

JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

Philippians 2:5-11

As we continue our journey through the Apostles' Creed, I invite you to open your Bible to **Philippians 2:5-11**. For the last few Sundays, we've been considering what we believe about God the Father. Today, we turn our attention to God the Son: *"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord."* Jesus is **God the Son**, God incarnate—the God-Man. God in human flesh. God with a face. God we can see without dying at the sight of him. God reveals himself generally in nature and in the human conscience. God reveals himself specially in the Scripture. But God's highest revelation of himself is in Jesus Christ. Listen to the first three verses of Hebrews 1:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. God has appointed him heir of all things and made the universe through him. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The Creed says, *"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord."* The first creedal statement in the history of the church is **"Jesus is Lord"** (Rom 10:9). This is the testimony of the Scripture. John's gospel tells us that after a season of doubt, once the disciple Thomas saw the resurrected Christ for himself, he fell on his face at Christ's feet and called him, *"My Lord and my God"* (Jn 20:28)? But nowhere is the testimony more beautifully stated than in our Philippians text. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

Philippians is one of Paul's most personal letters. He writes it from a Roman jail. Some years before, Paul planted the church at Philippi in Lydia's house. He suffered beatings and imprisonment there till God sent an earthquake that shook the jail's foundations and set the prisoners free. Paul and his partner Silas promptly led their jailer to Jesus and baptized his whole

family. Of course, Paul never lights for long, so he was off to other places. And now we find him in jail again for preaching the gospel.

The Philippian church heard about this, took up **an offering** for him, and sent Epaphroditus to carry it to Paul. In response, Paul writes this beautiful letter. A letter filled with joy and thanksgiving. A letter trying to encourage unity in a church that had gotten a bit sideways with one another. A church that was being pressured by some false teachers claiming every man needs to be circumcised. So **Paul sent a letter** to encourage them in the truth and point them toward Christ. *“For me, to live is Christ,”* Paul wrote in 1:21. And after mentioning his worldly accomplishments, Paul wrote in chapter 3 that all his religious success is like dung compared to *“knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”* (3:7-8). And in 3:10 he declares, *“My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings”* Philippians is full of Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus in Paul. Jesus in the church. Jesus on every page of the letter. Jesus as the church’s Savior, Lord, and example.

And that brings us to our text. **Paul calls the church to unity around the example of Jesus.** As Paul begins chapter 2, he instructs them to put away selfish ambition and conceit, to think of others more highly than themselves and to look out for the interests of others. But he doesn’t just exhort this behavior, he paints them a picture of Jesus as the example of selfless behavior.

II

More than a picture, Paul tells Jesus’ story. *“Adopt this same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,”* he writes. And what attitude would that be? Paul explains in maybe the highest, most majestic picture of Christ in the New Testament.

Paul begins by introducing us to **the pre-existent Christ:** *“Who, existing in the form of God.”* The participial form of the verb *existing* or *being* indicates that Christ has always existed. Christ is not a created being. He did not get his start as a baby in Bethlehem. He is God. He has always existed. There has never been a time when Christ was not. Christ was, is, and always will be.

And he has always existed ***“in the form of God.”*** The Greek word for *form* denotes form or shape but not in terms of external features by which something is recognized: like the lady with the big nose, the guy with scar on his cheek, the house with the sagging front porch. The word *form* is not about external features. It means that which truly characterizes a given reality. Christ who was known as truly human in history had prior existence in the form of God—not meaning that he was *“like God but really not God,”* but that **he was characterized by what is essential to being God.**¹ Jesus is not a second-class God, an under-God, an apprentice God. As we learned when we talked about Trinity, Jesus *is* God. One God in three distinguishable persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, coequal in majesty and glory. Jesus is God’s only Son. He is the Son of God. He is God. He has existed before time and through eternity.

But as Paul goes on to say, Jesus *“did not consider equality with God as **something to be exploited.**”* There is much debate on the exact meaning of the term the CSB translates *exploited*. But here’s the gist of it: being in the form God, being God, Christ did not choose to seize upon equality with God **to his own advantage**. When Trinity set forth the plan of salvation, Jesus Christ did not balk at doing his part: *“But I’ve got it so good in heaven. Why would I want to lower myself for a bunch of sinners, most of whom won’t appreciate what I do for them? Can’t we find another way?”* None of that, says Paul.

*“Instead, **he emptied himself** by assuming the form of a servant ...”* There’s debate over the term *emptied* too. This does not mean Jesus became God-lite when he became a man. It does not mean that he gave up his divine attributes to come to earth. As Gordon Fee puts it: *“Christ did not empty himself of anything; he simply ‘emptied himself,’ poured himself out.”*² He emptied himself like the last drips from the coffee pot. And this is the very nature of God. God is not selfish. He does not look out for his own interests at the expense of others. He is not conceited, doesn’t consider himself too good to rub shoulders with sinners and tax collectors, with Pharisees and Roman centurions, with you and with me. He pours himself out for the salvation of

¹Much help in this interpretation from Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 204-205.

²Ibid, 210.

humankind to last drip and drop of his precious blood for your salvation and mine. **That's who God is:** holy, self-giving love. Jesus makes that clear in *"assuming the form of a servant."* There's that word *form* again. It means that Jesus was characterized by **what is essential to being a servant**—a person with no advantages, rights, or privileges. A person in servanthood to all. Jesus assumed the form of a servant ...

"Taking on the likeness of humanity." In doing this, Jesus never ceased his *"equality with God."* The word *likeness* is the key to understanding this. Jesus became a man. He came in the "likeness" of a man, meaning he fully identified with us yet was not "human" only. He was God living out a truly human life. So this is what it means for Christ to be equal with God—to pour himself out for the sake of others and to do so by taking on the role of a servant in the likeness of humanity.

III

Paul describes what that looks like in the rest of v. 7 and v. 8. *"And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross."* Jesus didn't come part way down. He came all the way down. He humbled himself.

He **left an arena** in which he was comfortable, worshiped, loved, and glorified to enter an arena in which he would be born to Jewish peasants in a musty stable, his first bed a donkey's feeding trough. He humbled himself.

He who in heaven **knew no suffering**, no lack, no pain, would feel hunger and thirst, feel weary and tired, hit his thumb with a hammer, or stub his toe in the night. The words *tired, thirsty, hungry*, and *ouch* would become part of his vocabulary. He humbled himself.

He who is Lord **acted in obedience** to the Father's will even when it was painful and terrifying. He humbled himself.

He **endured** the temptations of the devil, the rejection of his hometown, the criticism of religious leaders, the mocking of those who didn't understand him, the wrath of Roman government, the hard steel of Roman nails driven with malice and violence into his hands and feet on a criminal's cross, and the bearing of your sins and mine in his body.

He who always existed **died**. He traded the glory for the gory, the crown for the cross, the throne for a tomb. He humbled himself.

And **he did it willingly**. Nobody dared him. Nobody forced him. His only motive was self-giving, sacrificial love. He humbled himself. God is great. God is good. God is humble. Chew on that for a while.

Henry Mitchell did and pictures it this way³:

In the halls of heaven, God the Father called a conference one day to review the progress of communication with the human beings on planet earth; reports were given. There was a report given on the patriarchs, but the report was so-so. There was another report given on the judges, but it was not good. There was another report on the kings, and it was worse. There was a report on the priests and a final report on the prophets, and all of them somehow failed to adequately communicate God to man. At the close of the report—the evidence that all had failed—God looked to his right. *“It's time,”* God said to his Son. And his Son Jesus said, *“I'll go. I'll close the gap; I'll try to reconcile them. I'll use the method we conceived in eternity: I'll go in their likeness. I'll go sit where they sit.”*

“And if they sit in temptation, I'll sit in temptation.” Somebody said he was tempted in all things like as we (Heb 4:15).

“If they sit in hunger, I'll sit in hunger.” And they all record that after 40 days of fasting, he hungered (Mt 4:2).

³Adapted from Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 9.

"If they sit in thirst, I'll sit in thirst." And on the cross, he said, *"I thirst"* (Jn 19:28).

"If they sit under a cloud of misunderstanding, I'll sit under a cloud of misunderstanding." And somebody reported that he looked up wistfully one day after many had turned their backs on him and said to his disciples, *"Will you all go away also?"* (Jn 6:67).

"If they sit in sorrow and tears, I'll sit in sorrow and tears." And the shortest verse says that *"Jesus wept"* (Jn 11:35).

"If they sit in deep depression, and if they feel abandoned by God himself, I will sit where they sit." And from the cross he cried, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Mt 27:46).

"And if they sit in death, I'll die too ... for them, carrying their sins on myself." And the gospel writer records that from the cross, *"Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed his last"* (Mk 15:37).

Listen again to **our text**:

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross (Ph 2:5-8).

But this is **not the end** of Jesus' story.

IV

Death does not get the last word on Jesus. A dank, dark tomb sealed by a stone is not his final resting place. Paul writes on:

For this reason, God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Ph 2:9-11).

Jesus died. But Jesus **didn't stay dead**. He got up. On the third day, he walked out of that grave with all power and authority in his nail-scarred hands. Take that, Sin! Take that, Death. Take that, Grave. Your very existence is on the clock. Because Jesus Christ has crushed you, killed you, and when he comes back to earth again, he will vanquish you forever.

The Father vindicated the Son and exalted him so high he could not exalt him higher: resurrection on the third day, ascension on the fortieth day after making many appearances so his followers would know he lives and he is Lord, and now Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father in the glory he left to come down and save the likes of you and me.

Jesus carries the **name above all names**, the most excellent name, the only name by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12), the name at which every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. That's going to happen on the last day. Those who rejected him will declare that he is Lord. Those who hated him will declare that he is Lord. Those who ignored him will declare that he is Lord. Those who love and follow him will declare that he is Lord. But we don't wait till the last day. We declare him Lord today!

Lord—boss, ruler, Sovereign King, large and in charge. Jesus is Lord! Lord of heaven, Lord of earth, Lord of all. I wish I could help you understand this. Does your life reflect that Jesus is Lord or is that just a little too much Jesus for you? Does this description by Wilbur Rees describe your relationship to Jesus as Lord?

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant

worker. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.⁴

Is that all of Jesus you want? Jesus on the cheap. About 3 bucks worth of him? You want him as advisor but not Lord, as trouble-fixer but not Lord, as a soft mattress to land on when you fall but not Lord? Jesus is Lord ... period.

Jesus is not your personal life coach, your co-pilot, your partner in fulfilling your personal dreams, or a co-star who makes cameo appearances in your own play; Jesus is Lord.

Jesus is not a culture-warrior, a political revolutionary, a philosopher, or just a good example for you to try to follow when it fits your personal views; Jesus is Lord.⁵

That means Jesus doesn't just get his *say* in your life, he gets his *way* in your life. Our **best response** to the lordship of Jesus is not, *"I refuse,"* or *"Let's negotiate."* The best response is, *"I surrender. Wherever you lead, I'll go. Whatever you ask, I'll do."* Put your yes on the altar, and Jesus takes it from there.

V

It is a great adventure—an adventure so few Christians experience because they will say *"Jesus is Lord,"* but they will still try to run their own lives their own way on their own terms. That's just an adventure in frustration, moments of temporary joy that drains quickly when things don't go your way. Get in on the adventure of following Jesus as Lord.

Here are some ways to take the first steps.

⁴Cited by Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve: The Art of Unselfish Living* (Waco, TX: Word, 1981), 29.

⁵Adapted from Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 25.

First, **get to know Jesus**. Spend a lot of time in the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Listen to things Jesus says. Watch how he treats people. Take note of the things he values. And spend time with people who follow Jesus as Lord. Read Acts. Read the New Testament letters of Paul and Peter and James and John. Spend time with them. And spend time with people you know who follow Jesus as Lord. They are not perfect people. They don't bat 1000, but they want to. And when they fail, they repent and step back up to the plate. Get to know Jesus.

Second, **take on his character**—the character Paul describes in our text: humility not arrogance, thinking of others more highly than self, a servant spirit, and obedient attitude. Paul tells us to *“adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.”* Take on Jesus' character. Let him grow that in you more and more and more.

Do this third thing too: **Seek Jesus' guidance** at every turn, every decision, every opportunity. I'm not talking about asking Jesus if you should eat the fish or the chicken, wear the red shirt or the blue. I'm talking about larger things, things that involve relationships and values and direction. Ask Jesus about these things: *“Jesus, what do you want me to do? Jesus, where do you want me to go? Jesus, what is your will for my life in this matter?”* Seek Jesus' guidance, and act on what he tells you .

And do this fourth thing: **embrace your sufferings**. I did not say, *“Seek suffering.”* I am saying, *“Embrace your sufferings when they come.”* Don't rebel against them. Don't kick against them. Don't dive into an extended stay in the Land of Self-Pity. Meet Jesus in your sufferings. He suffered. If you follow him as Lord, you will suffer too from time to time. Embrace that suffering. Receive it as the gold receives the refiner's fire, as the clay receives the pressure of the sculptor's hands. Receive it because suffering is not the last word on your life. When you know the Lord Jesus in the power of his resurrection, you have the strength and hope to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. Fellowship of his sufferings: temporary. The power of his resurrection: eternal. Embrace your sufferings.

These are the steps toward living with Jesus as Lord of your life. Bend your knee and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, then get up and live like it. It's a great adventure.

V

Are you in? A pastor friend of mine tells about a report on MSNBC about a group of new vegetarians. They interviewed one of them, a twenty-eight-year-old named Christy. One of her quotes captures the viewpoint of this group. She said, *"I usually eat vegetarian. But I really like sausage."* She represents a growing number of people who eat vegetarian but make some exceptions. They don't eat meat unless they *really* like it. Apparently real vegetarians aren't happy about the new vegetarians. So they pressured the new vegetarians to change their name. Here's the name they chose for themselves: flexitarians. Christy explains it this way, *"I really like vegetarian food, but I'm just not 100 percent committed."*⁶

You know any **flexitarian Christians**?

- *"I really like Jesus, but I don't really like serving the poor, I'm not real big on going to church, and I spend my time and money the way I want to."*
- *"I like Jesus all right, but don't ask me to save sex for marriage, don't ask me to forgive the person who hurt me."*
- *"I follow Jesus, but don't ask me to humble myself, sacrifice my ambitions, consider others more highly than myself, and serve others with self-giving, sacrificial love."*
- *"I love Jesus, I sure do, but I'm not 100% committed."*

They call themselves Christians, but they are **flexitarian Christians**. They make their own exceptions. They may bow their knee and confess with their tongue that Jesus is Lord, but their lives tell a different story.

⁶ From a sermon by Drew Hill, "An Invitation to Follow," Memorial Baptist Church, Arlington, VA (Sept 15, 2013).

According to **our text**, the pre-existent, humble, incarnate, servant, crucified, resurrected, ascended, exalted, reigning, returning Son of God, Jesus Christ, is Lord. Whether you believe it or not, whether you acknowledge it or not, whether you yield to him or not, Jesus Christ is Lord. He is our Savior. He is our model for humble, servant, self-giving love. He is Lord.

You can **joyfully confess** him as Lord today. Or you can **grudgingly confess** him as Lord at the judgment on the last day. The Apostles' Creed declares, "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.*" Anybody can say that. True believers live that and do so to the glory of God the Father. Put away your self-centered, wishy-washy faith, and yield to Jesus Christ the Lord.

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John S. McCallum II