

## Let's Marvel at the Christ of Christmas Christmas Sermon 2019

**Thesis:** Jesus changes how we think about God and embodies everything God intended for human beings. We start from Jesus himself and we rethink our whole picture of God and of ourselves.

**Text:** Philippians 2:1-11

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:1-11 NIV).*

Think about what Paul is saying in Philippians 2:1-4. Is it even possible to begin to think that we can live the way Paul says here: thinking the same, loving each other completely, regarding everyone else (and their opinions) as superior to myself and my own? If so, how is that possible?

Most of us just read over passages like this one in Philippians and we basically ignore it, because it seems impossible.

Think about it. Church people have differences on everything. There are big theological differences, hurts and wounds that divide people, clashes over leadership styles, arguments on issues of moral behavior and politics, and radical variations in styles of worship. We also have different opinions on what the church is supposed to be and what the church is to do.

Is what the Lord describes in this passage about unity possible?

## **Let's use a different mental model to picture what is possible.**

Picture this scene with me this morning, You are seated here, watching an amazing play. You watch spellbound as the actors move at what seems like the speed of light. It is a complex and intricate play, with many layers and double or triple meanings. At times things are happening so fast all around the stage, that it seems more like a circus act than a play. Everybody has to know exactly where to be and what to do so that the next move works out right, and the next, and the next. It is like watching a highly complex piece of machinery with all its cogs and wheels working together in perfect harmony.

That's a bit like what Paul is urging on the little church in Philippi. On stage, the actors are not out for their own individual glory at each other's expense; if one single actor tries to steal the limelight from the others, the whole thing would fall apart. It only works because everyone is working together with the same vision.

That's how the church should be, too.

Is what the Lord describes in this passage through Paul possible? The answer must be that everyone has to focus on something other than themselves; and that something is Jesus Christ himself, the king, the Lord, and the good news which has come to take over the world in his name.

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## **Unity Among Believers**

1. **The motivation for unity** (Philippians 2:1).
  - a. *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion... (Philippians 2:1 NIV).*
  - b. First, we should want to live this way because all Christians know the comfort that comes from belonging to the king's family, from being in Christ, in the Messiah.
  - c. Second, in addition to the comfort that comes from belonging to this family, there should be a growing sense of love within the family, a love that sustains and encourages us from day to day.
  - d. Third, the Spirit lives within Christians, directing and strengthening them. We see one another as spirit-carriers, and we can hardly help the sense that we should work together in a single direction.

- e. Fourth, all this should produce the natural emotions of affection and sympathy.
  - f. In light of this reality, we want and are motivated to work at living in unity with our fellow Christians.
2. **The inner life of unity** (Philippians 2:2).
- a. *Be like minded.*
    - i. Like the actors all focusing single-mindedly on the play, Christians should focus completely on the divine drama that has unfolded before our eyes in Jesus the king and which is continuing now into its final act with ourselves as the characters.
    - ii. Bringing our thinking into line with each other wouldn't do any good if we are thinking something that was out of line with the good news.
  - b. *Have the same love.*
    - i. The love that we must have is the love that the gospel generates and sustains.
  - c. *Be one in spirit and purpose.*
    - i. Unity itself isn't the final goal. After all, unity is possible among thieves, gangs, and white nationalists.
    - ii. Our inner lives, which are to be bonded together, must be the inner lives that reflect the gospel of the kingdom of God. The same object which we must fix our minds on must be the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, and the meaning which emerges from that good news. Paul will talk about this understanding of the gospel in Philippians 2:5-11.
3. **The practical application of unity** (Philippians 2:3-4).
- a. Here is the challenge that emerges from the very heart of the gospel itself: **look at one another with the presupposition that everybody else and their needs are more important than ourselves and our own needs** (verses 3-4).
    - i. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4 NIV).*
  - b. **How is this possible?**

### Let's Marvel at the Christ of Christmas

When people in the ancient world thought of heroic leaders, rulers, and kings, they often thought of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). At the age of 20 he succeeded his

father Philip to the throne of Macedonia, quickly made himself master of all Greece. Then, he set about the task of conquering the rest of the world. By the time he died at the age of 33, Alexander had succeeded to such an extent that it made sense, within the thought of the time, for him to be regarded as divine. (He had himself suggested this.)

In Paul's world the closest equivalent to Alexander was the emperor Augustus, who had put an end to the long-running Roman civil war and had brought peace to the whole known world. It wasn't long before many grateful subjects came to regard him, too, as divine. The power of military might and the immense organizational skills required to hold the empire together made this, for them, the natural conclusion. Other rulers did their best to copy this model. This was what heroic leadership looked like in that world.

Only when we grasp this cultural understanding do we see just how deeply subversive, how utterly counter-cultural, was Paul's gospel message concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The resurrection of Jesus had declared Jesus to be Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord. Jesus was the reality, and Alexander and Augustus were the caricature. This is what true global sovereignty looked like. Hadn't Jesus himself said something similar?

*Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45 NIV).*

Now take this stark contrast between the pagan gods and heroes and Jesus of Nazareth, and think it through against the background of the Old Testament. Who was it who arrogantly grasped at the chance to be 'like God, knowing good and evil'? Why, Adam [and Eve], of course, in Genesis 3. Alexander and Augustus were just doing what the human race has always done. But what's the solution? In the Old Testament, God's people Israel are the servant-people, whose suffering obedience to God's saving plan will be the unexpected way of dealing with the world's sorry state. But Israel, too, is in slavery; Israel, too, has gone the way of Adam. In Paul's own day there were would-be rulers of Israel who seemed only too eager to go the Alexander/Augustus route. So what was to be done? (New Testament for Everyone - Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, NT Wright).

*5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him*

*to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11 NIV).*

### Let's Marvel at the Christ of Christmas

1. Jesus, who is God eternal, chose not to hold onto his divine rights at all costs (Philippians 1:6).
2. *Jesus made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness* (Philippians 1:7).
  - a. Paul is not saying that Christ became less than God or “gave up” some divine attributes... Nor is he saying that Christ ever gave up being “in the form of God.” Rather, Paul is stressing that Christ, who had all the privileges that were rightly his as king of the universe, gave them up to become an ordinary Jewish baby bound for the cross. Christ “made himself nothing” by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of humans (roughly equivalent phrases). While he had every right to stay comfortably where he was, in a position of power, his love drove him to a position of weakness for the sake of sinful mankind (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9, “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich”). The “emptying” consisted of his becoming human, not of his giving up any part of his true deity (ESV Study Bible).
  - b. **Jesus chose to live as people were meant to live: in deep intimacy and in full partnership with God. He lived in humility, surrender, and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Jesus embodied sacrificial love. Christ lived as humans were meant to live.**
3. *Jesus, being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8).
  - a. We have to marvel at the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ.
    - i. **The Word became flesh** and made his dwelling among us. *We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 NIV).*
  - b. The decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross—this decision was not a decision to stop being divine. **It was a decision about what it really meant to be divine.** (New Testament for Everyone - Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, NT Wright).
  - c. Jesus retained his equality with God; the point of the cross, for Paul, is that *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself* (2 Corinthians

5:19). The point of verses 6 and 7 is that Jesus didn't regard this equality as something to take advantage of, something to exploit. Rather, the eternal son of God, the one who became human in and as Jesus of Nazareth, regarded his equality with God as committing him to the course he took: of becoming human, of becoming Israel's anointed representative, of dying under the weight of the world's evil. This is what it meant to be equal with God. **As you look at the incarnate son of God [coming as a baby in a manger and] dying on the cross, the most powerful thought you should think is: this is the true meaning of who God is. He is the God of self-giving love.** (New Testament for Everyone - Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.)

4. *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11 NIV).*
  - a. Here, then, is [the] point: the God who will not share his glory with anyone else has shared it—with Jesus. Jesus, therefore, must somehow be identified as one who from all eternity was 'equal with God.' And his progression through incarnation to death must be seen, not as something which required him as it were to stop being God for a while, but as the perfect self-expression of the true God.
  - b. Most people in Paul's world, [who had] an idea of the gods into which people like Alexander and Augustus could be fitted without much difficulty, were shocked beyond belief at the idea that the one true God might be known at last in the person of a crucified Jew. Many people in our world find it very difficult as well, and we might like to ask the reason why. Could it be that we, too, have allowed ourselves to slide into pagan views of what deity or divinity consist of—views that would then make it difficult to fit Jesus into them? If so, isn't it about time we did what the New Testament writers urge us to do, and what this wonderful passage poetically invites us to do: to start from Jesus himself and rethink our whole picture of God around [Jesus]?
  - c. If and when we do that, we shall find of course that the picture is very challenging. This is a God who is known most clearly when he abandons his rights for the sake of the world. Yes, says Paul; and that's 'the mind of Christ', the pattern of thinking that belongs to you because you belong to the Messiah (verse 5). And if you are truly living in him and by his kind of life, the exhortations of verses 1-4 [about unity] may suddenly make a lot more sense. (New Testament for Everyone - Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.)

**Conclusion:**

Jesus came as a lowly baby in a manger at Christmas. He laid aside his divine rights that we might become the sons and daughters of God.

Jesus changes how we think about God and embodies everything God intended for human beings. We start from Jesus himself and we rethink our whole picture of God and of ourselves.

1. **Let's marvel at the Christ of Christmas.**
  - a. He humbled himself and made a way for us to have an eternal relationship with God.
  - b. He came to put heaven and earth together.
  - c. He came to reconcile, redeem, and restore all things to God through his sacrificial love.
2. **Let's agree with God the Father.**
  - a. Jesus is worthy to be exalted to the highest place. Thus, his resurrection and ascension.
  - b. Jesus has the name above every name.
  - c. At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.
  - d. And, may every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
3. **Let's follow the Lord Jesus Christ in deep intimacy and full partnership, that we might embody his nature, his ways, his presence, and his power in this world, so that others might know his love and experience his life-changing grace.**