

The Self-Giving Servant Father 11-21-04

Adapted from a sermon by Darrell Johnson
Philippians 2:5-11

Christians are the singiest group of people on the planet! It is because we have something to sing about. I do not think any other religion comes close. It is no wonder other religions do not sing as much, I would have a hard time singing about one day being one with the universe. Thinking of someday attaining the state of no desires just does not put a song on my lips. Even the thought of endless wine and seventy virgins just reminds me of the country western *All My Exes Live in Texas*. However, when you begin to know Jesus, when you begin to sense the greatness of His love, and start to understand the beauty of His nature, my eyes well up with tears of joy and song rises in my heart. Sometimes it is a song we sing together and sometimes it is a new song, the overflow of my heart to His. And so the psalmist writes, ⁶ *Sing praises to God, sing praises: sing praises unto our King, sing praises.* (Psalms 47:6 KJV) And again, ¹ *O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth.* ² *Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day.* (Psalms 96:1-2 KJV)

I rarely use other men's messages, but when I was asked to consider bringing a message at this retreat, I "happened" to be reading a message by Darrell Johnson, an associate professor of pastoral theology at Regent College in British Columbia. It so resonated with my spirit that I soon became convinced that it was what the Lord would have me share with you. Some messages are so basic in their revelation of the nature of Christ that they transform the way we see Him and our own lives as well. That is what the message did for me and I pray will do for you. So I have used much of his material and adapted it for the message today.

Scripture is full of songs. We have some heavenly songs recorded by John. *"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."* (Revelation 4:8) The 24 elders and the living creatures sing to the Lamb that was slain, our Lord Jesus, *"Worthy are you to take the scroll and break its seal, for you were slain and you purchased for God with your blood men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."* (Revelation 5:9)

The early church had their hymns and choruses. The Apostle Paul quotes a hymn in Ephesians, one probably sung at baptisms, *"Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you."* (Ephesians 5:14) I hope some anointed musicians put these to music again. Paul also quoted a hymn in his first letter to Timothy. It reads like an early creed. *"He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory."* (1 Timothy 3:16)

Paul also wrote of the very nature of Christ that was most likely an early song in his letter to the Colossians. I will read for you just the two verses of that six-verse song we find in Colossians 1 ¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.* ¹⁶ *for by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible*

and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. (Colossians 1:15-20)

The beginning 18 verses of the Gospel of John is one of the most intellectual hymns, and speaks of Jesus' eternal existence and His incarnation. The first verse reads, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" It reaches a crescendo in verse 12, "*The word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" It ends with the expression, "*No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten of the Father, he has explained him.*"

Our text for this message is the hymn of all hymns; the hymn that most agree is the richest in theology and revelation, Philippians 2:5-11. What a declaration it sings! We do not know its origin, whether Paul composed it or is quoting another writer, but the poetry, wording, and rhythm make it most assuredly an important song of the early church. It is a song that defines much of our understanding of the eternal Lord and Savior Christ Jesus. It is a song that takes the mindset of man and turns it upside down. I would add that it is a song that is desperately needed in the church today if we are to return to the influence and power of the early church.

Verse 5 may begin or may just introduce the song, but it definitely sets forth the reason for which the Apostle inserts the song into the text.

⁵ *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:* (Philippians 2:5 NIV) The verse should end with a colon as Paul goes on to describe the attitude of Jesus. It ends by declaring that the description of Jesus' attitude was "*to the glory of God the Father.*" Why is that? Why is a hymn so focused on Christ to the glory of the Father? We would think it would say, "to Jesus' glory".

Read along as I read the passage to you. I am reading from the NIV, and do not be too concerned if you note some differences in the KJV, we will be going over those differences in the G-R-E-E-K. Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

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.*

This hymn can readily be divided into three stanzas, each describing to our understanding portions of the Lord Jesus' eternal existence. Verses 6 through 7a are the first stanza, describing Jesus preincarnate existence. The second stanza is verses 7b and 8. This stanza sings of Jesus' earthly ministry. The final stanza, verses 9 through 11 are of Jesus' post earthly existence. The Swiss theologian Emil Bruner suggested that the song could be presented as a parabola, starting in heaven at the heights of glory, descending to the depths, the lowest point being the crucifixion, and rising again on the other side to the previous heights.

Commented [notes1]: ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.
¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
Colossians 1:15-20 (NIV)

This threefold movement begins with a decision. Verse 6 says that He did not regard (or consider) equality with God something to be grasped. "He did not consider" is the turning point on which the salvation of man depends. It was this decision that starts that great parabolic movement.

In order to fully appreciate the enormity of the decision the hymn begins with, we need to carefully look at some of the key terms. I will go through the hymn examining these terms, and that will prepare us for an amazing revelation.

Verse 6 says, "Although he *was* in the form of God." *Was* The Greek word can be interpreted in two different ways. It can mean *to exist* or it can also mean *to be at one's disposal, to have possession of*. Before the incarnation, Jesus existed in and was in possession of the form of God.

The word for *form* is the Greek word *morphe*. It means the *outward shape of a thing* but can also mean *the outward shape of a thing conforming to its inner reality*. In other words, this song is declaring that Jesus, before the incarnation, possessed inwardly and outwardly the very nature of God. That is why in the Old Testament when there is a manifestation of God, we are seeing Jesus Christ. The Jews do not know what to make of this so they call these appearances the Prince of the Countenance. The patriarchs referred to these appearances as *JHWH*, the Lord God. That is why the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians that Jesus is the manifestation of the invisible God. (Colossians 1:15) The pre-incarnate Christ was what God is on the inside. What God expressed outwardly is the pre-incarnate Christ as well.

Commented [notes2]: ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. Colossians 1:15 (NIV)

The song refers to that equality. Jesus eternal existence with the Father was as an equal. They had the same nature and expression before the incarnation. That is why Jesus could pray, "And now, Father, glorify me together with yourself with the glory I had with you before the world was." (John 17:5) Jesus eternally was the equal of God. His prayer was to return to that state of glory.

Commented [notes3]: ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. John 17:5 (NIV)

The next term is a much-debated term, *emptied*. It is not debated in regard to the meaning but as to what Jesus emptied Himself of and why? Some would say He emptied Himself of His divine nature. Some say He set aside His authority to call the shots, the prerogative of the godhead. However, the wording does not say He emptied Himself of anything. It just says He emptied Himself. It almost seems a contradiction in terms, but the text says, "He emptied Himself, taking..." It is an addition, not a subtraction.

Verse 7 tells us, "Taking the form of a slave." There is the word *form* again, *morphe*. We saw the same word in verse 6. He, who was inwardly and outwardly in nature God, chose to live inwardly and outwardly as a slave. Some translations give the word *slave* as *servant*. There are two Greek words used for *servant*. One implies the person was hired for a time to perform a task. The other is sold as an instrument for the use of the buyer. The first has the right to come and go, as they will. The second serves at the will of their master. It is the second term that is used in this passage, *doulos*. The *doulos* has no rights. They serve their master in whatever way he or she chooses. So Jesus took the inward and outward life of a slave. But the

question is why? Why would the one who was equal with God inwardly and outwardly conform to the life of a slave?

Another term we must understand is *likeness*. Verse 8 reads, "*Being born in human likeness.*" These words were chosen by the Holy Spirit. Each one is significant. This word is related to the word *image*. The emphasis is on similarity but it allows for difference between the original and the copy. The term allows us to see that the one who was by nature God became a human being, but not merely human. Ralph Martin wrote, "He is truly man, but he is not merely man." He is man but He is still divine. He was all man and yet all God. We can read that into this text because of the word *likeness*.

As we look at these terms, we are confronted with two great mysteries in the person of Jesus Christ. You have the plurality of Persons of the Trinity in one person who is all God and yet all man.

Verse 8 tells us that, "*He humbled himself and became obedient unto death.*" As a human being, Jesus chose to live the life of a slave in obedience to a Master. Whoever penned this hymn is contrasting Jesus with the first Adam. The first Adam chose disobedience. Fashioned as a man, Adam did not choose to submit to God. His use of freedom to choose disobedience resulted in the fall of mankind with all the horrendous repercussions. Jesus became the second Adam. Seeing Himself as a man, He chose obedience like that of a slave resulting in the salvation of mankind.

The passage continues, "*even death on a cross.*" His obedience went so far as the ultimate humiliation of that day. Only the worst of criminals were tortured like that. There was no more degrading expression in the world than the cross. We have come to the bottom of the parabola. We have gone from the glory of heaven to the life of a slave that obediently submits to the worst degradation that man could suffer.

There is one more term we need to understand, *name*, in verse 11. He was given a name above every name. What name is that? LORD! Throughout the Old Testament, the sovereign God was referred to as LORD, YHWH. It was a title so sacred that it was not spoken. When the Hebrew was read, the name, *Adonai* was substituted. We translate it as the word Lord, too. Brought into the Greek it becomes *kurios*. We translate it in the same way, Lord. What a title for a traveling preacher from the little despised town of Nazareth. It carries the same reverent respect as the title YHWH. *At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is kurios*, or YHWH of the Old Testament, *to the glory of God the Father*. We have come to the other height of the parabola on the other side of the cross.

Now consider why a servant is given such a title and why that brings glory to God the Father? Understanding all the terms we have gone over, we can look back at that decision that set Jesus on this course. Understanding those terms bring us to the enormity of the decision and to the depth of meaning in this passage. "*Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.*" We owe our

redemption to that decision. Understand what was being decided hinges upon the word translated *something to be grasped*. It is the Greek word *harpagmas*. It has been a problem for translators because of its rarity. KJV uses the term *robbery*. It is not found anywhere else in the New Testament and is scarce in Greek literature. The latest translations are translating it, *something to be exploited*. It has been shown that it means *something to seize upon* in the sense of something *to take advantage of*. Then we can see this passage as beginning by saying that Jesus did not see equality with God as something to take advantage of, something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. Why would He do that? What was it that Jesus saw in His equality with God?

One reason He emptied Himself is our worth to Him. He saw what we could be in Him and decided it was worth the descent. He saw sinful, wicked, suffering and oppressed humanity and decided we were worth saving, worth emptying Himself for. However, the hymn does not say that. We are not mentioned. So why did He do it?

The language we have gone over is getting at the very heart of who God is by nature. It answers the why. It suggests that Jesus' consideration of what equality with God the Father meant resulted in the conclusion that it meant to empty Himself and take the form of a servant, in contrast to exploiting or taking advantage of the position. In contemplating His equality with God, He concludes that it means to be a servant. If we take that meaning, then He does not lay aside equality with God, or the form of God, which would make Him less than the God man. No, He concludes that to be equal to God is to empty oneself and take the on a form inwardly and outwardly of a servant. He concluded that it meant to accept the mortal condition of weak and frail man and die the death of a common criminal.

What a contrast with the power brokers of this world! Being in the form of God and equality with God is not forsaken. He is still both in His humanity. Jesus understood that greatness meant death to self. If He were to be fully equal with God He would not seize upon things for Himself, but forsake Himself in service like a slave. The inward and outward form of God is to give not get. I ask you, is this not your experience of Jesus? Is it not your experience of His life in you? Is His life not manifested to the greatest extent inwardly and outwardly in your life when you unselfishly serve others? Moreover, was not His Spirit quenched when you tried to exploit your position and power for personal preference?

Becoming a servant did not strip Jesus of His divinity. Becoming a servant expressed His divinity. He considered equality with God as self-emptying servanthood. The Son of God, who has always possessed inwardly and outwardly the form of God, equal with God, understands being God in terms of incarnation, servanthood and crucifixion. This Jesus who has eternally pleased the Father sees equality with God best expressed through a cradle, a towel, and a cross. It should redefine our idea of greatness to understand that the Greatest One embraced the cross. This is not just a revelation of Jesus, but also a new understanding of God. We have struggled with recreating God in our image since the beginning of time. It is the cradle, towel, and cross that reveals what true greatness is.

Now we can understand why God would bestow upon Jesus the great title YHWH. He clearly expressed what it means to be YHWH by humbling Himself and obeying unto death on a cross. He clearly showed the heart of the Father in His self-emptying love. The title is not granted to Him because He went to the throne, but because He went to the cross.

Have you noticed in John that throughout the Gospel His hour had not yet come? Repeatedly His enemies are unable to capture or trap Him because His hour had not yet come. Then, just before the crucifixion, Jesus prays that His hour has come to be glorified. Now is the time? Just before the cross? We would expect those words at the resurrection or the ascension, but not before the horror of the cross. However, when we understand that self-emptying love is the Father's heart, that the Suffering Servant is an expression of equality with God, then the cross becomes the greatest expression of the love of God, a display of glory.

We tend to think that it was out of place for Jesus to wash the disciples' feet. Surely, He was just illustrating for them how they should act toward one another. Reality is that this service is exactly true to His character. John clearly told us that it was when Jesus realized that He came from the Father and was returning to the Father that He took the towel. (John 13:1) He said that He only does what He sees the Father doing. Jesus sees the Father as the consummate servant and so He acts the same way. Jesus sees the Father giving of Himself to serve humanity and so He does as His Father does. It is when we realize that we are His children, filled with His serving Spirit that we too can lay down our rights to be served or treated fairly and simply serve others in love.

Because Jesus saw that being equal with God was not something to be exploited, but instead a call to slavery in humble service, He was given the name LORD. The *doulos* became the *kurios*. The Servant is called YHWH. That is because being *kurios* means being *doulos*. It is because being YHWH is being a servant.

Now consider this. We were made in the image of God. If being equal with God means being a servant, then what does it mean to be a man or woman in the image of God? Does it mean something to be taken advantage of and exploited? Being made in God's image means that we are created to reflect the character of God. Since that means to be a servant, we are most fully human when we serve one another. We find what we were created to be when we serve others. It is then that we are most like the image of the One who made us.

When you think of Mother Theresa, what comes to mind? What a servant! You may not like her theology but you cannot help but be impressed with her service. I have heard several people say that she carried such a great aura of authority and yet she was totally a servant. We are impressed with her similarity to Jesus, the Suffering Servant.

I am married to a woman who models this daily. I have recently been ashamed of myself for being upset with her because she did not get something done. I stopped and considered all that she quietly gave herself to in service and wondered how in the world I expected her to do it all. Some of you probably have a wife like that.

Commented [notes4]: ² It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.
John 13:1 (NIV)

Laundry, dinners, ministry, teaching, babysitting, cleaning, all my requests, the list goes on and on and never a complaint. She looks so much more like Jesus than I do. What an example she is for me. She understands that when Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me", He is not asking us to be something we are not. He is simply asking us to be what we were created to be, the image of God. Serving should be natural for anyone created in His image.

The opposite of serving is to cling to rights, our lives, and our desires for fulfillment. Jesus warned that if we save our lives we would lose them. It is not what we were created for. But when we lose our lives, when we let go of our demands and serve, it is then that we find our life.

I mentioned early on that I believed this understanding was what the church today needs to return to the power and impact of the early church. It is because we do not look like Jesus that people are not drawn to Christ fellowship with us. The more we go out into the world with this self-giving servant attitude of Jesus, the more people will be irresistibly drawn to the One we reflect. How could you not be drawn to the God who expresses His nature in serving? How could you not be drawn to One who is so great that He set the stars in space, but also so great that He could descend to the cross and be completely consistent with His nature? Does it not draw your heart right now as you consider Him?

We cannot forget that Paul's whole point in reminding us of this song is that we have the same attitude as that of Christ.

⁵ *Have the same attitude among yourselves* (that makes us apply it in relationships) *that was also in Christ Jesus.*

Listen to the attempt of the ISV to imitate the poetic flavor of the original.

⁶ *In God's own form existed he, And shared with God equality, Deemed nothing needed grasping.*

⁷ *Instead, poured out in emptiness, A servant's form did he possess, A mortal man becoming. In human form he chose to be,*

⁸ *And lived in all humility, Death on a cross obeying.*

⁹ *Now lifted up by God to heaven, A name above all others given, This matchless name possessing.*

¹⁰ *And so, when Jesus' name is called, The knees of everyone should fall, Where'er they are residing.*

¹¹ *Then every tongue in one accord, Will say that Jesus Christ is Lord, While God the Father praising.* (Phil 2:5-11 ISV)

What a song this passage sings. My knees do not bend because of His power. They bend because His power and glory is loving service. My prayer is that our lives will sing it by daily demonstration! Let others see Jesus in me, in my self-giving service. And all God's people looked at the glory of the cross and said, "Amen!"