

## HUMILITY LEADS TO JOY (Philippians Series)

Philippians 2:1-11 - July 19, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

**I like the story I read** about a pastor who finally got an invitation to give an inspirational speech at a large community event attended by several local dignitaries. He felt rather proud that he was asked, so when it was done, he refused the honorarium they offered him. He said, *"I felt special just being chosen"* and then asked if the check could go to a better cause.

**Reluctantly**, the person giving the check said, they did have a special fund where the money could go. The pastor asked what this special fund was used for, the person said, *"It's so that we can get a better speaker next year."* I guess you could call that a humility check.

**Being humble, consistently**, doesn't come naturally to most people, and for many it is not something they really aspire to, or even value very much. We may admire humility in others, but in truth, we often value privilege, power, and prestige much more for ourselves. Making humility our aim in life is a challenge, but it's one that we must take if we want to follow the example of Christ. As an incentive, I suggest that the way of humility leads to greater joy.

***I have long loved the poem by Robert Frost entitled, "The Road Not Taken" better known to most people as "The Road Less Traveled."*** Let me share just a portion.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

**I love that poem partly because it emphasizes the great importance of the choices we make in life.** Each person, should eventually realize that we must choose which road we will travel.

**In this sermon series from Philippians I've shared my belief that Christian joy is a gift from God.** But just like all gifts - including the gift of salvation in Christ - we can choose to accept it or reject it. I believe therefore, that we must choose to accept the gift that is the joy of the Lord. One way to do that is to walk the road less traveled. Before I describe that road, I want us to consider the road most traveled by the people in our world.

**To illustrate let me paraphrase the story of James and John found in Mark 10:35-45.**

These two disciples somehow got the idea that they were Jesus favorites. Jesus pulled them off to the side with Peter a few times for some special lessons and experiences - and this gave them the notion that they could trade on their status for special favors.

**So they asked Jesus to give them seats of honor**, at his right and left hand, when he sat on his throne in heaven. James and John were jockeying for position, for prestige, for privilege and power - they wanted to shove their way to the front of the line and get the best for themselves ahead of anyone else. Sound familiar? It is the road called “me first.”

**James and John are not the only ones who struggle with a “Me first” mentality.** In his great book, Improving your Serve, Chuck Swindoll shares this illustration.

I am like James and John. Lord, I size up other people in terms of what they can do for me; how they can further my program, feed my ego, satisfy my needs, give me strategic advantage. I exploit people, ostensibly for your sake, but really for my own sake.

Lord, I turn to you to get the inside track and obtain special favors, your direction for my schemes, your power for my projects, your sanction for my ambitions, your blank check for whatever I want.

I am like James and John. Change me, Lord. Make me a person who asks of you and of others, what can I do for you? Improving Your Serve, Key Word Books 1991, p. 94, 95

**In response to James and John, Jesus basically said,** “*You don’t know what you talking about - I can’t do that for you.*” I suspect he was patient with them - but the Bible says when the ten other disciples discovered what James and John had asked, they were angry with them. “*Just who did they think they are trying to be first? I thought I would be first...*” and so on. So Jesus used their example of selfish ambition as a launching pad for teaching, so Jesus tells us,

“You know that in this world kings and tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be [great, or] a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.”

**Jesus tells the disciples that their focus is wrong.** They are looking to muscle their way into positions of honor and influence and significance. They believe, if they can get the power, the position, the title, the notoriety, life will be good. Then they will know joy. But Jesus tells them they are mistaken, even though their route is popular, they are on the wrong road.

**In effect, Jesus says it is the road less traveled that leads to joy.** Jesus says the route to being great is by way of becoming a servant. A servant? Just like the first disciples - we may wonder if we heard Jesus right, I imagine they said, “*Jesus could you say that again? Did you say that to be first, to be great, to be a leader, you must become a servant of everyone else?*”

**That idea means going off in a whole different direction for most people.** Jesus had to repeat this lesson again and again - in they way he lived, in what he taught, in the way he died and rose again. According to Jesus, the best way up, is first down. The best way to advance higher is to take a lower and more humble position. The way to significance in life is not gaining the power or wealth to make others serve you - no - it is by volunteering to serve everyone else as a free act of grace. And what is more - it is this way of living that leads to joy.

## **Hear Philippians 2:3-7 again, this time from the New Living Translation,**

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, 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.

**In verse two of this chapter, Paul asks the Philippians, to make his joy complete** - by doing several things which he goes onto describe. These things increase joy in our lives. I think you can read this as a set of instructions that help us walk on the road less traveled - they way of humility. So if we want more joy, it will help us if we will learn to do these three things.

**FIRST, if we want more joy - we need to Choose Grace and Giving over Grabbing.**

**Most people spend a good portion of life looking out for themselves.** They are constantly pushing and grabbing and trying to get ahead. Think about that phrase - "*I want to get ahead in life...*" meaning ahead of others, out in front... in first place... or at least closer to the front than others. Many people are constantly competing to make sure they get theirs before it's gone.

**I believe that is the road most traveled.** Our culture tells us that the way to success and significance is found in attaining power and using ambition and aggressiveness to get ahead of others and beat them to the "Good life." However, the Bible and history are full of stories about people who gained everything the world had to offer and still ended up without any joy. There is another, better way. The way to significance in life is to be a giver not a grabber.

**Let me illustrate with this example.** When I was young, we had many financial challenges, which is to say we were often poor or struggling to get by. As a result, when I saw people who were wealthy, I condemned them for taking more than what I considered to be their fair share. As if wealth was pie that had only so many pieces to take, as opposed to a type of garden where you could grow enough to eat from and also to share with others. I didn't stop to realize how hard they may have worked to get where they were, or what kind of stresses they were facing, what kind of sacrifice they had to make along the way. But most importantly, while I was criticizing them for taking too much, I was imagining taking it from them. In other words, I was guilty of the very same sin I assumed they were committing (which wasn't even fair to them). I was living my life looking for chances to grab and focusing on what I lacked, and what I thought I deserved, and I was jealous and envious - and it made more and more miserable.

**That way of looking** at life made me poor in spirit as well poor materially - and being poor in spirit is worst kind of poverty. When you're "poor in spirit" it rots your life from the inside out.

**I can't go into all** the ways I learned how that way of thinking is just ignorant and unjust, but what I can say is that learning to be gracious and generous has been the cure for that evil.

**I came to Christ, after I came to the end of myself.** I learned that God had already given me more than I could ever deserve, just by giving me life and a place in the universe He created. Then when I trusted in Christ, God gave me grace and forgiveness and the power to change. God gave me a family of faith, and a sense of purpose, and God gave me the promise of a more abundant way of life - both now and forever. In other words, I didn't grab or take the greatest blessing of my life, I simply received them as they were given to me by our gracious God. It led me to believe that the best things in life are the result of grace and generosity. In the 39 years since I accepted God's grace in Christ - I've never found reason to doubt that belief.

**Of course** whenever we accept any the many gifts God gives, we still need to put them to work. It is something like a farmer who might receive a gift of seeds and land - which still needs to be cultivated, planted, grown, and harvested - which is all very hard work. But without the grace and generosity of God, which comes first, none of that would be possible. Joy comes from humbling recognizing your dependence on grace and generosity and then passing it on.

**SECOND - if we want joy - we will choose to work on our failures** (and give less attention to judging the failures and weaknesses of others).

**I always love to read quotes from Winston Churchill.** As great as he was, he did not think more highly of himself than he ought to think. He was once asked, "*Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?*" "*It's quite flattering,*" replied Sir Winston. "*But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.*"

**Paul tells us that we should "*consider others to be better than ourselves.*"** The principle is a bit hard to understand. Paul is not saying that we should see ourselves as "inferior" to others. The Christian faith is a fountain full of positive self-esteem.

**I believe that we don't need to look down on ourselves to look up to others.** That is worth repeating... *We don't need to look down on ourselves to look up to others.*

**To "*consider others to be better than ourselves,*"** does mean that we should be fiercely honest in looking at our lives, but I believe it also means we give others the benefit of the doubt. We need consider others as better than us because we don't know their heart ... but we do know ours... and we know how much we still need God grace and help.

**For example, I know that I often do things for selfish motives.** I know that my thoughts and priorities don't always honor to God. I know sometimes I do good things only because others are looking. I can't know the same about you for sure. So I shouldn't judge you.

**However, most of us live by a double standard.** We want others to assume the best possible motives for anything we do. We want people to give us another chance because "*we didn't really mean it*" when we did something bad. We ask for, and expect charity for ourselves.

**But, at the same time many of us assume the worst about others.** We want others to overlook our imperfections while we want to throw a spotlight on theirs. We want grace for ourselves but justice for them. We want to be let off with a warning, but we want them to be taught a lesson. Here Paul seems to advise that we need to turn things around.

**Jesus taught this same idea over and over** - I think the Lord wants us to be ruthlessly honest about our own faults and very slow about attacking others for their faults. You see, the true servant is so aware of their own sinfulness and need for grace that they would never presume to point their finger at another. They are so humbled by God's mercy for them that they are too grateful to be stingy when offering mercy to other people. Christian servants live in humility, recognizing that we are totally dependent on God who must constantly forgive us and help us. If we are so weak and needy ourselves, then who are we to criticize others. Instead - we should have compassion, and do whatever we can to help them. Christian servants assume the best about others and live in humility, trusting God to forgive them and help them grow up.

**THIRDLY, if we want more joy - we need to focus on meeting the needs of others.** Paul said, "*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*" A servant of God is a person who is aware of others around him. They are tuned into the needs of those around them. They are always aware of the struggles that others are going through. Why because, a Christian servant is always looking for someone to serve, someone to help, someone with whom they can share the grace of God.

**Much of the time we are so aware of our own needs and problems** we cannot see anything else. Sometimes we are so wrapped up with our desires, our impressions, our goals, that we don't take time to consider others. But the servant is different. The servant puts the needs of others ahead of their own. The best way I know to get our problems into perspective is to pay attention to the needs of others. And when we focus on supporting them it actually helps us.

**Leonard Bernstein, the late conductor of the New York Philharmonic orchestra,** was once asked to name the most difficult instrument to play. Without hesitation, he replied, "*The second fiddle. I can get plenty of first violinists, but to find someone who can play the second fiddle with enthusiasm - that's a problem. And if we have no second fiddle, we have no harmony.*" A Christian servants volunteer to play second fiddle so we all can enjoy the harmony of life.

**I remember reading a little gospel tract many years ago**, the kind you might find lying on the counter at a truck stop or a waiting room. The tract was called, "Holy Joe." It was this little comic book that told the story of a Christian man who went into military service.

**This Christian man** wouldn't cuss or fight or drink like the rest of the guys so they made fun of him. When he got up early in the morning to pray, the other men yelled insults at him. One night as he was praying they all threw their boots at him. When these soldiers woke up in the morning, all their boots were polished and put back in their places. It took him all night. He could have preached at them, he could have thumped his bible, he could have set them straight, he could have pointed out their faults. But he knew that what they needed most of all was to know the love of Christ... and so he demonstrated it for them. That's what made 'Joe' a holy man. It was the servant heart of that soldier that won the hearts of the other soldiers.

**James Boice tells the true story of a Christian who lived in China.** He was a poor rice farmer, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water from the mountain stream into the paddies of new rice in his field. But every morning he returned to find that a neighbor who lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water escape to fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate, because his fields were about to be ruined. He met and prayed with other Christians and together they came up with a solution. He would serve and put his neighbors needs ahead of his own. The next day the Christian farmer rose extra early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields. Only once they were watered did he attend to his own fields. This went on for some time. The neighbor finally decided to become a Christian. His unbelief was overcome by this simple demonstration of a Christian's humility and a servant heart.

**This is true Christian servanthood ...** it is caring for the needs of others ahead of your own. It means learning to listen with your eyes, your ears, but mostly your heart and soul. It is putting service to others above asserting your rights. It is putting ministry before convenience. It's an attitude - a choice - and I believe it leads to joy.

**One of the first things I ever learned as a Christian was a simple little acrostic** (where the first letters spell a word). It still rings true to me. It says: JOY = Jesus, Others, You! In that order, in that priority - Jesus, then others, then you = JOY.

**The best way for us to understand what it means to be a servant is to look at Jesus.** I'm going to focus on this next week, but for now let me remind you of these things about our Lord:

- Christ set aside the privileges of divinity to become a human being.
- Christ traded the glory of Heaven for a humble stable.
- He gave up sleep and privacy and comfort so He could pray for the lost and heal the sick.
- He gave no regard to his reputation but instead took time to meet with sinners so He could call them to repentance and faith, after others had written them off as unworthy of God's grace.

- He washed the feet of his disciples (even the feet of one who would betray him).
- In the ultimate act of humility and service Christ willingly gave his life on the cross in our place to give us a grace we could never earn or deserve.
- Jesus is the source of joy and the example of how to live in joy.

**I believe the road less traveled is the way of Christian humility. I also believe that way of life leads to greater joy.**

- Joy is found in choosing to be more and more gracious and giving in this life.
- Joy is found in choosing to work on our own failures more than those of others.
- Joy is found in trying to meet the needs of others ahead of our own.
- Joy is found in humbly serving others - even as Christ gave His life for us.