

The Humility of God

Philippians 2:5-11 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. ⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As children grow up, parents enjoy spotting what attributes come from which parent. You hear parents say, "He has his father's eyes, but his mother's nose." Sometimes it will not just be physical likenesses but emotional or personal likenesses. "She has her father's temper!" "He's always had his mother's gentle nature." And even though children are a mix of their parents, they aren't carbon copies either. Some traits are not passed down, and children also have their unique characteristics.

That's partly a picture of humans and God. We are said to be made in God's image, which means we resemble God, not physically, but morally, spiritually. There are aspects of God that he did not communicate to animals, such as reason, self-awareness, freedom, and with that moral traits such as love, mercy, gratitude, honour, judgement. Theologians call those the communicable attributes of God – all those attributes that originate in God and are communicated or given to man. They are broken and warped by the Fall of Adam, but as we are born again, renewed, we come back to increasingly resemble our God and Father.

There is another set of attributes which God has which He does not communicate or give to man, because they belong to God alone. Attributes such as His omnipresence, His omniscience, His omnipotence, His eternality, His infinitude, His immutability, are attributes that belong to God alone. They do not show up in man in any way.

But there is one strange attribute that is almost in reverse. This is an attribute that God has never needed, and in all eternity did not need to display. It is an attribute that shows up in humans and ought to be in us, but does not have to be in God. And yet, in the coming of Christ we learn that this attribute was always in the heart of God, only waiting for the time and the opportunity to display it.

That attribute is humility. Humility is the one thing that a perfectly glorious and sovereign God has never needed. Humility is accepting your true position before a superior, showing the right deference, reverence and submission before that superior. Does a God who is highest over all have to be humble? No, because no one is over Him. He has to submit to no one. When the most glorious God says, my glory, my beauty is the most precious and valuable thing of all, He is not boasting, He is reporting reality. It was impossible for God to boast, because there is no claim He can make that is bigger than the reality of who He is, and it was impossible for God to act as if He was inferior or dependent or in awe of another being, for He is infinitely higher than all.

On the other hand, humility is absolutely proper and expected for creatures. Humility is in fact getting back into a rightful place. One of the old writers said of humility that it is a just posture before God. In other words, it is only right, only fitting, for human beings to admit, accept and submit to the fact that God alone is God, He is worthy of worship, life is lived beneath His gaze by His permission, for His glory. The motto of the humble man should be Romans 11:36, "For of Him, and through and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever."

So here is the celebration of the Incarnation takes our breath away. At the Incarnation, at the coming of the Son into the world, God humbles Himself. God displays something that seems proper for the

creature, but not needed for the Creator. God displays something almost the opposite of what His infinite beauty and glory seems to call for – humility.

Don't misunderstand, God did not change. The glory of this is that this was always in the heart of God. But only a story like the human story, a story of a lost race, a fallen bride needing to be redeemed, could give the platform, the stage, the opportunity for God the glorious to show that He was also God the humble.

So here we're going to learn about the humility of God. Because this passage is so dense, we'll look at it over two weeks. This morning, we'll look at verses 6 and 7. We'll see two attitudes that God the Son had, the first one in verse 6, and the second one in verse 7. As we study this, this is the background question you want to keep asking: was this voluntary or forced? Was God the glorious required to do this or did this come from His heart?

I. The Lord Jesus Relinquished His Royal Rights

Philippians 2:5-6 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,

What did humility look like in God?

Jesus, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God. What does that mean? First we're told about who Jesus is and has always been “who being in the form of God”. A literal translation would be “who existing in the form of God”. He had always existed like this, and still does.

What does 'the form of God' mean? The word *form* translated the Greek word *morphe*, and it means the true nature of something. The form of something is its actual quality, its essence. It is the inner character or quality. Later on in this passage, Paul is going to use a different Greek word, *schema*, which means an outward appearance.

Before Bethlehem, Jesus had always existed and lived with the glory and splendour of being God the Son. But before He took a human, material form, Jesus had always existed as God. Before the universe was brought into being, before the beginning of the beginning, Jesus had been in the form, in the *morphe* of God.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God.

John 17:5 "And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

But what did He do? What does the text say that He did, even though He had always existed in the form of God?

“did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, “

The Greek word translated *robbery* can mean two things. It can mean something seized unlawfully, like robbery, or it can mean something held onto and gripped tenaciously. So the text either means Jesus didn't try to steal equality with God, or it means, Jesus did not cling and fight to hold onto that equality with God.

So context must be our guide. Paul has just told us that Jesus had always existed in the form of God. Which would fit the context better – Jesus not trying to steal equality with God, or Jesus not trying to fight to hold onto the privileges of being equal with God? Well, the second one.

Paul says, Jesus had always existed in the form of God, and yet, He did not regard His status as being God something to be so tightly gripped that He could not release some of its privileges. He did not regard His position as equal to God the Father and God the Spirit with all its royal privileges as something to be protected and fought for and defended.

What were some of those royal privileges?

25 To God our Savior¹, Who alone is wise², Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power³, Both now and forever. Amen. (Jud 1:25)

Glory means beauty. That which is most excellent, most attractive and precious and valuable. One of the royal rights of the Son was unequaled beauty that was the pleasure and delight of all to behold. The Lord never earned this or made this, or improved upon it. He had it by right.

Majesty means importance or greatness. Amongst all the ranks of greatness in the heavens, and Scripture shows quite a sophisticated hierarchy archangels, dominion, thrones, principalities, powers, amongst the millions of created angelic beings with their princes, generals, captains, footsoldiers, supreme above all was the importance and greatness of God Himself.

Dominion – sovereignty, the control over creation. God the Son had always enjoyed absolute, unmediated sovereignty over all created things.

Power – authority, the right to exercise that sovereignty.

Infinite beauty, unmatched supremacy, unequaled control, and unquestioned authority. These were the badges of royalty that God the Son wore.

The Bible says that God the Son made a judgement in His mind, and the judgement was this: He did not have to hang on to the privileges and rights and honours and delights of being God the Son. For the sake of our salvation, for the sake of bringing grace, Jesus did not cling to His rights.

This was the attitude of Jesus Christ before He came to earth. This was His attitude when he came to earth. Here is God, saying, I do not have to have all my privileges and glory and status all the time. I can surrender them for the sake of this dying race of rebels, called mankind. And think too, that this was the attitude of God the Father. For in sending His Son, He was sending His most precious one, the very radiance of His glory, and sending Him to be trampled on, ignored, blasphemed. The Father did not regard the perfect tranquility of the Trinity a thing to be gripped onto at all costs. So too, the Holy Spirit, who as the bond of fellowship between Father and Son, would feel Himself as it were torn asunder by the work on the cross, He too was not counting that perfect, undisturbed fellowship in the Trinity as a thing to be held onto no matter what. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, surrendered a right that was rightfully theirs.

Do you know what's interesting? When Satan tempted Adam and Eve, what did he say? Eat of this, so you can be equal with God. Though you are not God, reach up, and take it, because God is keeping it from you.

How wickedly deceptive. God was actually willing to give up some privileges, if necessary. Satan was the usurper, and encouraged our race to become usurpers.

And ever since then, which mindset, which attitude is natural to man? The one that says, “I don't have to protect my privileges, I can relinquish my rights for the sake of others”, or the attitude which says, “Give me mine! Give me my rights! Don't deny me my privileges! I deserve this status, this honour, this recognition! I must have what is due to me!”

Well, have you ever heard someone say, “Do you know who I am?” What is such a person saying when he or she says that? He is saying, “You have mistreated me. I deserve the highest, and I will in no way submit to this kind of treatment. You will recognise and honour my rights, my privileges.

This is meant to humble us, because as we gaze upon the Incarnation, we are gazing on the humility of the only One in the universe who did not need to be humble.

But how do we know that He gave up those royal privileges? How do we know He relinquished them? We know this because of the second thing that He did which displays His humility. Not only did he relinquish His royal rights, but

II. The Lord Jesus Received a Servant's Role

Philippians 2:7 *but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*

He made Himself of no reputation. What does that mean? Those words translate a Greek word which means to empty. To translate that literally would be to say, “He did not regard equality with God a privilege to be clung to, but instead emptied Himself.”

Well, what does that mean? There have been some false teachings surrounding this verse, where some people taught that the *kenosis* is that Jesus emptied Himself of His Deity. According to them, He emptied Himself of His divine nature. But that's not what this means. If God could empty Himself of being God then what is left? Who would the God-man be if He could divest Himself of deity?

Paul tells you what it means with His next words: *taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*

Here is what it meant that Jesus emptied Himself. He took the form of a slave – He embraced submission and service. Here's that word *schema*.

What does a slave do, that a king does not? What can a king do that a slave cannot? A slave has lost his own freedom. He now lives entirely at the will of His master. He lives under another's authority. He lives a life of total surrender and total obedience.

Not only does the human race have a real problem with giving up our supposed rights, we have a real problem giving up our autonomy. We want to run our own lives, and we glorify the people who do so. We say, “You know what I admire about him? He did it his own way. No one forced him. He followed his own path.” That goes right back to “You can know the knowledge of good and evil for yourselves. You don't need God to tell you. You don't need to live in submission to Him all the time. You can decide.”

That's deep in us, and it's in our sinful nature. My youngest recently told me after I corrected her, “You don't tell me what to do!” Well, she found out that I do, but where did that comment come from? It's natural to our sinful natures.

Pride hates submitting. But we need to. It's our true position. Did God the Son need to yield and submit?

As always having existed in the form of God, and continuing to exist in that *morphe*, Jesus enjoyed the prerogative of being served, and being obeyed. He had given the orders, and they had been obeyed. He had sat on the throne of majesty, and had ten thousand times ten thousand angels adore Him and serve Him. Now He embraced the life of a slave. Part of what this meant is that in His Incarnation, the Son of God gave up independent, sovereign exercise of His will and of His powers. He never stopped being fully God. But He handed the exercise of His powers and rights entirely over to His Father and to the Holy Spirit. So He lived a life where His Father's will and Word was His Law, and His will, and the Holy Spirit was His power and strength upon whom He was totally dependent. That sounds a lot like the Christian life, doesn't it?

But it hadn't been that way in eternity past, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit lived in mutual joy, in co-equal glory. Now the Son was a slave of the Father and the Spirit.

As you read the Gospel of John, you will find everywhere Jesus is reporting on His submissive relationship to the Father.

Not only did He submit to God, but think of all the human authorities He submitted to for His mission.

Did He have to do this? Was He forced to? God humbled Himself, because He was on a mission to save. He came and submitted to His Father.

There's a second way He emptied Himself. Paul says He came in the likeness of men. To accomplish His mission He not only embraced a new position under the Father and the Spirit, but He genuinely became a man.

By *likeness*, Paul does not mean Jesus only looked like a man, but wasn't really a man; he means Jesus truly appeared as a man, but was more than just a man. He was the God-man.

How do we imagine how this was humbling?

Once did the skies before Thee bow;

A Virgin's arms contain Thee now;

Angels who did in Thee rejoice

Now listen for Thine infant voice (Latin Hymn of 11th century)

As the mystery of two natures, united in one Person occurred, we can barely imagine how infinite and finite could be united. But they were and are. The God who is eternal now experiencing the passing of time. The God who cannot change experiencing growth. The God who is everywhere present now being located in one place. The God who knew all now learning and hearing truth from His Father and from the Spirit. I try to imagine that. Picture the all powerful, self-sufficient God now experiencing tiredness from walking long distances, sweat from being too hot, discomfort from sleeping in makeshift beds. Imagine the God who had created all things for His pleasure enduring thirst and hunger, feeling the irritations of thorns and insect bites and cold nights.

And then, the immortal God, the source and author of life, experiencing death.

Can you imagine you as a human, with all your capacities, becoming a very basic creature – not losing your human nature, but now becoming along with that, something else – a simple thing like an insect.

But He did so willingly! This is the glory of the message of the incarnation. The God we serve has always had a servant's heart. He voluntarily embraced humiliation for the sake of saving people. He is worthy of exaltation precisely because of His voluntary humiliation.

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

When Peter saw Jesus humbling Himself to wash his feet, He reacted like a natural man: you will never do this. In other words, this is beneath your great dignity and glory. And in one sense Peter was right. It was beneath Jesus to do that. But then Christ's reply sums it up: He said to Peter, if I did not wash your feet, you have no part in Me. Unless Peter humbly accepted the humble service of Christ, he would not be saved.

That's still true today. The humility of God staggers us. Everything in us says, "He didn't have to." And the worst mistake would be to say something like Peter, "I can't accept such a gift. I would be insulting God. That's exactly pride.

And yes, He didn't have to in His own Person. But He did have if He wanted to save us. And He did want to. And if we are to be restored to God, we must accept His humble coming to Earth to die for us. We must humble ourselves, and adore the God who humbled Himself.