

## ***Philippians 6***

“Three Great Changes”

08/01/2010

***Philippians 2:5-11***

### **INTRODUCTION**

My study of this morning’s text has dispatched my thoughts on two additional journeys back in time – one to the dusky realms of pre-history; the other to a more recent time in a more local place – and brought to mind two incidents which set examples of personal pride and arrogance alongside the attitude of authentic humility.

Many of you know that I took a U.S. history major at George Mason University (lo, these many years ago), and that I retain an abiding interest in that subject. I was born and raised in northern Virginia and moved my family to central Maryland in 1987. Both regions have a rich history in conjunction with that most pivotal period of U.S. history – the War Between the States. American texts and history professors often describe Robert E. Lee, commander-in-chief of the Confederate army, and Ulysses S. Grant, his counterpart in the U.S. Army, as completely different from one another in lineage, personality and demeanor, and so they were. But to my own mind the two most dramatically opposite characters of the Civil War were President Abraham Lincoln and General Grant’s predecessor, George B. McClellan.

Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe, in his short commentary on ***Philippians***, opens his chapter on today’s sermon text with this observation, one which is affirmed in every book I have ever read about our 16<sup>th</sup> President:

“During the American Civil War, General George B. McClellan was put in charge of the great Army of the Potomac, mainly because public opinion was on his side. He fancied himself to be a great military leader and enjoyed hearing the people call him ‘a young Napoleon’. However, his performance was less than sensational. His most consistent strategy had been, for months and months, avoiding every opportunity to engage the enemy in battle. President Lincoln then commissioned him General-in-Chief, hoping this would get some action; but still he procrastinated. One evening Lincoln and two members of his cabinet went to visit McClellan, only to learn that he was at a wedding. The three men sat down to wait, and an hour later the general arrived home. Without paying any attention to the president, McClellan went upstairs and did not return. Half an hour later, Lincoln sent the servant to tell McClellan that the men were waiting. The servant came back to report that McClellan had gone to bed!

“His associates, who knew of McClellan’s lack of respect for the simple, self-educated president and despised his insufferable attitude of self-importance, were furious at this latest slight. Lincoln merely got up and led the way back to the White House. ‘This is no time to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity,’ the president explained. ‘I would hold McClellan’s horse if it helps him to bring us success.’ This attitude of humility was what helped to make Lincoln a great man and a great president. He was not thinking of himself; he was thinking of his country, and was willing to serve in any way he could in order to hasten the awful war to an end.”

- Warren W. Wiersbe: *Be Joyful*

Long before the time of Lincoln and McClellan, long before the time of the apostle Paul, long before **Genesis 1:1** – back to “the dusky realms of pre-history”, another being filled with pride and arrogance existed. His name was Lucifer; we refer to him most often as Satan. The brief, poetic account of his brazen effrontery and resultant expulsion from the presence of Almighty God is recorded in **Isaiah 14:12-15**:

*How you are fallen from heaven,  
O Lucifer, son of the morning!  
How you are cut down to the ground,  
You who weakened the nations!*

*For you have said in your heart:  
“I will ascend into heaven,  
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;  
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation  
on the farthest sides of the north;  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,  
I will be like the Most High.”*

*Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol,  
to the lowest depths of the Pit. (NKJV)*

In his pastoral exhortation to the church at Philippi – toward their mutual affection, sincere humility and harmonious unity – the apostle Paul sets forth an extraordinary declaration about the condescension and exaltation of Jesus Christ which stands exactly opposite the preening conceit and catastrophic downfall of Lucifer described by the prophet Isaiah. In so doing, Paul has composed a doxology celebrating the Incarnation of our Lord that has resounded in the Church for two millennia, one which, writes John MacArthur:

“...is a Christological gem, a theological diamond that perhaps sparkles brighter than any other in Scripture.”

- John D. MacArthur: *Philippians*

Before we consider this awesome text, let us pray.

### **LESSON: *Philippians 2:5-11***

1. It is tempting to delve scholastically into this famous passage of Scripture, one of richest summaries of the doctrine of the Incarnation in all the Bible, one which has intrigued and exasperated theologians for many centuries by what Paul has written about the Incarnation and by certain words he has employed in his description of it.
  - a. Why, in v.6, does Paul say Christ was “*in the form of God*” instead, simply, that Christ “was God”?

b. Why all the awkward English translations of the original Greek in the second part of v.6?

(1) the pre-incarnate Christ “*did not consider it robbery to be equal with God*” (KJV)

(2) the pre-incarnate Christ “*did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*” (NASB, also, with some slight variation, NIV, ESV)

(3) the pre-incarnate Christ “*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited*” (RSV)

c. What is meant in v.8 by the phrase “[Christ] *emptied\* Himself*”? Did He somehow rid Himself of His divinity in order to become incarnate? Was He, therefore, not fully divine during His incarnate lifetime?

\*the exact meaning of the Greek verb rendered most often in English Bibles as “*humbled*”

d. Why in v.7 does Paul describe Christ’s incarnation as “*in human likeness*”? Why not “*in full humanity*”, or something like? Doesn’t this choice of words allow for the possibility that Jesus was not, in fact, fully human?

2. The debates rage on and on – in seminaries, divinity schools, and in thousands of pages of commentaries and textbooks – and these questions are intriguing. But I have decided to save them for some future classroom venue, *D.v.*, choosing instead to contain our musings this morning within the context of what I believe to have been Paul’s intent in writing this letter. Remember, in v.1-4 he is NOT formulating a profound theological treatise; he is expressing pastoral concern for the well-being of the church in Philippi, and exhorting that congregation accordingly.

“As profound and unfathomable as the passage is theologically, it is also ethical. As the introductory words – *have this attitude yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus* – makes clear, it is primarily designed to motivate Christians to live like their Lord and Savior.”

- MacArthur: *Op. cit.*

a. Paul wanted to make sure that his good friends in Philippi understood that **unity** is the critical component of the corporate health and missional effectiveness of the local church.

b. He wanted them to learn that the members’ genuine **love** for one another is the critical component of corporate unity.

c. And he wanted them to comprehend that authentic **humility** – voluntary selflessness on the part of the individual members – is the critical component of genuine love.

3. And so, in v.5, Paul points the church at Philippi to Jesus, and that is where I seek to point this church on this day.

“What Paul says in effect is that ‘this attitude of mind I have been urging on you is exactly that of God Himself, as it has been spelled out in the incarnation’.”

- Gordon D. Fee: *Philippians* (The NIV New Testament Commentary series)

“He presents the supreme, unparalleled example of humility to serve as the most powerful motive to believers’ humility. The Incarnation calls believers to follow Jesus’ incomparable example of humble self-denial, self-giving, self-sacrifice, and selfless love as He lived out the Incarnation in obedient submission to His Father’s will.”

- MacArthur: *Op. cit.*

- a. The pre-incarnate Christ was God (**John 1:1-5**), possessor of every divine characteristic attributed to our heavenly Father described in Scripture.
- b. Yet He considered His eternal place and status – His unassailable right to all that was due Him in accordance with His deity – entirely *disposable* for the purpose of sacrificial service to the divine covenant of grace initiated by God, by which He had voluntarily bound Himself to sinful mankind for the purpose of the salvation of all those who would repent and draw near to Him by means of faith in Christ. The self-humiliation of God the Son to the status of *bond-servant* issued forth in a sequential descent.
  - (1) He somehow divested Himself of whatever it was about His being and His status in the eternal realm that might prevent His incarnation (Let’s leave it at that!);
  - (2) He became incarnate – human. By means of a miraculous virginal conception, He was brought forth from the womb of a Nazarene teenager as a human infant. He grew to manhood as carpenter’s apprentice, still fully God but also fully human, a preternatural state so singular and complex as to defy any cogent explanation from even the wisest and most devout scholar. Christians accept this profound proposition as absolute truth on the authority of Holy Scripture entirely by faith, enabled by the Holy Spirit to do so.
  - (3) He “*obediently humbled Himself even further*” (NIV), willingly submitting to the verdict of an unjust legal proceeding and to the most fearful, despised and scandalous form of execution known in the civilized world: crucifixion.

“No one in Philippi, we must remind ourselves, used the cross as a symbol for their faith; there were no gold crosses embossed on Bibles or worn as pendants around the neck or lighted on the steeple of the local church. The cross was God’s – and thus their – scandal.”

- Fee: *Ibid.*

“In the world Paul shared with the Philippians, this was the lowest that one could stoop socially. Crucifixion was the cruelest form of official execution in the Roman empire, and although a Roman citizen might experience it if convicted of high treason, it was commonly reserved for the lower classes, especially slaves.

“Thus it is no surprise that Paul found the message of the cross to be “*a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*” (1 **Corinthians 1:18, 23**). Christian apologists in later centuries had constantly to explain to their detractors the meaning of this offensive, yet central, part of their proclamation, and that some who called themselves Christians tried to play down its significance or to eliminate it altogether with the claim that their Savior did not actually die on the cross. When Paul adds to the statement that Christ emptied Himself by taking the form of a slave the comment that He humbled Himself by becoming to the point of death on a cross, therefore, he has taken the nature of Christ’s selfless denial of His rights to new depths. Christ went from the highest position imaginable to the lowest precisely because such selfless love was an expression of His deity.”

- Frank Thielman: *Philippians* (The NIV Application Commentary series)

- c. In v.9 Paul’s teaching takes a sudden turn, directing his readers to the exaltation of Jesus Christ initiated by God the Father:

*Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place  
and gave to 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 confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.* (v.9-11, NIV)

“The final picture we have is of Jesus again on the throne of heaven. Four times in His ministry\*\* Jesus spoke the text: “*Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted*”. And Jesus lived the text. His own life is the greatest example of that principle.”

- James Montgomery Boice: *Philippians*

\*\* **Matthew 18:4, 23:12; Luke 14:11, 18:14**

## LESSONS

1. Only two of the “three great changes” alluded to in the title of this sermon are recorded in ***Philippians 2:5-11***:
  - a. the change wrought in God the Son upon his voluntary condescension from One who was “*in very nature God*” to One who “*made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness*”;
  - b. the change made when God the Father exalted Him who died a shameful death on a cross to “*the highest place, and gave Him the name that is above every name*”.

2. The third change is the one which is wrought in the sinners who give their hearts to Jesus Christ, receiving Him by faith as their Saviour and then following Him as Lord. In some ways this third change is even more dramatic than the first two.
  - a. When a person comes to God through faith in Jesus Christ, he or she is given the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Christians have for centuries held different understandings of just how and when this indwelling takes place, but nearly all believers affirm the Bible's declaration that it does so.
  - b. When the Holy Spirit begins His own unique work in the believer, that change, however gradual and halting, produces a change which the apostle Paul elsewhere describes as a metamorphosis – a complete *transformation* from a self-centered sinner into a “new creation” in Christ Jesus: a person whose life's focus is narrowed and centered ever more intently on the “resurrection life” of a disciple of Christ; a person who is ever more able to resist the temptations of the flesh; a person who is ever more willing to live, love, worship and serve as a fully functional part of His body, the Church – brought into unity not by compatibilities in age, tradition, or doctrinal specifics, but by the mighty power of God through the Holy Spirit, with our eyes fixed “*on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*”.  
 ref: *Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:11-16; Hebrews 12:2*
3. How critically important that the Church looks constantly to Jesus! How crucial that this church refuses to take a single cue from the value systems of this fallen world and instead focuses its didactic and ethical teachings on squarely on Jesus Christ! How necessary it is for each of us in this congregation to set the meaning of His birth, life, death and resurrection far above all other doctrinal convictions, to surrender our lives to His lordship, and to follow His example inside and outside of the walls of this fine old building.
4. Believers: Have you done that? Will you do it? Are you willing to humble yourself in this way, as an act of sincere worship, an expression of love for your brothers and sisters in Christ, and for the purpose of unity and ministry in this church? You've given your mind to Christ, perhaps many years ago. But have you given Him your heart? This, Beloved, is the single most selfless and humiliating gesture possible: the complete surrender of one's will to the persuasion of God's Holy Spirit, and to the definitive, transformational re-orientation of one's life after the pattern demonstrated by our Lord as set forth in ***Philippians 2:5-11***.
5. You who have never repented of your sin and given your life to Christ: will you receive Him by faith this morning, turning away from your sinful past and present and vowing to follow Him, with the help of God, for the rest of your life? A brand new life and a glorious eternal future await all who, during the days of their lives, would humble themselves, bow the knee, and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, *solī Deo Gloria. Amen.*