

Text: Phil. 2:5-8

Title: "The example for local-church unity"

Time: 9/12/2021

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our men had a good time together meeting for prayer Tuesday morning. At one point the conversation turned to a surprising blessing that comes to our church through the empty pews of our Sunday morning service. We realized together that if we had a full house on Sunday morning, we might have a pastor with a pride problem.

I had to confess that the Lord has used our struggle as a ministry to deal with my pride, and that without those dealings I would be a very different man. Still, I told the guys that I would like to give the full-house thing a try anyway. We enjoyed a sanctified chuckle together. Those are encouraging times on Tuesday morning. As I thought about that conversation later, it occurred to me that it is a wise thing to assume always that pride could be a problem.

Paul assumes in our passage that pride could be one of the problems local-church unity faces. In the first four verses, he describes the joy of Christian unity, and he explains that achieving that takes work because things like our natural human strife, pride, and selfishness must be overcome.

Where can we look to see what that looks like? This is the question Paul answers in our passage this morning, vv. 5-8. Paul says look to Jesus. He is the example of the humility of local-church unity. We certainly all know the value of a good example. Some of us have had dads or moms who were good examples to us, and so we have tried to follow their example. Others look elsewhere for the wisdom of a faithful example. I can say that the pastors I have had

throughout my life were godly examples to me, and I am thankful for them.

But to whom would you look for a perfect example of perfect humility? That can be hard to find. Our men know not to look to me for that. In my own experience, the more people have provided that example for me, the older and feebler they were. I remember our founding pastor, Bob Poole, as an example of humility, but I only knew Brother Bob in his years of poor health and dependence on others. Life under those circumstances brings humility to the life. But Pastor Poole's example is no longer accessible to us.

The good news of this passage is that we have the example of Christ to guide us into the humility we need to experience the joy of local-church unity. Paul commands believers, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus*" (v. 5). That verb is used in an opposite way in 3:19, where Paul is describing the enemies of the cross of Christ, who "*set their minds on earthly things.*"

So in our passage, Paul is commanding believers to set their mind on what Jesus set His mind on. He then explains what Jesus set His mind on so that we can follow His example. Jesus set His mind on humility (v. 8). I want us to see three things about the example of Jesus's humility this morning.

I. Jesus's humility was the humility of Almighty God (v. 6a).

Illustration: Dizzy Dean was a Hall of Fame baseball pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals and Browns, after which he became a popular baseball broadcaster. He is the last National League pitcher to have won 30 games in a season. "Ol' Diz"

was know for his brash confidence. He is famous for giving us the quotation, "It ain't bragging if you can do it."

Application: Well, as I read our passage, I am going to have to disagree. I actually think it is the reciprocal of that quotation that carries some weight. I think it more accurate to say, "It ain't humility if you cannot do it." I have never boasted that I won 30 games for the St. Louis Cardinals in a single season. But that is not humility, of course. For Dizzy Dean to not say so, that would be humility.

Now if we think of all the Jesus Christ is and does, which He never bragged about, we will begin to understand the reality of His humility. Jesus's humility was the humility of Almighty God. As He walked this earth, Jesus was omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent – and humble.

When Paul describes Jesus as "*being in the form of God,*" he uses a present tense verb. Paul's meaning is that Jesus is currently in the form of God, even now, these few years after His death and resurrection. The form of God is not merely a *was* for Jesus, nor just a *shall be* for Him, but an eternal *is*. Jesus exists eternally in the form of God.

Illustration: In English, when we say *something is in the form of a thing*, we understand that it may not actually be that thing. For example, we might say a car that has been smashed by a wreck is in the form of an accordion, but we still know it is a car, not an accordion.

It is important to understand that the Greeks did not use the word *form* this way. One of the famous messages on this passage was titled "The Imitation of Christ," and it was preached by Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, a Princeton theology professor who taught in the early 20th century.

He explains what Paul meant by “form” in this passage: “‘Form,’ in a word, is equivalent to our phrase ‘specific character.’ If we may illustrate great things by small, we may say, in this manner of speech, that the ‘matter’ of a sword, for instance, is steel, while its ‘form’ is that whole body of characterizing qualities which distinguish a sword from all other pieces of steel, and which, therefore, make this particular piece of steel distinctively a sword. In this case, these are, of course, largely matters of shape and contour. But now the steel itself, which constitutes the matter of the sword, has also its ‘matter’ and its ‘form’: its ‘mater’ being metal, and its ‘form’ being the whole body of qualities that distinguish steel from other metals, and make this metal steel. . . .

“So too, with God: the ‘matter’ of God is bare spiritual substance, and the ‘form’ is that body of qualities which distinguish Him from all other spiritual beings, which constitute Him God, and without which He would not be God. What Paul asserts then, when he says that Christ Jesus existed in the ‘form of God,’ is that He had all those characterizing qualities which make God God, the presence of which constitutes God, and in the absence of which God does not exist. He who is ‘in the form of God,’ is God” (*Person and Work of Christ*, 566-567).

So, the humility of Jesus, our example, was the humility of God. What does this teach us about what our humility should be? If nothing else, it should teach us that our humility should come to us much easier than Jesus’s humility came to Him. And yet, how we struggle to be humble! Humility comes much harder for us than it did for Jesus, who is God. We must understand that our struggle with humility is never due to our goodness or to the idea that we deserve better, but always due to our sinful heart of pride.

II. Jesus's humility was the humility of a servant (vv. 6b-7).

Illustration: Jesus's public mediatorial ministry as the Messiah began with His baptism. His ministry was uniquely Spirit-filled. You may remember that after Jesus's baptism, He was led of the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where after a 40 day fast, he was tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1-11). The last thing the devil offered Jesus was the kingdoms of the world. Right then and there, Jesus could have seized His rightful honor as the God of this world.

Application: But Jesus refused because He was not only everything that makes God God, but also everything that makes a servant a servant. A servant like Christ determines to live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. A servant like Christ would not tempt the Lord, His God, nor would He bow down and worship Satan.

I believe that this is the episode Paul is referring to when he notes that Jesus "thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (see Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 253-264). The phrase literally tells us that He did not try to seize equality with God the Father, when Satan offered Him the kingdoms of this world.

Instead, Jesus "made Himself of no reputation." That phrase literally says that He emptied himself. Paul is thinking of the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecies, of whom the prophet wrote: "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Jesus poured Himself out. He emptied Himself of His own soul, His own life, His own ambition, what Paul

calls in verse 4 His “own things” (Phil. 1:4). He did so that we might be saved, “taking the form of a servant, having been made in the likeness of man.”

So one of the lessons of our Lord’s example of humility is that Satan is going to try to get us to seize our own things, and when that happens, local-church unity will fail. Satan seeks to destroy church unity by having us seize our things.

What can we do when a brother or sister has succumbed to the temptation of putting his own things ahead of following the example of our Lord’s humility? Paul tells Timothy what to do: “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth, and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will” (2 Tim. 2:22-26).

Jesus’s humility was the humility of a sacrificing servant, and we must follow that example.

III. Jesus’s humility was the humility of obedience (v. 8).

Illustration: As we read those words this morning, “even the death of the cross,” we are able to glance up to the front of our sanctuary and notice the architectural beauty of the cross hanging there. We may think of the cross as a beautiful piece of decorative furniture, or a piece of golden jewelry that hangs around our neck. These may come to our minds when we read, “even the death of the cross.”

Application: But we must remember that neither architectural beauty nor beautiful ornamentation came to mind when the Philippian believers read the words, “even the death of the cross.” I think the phrase sent chills down their spine. It may have made them a bit nauseous. Every time I see a guillotine, I cannot help but imagine what it would be like to be hit by one of those, or a noose – what would it be like to hang from one of those? Perhaps the Philippians heard the word cross and wondered what it would be like to be nailed to one of those.

Paul wants the Philippian church to come to grips with the fact that the example of Jesus’s humility is an example of obedience, and that this kind of obedience involves severe suffering at times. Disobeying is safer, but Jesus’s example teaches us that it is also prideful. To obey is humble; to disobey is prideful.

In addition, humble obedience is very difficult. Jesus never said it would be less than this. He told His disciples very plainly, “And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). This is the path to Calvary.

Jesus set His mind on humble obedience, and we must look to His example and seek to be like Him. “Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1-2). Only by following this example can our local-church be a unified church.

Conclusion: As we conclude this morning, perhaps you feel a bit overwhelmed like I do. Imagine a 7-foot basketball

player showing you how to reverse dunk a basketball and then asking you to follow his example, and you get a bit of an idea of what I feel like when Paul says, “Set your mind on what Jesus set His mind on.” Perhaps you feel this too.

But then I remember that it was the Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the enemy to seize the pride of His own interests. It was the Holy Spirit who helped Jesus in the weakness of His human flesh to resist that temptation and gain the victory. That same Holy Spirit helps us as well (see Paul’s example – Acts 20:24).

We can follow our Savior’s humble example of obedient servanthood if we yield our lives to the Holy Spirit’s control every day. If we confess our pride and selfishness, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The gift of repentance can be ours for the asking here this morning. Let’s set our minds on humility like Jesus did. Humility starts here. The more we become humble believers, the more unified our church will be.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*