Yi's wife would awkwardly bow her head and smile politely if anyone asked her if her husband was blameless, pure and without fault.

But by daily allowing God to work in us, cooperating with him in his strength, experiencing his power and joy in our lives, in Paul's words, ***you*** (plural!) ***will shine*** in the society God has placed ***us like stars in the sky as we hold firmly to the word of life***. Like the moon is to the sun, we can reflect the glory of the word of life, the good news of Jesus to the people around us.

And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Philippians 2:16a-18

Paul concludes this section in a reflective mood, longing that this letter will encourage the Philippian believers to grow in their faith. Paul is here at his most human.

Languishing in a Roman prison, Paul must have had moments when he wondered whether Epaphroditus had even managed to get the letter to the Philippians, let alone whether they would listen and act on what it said.

Paul was aware that as a younger man he had been responsible for the persecution, imprisonment and (probably) deaths of many Christians.

And yet Jesus chose to save him, which is why he is happy to boast about Jesus, the one he had once hated, who so spectacularly changed Paul's life while he was on his way to persecute a group of Christian believers.

This is why Paul regularly boasts about his weaknesses, because he knows that where he is weak is where he most depends on God's power to help him.

Jesus emptied himself so that he could reveal God's power to us. It is when we empty ourselves of pride, ambition, the desire to be first, that God's power will be revealed in us to those around us.

As Paul sits in his cell, he thinks about how good it will be on 'the day of Christ' to see the people who he has been a part of rescuing from sin and death. Not in a prideful way, but in a grateful, joyful way.

He compares himself to a 'drink offering'.

The Philippian Christians would have been familiar with similar offerings in the Greek and Roman temples around them, which would be followed by a communal, celebratory meal.

Paul is saying that...

— his ministry is a drink offering,

— poured over the sacrifice that is the Philippian church's faith

Paul is not saying he is righteous because of the offering, he is saying that he **is** the offering!

and then, as Paul is fond of doing, he mangles the metaphor by saying

— the Philippians are both the sacrifice offered on the altar

— and the priests offering it.

Our life of faith involves yielding to God, and to one another as we are actively involved in working for God. Our faith leads us to lives that are

both a sacrifice and service to Jesus as we work at being people who help other people.

So, to summarise today's message...

- As Christians, we are to remember that Jesus is the perfect example of how we are to live our lives, putting God first, then others.
- That the 'me, me, me' culture we live in is fundamentally opposed to the life that Jesus exemplified.
- That asking and allowing God to empower us to live his way will result in lives that are guilt-free and rewarding, working as part of a team with other believers to make the message of Jesus known to our family, friends and neighbours.

Paul signs off on a high note,

Slide (Philippians 2:16a-18 - 'I am glad' highlighted)

...even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Philippians 17b-19

In the coming weeks, let's be glad and rejoice as we serve each other and serve a God who loved us enough to die for us, and who loves us enough to live and work with us.

Amen