

Main Idea: In Philippians 2:1-11 we find out what happens when the gospel shapes the way we view Christmas.

- I. Consider what Christmas meant for Jesus (6-11).
 - A. He denied Himself (6).
 1. He is the essence of God.
 2. He is equal with God.
 - B. He demoted Himself (7).
 1. He took the essence of a servant.
 2. He became a man.
 - C. He deprived Himself (8).
 1. He exhibited ultimate obedience.
 2. He died on a cross.
 - D. He was exalted by God (9-11).
 1. The ultimate purpose of the incarnation isn't our gain.
 2. The ultimate purpose of the incarnation is God's glory.
- II. Consider what Christmas should mean for us (1-4).
 - A. Because God became a man, we have resources (1).
 - B. Because God became a man, we have responsibilities (2-4).
 1. We are to think right about each other (2).
 2. We are to do right towards each other (3-4).
 3. We are to resemble Christ with each other (5).

Application: A couple of questions...

1. Do I really believe the Christmas story?
2. Am I really living like it?

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

We don't often think of Philippians 2 as a Christmas text, but it is. And as we'll see today, it shows us in very practical terms how to celebrate a gospel-shaped Christmas.

There's a lot of talk these days about *gospel-centered*. And there should be. The gospel should affect every aspect of our lives. According to today's text, that includes how we celebrate Christmas.

According to Philippians 2:1-11, if we really believe in the incarnation then we will seek to have the same attitude that Christ exhibited when He entered the world as a baby. That means, if we really believe that God became a man then it will show up *in the way we view ourselves and treat others*.

Verse 5 is key, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

And what was His attitude? In the verses that follow (6-11), Paul shows the attitude Christ exhibited in His incarnation. This is no abstract matter for Paul either. It follows verses 1-5 in which the apostle exhorts church members concerning how they view and treat each other.

It's true. You can tell if people have really been gripped by the message or Christmas by looking at how they treat each other.

Let's take a close look at this passage. Verses 1-5 call us to imitate Christ's humility. Verses 6-11 show us what the humble Savior did. In this message I'd like to invert the order. Let's look at what Christ did and then we'll back up and consider the implications.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this edifying text, please see a sermon preached at WBC 12/4/05.

In Philippians 2:1-11 we find out what happens when the gospel shapes the way we view Christmas.

I. Consider what Christmas meant for Jesus (6-11).

I've moved a few times in my life. Most of you have done the same. But there's never been a moving day like this one, the day that the Son of God took up residence on this planet.

What was involved in the incarnation? Jesus experienced four things...

A. He denied Himself (6). "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." To appreciate Christ's self-denial we need to grasp who it was that was born in that manger. Paul tells us two things about Him.

1. *He is the essence of God.* "Who, being in very nature God." The Greek term is *morpha* which can mean "outward appearance" or "shape." To say that Christ existed in the "nature" of God indicates that He possessed all the characteristics and qualities belonging to God.

Do you know what that means? There is nothing that is true of God that is not true of Jesus Christ. God had no beginning—that's true of Christ as well, for He is eternal. God is all powerful—Christ possesses that trait, too. God is all knowing—so is Christ. God is holy, just, gracious, and loving. Likewise, Christ is holy, just, gracious, and loving. Christ is in very nature God. He is the *essence* of God.

2. *He is equal with God.* Paul says that He "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." The word "grasped" has the idea of "snatching." One commentator says that Christ did not "snatch at equality with God."

And why not? He didn't have to "grasp" it. He already had it. And what He possessed He couldn't lose. Equality with God wasn't something Jesus Christ attained (contrary to what Mormon teaching says), but was something He possessed inherently.

Answer this. If you were God, what do you think life would be like? We might suppose that God-likeness would mean having your own way and getting what you want. Everything would be at your disposal, so why not enjoy it?

Such was not Jesus' attitude. The Son of God viewed God-likeness essentially as *giving*, not getting. Though He had the right to receive all glory and honor, He chose to relinquish this. He chose to *deny Himself*.

There's something I must mention about the recipients of this letter. The Philippians were a privileged people. The inhabitants of Philippi actually possessed legal citizenship of the city of Rome. And they prided themselves in this. Retired military men were given land in Philippi. The people of Philippi dressed like Romans and often spoke Latin.

Is there anything wrong with having special privileges like these? That's a good question for Americans to answer, isn't it? We certainly are a blessed people with privileges like none other.

Wednesday a visitor came to our church from the Philippines. He told me how he dreamed of coming to America and is overwhelmed that God granted this privilege.

There's nothing wrong with possessing the privileges we enjoy, as long as the privileges don't *possess us*.

How can we tell if we have a proper attitude towards the privileges? The answer is a question. *Are we willing to give them up?*

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, says God's Word. Did He have privileges? Indeed. But He denied Himself. And He didn't stop there.

B. He demoted Himself (7). "But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

Talk about lowering your standard of living! Having never seen heaven, our minds cannot fathom the sacrifice Christ made when He left His glorious, eternal home and came to earth.

I don't mean to be crude, but perhaps a simple illustration will illumine our eyes. When I traveled to Ukraine a few years ago I experienced something I'd never encountered before, a pit toilet. Life in the remote villages of the Odessa region reminds me of stories my grandmother used to tell about life on the farm 75 years ago in Guernsey county, Ohio. To a Ukrainian villager, a pit toilet was a simple fact of life. To me, it was a humbling reminder that my living conditions had changed.

Let this sink in. Earth is not like heaven. When Jesus left heaven and came to earth, His living conditions changed. Indeed, He *demoted* Himself.

Don't misunderstand. Christ never ceased to be what He had always been. He didn't stop being God when He came to earth. He didn't lay aside His deity. He didn't stop being the essence of God and equal with God. Remember His words to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9)," and His announcement in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one."

What then happened at the first Christmas? The text says, He "made Himself nothing." The Greek verb is *ekenosen* which means "to empty." Scholars refer to this as the "kenosis" passage because of this word. Translators have wrestled with how to interpret *ekenosen*. The American Standard Bible of 1901 says that Christ "emptied Himself," as does the 1890 Darby Bible, the RSV, and the Young's Literal Bible. The KJV says that He "made himself of no reputation," as does the NKJV.

The verb *ekenosen* can also carry the sense "to pour out." That sheds light for rather than suggesting that Christ emptied Himself of something, Paul seems to be pointing out that Christ *poured out Himself*, which speaks of His self-denial. Simply put, Christ *demoted* Himself, an English term which means, "to lower in rank."

And how did He lower Himself? The next two modifying phrases in verse 7 tell us how He did it.

1. *He took the essence of a servant.* Paul here repeats the same term found in verse 6, *morpha*. He who is the *morpha* (essence) of God (6) poured out Himself by taking the very *morpha* (essence) of a servant (7).

I don't know about you, but if I was God and was going to enter the world, I would have at least chosen to take the position of someone important. But that was not God's purpose. He came to give, to minister. He assumed the very essence of a servant.

That's not all. According to the next phrase...

2. *He became a man.* "Being made in human likeness." He became like us. He didn't merely become part man and part God. He wasn't 50% man and 50% God. Nor did He merely take the *appearance* of a man, as some false teachers have wrongly asserted, suggesting that Christ never actually became a man, but as a spirit only used a human body as a shell to transport him about.

No, no. God's Word says He became a man. Granted, He didn't stop being God, but in the incarnation He who is equal with God became a man.

Do you believe that? Think about a statement from the well known Christmas hymn, “The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, But little Lord Jesus, *no crying he makes.*”

Is that true, *no crying He makes?* William Hendriksen poses the question, “Should it not be assumed that a normal baby cries at times, but that in the case of Jesus this crying, too, like everything else, was ‘without sin’?”²

Certainly baby Jesus cried. We know He wept as an adult (John 11:35), just like He got hungry and felt fatigue. He became a *man*.³

The Bible doesn’t ask us to “figure out” how Christ could be both God and man. Our tiny minds are incapable of it. But the Bible does call us to affirm its truth by faith.

In His incarnation, Christ denied Himself and demoted Himself. But there’s more.

C. He deprived Himself (8). “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” He *humbled* Himself, a verb which means “to make low.” How did He do it? Again, Paul uses two modifiers to show us what was involved when Christ humbled Himself. First...

1. *He exhibited ultimate obedience.* Specifically, He “became obedient to death.” Paul speaks of Jesus’ death as an act of *obedience*, and it was. Jesus was so obedient to His Father that He was willing to take the ultimate step of obedience to something His Father told Him to do. He lay down His life.

But this was no death with dignity. Rather, in humiliation...

2. *He died on a cross.* He died the worst imaginable death to first century ears, death by crucifixion. “He became obedient to death—even *death on a cross!*”

Such was unthinkable for the upstanding Philippians. A Roman citizen couldn’t be crucified, no matter how horrible his crime. Yet Christ not only left heaven and died, but He chose to die the *worst kind of death*.

Please don’t miss the connection here between the incarnation and the cross, for we need to see Christmas in light of God’s redemption plan. Before time began, God the Father chose to form a people for the praise of His glory. It would be a people that He would transform into the very likeness of His Son. But in order for sinners to ever resemble His Son, these sinners would need to be *saved from their sins*.

Why did Jesus humble Himself and become man? Philippians 2 doesn’t tell us why. But John 17 does. There, in His high priestly prayer, Jesus explains the purpose of His incarnation: “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (4-5).”

So for what reason did Jesus say He became a man and came to earth? To *complete the work* the Father gave Him to do. What work? The work of redeeming the people His Father had chosen. And how would He redeem them? By becoming a man and dying in their place.

And so He denied Himself, demoted Himself, and ultimately deprived Himself, dying as a sin-bearer on the cross. That’s what happened when Christ left heaven.

² William Hendriksen, *Philippians*, p. 111.

³ In case you’re wondering, “Is Christ’s humanity really important?” Absolutely! Hebrews 2:14 states, “Since the children have flesh and blood, *he too shared in their humanity* so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.” And verse 17, “For this reason he *had to be made like his brothers in every way*, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”

But praise God, that's not the end of the story! Sadly, some people know Jesus only as a lowly babe in a manger and not as the pre-incarnate Christ. Still others know Him only as One who *died*, yet a dead Savior cannot save sinners.

Something happened after He died, and here it is.

D. He was exalted by God (9-11). Please notice the past tense verbs in verse 9, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name..."

God *exalted* Him. God *gave* Him the greatest name. These events have already occurred. When? Three days after Jesus died, God vindicated His Son by raising Him from the dead. And forty days later, Christ ascended to His Father's right hand in heaven where He is today. Today Christ has the greatest position and the greatest name in the universe. They are His because His Father gave them to Him.

For what intent were they given? Verses 10-11 tell us. "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."

That's significant. Why did Christ come to earth?

1. *The ultimate purpose of the incarnation isn't our gain.* Oh, we do gain, without question. Because of what Christ did, we who believe in Him receive eternal life. But the fact that we gain is secondary.

2. *The ultimate purpose of the incarnation is God's glory.* It's so that... "every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord *to the glory of God the Father.*"

So there it is, my friend, the real message of Christmas. In coming to that Bethlehem stable the Sovereign Lord of the universe denied himself, demoted himself, and deprived himself, in obedience to His Father, who consequently demonstrated His pleasure with His Son by exalting Him and giving Him the highest honor available. That's what Christmas is all about, the real message of Christmas.

But the question is, how can you tell if someone really believes that? How can you tell if you really believe in Christmas? By saying you do? No, words can be empty. By putting out the nativity set? No, that's external.

The Bible says there is an indicator, a proof, an evidence. What's the test?

We find the answer in verse 5, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." That's it, my friend. The attitude that Christ exhibited when He came to earth should be seen in us.

What does that mean in practical terms? That's what Paul just explained in verses 1-4, and it's the very reason he gave us this teaching about Christ's incarnation. So let's back up in the passage. We've just seen what Christmas meant for Jesus. Now let's...

II. Consider what Christmas should mean for us (1-4).

Because God became a man we have two things explained for us in verses 1-4.

A. Because God became a man, we have resources (1). What are these resources? Paul lists them in verse 1, "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..."

Four times Paul says "*if*" in this verse. Why? He wants the church to ponder its assets. *If* you have encouragement from being united with Christ—is encouragement something you have? *If* you have been united with Christ, then you have encouragement.

If you have comfort from His love—do you have comfort? Has the love of Christ changed your life? It had for the readers in Philippi.

If you have any fellowship with the Spirit—do you have that? Has the Spirit of God brought you into communion with God? Sure He has, if you're a believer in Christ!

If you have any tenderness and compassion—do you tenderness and compassion? That will be seen. Where? In the way you treat other people, as Paul is about to explain.

The point is, because God became a man, we have life-changing resources.

That truth makes all the difference. I was talking with someone who'd been struggling in life. As we conversed it became apparent why. The person acknowledged he was not right with God and confessed he needed to change. I presented Christ as his only hope. The Spirit of God was at work and the man called out to God, acknowledging his sin and received Christ as his Savior.

*Can that man now change? Absolutely, and it's the same reason you can change if you know Christ. Because God became a man we have *resources*.*

What's more...

B. Because God became a man, we have responsibilities (2-4). Jesus said, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you...love one another." A prime indicator of whether you know Christ is how you treat His people.

In verses 2-4 Paul maps out three responsibilities we have towards each other.

1. We are to think right about each other (2). "...then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." Paul wrote this to church members living in Philippi. His counsel applies just as well to church members in Wheelersburg. We're supposed to *think right* about each other. What does that involve?

First, we are to have the same mind. The verse says we're to be "likeminded." And it literally says, "Think the same thing." Quite honestly, this takes a ton of work. Why? Because we don't naturally think the same. You have your opinions. I have mine.

If we're going to think the same way, must we become clones? No. How then can different people have the same mind? By doing this. By resolving to think the same way our Savior did when He left heaven and came to earth, *to think like a servant*.

Second, we are to have the same love. Have you ever noticed how when two people love the same thing it brings them together? I'll give you an example. Anybody who loves Star Wars in this room? Do you know any others? A person who loves something makes it known and soon finds out who else loves what he loves. Their mutual love gives them common ground for conversation, for being together.

Now answer this. Is there anything or anyone that all of us in this church love? There sure is! We love the same Savior, don't we? And when a group of people love the same person, that mutual love brings them together.

Third, we are to have the same purpose. In fact, Paul says we are to be "one in spirit and purpose." Though we are many we have but *one purpose*. What purpose is that? It's the purpose that caused the Son of God to leave the splendor of heaven and come to this sin-infested world. It's the glory of God. Paul applied this purpose to the Corinthian church members in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

This is life-changing truth. If a group of people will work hard at thinking right about each other, if they will work hard at having the same mind, the same love, and the same purpose, do you know what will happen? Yes, their relationships will get stronger, but

something even more important will occur. The world will begin to see people who *really believe that God became a man.*

But right thinking is not the end. Because God became a man...

2. *We are to do right towards each other (3-4).* Paul shifts from thinking to doing in verse 3:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.” Selfish ambition must go, the "what I want is more important than what you want" attitude. Vain conceit must go, too, the "I know what's best for this church and no one else does" way of thinking.

Those two things--selfish ambition and vain conceit--will kill unity in a church (or any organization). We must do nothing in the church marked by selfish ambition and vain conceit. What's the positive alternative?

“In humility consider others better than yourselves.” What does that mean? I don't know LeBron James' spiritual condition, but just suppose he is a Christian and a member of this church. Suppose we played a pickup game together. Does this command, “Consider others better than yourselves,” mean LeBron is supposed to say, “I can't play ball as well as you, Brad. You're better than I am. You take the shot.”?

Does this verse mean that someone with a beautiful voice is supposed to respond, when she's thanked for her ministry in music, “Oh, I just can't sing as well as you.”? No. That's false piety, if not a down-right lie. The truth is, God has gifted us differently. We are better at certain things than others, by His design.

So what does it mean to consider others better than yourselves? The issue is our motive. Our motive must be the good of the team, not our own good. It's to put the spotlight on others, not ourselves, all to the glory of God.

For LeBron James to have this attitude means he's going to put his own interests aside, and pour his energies into the good of the team. He's going to be willing to turn down shots if that's what the team needs.

This verse says to the person gifted in music: “I'm not singing for man's applause. In fact, if my name isn't listed in the church program and if people don't pat me on the back, I'll still be glad to sing because my motive is the glory of God and the good of the team.”

Bear Bryant, the University of Alabama's late football coach claimed that being a good team required three ingredients:

If anything goes bad, then I did it.

If anything goes semi-good, then we did it.

If anything goes real good, then you did it.

That's all it takes to get people to win football games for you.

The emphasis on doing right continues in verse 4:

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests” That's hard to do. As sinners, we're wired to focus on self and even as saved sinners we struggle with being self-focused. When we miss church, we're bothered if others don't notice. When we're hurting, we're aggravated if nobody calls to check on us. Our natural tendency is to want to focus on our own interests.

We're not to do that, to look only to our own interests...

“But also to the interests of others.” It's a powerful thing when a congregation of people are constantly asking, “What's in the best interest of my brothers and sisters in this church? What would be best for my Sunday School classmates, or our teens, or our

shutins? What do they need and how can God use me to accomplish what's in their best interest?

When we all do that, do you know what happens? Not only do we experience true biblical fellowship, but we also send a message to the on-looking world, a message spoken not with words but with deeds, a message that says, "We believe that God became a man. We *really* believe it."

Again, Paul sums it all up in verse 5. Because God became a man...

3. *We are to resemble Christ with each other (5)*. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

To focus on others rather than self is what Jesus did, isn't it? When He left heaven, His focus was on pleasing His Father and rescuing us. When He became a servant, when He made himself nothing, when He became a man, He did it with our interests in mind. When He became obedient to death, even death on the cross, it was for our benefit, was it not?

If He who is the Master denied Himself for us, can we His servants do less? No. Beloved, this is how you know if you really believe that God became a man. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

Application: A couple of questions...

1. *Do I really believe the Christmas story?*

Perhaps you've never put your total trust in Jesus Christ. Why not now? And if you have professed faith, consider this. Do you *really* believe? In other words...

2. *Am I really living like it?*

Is there a selfish attitude you need to confess and forsake? Is there a person in need that God wants you to help? Is there a brother you need to forgive, or to seek forgiveness from? Will you do it? You have all the resources you need if you have Christ. Now walk in His steps.