

Main Idea: Philippians 2:1-11 is a perfect Christmas text, for in it we see so very clearly “The Humble Savior,” and the difference His humility should have on us.

- I. 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. 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).

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves two important questions...

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

It's a privilege to gather on this Christmas morning and worship our Savior together. I'd like to take us to a passage you may not at first associate with Christmas. But I think it's a perfect Christmas text, for in it we see so very clearly “*The Humble Savior*,” and the difference His humility should have on us.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

In our world pride is celebrated. People flaunt what they have and accomplish. Athletes do it all the time. So do business owners. And parents. And grandparents. “Look at me! Look at what I did!”

But pride is tricky. Sure, the athlete who complains that his 20 million dollar a year salary doesn't do justice to his talent has pride issues. But so do we all.

The truth is, pride is blinding. “This fact is why it is often difficult to see pride in ourselves, and yet so easy to see it in others,” as Stuart Scott remarks. Dr. Scott offers a helpful list to help us spot pride.

One, I am proud when... I fail to be grateful (2 Chron. 32:25). “This food stinks,” says Johnny to his mother. “Why do I have to eat it?” A proud person, instead of being grateful, thinks he deserves better in life than what he has. That goes not only for food, but for cars, for jobs, for houses, families and more. The complaint, “My family doesn't appreciate me,” may be true but they may also be an indication of the pride notion, “I deserve a family that appreciates me.” Proud people tend to be critical, complaining, and discontent.

Two, I am proud when... I look down on others and show little tolerance for differences (Luke 7:36-50). Proud people have little tolerance for differences. How do

** 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 To see earlier messages from this edifying text, please see the sermons preached at WBC 12/4/05 and 12/13/15.

you respond when you see a young person with dyed purple hair and a tongue ring? Whether he or she should have those isn't the issue right now (the purple hair and tongue ring could well be indications that this young person has a proud heart—he or she wants attention). But if I look down on that young person, I have the same heart problem, which is *pride*.

And the list of indicators goes on and on.

I am proud when I...

3. *See myself as being indispensable (1 Cor. 4:7)*. Proud people have a distorted view of their importance. “This place would fall apart if I wasn't around.”

4. *Focus on my abilities OR on my lack of them (1 Cor. 12:14-25)*.

5. *Have to be perfect (Matt. 23:24-28)*.

6. *Talk too much (Prov. 10:19)*.

7. *Am consumed with what others think (Gal. 1:10)*. A person can be very quiet, not because they are considerate of others but because they don't want to “say something stupid” that would cause others to think poorly of them. Is that pride? Yes, once again it's a self-focused activity, in this case a self-focused *non-activity*.

8. *Resist or become angry when criticized (Prov. 13:1)*.

9. *Fail to be teachable (Prov. 19:20)*.

10. *Fail to show compassion (Matt. 5:7; 18:23-35)*.²

I'll go so far as to say this. *Pride is our greatest enemy*. It's why Lucifer forfeited heaven, and Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and why you and I have gone our own way rather than God's time and time again. There's a statement that appears in three different places in the Bible, first in Proverbs 3:34, then is quoted in the New Testament in both 1 Peter 5:5 and in James 4:6. Here's the statement...

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Unpack that. God opposes, He stands against, He is the enemy of. Who? *The proud*. Which refers to all of us, unless what? We cast off pride and become humble. It is to the humble that God gives His unmerited help.

So if pride is our greatest enemy, and I believe it is, then humility is our greatest need. But what exactly is humility? What does it look like? And how do we obtain it?

Back in 2004 we took our daughter Julie to a summer class at college and participated in a parent-student orientation. One of the sessions began with an interesting exercise. The parents watched as the professor divided the students into four groups. He then gave each group a jigsaw puzzle to put together and at his command, each group started assembling their puzzle. It was fun watching the young men and women learn how to work together in accomplishing their task. Something interesting happened. Three of the groups finished at about the same time, but one of the groups finished far ahead of the others. It became obvious why. The professor had given one of the groups the box-top for the puzzle that showed a picture of the finished product. While the other groups had to guess what the finished product would look like, the group with the picture knew exactly what their work was supposed to produce.

Is it possible to assemble a puzzle without the box-top-picture? Sure. It just takes longer. It sure makes the process easier if you can picture the intended outcome.

When it comes to humility, God has kindly given to us the box-top picture. Humility is not an abstract concept. It's a person lying in a manger. And according to Philippians

² Adapted from list in *From Pride to Humility*, by Stuart Scott, pages 6-10.

2, by gazing intently at that box-top-picture, we become different. We must become different, or we've missed the point of Christmas.

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. As I preach this message, I'd like to invert the order. I'd like for us to see what Christ did first, and then back up and consider the implications for our lives.

I. What Christmas meant for Jesus (6-11)

In the ESV, "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so 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."

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? For Jesus, four humbling experiences.

A. He denied Himself (6). "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (NIV)." 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 ESV says, "Who, though he was in the form of God." The Greek term is *morpha* which can mean "outward appearance" or "shape." To say that Christ existed in the "nature/form" 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 Mormon teaching), 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 the Son's attitude. He 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 we should know 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. 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 these privileges? Here's a good test. *Are we willing to give them up?*

Did Christ have privileges? Oh yes. But He denied Himself. And He didn't stop there.

B. He demoted Himself (7). The NIV says, "But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." The ESV puts it this way, "But emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

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 several 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 90 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 NIV 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 ESV says that Christ "emptied Himself," as does the 1890 Darby Bible, the RSV, the American Standard Bible of 1901, 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’?”³

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*.⁴

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 (NIV)!”⁵

Here’s the box-top-picture. Look carefully. He *humbled* Himself. This verb means “to make low”. That’s what Christ did. He made Himself low.

And in specific terms, how did He do it? 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.

There’s a lot of talk these days about *dying with dignity*. My friend, this was no death with dignity. To the contrary, this was death with humiliation. How so?

2. *He died on a cross.* He died the worst imaginable death to first century ears. Death by crucifixion. Such a death was unthinkable to the upstanding people of Philippi. 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, *even death on a cross!*

Please notice the connection here between the incarnation and the cross. We must see Christmas in light of the rest of God’s redemption plan.

In eternity past, before there was time and the universe in which we live, there was only God. In the beginning, God. And before the beginning, the Triune God designed and decreed a plan. God the Father chose to create a people who would exist for the

³ William Hendriksen, *Philippians*, p. 111.

⁴ 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.”

⁵ The ESV says, “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

praise of His Son's glory. It would be a people that God the Holy Spirit would transform into the very likeness of His Son.

But these would not be good people who would deserve this privilege. To the contrary, they would be rebels who would transgress His Law, and deserve His wrath.

How would this undeserving, rebellious people ever resemble His Son? There would be only one way. These sinners would need to be *saved from their sins*.

Why did Jesus humble Himself and become a man? Philippians 2 doesn't tell us why. But in John 17, Jesus Himself does. There, in His high priestly prayer, the Lord Jesus talks to His Father about the purpose of His incarnation, and says, "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)."

What was the reason Jesus said He became a man and came to earth? To *complete the work* His Father had given Him to do. What work? The work of redeeming (a word that means "to buy back" someone through the payment of a ransom) a people, the very people His Father had chosen and given to Him.

And how would He redeem them? He would do so by becoming one of them, and then dying in their place.

Thus, He denied Himself, demoted Himself, and ultimately deprived Himself, dying as a sin-bearer on the cross. That's what happened to the One who left heaven.

Sadly, some people know Jesus only as a babe in a manger and not as the pre-incarnate Christ. Still others know Him only as the One who *died*, but that doesn't far enough. What good is a dead Savior? A dead Savior cannot save sinners. He's dead! He can't do anything.

But this One is not dead. 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 has given 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, if we have repented and believed in Him, 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.*"

My friend, this is the real message of Christmas. When He came 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 the real message of Christmas.

Do you believe that message? Do you believe in this person, the humble Savior?

But this raises another set of questions. How can you tell if someone really believes? How can you tell if you really believe the message of Christmas? It is by *saying* you believe? No, words can be empty. Is it by going to church on Christmas day? No, though good, that's merely external.

The Bible says there is an indicator, a proof, an evidence. What is it?

We find the answer in verse 5, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." There it is, my friend. We show that we truly believe in Christ by exhibiting the same attitude that He exhibited when He came to earth.

How do we show it? 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 now, let's back up in the passage. We've just seen what Christmas meant for Jesus. Now it's application time.

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

In the ESV, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

There are two implications of Christmas. We have *resources* and *responsibilities*.

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? Indeed, 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. And this reality 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 person 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 must 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 must 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 must 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. He says, "**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."

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 prideful 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 shut-ins? 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."

Make It Personal: Let's ask ourselves two important 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.

Closing Song: #145 "*O Come, All Ye Faithful*" (all three verses)