

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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The Servant Who Is Lord

Philippians 2:1-11

Key verse: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

Philippians 2:1-11 is one of the key passages in the New Testament, both for what it says about Jesus Christ and for what it says about the call to follow Christ.

“The birth of Jesus itself was of the humblest peasant parentage, in an unimportant town, and in the roughest of buildings. He made a career of rejecting marks of status or privilege: He loved lepers, washed the feet of his disciples, befriended little children, encouraged women to join his entourage, and, finally, submitted to crucifixion by a foreign power” (from *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* by Eugene Peterson).

This Jesus, writes Paul to the church in Philippi, was “in the form of God.” These words in verse 6 are also translated “in very nature God.” Paul is clearly affirming that Jesus Christ is *fully God* and, in fact, had “equality with God.” But Jesus did not consider his equality with God “something to be exploited,” meaning something to be greedily held on to.

Instead, Jesus “emptied himself” (v. 7). By this Paul means that Jesus laid aside not his divinity, for He never quit being equal with God, but Jesus gave up the *position, power, and glory* that were His because He was God.

Steven Smith gives an illustration of this truth in his book, *Dying to Preach*: “Imagine that you are visiting a hospital. You cannot find a parking place close to the hospital, so you park way in the back, and now you are lost. You stop another driver in the lot to ask directions, and he kindly says that he will just park beside you and walk with you to where you need to be in the hospital.

“Now suppose that as you get to the front of the hospital, you find out that this man is actually the chief surgeon of the hospital. And, as you near the door, he adds, ‘Oh, yes, and this is my parking place.’ He had a superior advantage because of his status. However, in deference to your needs, he did not take his rightful parking spot but walked with you the whole way. So here is the question: As he was walking with you, did he stop being a doctor? No. Did he have a parking place? Yes. He had all of these things and at any time could have laid hold of those things and used them, but for your sake he just chose not to in that particular moment.”

In a similar way, when God became a human being, He did not quit being God. He put aside for a while his privileges and rights as God, so that He could know, love, and save lost people. Yet, Paul affirms in this great passage, that Jesus Christ was and is *fully God and fully man!*

This *emptying* of God in Christ, first mentioned in verses 6-7, is demonstrated in its ultimate form by Jesus' death on the cross. "He humbled himself," writes Paul, "and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross" (v. 8). In the first century Roman world, death by crucifixion was not only one of the most painful methods of execution, it was also one of the most degrading. So, for Paul, Christ's emptying and His humility find their ultimate expression in His willingness to die on the cross in order to save a lost and broken world.

In verses 9-11, Paul describes the exaltation of Christ that comes as a result of His humility and obedience. God has "highly exalted" Jesus and given Him the "name that is above every name" (v. 9). At the name of Jesus, "every knee" will one day bend (v. 10). And at the name of Jesus, "every tongue" will one day "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (vv. 10-11).

This passage, then, is exceptional for what it tells us about Jesus Christ but also for what it tells us about *the call to follow Christ*. In fact, Paul begins with the reminder that Christ-followers are to be people of "love," "compassion," and "sympathy" (v. 1). As followers of the Servant who is Lord, we are to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than" ourselves (v. 3).

Paul's entire description of the *emptying* and exaltation of Christ is a challenge to us who follow Christ. "Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (v. 5).

As Jesus refused to grasp for *rights, status, and power* (v. 6), we are called to the same kind of self-emptying.

As Jesus took "the form of a slave" (v. 7), we who follow the Servant who is Lord are called to lead through humble service.

As Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (v. 8), we who bear the name of Christ are called to die to *pride and self-centeredness* so that God can use us for His kingdom purposes.

James Plueddemann shared an experience that taught him about the value of servant leadership. As a high school student, James was working at a Christian camp under the supervision of a Christian man named Hiram "Hi" Johnson:

"One day," James writes, "we worked until dark trying to finish a staff house before the camp season started. My shirt was soaked with sweat, and my hands blistered from shoveling sand around the foundation. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself when Hi strode around the corner of the building. He watched what we

were doing for awhile and then quietly reminded us that the staff who were moving into this house would be a big help to the camp.

“Then he said something that I will never forget: ‘Your shoveling will, in the long run, be used of the Lord to bring a lot of campers to Jesus.’ We started shoveling with a renewed sense of purpose. Now we were not just a bunch of dirty, sweaty high school kids tired of shoveling mud. We were instruments of God Almighty to bring people to himself. What a lesson in leadership! Our view of the task shifted from shoveling sand to building the kingdom” (from *Leading Across Culture* by James Plueddemann).

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