

The Incarnation Attitude

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 we approach December 25th, we start to hear more and more about the 'Christmas spirit'. We'll hear it on the radio, in the advertisements, and the specially Christmas-themed movies and TV shows. And we'll hear it from neighbours and colleagues and friends. And we'll even notice a change in some people. I remember a man who was without a doubt one of the grumpiest men I have ever met. But at Christmas time, his family would remark how different he was – warmer, more open, friendly, playful. Of course, come December 26th, that all changed.

What is this so-called Christmas spirit? To tell you the truth, I don't think anyone knows. It's a vague kind of warm feeling towards the world, where you become slightly less selfish than usual, and try to be generous. You relax a bit and appreciate family more than usual.

Now, I've got nothing against people being a little kinder, and more patient. I think people being a little more generous is a good thing. And I think that whatever it is that makes grumpy men a little happier is a nice thing for its own sake. But I want to suggest to you that all this is not the true Christmas spirit. And since Christians love Christ, we ought to know what kind of attitude is the right one for thinking about the Incarnation.

Strictly speaking, the Christmas spirit would be the spirit, or the attitude that is on our hearts because of the event of Christmas. You could call it the Incarnation Attitude. And here in Philippians 2:5, we are told that we are to have an attitude, a spirit, a mind-set that is truly based on the mindset of Jesus Christ when He became a man. What we find is that this is not merely an attitude that comes upon us in December and then leaves, but rather is a way of thinking that should be with us continually. Let this mind be continually in you.

He wants this Incarnation-attitude because it is part of how Christians should treat each other. We see part of what this attitude entails in the preceding verses:

Philippians 2:2-4 ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Now, to teach us how to do this, he points us to Christ in verse 5-11. These magnificent verses are some of the densest and richest verses in all of the Bible. Some Scriptures are like an open road that one can move through easily. Other Scriptures are so dense, that it is like walking through a thick jungle, where each word requires an investigation.

So here in verse 5-11 we're going to learn about the mind of Christ when He came to earth. We're going to learn about the attitudes He had, the thinking He had, when He gave up glory to be born as a human. As we study the mind and actions of Christ, it is so that we can learn and have that mind as well, not only in December, but throughout the year.

Because this passage is so dense, we'll look at it over two weeks. This morning, we'll look at verse 5-7, and see the first part of the Incarnation Attitude. As we study the attitude of Jesus in becoming a man, we'll see a negative and positive about Jesus' attitudes: Jesus Did Not Protect His Privileges, and Jesus Surrendered His Prerogatives.

I. Jesus Did Not Protect His Privileges

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,

Here is the Incarnation-Attitude: Jesus, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God. What does that mean? Let's begin with that first phrase ...' who being in the form of God'. This little phrase tells us about the nature of Jesus, long before He was born at Bethlehem. 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. The difference between the two is that my *morphe* is that I am a man, but my *schema* has changed, with my age. Paul is saying, Jesus was in His *morphe*, God. (The word is used without the article, emphasising the properties and qualities of Deity, not equating Jesus with the Father).

Before Bethlehem, Jesus had always existed and lived with the glory and splendour of being God, the Son. His glory was the kind that could be seen and known by other spiritual beings like the angels. But before He took a human, material form, Jesus had always existed as God.

John 1:1-2 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.

Micah 5:2 But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."

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

Now, for how long had Jesus been in the form of God? Had He earned this privilege? Had He grown into it? Had He been awarded this? Before the universe was brought into being, before the beginning of the beginning, Jesus had been in the form, in the *morphe* of God.

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

... "consider it robbery to be equal with God, "

This is a confusing translation of the Greek. The problem is that 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 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 as something to be protected and fought for and defended. 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.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Bible, the New World Translations, actually translate this verse in precisely the opposite way it is meant: "who, although he was existing in God's form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God." No, that's the opposite of what Paul says. Paul says, being in very nature and essence God, He did not regard such status and position something to be fought over and defended.

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.

Here is God, embracing humiliation. There is a strong contrast to this Incarnation Attitude. It's the attitude we find in someone else.

Ezekiel 28:12-17 Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. ¹³ You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering: The sardius, topaz, and diamond, Beryl, onyx, and jasper, Sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes Was prepared for you on the day you were created. ¹⁴ "You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; You were on the holy mountain of God; You walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. ¹⁵ You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, Till iniquity was found in you. ¹⁶ "By the abundance of your trading You became filled with violence within, And you sinned; Therefore I cast you as a profane thing Out of the mountain of God; And I destroyed you, O covering cherub, From the midst of the fiery stones. ¹⁷ "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, That they might gaze at you.

What was the content of this pride?

Isaiah 14:12-15 " How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! ¹³ For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; ¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.' ¹⁵ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, To the lowest depths of the Pit.

How amazing is the contrast. There is Jesus, existing in the form of God, but did not regard it as something to be so tightly held, that He could not sacrifice Himself for sinners. Here is Lucifer, not in the form of God, regarding equality with God as something to be grabbed, fought for, reached up to. You couldn't have a stronger contrast between the Prince of peace and the Prince of this world.

When Satan tempted Adam and Eve, what did he say? Eat of this, so you can be equal with God. Reach up, and take it, because God is protecting Himself from you having that. How wickedly deceptive. God was actually willing to give up some privileges, if necessary. Satan was the usurper.

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 time 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!" Paul says, let this mind be in you, which was in

Jesus.

Now, here's a question: if Jesus, being in the form of God did not protect His privileges of being God, what would that look like for you and 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, "Know my status. I want all the privileges and corresponding treatment that go with my status."

Do you know that in small and big ways, we can do the same thing? You can treat another Christian in a way that says, "Do you know who I am? Do you really expect me to put up with you? Do you know my background? Do you know my education? Do you know my position in the church? Do you know my experience as a Christian? Do you know who I know? Don't expect me to come down to that level, that's for someone else. Don't treat me like I'm just a nobody, because I'm a somebody!"

We fathers can be very touchy about being regarded as the big boss of the house. Managers and people in positions of authority can become very clingy to their titles and to their supposed rights that go with those titles. In those times, we are counting our supposed status a thing to gripped tightly. We will not be mocked, humiliated, belittled, unrecognised. We want a certain quality of recognition.

I remember an ordination questioning, where a prospective deacon was asked a rather loaded question: Would you clean the toilets? His hesitation and laughter was not what the questioner wanted to hear. It revealed to him that he felt his status was above that of cleaning toilets.

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is setting the bar as high as it will go. Jesus who was God, did not protect His privilege, and assert His rights, and remain aloof. So what is our excuse? When we cling tightly to our supposed status and reputation, must we not look like children guarding sand castles?

Let this mind be in you, Christian which was also in Christ Jesus, who did not protect His privileges. Look again at verses 2-4 and see them in light of the Incarnation Attitude:

Philippians 2:2-4 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

This is the Incarnation Attitude: Jesus did not protect His privileges. That's the negative side of the attitude. The positive side brings us to the second side of Christ's attitude.

II. Jesus Surrendered His Prerogatives.

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

Once again, we have some difficult words here: He made Himself of no reputation. What does that mean? Those words translate a Greek word ἐκένωσεν 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 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.

Paul tells you what it means with His next words: *taking the form of a bond servant, 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. As always, having existed in the form of God, 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 was willing to surrender this prerogative so as to be the Savior of men.

We see an amazing picture of this in John 13:

John 13:3-5 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. ⁵ After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded...John 13:12-16 So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" ¹³ "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. ¹⁴ "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

Here is Jesus, now living under authority. Here is Jesus, now serving others. He had a right to be obeyed and be served, but here He emptied Himself of those prerogatives.

There's a second way He emptied Himself. Paul says He came in the likeness of men. He embraced limitations. Jesus truly 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. But by becoming truly human at a point in time, Jesus surrendered several prerogatives.

As one existing in the form of God, Jesus had enjoyed a face-to-face relationship with God, and had enjoyed His glory for eternity past. He could have displayed His own glory any way He wanted to. He had enjoyed all the riches of heaven. He now surrendered these prerogatives in coming in the likeness of man. He was no longer enjoying the presence and glory of the Father. His own glory was now veiled. His own use of His divine attributes was submitted to the power of the Spirit, and subject to the Father.

I try to imagine that. I hope I am not being offensive, but I cannot imagine that God becoming man would be an inviting prospect to God. God delights in man, man is made in His image. But for God to enter human flesh is, I think, like one of us imagining becoming an insect. 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. Picture the God who was perfect in Himself now having to care for His human body – wash it, clothe it. The God who knows all, sees all, hears all, now having two eyes, two ears, a human brain. I don't claim to understand all the mysteries of how Jesus was 100% God and 100% man, but it was definitely an emptying of His prerogatives and privileges.

"In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost

disappear under the whole mass before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour too.

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!

Now, if Jesus gave up what was rightfully His, to serve others, what is it that should keep us from serving one another? What rights and prerogatives can we defend as being something we could never give up, in light of this passage?

What we actually find out is that when we embrace this Incarnation Attitude, we are filled with joy. When we refuse to cling to our privileges and surrender our prerogatives so as to serve, we enter into the fullness of joy that Jesus said is for us.

John 3:26-30 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified -- behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" ²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹ "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰ "He must increase, but I must decrease.

Once again, what would this Incarnation Attitude look like in us? If we surrendered our prerogatives, then we would be willing to give up certain things, so as to serve. Instead of demanding that you be served, husbands, we will often enough surrender our prerogatives and serve our wives and children. Instead of insisting that other Christians speak to you in ways you are familiar with, you do your best to understand them on their level, with their English. You get down on your child's level to be able to serve him or her. Like Jesus, you embrace the possible humiliation to be in the position to serve others.

If we surrender our prerogatives, we are willing to be under authority, we are willing to be unrecognised, we are willing to be unrewarded. We are willing to assume a place below our station, without losing your identity.

Read again verse 2-4, and think how much easier it is, when we have this mind of Christ:

Philippians 2:2-4 fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. ³ Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of

others.

What happens to a church where the Christians are not insisting on their rights and status and reputation, but are instead emptying themselves of them, so as to serve others, and be in a position to serve? You have a church of like-minded, Christlike, people, where the love of God is expressed. You have people who have entered into the joy of foot-washing.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. Let the Incarnation Attitude be yours all year long: don't protect your privileges, surrender your prerogatives so you can esteem others better than self, so that you can put the needs of others first.