**CHRISTMAS SERMON**

**THE HUMILITY OF GOD**

**Philippians 2:1-11**

**INTRODUCTION**

Last week I had the privilege of spending five days in Louisville, Kentucky attending a class at the Sovereign Grace Pastors’ College. Pastor Tim and I, along with another friend from a church in the area, drove 12 hours there and back to hear Dr. Douglas Moo teach on Pauline theology. It was an incredible experience. I was struck again and again throughout the week that here we have *the* leading authority on Paul, not just in the US, but *in the entire world* teaching *us*, a ragtag group of pastors. This man had spent an entire lifetime applying his exceptional intelligence to studying the thought of the Apostle Paul. I must admit that there were times whChrien words were coming out of his mouth but my brain wasn’t processing those words because his concepts were way above my head. However, I had enough moments of lucidity and coherence to say that I came away with a rich storehouse of biblical truth. He made me love the Apostle Paul even more than I did before, and that’s a beautiful thing, because it means that he helped me grow in my love for God’s Word.

The exceptional quality of Dr. Moo’s teaching would have made the week worthwhile in itself, but what impacted me equally as much was Dr. Moo’s evident humility. This is a man bordering on genius, a generational talent among academics, and yet, he didn’t do anything to bring attention to himself or lift himself up above us. Instead, he consistently and intentionally brought our attention to the greatness of others, even when he was speaking about people he disagreed with. If you went into his class not knowing anything about the breadth and depth of his scholarship, you would have thought that he was just an average academic instead of one of the most highly respected minds in the world.

And so, as I listened to Dr. Moo throughout the week, it occurred to me that this isn’t just a man who has studied the Apostle Paul. This is a man who has been *changed* by the Apostle Paul. The rich truths he has gleaned from a lifetime of study have made him into a different man than he could have been if all his study had just gone to his head, but it hasn’t. By the grace of God, it has gone to his heart.

That’s my hope today as we spend some time looking at the Apostle Paul ourselves. More specifically, we are going to look at what Paul says about humility. Humility is the forgotten virtue of Christmas. Everyone knows that Christmas is about generosity. We give gifts to one another, and make special donations to soup kitchens and homeless shelters because Christmas reminds us to be generous with what we have. That’s a good thing. But as we celebrate Christmas and grow in generosity, we also want to grow in humility, because Christmas is about becoming more and more like our humble God who humbled himself to become man.

The title of this message is **The Humility of God**. My aim today is to show you that **Christmas is the Key to True Humility.**

We will have three points today:

1. The Need for Humility
2. The Key to Humility
3. The Greatness of Humility

(1) **THE NEED FOR HUMILITY**

Paul is writing this letter to the church in Philippi, which was the leading city in the Roman province of Macedonia. Luke tells us in Acts 16 that Paul was the one who planted this church. The church began as a very diverse group of people. It had wealthy merchants like Lydia, a “seller of purple goods” and her household, it had a slave girl who was once possessed by a fortune-telling demon that Paul cast out from her, and it had a middle-class jailer along with his family, a man who went from guarding Paul to joining Paul as a follower of Christ. The church no doubt grew from these early stages to draw in more people with more diverse backgrounds as the gospel spread in this urban context.

If the church was known for anything, it was its generosity. Paul commends them in Chapter 4 for being the only church that “entered into partnership” with him by giving him financial gifts to support his missionary work. He also mentions them in 2 Corinthians 8, Paul’s famous chapter on generosity, and says that though they were in a state of “extreme poverty”, their joy in Christ overflowed in a “wealth of generosity” as they willingly gave beyond their means to support the church in Jerusalem. In short, this was a thriving church. It was a gospel-rich church, and they displayed the gospel by uniting people from diverse backgrounds and overflowing in generosity to others.

That’s one of the reasons why Paul writes with such profound gratitude for this church in this letter. He wrote this letter while he was imprisoned in Rome, which is something he mentions multiple times in Chapter 1. He is a religious prisoner of Caesar himself because of his belief that Jesus Christ died and rose again, and now calls people everywhere, Jews and non-Jews, rich and poor, kings and slaves alike, to believe in Jesus and worship him. And yet, despite his imprisonment, he has occasion to rejoice, because of the faith and generosity of the Philippian church.

But in the midst of his gratitude for them, he has one concern for them, and it’s found in verse 3. Paul tells them to “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.” It appears that some relational friction was beginning to build within the church because of what one commentator calls “internal posturing” (Gordon Fee). Some people in the church were starting to become arrogant. They were starting to posture themselves as being superior to others. They believed that they were better than others, and they wanted everyone else to know about it. The sad result of this is that they were becoming selfish people, which is always the evil fruit of arrogance. The prouder you are, the less you care about others, because you’re too busy caring about yourself.

This is fatal to community in whatever form. It doesn’t matter if you’re talking about a church, a family, or a country. Once arrogance and selfishness enter a community, they spread like deadly poison to fracture relationships until the community slowly dies away.

We see this happen all the time. A few weeks ago, I was picking up three of my kids from school along with a couple of their friends who live near us. Five kids in one vehicle. It’s usually a great time. They make up games together, they tell each other stories, and they laugh a lot. But on this particular day, no one could agree on the game they were going to play. One group of kids wanted to play “baby” where one kid was a baby and everyone else took care of her. The other group wanted to play rock paper scissors. When the first group insisted on playing baby, the second group said “Fine, we’re not playing.” Just like that, no more talking. Where there had been laughter, there was only silence. Where there had been smiles, there were only frowns. Their normally happy, united community had been broken.

Why? Because of *selfishness*. The kids were only looking to their own interests, not the interests of others. They only wanted to play what they wanted to play, and weren’t willing to consider what the others wanted to play. To their credit, as soon as I pointed this out, they accommodated each other right away, and they were back to being a happy little group of kids again.

What happens to kids happens to adults as well, except it’s worse with us, because we’re prouder, we’re more stubborn, and we don’t forgive one another nearly as easily. We remember offences. We hold grudges. And when those grudges stretch on for days and weeks, then months and years, relationships break down and communities slowly die away as laughter turns to silence, and smiles turn to frowns.

That’s not what the church is meant to look like. Jesus said that the world would know that we are his disciples by our *love* for one another. The moment we stop living as a loving community is the moment we stop living as a Christian community.

That’s why Paul takes selfishness so seriously. Think of all the things Paul could have asked the Philippians to do while he was in prison. “Do whatever you can to get me out of here! Start a petition! Organize a rebellion! At the very least, pray for my release!” He doesn’t ask for any of that. Instead, the one thing he asks them for is *unity*.

Verses 1-2: “If I have encouraged you spiritually, if you’ve received comfort from my love, if we share in the same Spirit, if you have any affection and sympathy for me while I suffer in prison, then do this one thing! Be *united.* Be of the *same mind*. Have the *same love*. Be in *full accord and of one mind*.”

And what kind of mind is that? It’s a mind of *humility*. Verse 3: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in *humility* count others more significant than yourselves.” Stop lifting yourself up as superior to others, and start lifting others up as superior to yourself! How? It starts with the mind. It starts with your thoughts. We all know how easy it is to mentally compare ourselves to others. When we walk into a room, whether it be at work, school, church, or home, we start sizing other people up. “How smart are they? How educated are they? How wealthy are they? How attractive are they?” And as we size them up, the reference point we use is ourselves. “Are they smarter than me? Are they as wealthy as me? Are they as attractive as me?” And in our proud, arrogant minds, our answers to those questions are so often “No, no, no. I’m smarter. I’m more attractive. I’m more *important*.”

Paul says that’s conceit. That’s arrogance. That’s the kind of selfishness that kills communities. That mind of arrogance needs to be replaced with a mind of humility.

What’s more, Paul says that a humble mind leads to humble actions. Verse 4: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” If you think more highly of other people, you’ll do more to care for them. It really is simple. If you’re always caught up in how great you are, you’re not going to spend much time caring for other people. But if you’re constantly thinking about the greatness of others, you’ll naturally want to do things that honour them. Care for them. Lift them up. You’ll speak about them in ways that make others admire them. That’s what humility looks like. That’s what a humble mind does.

This is what we need to live in healthy, loving community with one another. It’s what our families need, it’s what our churches need, and it’s what our world needs. We need humble minds that count others as more significant than ourselves and that consider the needs of others above our own.

(2) **THE KEY TO HUMILITY**

That’s our need for humility. Sounds simple enough, doesn’t it? Just change the way you think about others and you’ll be fine! We all know, however, that it’s not that simple. We can’t just become the people we want to be by flipping a switch. It takes work, it takes time, and as we will see, it takes a power that we don’t possess within us. This leads to our second point: The Key to Humility.

What is the key to humility? If Paul were a self-help guru, he would transition from telling us about our need for humility to giving us five tips to cultivate humility in our lives. “Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Write someone you find difficult to like an encouraging letter. Spend an entire day encouraging people rather than correcting them.” Those are all helpful tips, and they may help you think humble thoughts for a time, but none of them will bring any lasting change. We need something much more powerful than that.

Thankfully, Paul isn’t a self-help guru. He’s a pastor, and as a pastor, he knows that the key to right living is right thinking about God. A lot of people think that theology is just for big wigs and egg heads, the “smart” people who like to do a lot of thinking and not much else. But that’s simply not correct. Theology is eminently practical. We see this again and again in Paul’s letters. He writes about how to forgive one another. How to be patient. How to raise your family. How to care for your spouse. How to rejoice in trials. How to be content in times of trouble. Paul wants to change the way we *live*, and to do that, he lifts our minds above our circumstances and earthly lives to think about God: who he is, and what he has done in Christ to save us.

That pattern is no different here. As Paul leads us to contemplate how to grow in humility, he lifts our minds above who we are to think about who Christ is. Verses 5-7: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

For those who know the Christmas story, you’ll know that these verses are about. They’re speaking about what lies at the heart of Christmas: God himself became man. The eternal one entered time. The omnipotent one became a helpless baby. The divine one became a human being, born of a virgin and laid in a manger in a little town called Bethlehem.

This is the greatest mystery the world has ever known or will know. As J.I. Packer remarked, it’s greater than the mystery of the cross. It’s greater than the mystery of the resurrection. The mystery of the *incarnation* – God taking on human flesh – ought to make us tremble with wonder and awe.

That’s not often what we feel at Christmas though, is it? We have become so familiar with the humanity of Christ that we haven’t paid sufficient attention to his divinity, and yet ironically it is only by paying attention to his divinity that we can truly appreciate his humanity. And so, we would do well to linger here a little more this Christmas, meditating not only on the Word who became flesh, but the Word who was with God and was God in the beginning.

Scottish theologian Donald MacLeod describes the divine Christ beautifully when he writes:

“He possessed all the majesty of deity, performed all its functions and enjoyed all its prerogatives. He was adored by his Father and worshipped by the angels. He was invulnerable to pain, frustration and embarrassment. He existed in unclouded serenity. His supremacy was total, his satisfaction complete, his blessedness perfect. Such a condition was not something he had secured by effort. It was the way things were, and had always been; and there was no reason why they should change.” – *The Person of Christ*

This is what we are to remember when we think about Christmas. This is what we are to remember when we read in verse 6 that Christ was “in the form of God”, because only then will we be appropriately affected by the words that follow: he “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” There was no reason why the way things were for Christ should change, but they did when he left his world to enter ours.

Why did he do this? Was it just to walk among us, relate to us, help us relate to him? Not at all. Paul tells us in verse 8: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

The cross lies at the center of Christ’s coming into the world. The purpose of his life was his death, because only his death could give us life. You see, our problem isn’t just that we have broken relationships with one another. Our ultimate problem is that we have a broken relationship with God. The selfish ambition, conceit, and arrogance that we all have to admit to aren’t just character flaws. They are *sins*, acts of rebellion against a Holy God that call for God’s Holy retribution. But in his great mercy, God sent his only Son into the world to die on the cross for our sins, paying our penalty on our behalf, so that those who trust in him will be saved from God’s justice and brought into a loving relationship with him.

And so, we see how Jesus Christ demonstrated perfect humility. He counted us as more significant than himself, so much so that he was willing to lay down his life to save ours. He looked not only to his own interests, but to ours, when he considered that we would suffer God’s eternal justice and decided to do something about it. Jesus Christ is the humble God who humbled himself in his life and in his death so that we could be saved.

This is the key to humility. Christ’s humility is the only way we can become truly humble people, because it’s not just about knowing the right things. It’s about transformation. When we put our trust in Jesus, we become fundamentally different people. Paul says in verse 5, “Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours in Christ Jesus*”. We already have the mind of Christ. He’s given it to us through our union with him, so that the process of becoming humble is simply becoming who he has already made us to be.

(3) **THE GREATNESS OF HUMILITY**

We finish our text with a bit of a surprise ending, as Paul reveals to us the true value of humility. It doesn’t just bring people together in loving community. It catches the attention of God himself. This leads to our third and final point: The Greatness of Humility.

What makes someone great? When we say that someone was a “great man” or a “great woman”, what are we referring to? I think many of us would say that one’s greatness is determined by the scope of one’s accomplishments. Businesspeople who build multi-million dollars company from scratch are called great. Politicians who brought meaningful change during their term are called great. Philanthropists who donate lots of money are called great. Again and again, greatness as we define it is determined by the scope of one’s accomplishments. The more you do, the greater you are.

That may be how we define greatness, but it’s not how God defines it. Paul shows us how God defines it in verses 9-11 when he says, “Therefore” – that is, in light of Christ’s humility in becoming man and dying on a cross – “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above very name, so 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.”

What makes someone great? *Their humility*. True greatness is determined by the measure of your humility. That’s why God recognized Jesus as great by exalting him and giving him the name that is above every name, so that every knee should bow before him and every tongue confess that he is Lord. Jesus is great because he’s *humble*.

It’s an ironic but powerful truth. God lifts up those who lower themselves. God honours those who honour others. God exalts those who exalt others, because that’s what true greatness looks like. Those who are humble are great, and since none were humbler than Jesus, none will be greater than him. As Jesus himself said,

“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” – Luke 14:11

**CONCLUSION**

As we close, let me end by asking you a question. What are you living for today? Everyone is pursuing greatness in one form or another. Some of us may define greatness in relation to our work. We’re striving to become great by obtaining a prestigious job or position. Others define greatness in relation to our families. We believe that if we can only marry this kind of person, or if our children become that kind of person, then we’ll finally be great.

If you struggle with knowing how you’ve been pursuing greatness, just think back over the past year and ask yourself what you spent the most time pursuing. Was it a better job? Was it certain kinds of relationships? Was it more wealth? Was it more knowledge? Whatever it is that we’re pouring out our lives for reveals what we think is true greatness, and if that thing isn’t *humility*, then we’ve got it all wrong.

You can spend your life making as much money as possible. You can pour out your life into raising the perfect family. You can even spend a lifetime studying the Bible and gaining deep theological insights. If you’re pursuing any of those things more than you’re pursuing humility, you haven’t yet understood what true greatness is.

This Christmas, God wants you to commit yourself to the pursuit of humility, to the mindset that considers others as more significant than yourself, and to a life that looks not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. God wants you to commit yourself to becoming more like Christ. If you’re a Christian today, the good news is that you already have the mind of Christ. It’s yours as God’s gracious gift to you. You don’t need to get this mind from somewhere. You just need to grow into it, and the only way to do that is to know Jesus more. Read the Christmas narratives in Scripture. Read books about the incarnation. Pray regularly for growth in humility, and find practical ways to honour and serve others.

And if you’re not a Christian, God’s Word to you today isn’t “make yourself humble so that you can come to me.” It’s “come to me so that I can make you humble.” Don’t put the cart before the horse. You need the mind of Christ before you can become like Christ. And so, today, God is inviting you to come to him, just as you are, in all your selfishness and pride, so that he can forgive you, save you, and change you into a truly great person.