

The Practice of Servanthood

Philippians 2:5-11

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 27 August 2006

The messiah complex

The psychologist Milton Rokeach once wrote a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. It was a true story about three chronic psychiatric patients at a hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan: Leon, Joseph and Clyde. All three were diagnosed with psychotic delusional disorder, grandiose type. Each one thought that he was the Messiah. For two years Rokeach conducted an experiment. He put these three delusional messiahs together, assigned them adjacent beds, made them eat every meal together, brought them together for daily group discussions. He wanted to see if rubbing up against other would-be messiahs might diminish their delusion. The experiment led to some interesting conversations. One of the men would claim, "I am the Messiah. I'm on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth." Rokeach would ask, "How do you know?" The man would say, "God told me." And one of the other patients would pipe up, "I never told you any such thing." Ultimately, the experiment failed. The three men shut each other out. It turns out that if you want to be your own god, you have to settle for living in a tiny universe where there is room for only one person.

I suffer from a kind of messiah complex. It's not the kind that would get me sent to Ypsilanti. But in its own way, it is just as serious and irrational. We all suffer from it. Pride is the oldest sin in the Book. The writer of Genesis says that it was through pride that the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God*" (Genesis 3:9). I guess in our own way we all try to be like God. We try to look smarter, more successful, more spiritual than we really are. We spend our lives trying to win the praise of other people. We live in – and are shaped by – what Bill McKibben calls "a culture of unrelenting self-obsession." Do you agree? Let me take a little straw poll. When you are looking at some newly developed photographs, do you ever pretend you are looking at the other people in the picture while secretly looking first at yourself? We live in a culture of unrelenting self-obsession, don't we?

The Messiah's example

But in the passage we read, Paul says that we should take our lead not from our culture, but from Christ: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who, *being* in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing" (Phil 2:5-6). To understand what Paul is saying here, we need to do a little Greek grammar. The little word "being" is known in Greek as a circumstantial participle. How we translate it depends on the context, on the surrounding "circumstances." It could mean, for example, "because," "although," "while," "by means of," "in order to." Let me give you a couple of quick examples. "*Being* an All Black fan, I predict my team will win the next world cup." Now, which word or phrase would you use to translate it? "*Because* I'm an All Black fan, I predict my team will win the next world cup." (Given the All Black's run of late, that would certainly be a correct translation of that circumstantial participle.) Another example: "*Being* a Black Caps fan, I predict my team will win the next world cup." Again, which word would you use? The Black Caps can't quite match the All Blacks' record in recent years, so "although" would be the right word.

Back to Paul's phrase: Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing." What does he mean there? How would you translate this circumstantial participle? You could translate it, "*Although* – in spite of the fact that – Jesus was in very nature God, he made himself nothing." From a human standpoint, this makes perfect sense. Jesus became a servant *in spite of the fact* that he was God. Several Bible translations take it just this way. But that would be to miss the essential point that Paul is making about Christ. The context (2:1-4) suggests that what Paul meant was this:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, *precisely because he was in very nature God*, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'

In other words, God's very nature is to serve. Stop and think about that. In an ancient Greek myth, the gods Zeus and Hermes came down to earth for a brief time disguised as poor slaves. They did this to fool human

beings, to get a reading on the level of homage people pay to the gods. When Zeus and Hermes found out what they wanted to know, they threw off their rags and revealed themselves in all their Olympian splendour. It was like Clark Kent and Superman. They took on the outward form of a servant, but it was just a disguise. Their weakness and vulnerability was just an act. Underneath the rags was strength and power. Paul, though, says that by coming as a servant, Jesus was not *disguising* who God is; he was *revealing* who God is. God is the Infinite Servant. God is the most giving, humble being in the entire universe.

Downward mobility

So, if we want to bring "glory" to God (v 11), if we want to honour God with our lives, it means following the path that Jesus took, the path of "downward mobility." In practical terms, what does that involve?

Giving up our rights

First, it means giving up our rights. In v 7 Paul says that because he was in very nature God, Jesus "made himself nothing." Or, as *The Message* paraphrase puts it, "he set aside the privileges of deity." He laid down his power, his majesty. He gave up all his rights. One rainy Monday a few weeks back I took our girls to the Auckland museum. The place was swarming with rowdy primary school kids. I was standing in the main lobby, sliding Sophie up and down a railing. A reasonably innocuous activity, you would have thought. But a very officious lady came over to me – she obviously worked for the museum – and said, "No, no, no, no!" At first the little school boy in me wanted to say, "Sorry, Miss." But then I thought to myself, "Who is this lady telling me off?! I'm a grown up. I'm a responsible father. I know how to look after my children. How dare she scold me in that tone of voice." So I said, "What's the matter?" She hissed, "It's not safe!" It was patently safe. Maybe the lady was stressed out by all the school children running riot. Maybe she was on some kind of a power trip. Maybe she was just bonkers. But her reaction, and her tone of voice were completely inappropriate. Now the gracious thing to do – the Christ-like thing to do – would have been to give up my rights in this situation and back down. I'm not quite yet as gracious and Christ-like as I'd like to be. How often do we stand on our rights when someone offends or wrongs us? But it's when we give up our rights, and forgive those who wrong us, that God is honoured.

Getting on our knees

Secondly, Paul says that downward mobility means getting on your knees. Verse 7 says that Jesus made himself nothing, "taking the very nature of a servant" – or, literally, "the very nature of a *slave*." Under Roman law, slaves were regarded as "human tools," chattels, with no legal rights whatsoever. They did what they were told to do, however unpleasant or inconvenient. That was Jesus. He specialised in tasks that everyone else tried to avoid: washing feet, serving lepers, helping the helpless. One of my favourite authors is Henri Nouwen. He was a brilliant scholar who taught at Harvard University, one of the most prestigious universities in the world. At the height of his academic career he moved from Harvard to a community called Daybreak, near Toronto. He went there to take on the menial – and demanding – role of caring for Adam, a severely disabled 25 year old. Every morning Nouwen would wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, feed him, put him in his wheel chair, and take him to the place where he spent most of the day in therapy. People suggested to Nouwen that he was wasting his time and his talent giving up his career to do this menial work that someone else could have done. But you know what Nouwen said in reply? "The hours spent with Adam have given me an inner peace so fulfilling, it makes the loftier, high-minded and often selfish pursuit of success in the academic world seem empty by contrast." Isn't that exactly what Jesus taught? It's in getting down on our knees in service to others that we are lifted up. Yet so often we try to climb the ladder of achievement and success. Maybe Jesus is whispering, "It is in losing your life that you'll find it."

Going to our cross

Give up your rights. Get on your knees. And thirdly, finally, honouring God means going to our cross. In v 8 Paul says that Jesus, "being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" Of the various forms of Roman execution, crucifixion could be used for slaves, rebels and anarchists; but it could never be used for a Roman citizen, except with the express sanction of the Emperor. Crucifixion was considered too cruel, so shameful that the word itself was avoided in polite conversation. Yet

here Paul insists that the Jesus who we serve, precisely because he was in very nature God, was willing to die this kind of tortuous death on a cross. He was willing to suffer. It's relatively easy to serve others if it doesn't cost us anything. But if we want to obey God, and honour God, it will mean sacrifice. It'll mean suffering.

Another hero of mine is a guy called Adoniram Judson. He was the first person to take the Christian faith to Burma. When war broke out between the Burmese and the English, the Burmese arrested Judson because he looked and spoke like the enemy. For two years he was imprisoned in appalling conditions. Every night the guards would hoist the lower part of his body high off the ground so that blood rushed to his head, preventing him from sleeping and causing fierce cramps in his shoulders and back. Clouds of mosquitoes feasted on his raw flesh. Incredibly, he survived. But a few months after he was released, his wife died of small pox. The pain for him was that he hadn't been able to be with her during most of her illness. Shortly after that their baby daughter also died. Judson nearly had a breakdown. He would kneel by his wife's grave for hours each day, regardless of the weather. He built a one-room hut in the jungle, dug his own grave in case it might prove necessary, and worked in solitude on translating the Bible into the Burmese language. Only a handful of Burmese had shown any interest in the Christian message. Yet he struggled on, thirty-four years in all, and because of his faithfulness, in the face of suffering, more than one million Burmese Christians today trace their spiritual ancestry to Adoniram Judson. Maybe God's word for some of us today is simply this: "Keep going. I know it's hard. I know it's painful. But don't give up. Your faithfulness, your perseverance in the face of suffering honours me."

Conclusion

We see this willingness to suffer most clearly in Jesus himself. That is one reason that people had such a hard time recognising him. The oldest Christological heresy – Docetism – arose because people could not absorb the notion that God himself might enter into our vulnerability and suffering. They believed that Jesus had only the appearance of humanness, not its reality. But Jesus was no Superman. He did not defy his enemies with hands on hips and bullets bouncing harmlessly off his chest. The whip of the Roman soldiers drew real blood, the thorns pressed real flesh, the nails caused mind-numbing pain, the cross led to actual death. And through it all, he forgave them, loved them – loved us – to the end. God's great, holy joke about the Messiah complex is this: Every human being who has ever lived has suffered from it – except one. And he was the Messiah.

Questions

1. When you are looking at some newly developed photographs, do you ever pretend you are looking at the other people in the picture while secretly looking first at yourself?
2. Bill McKibben says that we live in "a culture of unrelenting self-obsession." Do you agree? How does our culture encourage us to focus on ourselves?
3. Read Philippians 2:1-11. What do you understand by the phrase, "In humility consider others better than yourselves" (v3)?
4. Paul says that Jesus "made himself nothing." What are some of the ways in which Jesus did that while he walked on this earth? How could you make yourself "nothing" this week?
5. Verse 7 says that Jesus took the very nature of a servant. What are some ways in which Jesus took the role of a servant? What are the primary obstacles to your serving others? What one practical step could you take to serve someone this week?
6. How might God be calling you – or your small group – to serve within the church family?
7. Paul reminds us in v 8 that Jesus' service took him ultimately to the cross. How do you suffer for your obedience to God's call on your life? What is your cross?

Acknowledgement

This message is drawn from John Ortberg's treatment of Philippians 2 in *The Life You've Always Wanted* (2002).